

## *Introduction*

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The majority of articles in this issue of *Dialogue and Alliance* take up the elusive and perennial question of the relationship between religious devotion and social responsibility.

One of the great challenges to the religious enterprise is the enlightenment and post-enlightenment positions that human goodness is not related necessarily to religious life, piety, and devotion. This claim of disjunction, like virtually all the facile propositions inherent in the 17th century critique and lampooning of religion, has come to rest in the mind of the average modern as true (without reflection or examination).

To the extent that the essence of this critique is true or warranted (i.e., that religious devotion does not result necessarily in human goodness and social compassion, and conversely that goodness and compassion are available *sans* religion) religions in the world today must do everything possible to alter that reality, from the most rarified realms of their respective theological labors, to the most mundane or practical elements including the functioning of their respective ecclesiological structures and politics, and the pastoral leadership of the faithful. To the extent that the critique is false and unwarranted, religions likewise have the responsibility to engage the debate, and challenge the errors in the secular assumption in the most compelling and intellectually adroit ways.

This question of social responsibility in the modern and recent expressions of religion informs a number of the articles in this collection (most notably He and Lai, Jones, Cromwell, and Doe).

This issue of *Dialogue and Alliance* is organized into 3 sections, the Middle East and its religions, the Far East, and global civil society.

The Middle East section opens with Dr. Selengut's far-ranging analysis of "religious disappointment" as it pertains to and participates in the Israel-Palestine standoff that so haunts our world. Selengut holds that vying claims to the Holy Land are religious above all, guaranteed in respective scriptures, and prescriptive for modes of faithful life. Sacred Scriptures guaranteeing different communities exclusive rights to the same thing (in this case, the Holy Land) give rise to what Selengut calls "religious disappointment."

According to Selengut, religious disappointment spawns cognitive dissonance which resolves and dissolves itself by any of a number of options. Selengut identifies three: "Religious and Theological Surrender," "Religious and Theological Reinterpretation," and "Militant Religion." He concludes with recommendations for how to diminish the likelihood of militant religion ascending in response to dissonance. This least desirable response always renders itself into political, military, and social instruments intensified by the force of sacred scripture.

Joshua Ben-Ami's article is a brief but captivating theological and historical tour grounded in the writings of established and authoritative rabbinical texts, and first century history. In this scholarly milieu Ben-Ami recommends the radical view that a comprehensive reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity is fully possible, and consistent with orthodox sources. The publication of this brief but compelling essay by Ben-Ami could hardly come at a more important moment. Mel Gibson's half a billion dollar box office wonder, together with other resurgent, erstwhile pieties threaten to reinvigorate some of the worst moments and impulses in Christian-Jewish relations. In such times, groundbreaking scholarship like that of Ben-Ami's here is all the more vital.

Clinton Bennet concludes the Middle East section with an article presenting the fruits of a personal life work and years devoted to the Muslim-Christian harmony. Bennet reviews the theological, textual, and ecclesiological barriers and hindrances not only to Christian-Muslim unity and cooperation, but barriers to even recommending such an ideal!

His essay is not a saccharine piece skirting the exclusivisms that challenge Muslim-Christian relations. On the contrary, Bennet meets these angular pieties head on. In addition to providing a sound

review of the landscape and resources for pursuing better Christian-Muslim relations, he also offers creative and practical guidelines for this crucial arena of religious encounter. Bennet provides realistic and “theologically commonsensical” steps requisite to realizing positive and fruitful outcomes for Muslims and Christians in dialogue. His study concludes the Middle East section.

The next section is based in religions of the Far East. The first Far East article is from He Jian-ming and Lai Pan-chiu. As always the work of Lai is immaculate, rigorously researched, and enlightening. This is the first time for Lai in collaboration (this time with He Jian-ming) to appear in our pages. The essay examines Buddhist reform during the Republican Era (1911–1949) and the extent to which Christianity influenced this reform movement.

What we learn from Lai and He (again not unlike Ben-Ami's piece earlier), is invaluable for this historical moment in time. We are burdened in our days by virulent voices of division and bias. For this reason, sound scholarship highlighting both historical and theological occasions of compatibility and mutual benefit among religions are needed and welcome. It is remarkable to discover through the scholarship of He and Lai the extent to which not only Buddhist reformers, but political and social reformers in China of the 20th Century, viewed Christianity so positively and so welcomed its impulses and genius for social service arising from spiritual foundations.

