

# Buddhist Chaplaincy in Public and Multi-faith Contexts

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# Introduction

- Not a Buddhist, nor an academic expert on Buddhism
- A Christian theologian within a contemplative tradition, with experience of Buddhist meditation practice
- A student of chaplaincy, especially in a multi-faith context
- In dialogue with Buddhist chaplains



## Aim

- To reflect on the distinctive contribution of Buddhism in the context of multi-faith chaplaincy
- To consider why that distinctive contribution is valued in the secular context
- From the perspective of an observer engaged in dialogue



# Structure

- Political liberalism and religion
- Chaplaincy in a multi-faith context
- Noticing: contemporary religion and spirituality
- The distinctiveness of Buddhism in that arena
- Implications for chaplaincy



# Political liberalism

## Religion in the Secular Public Square:

- Governed by rationality (and the liberal concept of fairness) – Rawls
- Governed by specific public policy which establishes the secularity of the state
- Different faith community responses – depending on polity and history



# Political liberalism

Secular norms shaping religion:

- Human rights
- Respect for diversity
- Equal opportunities
- Pluralism as public good
- Tolerance and fairness as driving values
- The secularization of norms for social care and control



# Political liberalism

The limits of tolerance, diversity and free speech

- The concern about (violent) 'extremism'
- Prevent Strategy
- 'Cohesion'/'integration'
- Religion as 'problem' (and as resource)
- Conforming religion to rationalism
- The challenge of believing in 'the way'
- Pluralism as normative



# Chaplaincy responses

Three areas of development:

- Ecumenical chaplaincy
- Multi-faith chaplaincy
- ‘Generic’ chaplaincy – for those of all faiths and no faith

Andrew Todd, 2011. ‘Responding to Diversity: Chaplaincy in a Multi-Faith Context’, in ed. Miranda Threlfall-Holmes & Mark Newitt, *Being a Chaplain*. London: SPCK: 89-102





## Generic?

- Focuses on care/service for all (irrespective of their faith)
- Pluralistic; user-centred; respects autonomy
- Distinguishes generic care ('spiritual'; 'pastoral') from specific religious care
- Has contested boundaries
  - How do we define/describe the generic aspect?
  - How far does generic care interact with religious?



## Other responses?

Anna Maxted, 'Life, the universe and everything'

*The Guardian*, 'Family', p.5

Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> September 2013

<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/sep/28/spirituality-children-material-world>

- Secular = 'facts, science and sport'
- Spirituality combats 'the materialism and ego of modern life'



# Other responses?



Munich Airport Meditation & Prayer Room

Dr Chris Hewson. Gallery 1: (Multi-)Faith Space:

<http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/architecture/research/mfs/media/>



# Other responses?

## Multi-faith spaces:

- Minimalism (in some cases)
- Silence, stillness
- Apart from...
- No explicit 'theology'

## Related:

- The response of mindfulness



# Interaction

Interaction of religion and political liberalism:

- Negotiating with rationalism and pluralism?
- Modes, or sites, of interaction
- Christianity – pastoral care understood as humanitarian; ethics as meditating language
- Buddhism – the emphasis on practice; mindfulness in particular
- How does it ‘work’ for Buddhism?



# Further noticing!

- Jon Kabat-Zinn – being mindful  
'nonjudgementally'
- Being non-judgemental is a key principle of chaplaincy in the public domain
- This locates being non-judgemental in a practice
- The practice connects and points us deeper



# Further noticing!

## Response to the Zendo:

No arriving,

For the past is here and nowhere;

No leaving,

For the future is here and nowhere;

But breathing and being,

At the centre-point of emptiness



# Hypothesis

- The apophatic way – unknowing, beyond words and concepts
- Hypothesis – that Buddhism’s interaction, through chaplaincy, and through mindfulness in particular, with the world of political liberalism ‘works’ because it is an example of ‘apophatic ritual’ (or practice)
- Minimalist ritual that cuts through the rational and pluralism, and through dialogue built on argument





Is this a good  
reading of  
Buddhism?





## Merton – Asian Journal

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything – *without refutation* – without establishing some other argument.

The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton (New Directions, 1973): 233



## Merton – Asian Journal

All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life is charged with dharmakaya... everything is emptiness and everything is compassion...

Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the shadow and the disguise.

The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton (New Directions, 1973): 235-236



# Sunyata

Form is emptiness, and emptiness is indeed form. Emptiness is not different from form, and form is not different from emptiness. What is form, that is emptiness; what is emptiness, that is form. Thus perception, name, conception, and knowledge also are emptiness.

Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra



# Buddhist wisdom

- So this might indeed be wisdom
- What Merton described as ‘prajna-sunyata’
- But why does it ‘work’ in the multi-faith context?
- Why is the gift so readily received?
  - Sunyata
  - Without refutation
  - Non-judgemental



# Buddhist wisdom

The wisdom enables people, perhaps, to:

- Cut through the dialectic
- Escape the cognitive trap – of rational argument in search of singular truth
- To approach the political differently

Space and ritual (practice) allow people to:

- Encounter the other
- Inhabit pluralism, rather than reconciling it



# Questions

- How far do those who practice mindfulness, and encounter the mindfulness of chaplaincy, enter into prajna-sunyata?
- How far do the ways in which mindfulness is offered and presented enable this distinctive contribution of Buddhism and Buddhist chaplaincy to be experienced?
- What other perspectives on the distinctiveness of Buddhist chaplaincy do you wish to offer?