

Report on “Peace & Harmonious Coexistence: An Islamic-Buddhist Dialogue”

Soka Gakkai Malaysia

Summary of Interfaith Dialogue

Introduction—Welcoming and Keynote Speeches

THIS interfaith dialogue was held in conjunction with The Lotus Sutra Exhibition: A Message of Peace and Harmonious Coexistence at Wisma Kebudayaan Soka Gakkai Malaysia (SGM) for the very first time in a South-East Asian country. The dialogue aims to enhance and promote the understanding of peace and harmony from the perspectives of Buddhism and Islam, based on parables and anecdotes drawn from the sacred texts of the Lotus Sutra as well as the Holy scriptures in Islam, Al-Quran and Al-Hadith.

The welcoming speech was delivered by Mr. Koh Sia Feai, General Director of SGM. In his speech, he acknowledged the involvement of multiple parties in this dialogue; SGM, The Institute of Oriental Philosophy (IOP) and Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya (UMCCD), as well as the Department of National Unity and Integration, Prime Minister’s Department (JPNIN). He reported that The Lotus Sutra exhibition had received close to 40,000 visitors since its commencement (as of April 13). He considered inter-religious dialogues as vital for the promotion of mutual respect and understanding between followers of different faiths and provided an opportunity to learn about parables or stories in the religious scriptures of Islam and Buddhism. He expressed his gratitude to UMCCD, the speakers and especially to the former UMCCD’s Director, Associate Professor Dr. Raihanah Abdullah for initiating the event. He concluded by hoping to work together in promoting harmonious coexistence and benefitting greatly from the dialogue and The Lotus Sutra’s exhibition.

Next, the guest of honour and keynote speaker of the day, Y.B. Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima Joseph Kurup, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department took the stage to deliver his speech. The minister began by referring to the recent incident of missing Malaysian Airlines’ flight MH370 en route to China from Kuala Lumpur on March 8th, 2014. He

noted that it had brought many different faiths together to pray for the safety of the crews and passengers of the flight. He also mentioned he had proposed to the cabinet to designate March 8th as “National Prayers Day”. Hence, he acknowledged the need of interfaith dialogues among the many religions in Malaysia as they were imperative to generate mutual understanding and respect among followers of any religions. However, he added, a dialogue should be sincere with the aims of strengthening the community, not to serve own, narrow interest. He concluded by congratulating the audience present and bade them to have an enjoyable and enlightening day.

Interfaith Dialogue Session

The moderator commenced the session by introducing the speakers to the audience. She remarked that this dialogue would be based on the parables drawn from the holy scriptures of Islam and Buddhism as they were easier to understand and remember. She explained that a parable is brief, succinct story in prose or verse which illustrated a moral or religious lesson.

“Light your own lamp of peace before lighting the lamp of others”

The first speaker, Dr. Ramzy began by noting an interesting parable in the Lotus Sutra about Buddha rescuing people from a burning house by preaching the message of peace, which was similar to a parable in Al-Quran that the message of Islam is to protect people from hellfire (Al-Quran, 3:103). He explained that Al-Quran is a divine revelation from God to Prophet Muhammad S.A.W and was recorded and documented during his lifetime whereas Al-Hadith is a practical explanation of Al-Quran and contains the reports of his sayings, deeds and quotes of Prophet Muhammad S.A.W during his lifetime and some were transmitted 50 years after his death. He emphasized that Muslims do not accept any interpretations or opinions contrary to Al-Quran and Al-Hadith. Like any other religions, he added, Islam promotes peace and harmony. This is reflected in the greetings among Muslims which means, “Peace upon you”. The God in Islam is described as God of All-Merciful (Al-Rahman and Al-Rahim) and in Al-Hadith, Allah is said to love His creations more than a woman loves her child (Hadith: Sahih Bukhari: 5999). The prophet S.A.W. is also known as a prophet of mercy, or *Rahmatan lil-Alamin* (Al-Quran, 21:107) and the believers are called Muslims or peacemakers. Thus, he argued, Islam should have guidance for peace.

Peace in Islam, Dr. Ramzy explained, is not the absence of war, rather

it is absence of fear other than fear of Allah. There are three basic principles for peace. Firstly, the existence of human being is sacred. Secondly, human being is not peaceful as human in nature is violent. Finally, human has weaknesses in knowledge and emotions and it is God who guides people to peace. He added that there are two methods of peace in Islam, that is establishing and managing peace. To establish peace, it should start within a person by ensuring that he or she is peaceful, like lighting one's lamp before lighting the lamp of others.

