

# TABLE FELLOWSHIP WITH OUR BUDDHIST NEIGHBORS FOR BELOVED COMMUNITY

## *Interfaith Table Fellowship: A Messy Business*

Multnomah Biblical Seminary of Multnomah University  
Paul Louis Metzger

### *Potlucks and Religious Pluralism*

What better way exists to build mutual trust and a sense of neighborliness than through potlucks and table fellowship? Everyone brings a favorite dish to share, sits down at the same table at eye level, and tastes from the respective foods and drinks. It can get quite messy with all the variety of finger foods and delicacies, and there is often a lot of cleaning up to do. But still, it is quite fun.

What isn't all that fun is seeking to address the messy business of right and left political and religious conflict. We all tend to portray ourselves and our camps in a more favorable light than we do others and are not able to see that our lives and movements are often messy and that we have our own messes to clean up.

I have been trying to clean up some religious messes over the years with my longtime friend and colleague, Zen Buddhist priest, Abbot Kyogen Carlson. We have addressed religious and civic issues on a variety of levels over the years. Among other things, we have sought to engage the messy business of the cultural and religious right and left in the city of Portland in Oregon. Our respective communities—Evangelical Christianity and Zen Buddhism—function by and large as a microcosm of this greater reality.

Members of our respective communities are sometimes if not often at the corners rather than at the center of our society, and we have been guilty at times of hurling food or worse at one another from across the divide. Kyogen and I have been trying for several years to get those in our respective camps to sit down together at the table and listen and engage one another eye to eye and heart to heart. Such efforts served as a fitting backdrop for our application to The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) for the grant aiming to help seminary graduates become effective ministers in a multi-faith society.

The ATS grant afforded us at The Institute for the Theology of Culture: New Wine, New Wineskins of Multnomah Biblical Seminary/Multnomah University to partner with Abbot Carlson and his temple community, Dharma Rain Zen Center. Through the grant, we were able to assist seminary students in addition to Abbot Carlson's Buddhist practitioners in serving more effectively in American society, which is increasingly a multi-faceted and messy religious smorgasbord.

The planning team, which included Beyth Hogue Greenetz (New Wine, New Wineskins' Administrative Coordinator), Genko Rainwater (Zen Buddhist monk at Dharma Rain Zen Center), Daicho Ohgushi (Ethics Council member at Dharma Rain Zen Center), Kyogen and me, decided to host a series of potlucks, where self-selected groups within our movement came together to eat, get to know one another, and discuss our traditions (involving pre-assigned readings), including key points of tension. The Evangelical participants were made up primarily of seminary students who were chaplains, pastors, missionaries and theologians in training. The Buddhist dialogue partners included priests from the Zen and Tibetan Buddhist traditions along with monks in training and parishioners of various walks of life. All who joined were those within our respective camps at Multnomah Biblical Seminary, Dharma Rain Zen Center, and their affiliates. The various evening potluck events would prepare the way for a weekend retreat that would serve as the culmination of the year long gatherings. There we would deal with a wide range of issues, including hot topic issues that separate our movements: religious pluralism, evangelism, heaven and hell, abortion and gay marriage.

### *Religion and Politics over Dinner*

As a rule, it is not wise to discuss these hot religious and political topics over or even after dinner. Still, those of us who planned these gatherings maintained that, with the appropriate instruction and support, we could have such courageous conversations if situated in the context of table fellowship. Sitting down together with people of different walks of life and looking them in the eye over meals where everyone brings a favorite dish to share is somewhat disarming and can ease tension. Such practices help us move beyond posturing on our favorite moral platforms so that we can share life while sharing meals and personal stories.

The very first potluck gathering we saw how important these occasions would be for building trust and understanding. The level of anxiety in the room among some members of the Buddhist community was very apparent. I don't think they expected to

feel such strong emotions, but several of them had come from Christian backgrounds and/or had Christian and even Evangelical Christian family members. These Buddhists had experienced rejection from these Christians due to their religious sojourns away from Christianity and lifestyle choices. They spoke openly about their anxiety the first night. Throughout the year, they would recount the visceral reactions some of them had in preparation for and during that first gathering. Some of them had forgotten or had stored away deep down inside memories of encounters that had hurt them, and which resurfaced through our self-identification as Evangelicals.

These Buddhists' level of anxiety and reawakened memories were no doubt matched by our own amnesia, and perhaps Evangelical fears of possible doctrinal and ethical compromise. Sometimes it is those fears that cause us as Evangelicals to speak louder and more often so that people know we have not budged on our important stands. We often talk about taking a stand for our convictions, but we fail to see and forget how hurtful it is when we push and shove and knock others down as we stand up for our truth claims and ethical stances. Moreover, we forget that those we objectify are often very much like us—they're humans, too. Surely, we Evangelicals are not alone. We have been the objects of other people's and other movements' ridicule and scorn. We need to learn how to move past objectification together with those of these other movements. The only way to do that is to sit down with those we would either objectify or be objectified by and seek after reconciliation. In order to do so, we need to develop the appropriate table manners and social etiquette. Otherwise, we will only make the mess worse. Hopefully, what we Evangelicals learned this past year with our Buddhist neighbors about how to dialogue and work together can be of benefit to our respective movements at large.

