

Religion and Peace

By Ajahn Chandako

At an interfaith gathering that focused on the role religion could play in supporting peace in the world, Ajahn was asked to offer a Buddhist's perspective.

It is a very noble and idealistic motivation to bring religious leaders together with the aim of establishing peace in the world. There is a natural human inclination towards peace and happiness that is not based on material acquisition or the manipulation of our external environment. If religion can support and encourage this inclination, then we will easily find ways to work together for peace. As the Buddha said, '*Natthi santi param sukham*', 'There is no happiness that surpasses that of peace.' As with all noble ideals, however, it then becomes necessary to determine practical steps for moving past the conceptual stage of 'wouldn't it be nice if...' This involves taking an open-minded look at the role religion plays, both in establishing peace, but also in undermining it. Looking at the relationship between religion and peace, well....it's complicated.

All the religious representatives here tonight have proclaimed or implied, "My religion is a religion of peace". Determining to what degree this is true requires educating ourselves somewhat, both on the content of the various ancient texts, as well as the behavior of contemporary followers of these faiths. Mutual tolerance and respect is an indispensable starting point to harmony, but true and lasting peace among religions will come through a deeper level of mutual understanding. This includes being open to critical examination. For any religion or way of life to be worth following, it must hold up to analysis. If we are to have any hope of peace through religion, then we need to extend a rational and compassionate attitude towards examining the scriptures of the major religions.

Scriptures and Non-violence

On the subject of peace, there is a wide range of ideas expressed in the Bible, Quran, Hindu literature and the Buddhist Canon. In most of these scriptures, although an inner peace is the stated goal, violence is not merely condoned but actively encouraged in specific situations. Fortunately, the vast majority who follow these faiths peacefully ignore the directives to kill people who, for example, worship a different god or work on a Sunday. These passages are relegated to a distant past that bears little resemblance to modern life. Moderates tend to ignore certain portions of our holy books as a practical way to live harmoniously in 21st century multi-ethnic societies. But as we can see, killing in the name of religion is not yet a relic of the past. Certainly it is not fair to judge a religion by the actions of every person who calls him or herself a Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Jew or Buddhist. What does seem fair is to determine if violence done in the name of religion has any basis for justification in their respective holy books.

So then is fundamentalism the problem? Even that depends on the fundamentals to which one adheres. With Buddhism, the more fundamentalist you are, that is, the more literally you take the original teachings of the Buddha, the more peaceful and tolerant you become. You don't have to skip over certain embarrassing archaic passages in

order to be a peaceful moderate. Non-violence is a central tenant of Buddhism, and there is no way to twist the scriptures to justify violence. There are no mitigating passages in Buddhist scriptures that allow one to kill. These teachings are essentially concerned with peace, from the outer social level to the most profound levels of inner consciousness.

If all followers of theist faiths distilled their message down to the simple and joyous personal creed of 'God is love', religious harmony would not be such an elusive ideal. When it comes to scriptures, however, we are presented with a bit of a problem. A close examination of our respective texts reveals mutually incompatible claims. Unfortunately, they can't all be right, and this is a continuing source of conflict.

Encouraging Unity, Not Fear

If religion is to play a role in supporting peace, then we first have to take an honest look at history and examine why so much violence has been committed by religiously motivated people. One factor is that religion tends to divide more than unite. Religions are very successful in uniting certain groups of people who share the same belief system, but it then divides that group from everyone who believes something different. When people then perceive others as different and wrong, it becomes easier for the faithful to commit and justify acts of cruelty to protect or advance their own particular set of beliefs. And when these beliefs are centered around concepts of eternal happiness and eternal pain, the stakes for being right are perceived to be so high that passions run riot.

There continues to be a disturbing amount of violence in the world today perpetrated in the name of religion. The causes are manifold and intertwined, but one of the dynamics operating is the close link between aggression and fear. When people are afraid, they easily become violent; and when there is violence, this perpetuates fear. If religion is going to play a role in encouraging peace, then it must stop generating fear: fear of others who are different, fear of speaking out, fear of being ostracized, fear of God and particularly fear of eternal damnation. Punishments, including death, for having pre-marital sex, being gay, being an atheist or merely satirizing religion are still carried out by 'religious' societies in some parts of the world. All this creates an atmosphere of fear and is effectively used as means of control. It's then no wonder that this fear finds expression in violence.