Further, he explained that Islam gives equal importance to human needs. Human needs include physical (hunger), intellectual (search for truth) and spiritual (religion). Islam encourages social interactions whereby it is better to mingle with others rather than keeping to oneself. Islam discourages anything that breaks social interactions, such as spying and backstabbing. According to a story in Al-Hadith, companions of the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W asked the prophet's wife about the deeds and daily activities of the prophet. One of them suggested that he would refrain from sleeping and pray all night, another would refrain from sexual activities and would not marry, and another from eating. To this, the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W rebuked that he observed fasting and breaking fast, he performed prayers and slept at night and he also married. The prophet cautioned them by saying, "Whoever turns away from my *Sunnah* (my way) is not from me. (Hadith Sahih Bukhari: 4776)"

On the other hand, managing peace falls under two types of responsibilities. Firstly, the individual responsibility which stands on one's consciousness that is *taqwa*, or fear of Allah. The other is social responsibility, as described in a story of travelers boarding a ship. Each of them has their own seats, but one of them claimed that his seat belonged to him and started to make a hole under the seat. Unless somebody tried to stop him, the whole ship shall sink. Another concept is repentance. In Islam, any sin against God is forgivable by God but if a person commits a sin towards other people, the sin is only forgivable by the person affected.

Such respect for other cultures and religions, he elaborated, were shown when the guide for Prophet S.A.W's journey from Mecca to Medina was a Jew. Moreover, the first peace treaty is the Medina Treaty, Egyptian people invited Muslims to their land (Saad bin Abi Waqas); and Arab traders went to Sri Lanka to trade and live harmoniously. In his conclusion, Dr. Ramzy highlighted that the current problem is because Islam has become exclusive for only Muslims. This is contrary to the spirit of Islam that Allah, Al-Quran and the message of Islam is

for all.

The moderator, Dr. Faridah then highlighted again that Islam is religion of peace and in order to have peace there must be peace at the individual level and at the societal level. She then passed the floor over to the second speaker, Prof. Dato’ Dr. Christopher Boey.

“Dialogue is the Tradition of All Founders of the World’s Religions”

Dr. Boey began by stressing that an interfaith dialogue is crucial in today’s world which is one characterized by so much separation, distrust and loneliness. He cited technological advancements over the last century in communication enabling data to be easily transmitted to different parts of the world in a matter of moments. He raised the question whether inspite of these advances, people were truly able to communicate and conduct dialogue in the true sense of the word. He also noted the many wars which had been fought and continue to be fought today in the name of religion and highlighted the need to return to the prime point, examining the underlying philosophies of these religions and the thinking or ways of life of the founders of these religions. He was convinced that all the founders of these religions love peace, love life and love humanity, and if they had the opportunity to get together, they would become the best of friends.

Dr. Boey noted that this conviction was strongly shared by the second President of the Soka Gakkai, Mr. Josei Toda, who once remarked, “All the problems will be solved if only the founders of the world’s religions and schools of philosophy would get together to talk things out”. Buddhism places great emphasis on dialogue. It is the very tradition of Buddhism and the tradition of all the founders of the world’s religions. He said that Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammed placed great importance on talking to the people. He also noted that the sutras which contain teachings of Buddhism are collections of dialogues conducted by the Buddha with the different people facing diverse problems as he travelled across India amidst a background of power strife and societal turmoil.

Genuine dialogue, in his opinion, is the first step to true friendship. It is an expression of a sincere desire to get to know another. He explained that the basis of genuine dialogue is two-fold. Firstly it is to respect the preciousness and immense potential of our own lives and those of others, Secondly, it is to respect the diversity of all lives.

Dr. Boey drew upon the Parable of the Jewel in the Robe in the Lotus Sutra, Chapter 8. The parable was about a rich friend who took pity on his poor friend and sewed a jewel on the underlining of his drunken poor

friend's robe before parting urgently. Upon waking up and not realizing the existence of the jewel underneath his robe, the poor friend continued his life roaming the streets for years until he met his rich friend again. The rich friend was shocked to find the poor friend in a dire state and asked the poor friend to look underneath his robe. The poor friend was ecstatic to find the precious jewel underneath his robe which he had been carrying all this while. He explained that the underlying teaching of the Buddha is that the supreme life condition of Buddhahood exists within every being. This is the basis of the Buddhist belief that everyone is equal because they are endowed with this supreme life condition in their lives regardless of their religion, creed, culture or gender.

Another example was drawn from Parable of the Three Kinds of Medicinal Herbs and Two Kinds of Trees from the Lotus Sutra Chapter 5, to illustrate the Buddhist concept of harmonious co-existence. In this parable, the three kinds of medicinal herbs and trees were distinguished by their different appearances, colours, height and structures. When the rain fell, they would absorb the water according to their needs in order to grow. The rain signifies the nourishment of the life force from the universe which is also the Buddha's teaching which nourishes the millions of creatures of the universe. The 13th century Buddhist leader, Nichiren used the analogy of the cherry, plum, peach and damson to explain how the Buddha strives to create an atmosphere for cultivation of all forms of life allowing each of them to develop to the fullest. Each herb when developed to the fullest is unique and beautiful in its own way. In the same way, we, as human beings do not need to model ourselves according to any stereotypes. This respect for the diversity of each individual was the main point of this parable.

