

Name of Media	Bangkok Post
Date of Article	15 July 2010
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Title	Building interfaith trust and respect
Project Name	8 <sup>th</sup> ASEF Journalists' Colloquium

## Bangkok Post The world's window to Thailand

### Building interfaith trust and respect

#### Major religions share a similar goal of creating a just and peaceful society

- Published: 15/07/2010 at 12:00 AM
- Newspaper section: [Outlook](#)

A university student stopped by a book stall, flipped through a book, and her mother stooped over and said: "What on earth would you read Islamic books for? We are Buddhists," she said matter-of-factly. A bearded seller smiled and said, "I am a Muslim and I am studying Pali. I want to read Buddhist texts too to learn more about the Buddha's teachings."



"It is all right to learn other languages - why not religions?" he said. The young lady smiled: "Indeed, it's not that I am going to convert myself into a Muslim. I just want to understand and learn from people of different faiths."

A grasp of "neighbouring" religions, the young lady said, may help her understand the ongoing conflicts in many parts of the world: Afghanistan, the Middle East, Europe, South Asia, the US and the deep South of Thailand.

"In Thailand, we have long enjoyed peaceful co-existence among religions and races, yet, if you ask whether we really understand one another, the answer is probably no," said Chupunit Kesmanee, former human rights committee member and the only Thai delegate of the recent 6th Asem Interfaith Dialogue, held in Madrid, Spain.

The international forum called for delegates from 46 nations in Asia and Europe - religious leaders, senior officials, intellectuals and media - to share and learn from each other on ways to bridge differences, promote social cohesion and reduce misunderstanding among faiths.

Promoting the culture of respect and tolerance seems to be an urgent global priority, the forum emphasized.

"The world has always been diverse, yet modern consumerism in society makes this diversity a divide," said Chaiwat Thirapantu, an enthusiast of complexity theory. "We have become very self-absorbing and self-centred, and the social fabric that used to foster traditional collective values has become weak. On top of that, life in the fast lane deprives us of the luxury of time and attention to really get to know and understand one another," said Chaiwat.

Many view the boon of information technology as a key to link us. Anglican priest Andy Shie, however, noted that despite our access to the sea of information on the web and our exposure to real-time media and education in schools, ignorance and prejudice prevail.

"More information is not equivalent to knowledge. More knowledge is not equivalent to wisdom," said the delegate to the Asem Interfaith Dialogue from Brunei. "Look at the world today, we have loads of information, but do we respect others or become any wiser?" he said.

In Brunei as in many Asian countries, teenagers disrespect their parents and older generations, he said. Environmental problems, such as deforestation and water pollution, are rooted from our lack of respect of Mother Nature.

"Like love, respect is a value from the heart. We won't learn to respect or love others through a handful of information, it requires other processes," he said.

Indigenous highlanders in the north of Thailand have little access to modern-day information, yet they are very respectful people, according to Chupunit, an ethnicity expert from Srinakharinwirot University. The Karen people assimilated Christianity and Buddhist teachings into their animistic beliefs.

The rotating farming system, for instance, shows these exchanged values. They put a simple wooden cross sign on their farms to ward off evil spirits. Or put a yellow robe around trees to protect the tree spirits. During farming and harvesting, they perform rituals to pay respect to natural spirits that they regard as God's presence and Buddha in nature.

These days, however, in industrialising society marked by consumerism, we trade religious and traditional values for material ones, collectivity for individualism. We disregard people with integrity and ethical values and respect people with money, power and authority.

"Science, politics and economics are among the new faiths people are holding on to, and we are fighting each other from these different ideologies," said Chupinit.

There have been polls in Thailand that reveal young generations saying that dishonest and corrupt people are acceptable as long as they show tangible performances and share their gains with others.

A similar trend happened in the Philippines too. The Filipino delegate said that people seem to have their own standards for what is right and wrong, no matter how offensive to the majority.

"The problems we are facing are not about clashing religious values, but the lack of them. Truly, we are facing a spiritual deprivation problem," said Fr Vichai Phoktavi, an outspoken Jesuit priest who is active in local inter-religious dialogue and socially-engaged religious activities. "We fight for benefits rather than stand for values. We base our judgements on emotional biases rather than on righteousness."

Among our different faiths, there are human values that all of us share and thus should be promoted. They are, for instance, respect, honesty, compassion, sharing, forgiving and caring for the environment.

"If we know how to respect and live our faiths, it wouldn't be difficult to respect others in a similar vein," said a Christian priest, a delegate from Spain. "So practise your own faith and cherish other cultures and support them to follow their faiths, if they are not against universal values."