Religious violence also manifests in ways more subtle than being burned at the stake. It harms through the systematic oppression of women, aggressive missionary work and widespread animal cruelty. Any true peace on the planet must be inclusive of all living beings, with a compassionate love that is not limited by the artificial lines of belief.

Greed Kills Peace

Although it may seem that the majority of wars throughout history have their roots in religion, in most cases the actual cause is greed for wealth, power and control. If a person or society or corporation or country is greedy, then that will eventually lead to conflict. Environmental, material and social exploitation inevitably lead to frustration,

protests and finally violence. Peace on earth will always elude us if a certain portion of society is exploiting the poor. To the degree that religions encourage a reasonable limit to economic desires, fair treatment of others and using wealth and power for social benefit, then religion can be seen as a force for peace.

It is difficult, however, to create a just and peaceful world when the roots of greed are still active within the human heart. As long as people are under the influence of selfish desires, there is a likelihood that someone will get hurt. A reasonable person relies on self-restraint to be considerate and not take advantage of others, but the Buddha took it even further. A thorough and systematic path of meditation will actually uproot greed from the human heart, and with it the main cause of social disharmony. Greed is gradually transformed into contentment and balance.

Attachment to Religious Beliefs

A significant obstacle to peace is self-righteous attachment to beliefs. By no means is this the exclusive domain of religion, but faiths do tend to be uniquely skilled in exploiting this for gain at the expense of harmony. Believing that what we hold to be true, is therefore true for everyone else, is a leap of faith and logic that fuels division and conflict. For any level of inter-religious peace to be possible, we need to make the effort to hold our beliefs in a mature and kind way.

If we identify with a belief as who we are, when others challenge that belief, it feels as if our 'self' is being threatened. The resulting insecurity can quickly spiral into a defensive fervor. An attitude of tight clinging to beliefs, views and opinions is then accompanied by self-righteousness that condemns others as wrong. It is more realistic and facilitating to express oneself in terms of a belief that one holds, or a quote from a literary source, rather than a certainty that one's beliefs are universally true. This opens the door to others who may have a different perspective. Teachings may then be respectfully revered, but views are held gently and compassionately.

When it comes to attachment to religious beliefs, it is also helpful to keep in mind that the particular religion we practice is most often determined by the geographical accident of where we happen to have been born or the genealogical serendipity of who our parents were. The same Christian fundamentalist in the U.S. could just as easily have been a Muslim fundamentalist had they been born in Saudi Arabia. Bearing this in mind helps us hold beliefs with a perspective of humility.

In Buddhism, it's not belief, per se, that is of primary importance. There is no encouragement to adopt unsubstantiated claims through faith. Instead, a Buddhist meditator attempts to see things as they actually are, no matter what beliefs one might have held previously. The Buddha even discouraged his disciples from believing in his own teachings merely because he said it. Only when these teachings were thoroughly tested through direct personal experience were they to be taken on with confidence. Insight and discernment, more than faith and belief, are the driving forces leading to purification of consciousness, or enlightenment. Clinging strongly to any belief is considered to be an obstacle to enlightenment.

Fellow Travelers

A few years ago I was on my way to a family reunion on a small plane to Calgary. The rows were only two seats wide, and mine was way in the back. Soon a middle-aged Canadian man sat down next to me and after chatting for a minute, he asked about the significance of what I was wearing. I explained that I was a Buddhist monk and so on. After listening politely, he said that he was a Christian, and that God said the only way to Him is through His Son the Lord Jesus Christ...and that all other paths lead to eternal damnation.

