

Development of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Hong Kong

U. Pemananda

The University of Hong Kong u.pemananda_766@connect.hku.hk

1. Introduction

Buddhist-Christian studies have been a major focus of scholarly research and teaching since the end of the 20th century. It is becoming a burgeoning field in many parts of the world where many local communities are religiously heterogeneous. Increasing of Buddhist-Christian dialogues in many parts of the world anticipate hints for consolidation of interreligious co-existence. Research related to the Buddhist-Christian encounter uncovers various facets of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue; historical background of both amicable and unfavourable responses; theological, and philosophical compressions between Buddhism and Christianity; Buddhist, and Christian views on contemporary societal issues; development of Buddhist-Christian encounter in Asian and Western worlds; and biographies of prominent religious personalities, and scholars in the field are some of them. Yet, Buddhist-Christian dialogue still requires depth investigation pertaining to divergent forms of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in different social and cultural settings of the world. Identification of divergent modalities of Buddhist-Christian dialogue helps further the development of this phenomenon methodologically, and pragmatically.

The aim of this paper is to explore the implementation of Buddhist-Christian dialogue within Hong Kong society and identify the unique characteristics of such interfaith interactions in this context. Historically, in China, with the waves of western imperialism, Buddhist-Christian encounters have ebbed and flowed: on one hand, bitter experiences due to religious proselytization, polemical writings, and ridicule responses, and on the other hand, amicable relationships between the two religions (Lai, 2001). These aspects of religious history in mainland China have impacted Hong Kong to some extent (Home Affairs Bureau, 2016; Kitagawa, 1955). Yet, the religious milieu in Hong Kong is relatively different from mainland China; this distinction is rather apparent in terms of Buddhist-Christian encounter to which less attention has been given.

As one of the most densely populated places in the world, Hong Kong consolidates inter alia the fundamental right of religious freedom. Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Judaism exhibit a rich variety of religiosity in Hong Kong. As religions, Buddhism and Christianity (both Catholicism, and Protestant) play a significant role in Hong Kong society. Several striking factors pertaining to the interreligious relationship in Hong Kong can be identified; Buddhist-Christian dialogue takes place as a part of the interreligious encounter, and it has been carried out uniquely.

Even though interreligious co-existence in Hong Kong is well constituted, less attention has been paid to recognizing how it has been carried out. This paper investigates how has Buddhist-Christian dialogue been carried out in Hong Kong society, and what are the distinctive aspects of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Hong Kong. This cross-case study helped to identify a detailed typology of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in modern Hong Kong society. Using an exploratory approach of case study, each case was examined. The thematic data analysis discovered four types of Buddhist-Christian dialogues in Hong Kong:

- Formal multilateral dialogical forum,
- Spiritual dialogue in public,
- Spiritual dialogue among small faith communities, and
- Dialogue in interreligious chaplaincy services.

From Oddbjørn Leirvik's philosophical approach of interreligious dialogue which was inspired by Martin Buber's and Emmanuel Levinas' philosophies on dialogue, these four types of dialogues were further viewed as "spiritual dialogue" and "necessary dialogue".

Compared to the existing literature on Buddhist-Christian dialogue, the findings of this case study are in line with many available studies. Additionally, the fact that the dynamic of Buddhist-Christian dialogue overlaps multilateral interreligious dialogue is uniquely well rooted in Hong Kong. It postulates the extent of the space for religious plurality and religious inclusivism in Hong Kong whereby a rich typology of Buddhist-Christian dialogue is constituted. Finally, the study suggests viewing if the typology of Buddhist-Christian dialogue would be a distinctive dynamic of multilateral interreligious dialogue in Hong Kong. Every modality of Buddhist-Christian dialogue may have its sole purpose, but ultimately, every model constitutes interreligious co-existence. The study concludes that freedom of religion and therefore interreligious co-existence are realistic with underlining divergent mechanisms of interreligious dialogues; the typology of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Hong Kong attests to this assumption.

2. Methodology

Being a qualitative research endeavour, the study employed a case study approach within the context of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Through the case study method, which helped contextualize a phenomenon, we explored some groups of people practicing interreligious dialogue. Following the principles of case studies, it selected cross-case and was limited to an embedded case study whereby it examined some aspects of cases pertaining to Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Hong Kong. The qualitative data, including interviews, was collected from 2022 to 2023. The study also limited its examination to four cases that were selected from Hong Kong society through the purposive sampling method. They were: 1) The Colloquium of Six Religious Leaders in Hong Kong, 2) RTHK. TV 31 – Buddhist-Christian dialogue series, 3) Interreligious dialogue group hosted by Sri Lankan Buddhist Cultural Centre in Hong Kong, and 4) Interreligious Chaplaincy of Queen Mary Hospital, Hong Kong. Oddbjørn Leirvik's philosophical approach to interreligious dialogue which was inspired by Martin Buber's and Emmanuel Levinas' philosophies of dialogue anticipates two types of interreligious dialogue: spiritual dialogue and necessary dialogue. For the discussion, this philosophical outlook was used as the conceptual framework. The study applied thematic analysis as its data analysis method. Even though the findings were rich for presenting a detailed typology of Buddhist-Christian dialogue the validity of the findings could not be generalized because of the limitation of an exploratory case study.