Furthermore, Dr. Boey emphasized that Soka Gakkai International (SGI) movement led by Mr. Daisaku Ikeda, the current President of SGI is fully committed to such dialogues. When Mr. Ikeda visited Malaysia in 2000, he used a local Malaysian idiom to express this idea of friendship, “*Bagai isi dengan kuku*” (Friendship is a bond as indivisible as a fingernail and the flesh beneath it). It illustrated the deep friendship between two human beings. He quoted Mr. Ikeda: “The movement of SGI is about spreading of trust, spreading friendship and spreading of happiness”. He also added that Mr. Ikeda emphasized the importance of dialogue and had conducted numerous dialogues throughout the world with people of different backgrounds. In the Muslim world, Mr. Ikeda has carried out profound dialogues such as the ones with the late Mr. Abdul Rahman Wahid Mohamad, former President of Indonesia and the late Professor Dr. Majid Tehranian, who came originally from Iran.

In addition, Mr. Ikeda founded the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research in 1996 in order to carry on the ideals of peace of his mentor Josei Toda. He appointed Dr. Tehranian, a Muslim and non-SGI member as the founding director of the institute. This appointment immediately demonstrated Mr. Ikeda’s conviction that what Buddhists and Muslims share in common is much more powerful than what divides them and that people of good will must work together and be enriched by the diversity and not be steered away from it. Dr. Boey said that the dialogue between Mr. Ikeda and Professor Tehranian is one of the best dialogues he had ever read. Although the contents of the dialogue were meaningful and inspiring, it was the beautiful friendship between the two authors that really moved him. He ended his speech by quoting a poem written by Professor Tehranian at the end of the book that described the friendship and unity between two people of different religions.

Question and Answer (Q&A) Session

The first question was posed by Mr. Taka, a Japanese student from University of Malaya on why Sri Lanka is not as peaceful as Malaysia even when the people are also diverse. Dr. Ramzy who hailed from Sri Lanka opined that the current political unrest has no religion involvement. He went on to elaborate that prior to colonialization, no record of violence among the Sri Lankan in terms of religious dispute. However, during colonial period, many quarters employed anti-colonial concepts to go against colonialisation. To do so, they included some ideologies which implied that Sri Lanka is an island of Buddhism and other people with different ideologies (religion) are not accepted. It was proven effective and as a result, even after the nation’s independence, some politicians continue to use these ideologies to profit themselves.

The next question was posed by Dr. Zobaida from University of Malaya. She asked how to be peaceful within one self. Dr. Ramzy replied that people could change their nature to be peaceful and they needed courage. He added that in Islam, prayer is the best way to attain peace and other ways may also include meditation and so on. Dr. Boey also expressed his opinion from Buddhist perspective. To attain peace, people must reflect on their own lives and develop a solid sense of self. It is the important role of religion to enable a person to perceive the true nature of their own lives and bring forth their own unique potential, thereby contributing to the betterment of society. One person who has done this has the power to inspire and influence others to do the same.

The potential of a single person is illustrated by the example of Rosa Parks, a renowned figure in the American Civil Rights Movement, who stood up for herself because she believed she had the same right as other white people in the country, thereby encouraging others to do the same. This kind of courage is important as it will teach young people that every single life matters and once a person sees the greatness in himself or herself, then he or she will see greatness in others.

The moderator Dr. Faridah also took the opportunity to inquire the panelists on how men and women can contribute to peace. She referred to the painting at the back of the hall depicting Muslim women and was painted by a Chinese artist. Dr. Boey replied that over the centuries, women have suffered greatly and often silently in times of war and violence and yet, unlike in the case of men, their pain is rarely highlighted in the news. This suffering of women has the potential to give rise to a great passion and powerful drive for peace. The SGI has always placed great importance on the role of women for peace which will increase even further in the future. Meanwhile, Dr. Ramzy provided an example of the roles of women with their neighbours. It was encouraged in Islam to have a cordial relationship with Muslims and non-Muslims neighbours as they have rights according to the religion.

The final question was from Mr. Yong, a Malaysian. He posed a hypothetical question to the panelists; if the founders of Islam (Prophet Muhammad SAW) and Buddhism (Gautama Buddha) were to come together, what would be their ultimate messages? Before the panelists replied, Mr. Abdullah, a member of the audience wanted to express his opinion on the matter. He said that God has created mankind and he believed that both religious figures were the messengers of God. Dr. Boey believed that both figures would discuss the current problems in the world today and try to come up with solutions. Dr. Ramzy also concurred and stressed that if it indeed happened, they would surely come together and do the best for the world.

Conclusion

At the end of the dialogue, the moderator Dr. Faridah concluded that this would not be the last dialogue between Islam and Buddhism. The speakers had given an overview to the concept of peace in both religions. In Islam, humans are given “*Al-Aql*”, or mind, to think. The audiences were the people who could talk about peace and at the same time, applying it in their lives. Peace is very precious to all the people of this world.

The way forward is to encourage more open and sincere dialogue between religions and within the religion. People of goodwill must come together and realize that they are the messengers of peace in order to make the universal values of Islam and Buddhism accessible to all.

The ceremony ended with a souvenir presentation and photo sessions with all the speakers and honourable guests present in the afternoon.