At this point I could have smiled and nodded and uttered an appreciative “Thank you for sharing that with me,” and spent the rest of the flight looking at the clouds out the window. However, his words didn't bother me much, and I could see he was a good person. So I decided to find out more about what he actually did believe and how he lived his life. As it turned out, yes, certainly he was a fundamentalist, but it seemed that he was sincere in trying live a kind and peaceful life modelled after Christ.

He tried his best to convert me, for which I give him much credit, but to no avail. As we spoke, however, he kept revisiting the same memorized phrases expressing that there is only one way to God and that way is through his Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and well, sorry to say, all other paths are leading to eternal hell—including all other Christian denominations different from his.

At this point the woman sitting in front of me couldn't restrain herself any longer. She turned around and put her head between the seats. She was from India, and with a distinct accent, addressed the Canadian next to me.

“No, no...God is not like that. God is love and embraces all good people everywhere. You are so fortunate to have swami sitting next to you. That is your good karma. Swami [pointing to me] is blessing you with his presence. You cannot limit the scope of God. Listen to swami's wisdom. The Buddha included all people in his compassion.”

I had to smile. The fundamentalist Christian wasn't quite sure what to make of it. Our Indian passenger then fully joined our conversation, and the three of us developed various religious themes further. We then turned to the man sitting next to her and asked what he was. He said Roman Catholic. As our four-way discussion became more animated, it was audible to most of the back half of the small plane.

The man sitting next to me, in all his certainty, kept speaking in terms of 'God thinks this...' and 'God is like that.' I suggested, for the purpose of our discussion, “How about if you phrase your statements, not as 'God said this' but 'I believe God said this' or 'I believe that there is only one way to salvation.' Because this opens the door for other people to express their, possibly different, beliefs and doesn't automatically put others on the defensive. And we'll all do the same.” He reluctantly agreed, although we had to regularly remind him when he got excited.

When our flight attendant reached the back of the plane we invited her to join our interfaith mini-gathering. She curtly said that she was a “Catholic... and an angry Catholic,” and then quickly pushed her cart to the front of the plane. But it wasn't too long before she was back again, joining our conversation and seemingly forgetting all about her flight attendant duties. She told us the whole, long story of why she was so angry at her priest, and by the end she seemed much lighter and happier.

We were really enjoying ourselves by this time. Our discussion lasted to the end of the flight and on into baggage claim. The point of the story is this: by the time we reached our destination, none of us had significantly changed our beliefs, but in the process we all had a great time. We laughed and joked and discussed meaningful things and learned from each other. And most importantly, we all parted as friends.

The Path of Peace

Now, we all like to think we're right, but attachment and clinging to any belief—even a good belief—leads to friction. Even our cherished religions are merely social conventions designed to lead us to a reality beyond them. So who's to say which is the one true way? The path to peace is paved with the humility of mutual respect.

We seem to have a choice: will our beliefs, speech and actions reinforce the existing divisions and prejudices in the world; or will we work towards dissolving the destructive barriers of fear, suspicion and ignorance—beginning with those within our own hearts? Will our hearts slowly harden with the heavy delusion of fixed perceptions, or will we rise to the great challenge of unconditional love that forgives perceived grievances, whether or not we actually like or agree with others? And if it turns out that causes and conditions out of our control had more to do with our specific spiritual choices than our own free will, then why not relax? Relaxing into appreciation of diversity is a wonderful way to be. If religions *are* going to coexist in harmony, then it will begin with the wholesome motivation of peace within each one of us. Peace ripples out from pure intention. Peace comes through living it. It seems we do have a choice, so with a wise heart let us please choose the path of peace.

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Ajahn Chandako is the abbot of Vimutti Buddhist Monastery near Bombay, South Auckland. His interest in the teachings of the Buddha grew as he studied towards a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religious Studies at Carleton College in the US. Wishing to devote his life fully to the teachings of the Buddha, in 1990 he ordained as a monk in the Forest Tradition of Northeast Thailand. Ajahn Chandako then spent 15 years training with forest meditation masters throughout Thailand before establishing Vimutti Monastery in 2004. Ajahn is the author of numerous books and articles and regularly teaches in the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.