3. Findings and Discussion

This exploratory case study identified four types of Buddhist-Christian dialogical approaches: They are: 1) The Colloquium of Six Religious Leaders in Hong Kong, 2) RTHK. TV 31 – Buddhist-Christian dialogue series, 3) Interreligious dialogue group based in Sri Lankan Buddhist Cultural Centre in Hong Kong, and 4) Interreligious Chaplaincy of Queen Mary Hospital, Hong Kong. Four themes were made based on these four types and analysed data accordingly.

- Formal multilateral dialogical forum

The Colloquium of Six Religious Leaders in Hong Kong which was established in 1978 has been carried out with the purpose of “promoting exchanges, unity, and cooperation among different religious groups” (CRS.CUHK, 2022). It is a driving force of religion and makes practical contributions to Hong Kong society. According to the historical documents of the Colloquium which are published by the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, representatives of six major religions—Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, Catholic, Christian, and Islam—have been maintaining an official dialogical network and thereby issued official letters to the public, joint Lunar Festival announcements, minutes of conversation sessions over the past 44 years. The documents consist of special issues related to Hong Kong society and more than 3,400 photos of the Colloquium’s events (CRS.CUHK, 2022). These records display the attribute of exchange and communication among religious leaders for cooperation and solidarity.

- Spiritual dialogue in public,

RTHK TV 31 (Chinese: 港台電視31), a 24-hour Chinese-language television channel in Hong Kong has been broadcasting a Buddhist-Christian dialogue series over the past couple of years. According to a Buddhist nun, Venerable Chuan Deng who was a co-host of the series, themes for each episode were intentionally set up with spiritual goals (Interview-1, 2022). Adversity vs peaceful mind, Celibate vs married, life vs death, and heaven vs hell were some of those episode themes.

- Spiritual dialogue among small faith communities

Interreligious discussions take place among different faith communities in Hong Kong. They are apparent as multilateral. Sri Lankan Buddhist Cultural Centre in Hong Kong hosts this type of dialogue group. Their discussion predominantly focuses on theological and philosophical exchange for creating space for harmonious existence (Interview-2, 2022). Even though this group is relatively small, once a week gathering of the group reflects an active continuation of dialogical relationship.

- Dialogue in interreligious chaplaincy services.

From a more general perspective, religious chaplaincy services in Hong Kong encompasses services to hospitals, schools, families, and prison. These volunteer services include pastoral care, visits, teaching, counselling, religious worship, and recreational activities (Hong Kong Correctional Services, 2022). In Queen Mary Hospital of Hong Kong, chaplaincy service is implemented with a collaborative network of religious leaders from different religious communities. These religious leaders maintain a frequent conversation for the sake of better chaplaincy to patients regardless of their faiths and beliefs.

Interreligious dialogue is defined by Oddbjørn Leirvik focusing on its description of a particular activity. His work, *Interreligious Studies*, distinguishes “spiritual” and “necessary” dialogue referring to its connection to interreligious relationship (Leirvik, 2014, p. 18). Whereas the notion of spiritual dialogue takes place in the practice of spiritual coexistence, necessary dialogue implies interfaith dialogue initiated in and by civil communities. The coordination and interaction among the six religions, and the constant communication of interreligious chaplaincy witness to necessary dialogue. In his initial concept, “I-Thou”, Martin Buber states that self and other can be uttered together and mutually, and therefore, human

being is an implicitly dialogical being (Nikulin, 2006, p. 18). In line with this view on dialogue, the spiritual Buddhist-Christian dialogue series can be viewed as a mutual utterance from which “I-Thou” is raised together. Four types of interreligious or Buddhist-Christian dialogue groups may have unique aims and objectives. Nevertheless, they simultaneously aspire and work for the united efforts to build a harmonious and healthy society and people’s hearts.

4. Conclusion

The greatest deal of the interreligious dialogue is religious harmony and therefore it was used as an underlined thesis of this study. The religiously heterogeneous society of Hong Kong is where religion plays a significant role in religious harmony and social well-being. For that purpose, the typology of Buddhist-Christian dialogue is imperative. In terms of process, this case study explored how Buddhist-Christian dialogue was carried out in Hong Kong. And outcome presented how it worked within four types of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. The finding serves to the philosophy of interreligious dialogue accentuating striking attributes of Buddhist-Christian typology in Hong Kong.

5. Keywords

Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Hong Kong, Interreligious Relationship, Typology of Dialogue

6. References

- CRS.CUHK. (2022). The Colloquium of Six Religious Leaders in Hong Kong: Historical Materials Database (CRS.CUHK). Department of Cultural and Religious Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Retrieved 10 September from <http://www.crs.cuhk.edu.hk/csrlhk/document.html>
- Home Affairs Bureau. (2016). Hong Kong facts: Religion and Custom. <https://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/docs/religion.pdf>
- Hong Kong Correctional Services. (2022). Religious Services. Retrieved 10 September from https://www.csd.gov.hk/english/reh/reh_overview/reh_overview_religious/reh_over_rs.html
- Kitagawa, J. M. (1955). [Meditation and Piety in the Far East, Karl Ludvig Reichelt, Sverre Holth]. The Journal of Religion, 35(3), 183-184. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uio.no/stable/1200926>
- Lai, W. (2001). Christianity and Buddhism : a multicultural history of their dialogue. Orbis Books.
- Leirvik, O. (2014). Interreligious Studies : A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Nikulin, D. V. (2006). On dialogue. Lexington Books.
- Interview-1. (2022). *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Hong Kong*. Interviewer: Rev Unapane Pemananda Thero.
- Interview-2. (2022). *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Hong Kong*. Interviewer: Rev Unapane Pemananda Thero.