To foster trust, mutual understanding and harmony, we need to reconnect and bridge people's relationships.

"Basically, we need a face to face connection, to meet, to exchange our values and learn from each other," said Phra Paisal Visalo. "Feeling connected, we will become more understanding and empathetic towards each other, and tolerance can come about."

"That we cannot tolerate different views or traditions is because deep down we are not secure about ourselves. We are threatened by differences, fearing that they will undermine us, uproot our identity or beliefs. If we are secure about ourselves and our faiths, then we can deal with differences with reverence and openness," said Phra Paisal.

Dialogue is one such means; it is not only talk but also action that foster human relations.

"In dialogue, we need to open our hearts to listen to different views and feelings. It is a way we practice respect and tolerance," said Chupinit.

Dialogue should be promoted as part of our culture, in everyday life, at home, at school, at work, in the neighbourhood and community, he said.

"I understood and appreciated Islam better when my teacher invited a Muslim friend to talk to us about his religious values," recalled Chupinit.

"Reading from textbooks was dry. When you talk about faiths, it is about human feelings and lifestyles. To be touched, it must be conveyed through human beings."

The Madrid Statement on Asem Interfaith Dialogue supports intercultural and interfaith dialogues; however, it depends on each state to implement such recommendations.

As in Thailand, dialogue is still uncommon. Most is by individuals and non-governmental organisations.

In the past, the late reformist monk Buddhadasa Bhikku hosted informal inter-religious dialogues with Christian priests and Muslim imams. As if he envisioned future chaos, since the 1980s the monk wrote as part of his resolution that we must try to bridge understanding among religions and all religions must come together to be a guiding light for a noble society.

The monk also emphasized the significance of the exchange of knowledge and understanding among religions. Comparative religions studies, the monk suggested, should seek common ground instead of differences.

Unfortunately, comparative studies on religion are not very common in schools and universities, even in the national monks' colleges.

Apart from individual efforts from religious leaders, lately we have seen more non-government organisations holding inter-religious and intra-religious dialogues and events.

The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), for instance, has been hosting annual intercultural events in Thailand for several years. The event includes seminars, talks and cultural performances.

Another organisation is the Thousand Stars Foundation (see sidebar on page 1), which has been organising seminars and cultural events to promote dialogue and mutual understanding among various traditions of Buddhism.

"There should be more of both inter- and intra-religious dialogue so that we understand and feel related to each other more. This, I believe, will prevent us from

being insensitive and ignorant to our friends," said Lapapan Supamanta, former INEB secretary.

She pointed out a case where state educational regulations demanded that each school have a Buddha image on their premises. "This regulation reflects our sheer ignorance for people in the deep South where the majority is Muslim. Such insensitivity causes the bitter feelings we have for each other."

"Buddhists are the majority in the country. If we made an effort to understand our friends who are minorities, they would not have to strive to get our attention. Negligence and ignorance create a rift in society; if unattended, it can become wider and we may fall apart," said Lapapan.

In light of increasing social rifts, FR Vichai emphasized, "It's time all religions join hands to bring religious values back to people's lives, to restore social justice and peace, and religious values must be the conscience for politics and society."

To date, spiritual leaders are rather passive when it comes to addressing social issues, not to mention political ones - it's like a taboo, said Fr Vichai. "Religions are confined to rituals and detached from people's lives and social problems. We need to change that, to be more socially engaged."

At present, a number of religious leaders have become more engaged. For example, Fr Vichai founded Santiwana Retreat Centre in Bangkok to host spiritual workshops as well as talks on spiritual values and social problems from different faith traditions.

Buddhism Network, led by Phra Paisal Visalo, has been active in light of social and political conflicts and each year he leads a walking pilgrimage to raise awareness for the environment.

There are a number of religious leaders who have been working to tackle social problems and restore people's faiths; however, their efforts are unknown by the public and under-reported by the media, said Assoc Prof Kitima Surasondhi of Thammasat University.

Additionally, Fr Vichai commented, efforts by religious leaders and groups are confined to their own followers. Inter-religious collaboration is needed to tackle complex social problems and yet it is still infrequent.

"When tragedy occurs, it is good when all religions come together to lend spiritual support by performing rituals. But greater than that, we should work together to bring religious values back to the people's hearts, to collaborate our efforts, be they talk or action. I believe all religions share a similar goal - to have a just and peaceful society," said Fr Vichai.

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