This study is remarkable in its grasp of the subtlety and nuance within Buddhist leadership as they debated in fine distinction the degree to which Christian strengths could be affirmed, and which should have been regarded as ill-fitted to Chinese culture and needs at the time. What is especially of interest in this piece is the chance to see subtle changes and development for advocacy and policy regarding *sangha* education and temple property. He and Lai uncover in this study an important key to the development of Buddhist social thought and application in China. Further, important findings extend through social engagement to questions regarding the delicate order of relations between church and state. This, of course, constitutes a vital concern even in the current, domestic and international decisions being faced by the present Chinese leadership.

The second Far East article is an interview with movie producer

Byron Jones. When first contacted by the marketing and public relations team representing *Home Beyond the Sun* (www.homebeyondthesun.com) asking for *Dialogue and Alliance* to publish an interview with Jones, my reaction was both intrigue, and a feeling of unlikelihood. Attraction to the prospect was sparked by the “Gibson phenomenon” demanding serious reflection on the matter of religion and popular entertainment media. *Home Beyond the Sun*, of course has no aspirations to take the world by storm *a la The Passion of the Christ*, but the insight of the producers into the power of popular entertainment media to serve as a vehicle for the transmission of religious values and ideals has not eluded the community behind *Home Beyond the Sun*.

On the face of it, *Dialogue and Alliance* is delighted for the chance to carry a piece on religious film, particularly at this time. The negatives however also weighed on the decision. My study of the promotional material led me to suspect that the film was characterized by a simplistic story line in which garden variety Evangelicalism did battle with the “godless behemoth of Chinese Communism.” Such a narrative did not seem to fit with the brief and long established mission and purpose of *Dialogue and Alliance*. For this reason I did all I could to discourage at first the public relations promoter, and then Jones himself, warning that the interview could turn, if not unfriendly, at least unsympathetic, especially if any form of religious triumphalism (including Christian Evangelicalism) was promoted. In the end, I could not turn them away even by presenting advance questions suggesting that China’s current positions must be considered at least in some part as related to abuses attributed to Christian missions and missionaries derived from detrimental policies delineated in the 19th Century Unequal Treaties.

To my surprise Mr. Jones persisted in his innocent-hearted willingness and desire to engage the interview, and to my delight showed a sweet side of Christian faith in all ways worthy of our pages. The film strives to convey a mirrored critique of Chinese and Western cultures told through the lives of a young western teacher bent on adopting a Chinese orphan girl. My interview with Mr. Jones follows with near Kismet as a good follow-up to the impeccable work of He and Lai.

The final Far East essay is one of those rare literary and scholar-

ly treats which come our way all too infrequently. Cromwell Crawford, with the grace of a true adept makes the world of religious writing look easy, like the grand deception of watching Tiger Woods and thinking, “You know? I think I could be a pretty good golfer myself.” That’s the feeling that comes when reading this piece by Crawford. He takes an elusive spirituality, metaphysics, and historical theology and effortlessly leaves the reader feeling as though we grew up with Hinduism as mother’s milk.

What is especially helpful here is Crawford’s account of how Hinduism functions in modern society, and how its classical forms and tenets have evolved. There are elements in this essay that harken to He and Lai’s discussion of Buddhist reform and social action. Cromwell similarly shows that modern Hinduism is “no prescription for otherworldliness. To the contrary,” he argues, “social responsibilities are taken ever more seriously. Eminent philosophers, like Samkara, have also been great humanitarians, not in spite of their philosophy but because of it.” Cromwell’s investigation into the ethics that derive from cardinal principles in Hinduism ultimately leads him to an enthralling exploration of the dance and *lila* among religious authority, conscience, and moral reasoning.

The final article in this issue, authored by Sondra Doe, is comprehensive and expansive, not only in its scholarship and command of relevant source material, but further in its concept and vision. Doe’s own abstract best introduces this important article, which, with immaculate attention to detail, translates a resplendent vision into manageable concepts and viable steps and applications for the pursuit and realization of a humane future and a world beyond the current death throes of the ruinous political and religious parochialism tearing at our dreams in our current times.

We hope you will enjoy and be edified by this issue. We wish to support, strengthen, witness to, and help develop a community of religious and conscientious visionaries and laborers determined to change the world, and usher in an era of peace and abundance. Please help us by recommending *Dialogue and Alliance* to your friends, departments, libraries and so forth. As always, we are grateful for your continued support.

—The Editor