### ***Table Manners and Social Etiquette at the Interfaith Table***

Here are a few of the values and practices that we came to esteem and embody and hope to share with other seminarians, Buddhist practitioners, and those of other faiths in the coming years in service to our ministries in a multi-faith society. Anyone seeking to coordinate a similar project should account for these dynamics and principles.

*Be hospitable, not hostile.* Hospitality is the foundational value and practice that grant participants sought to exemplify and embody. I would not say that America is generally known for its hospitality, at least not to the same extent as Middle Eastern and Pacific Rim cultures. If we want to build trust and clean up the messes of inter-religious conflict in our multi-faith society known for its culture wars, it is very important that

we come to cherish the art of hospitality. It is very hard to be hostile at the family table. Sure, it happens. But as was stated above, it is a lot more difficult when you have to look someone in the face and share food at the potluck with them. So, we recommend that ministers of the gospel become known in their communities as artisans and connoisseurs of hospitality.

*Be long-suffering toward anxiety and reduce amnesia.* In the West, we who are Christians have a lot longer record of missteps and bad deeds toward those who do not share our views than they do toward us. Of course, Christianity has also done incredible good. And no doubt, if we were in another culture where Christians are in the religious minority, the opposite would be the case and the negative list would be longer for those in the religious majority in that land. Qualifications aside, we Christians in the West need to be long-suffering and sensitive. So often, we enter into the room to sit down at a table without realizing that our family name with all its associations based on other family members' actions enters and sits down with us. There will be anxiety. We will have to weather messy emotions and awkward silence and conversations. We need to be prepared to handle these room dynamics and reduce our amnesia about the messiness of our traditions. With this point in mind, it is worth noting that it took us Evangelicals a whole year to feel comfortable enough to share some of our honest and pressing questions with our Buddhist friends. Before we could share about those concerns, we needed to make sure that they were able to share their concerns as those whose numbers were smaller and history shorter here in the States.

*Be inquisitive, not inquisitorial.* Listening is a form of love. Why should Buddhists and those of other religious movements listen to us Evangelical Christians, if we are not willing to listen first to them? We need to learn about them, learn from them, and learn about what they love because we love them. And so, we asked the Buddhists to share their traditions' stories, perspectives and customs rather than try to speak for them. We read what they recommended, just as members in our group read what we recommended. After all, we were all truly invested in our respective beliefs and practices. We were approaching one another from the outside looking in, and we wanted to try and understand one another from the inside out as much as possible. We learned how great our need was to develop further a spirit of charity. Charity involves a desire to listen, to learn, and to understand the other. Charity is inquisitive. Charity goes a long way toward building trust and cultivating healthy forms of communication in Christian witness. Case in point, one of the Buddhists had shared during the year's gatherings of how she had been rejected by her Evangelical father because of her beliefs

and way of life. When we asked her if she felt that we treated her the same way (given that we likely held similar convictions to him), she said that we were not like her father: “No, you (plural) are inquisitive.” Hospitality mixed with charity has a way of making us inquisitive, rather than inquisitional.

*Lead, don't shove.* Some of the Buddhists confessed at the end of the year that they had feared that the entire enterprise was a bait and switch set up, where hospitality would simply serve as a cover for evangelism. They were pleasantly surprised in the end to find out that we were true to our expressed aims and purposes. Certainly, as Evangelicals, we are committed to evangelism. It is in our DNA. Still, we need to be sensitive, and not force our views on others in overt or subtle terms. As one of the Buddhist practitioners said at one of the meetings, Evangelicals should gently lead people to Christ rather than push or force them toward him. How right he is. In fact, it is bound up with the previous point above about love. The great commission flows out of the great commandment and the ensuing commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. As Evangelicals who take to heart the Apostle Peter's exhortation, we are always to be ready to share the hope within us, and when given the opportunity, to do so in gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Respect entails that we are straightforward and honest with those who do not express faith in Christ and guard against forms of manipulation. The only way in a culture often cynical toward Evangelical Christianity to be in a position for our views to be heard is to create space with honest and open and relational lives. For all our talk as Evangelicals about personal relationships with Jesus, it is very important that we are committed to personal relationships with Buddhists and those of other faith traditions regardless of whether or not they ever express interest in Jesus. Only then is our witness truly relational and communal (rather than contractual).

*Go through our convictions in search of common ground.* So often in conversations on religious pluralism, people are encouraged to leave their respective convictions at the door and go in search of common ground. Our approach as Christian and Buddhist organizers for our gatherings was to go through our respective convictions rather than around them. Of course, we weren't willing to stop short and refuse to engage until those on the other side came to see things our way. Even so, we realized that we shared much in common anyway given our Christian and Buddhist traditions' emphases on hospitality, long-suffering, and compassion. We started and will continue to move forward from common ground in search of common ground as we sit down together to eat at the table.

*Be prepared to get messy and possibly messed up.* Not only did we get into the messiness of our religious, ethical and cultural convictions, but also it got messy as we had to come to terms with our misconceptions, repent of our faulty judgments and prejudices, and deal with our growing affection for one another as we continued eating together and sharing personal stories of pain and joy. We realized how ideological we can all get at times. We so easily objectify others. In keeping with the point above about moving through our convictions in search of common ground, Kyogen in particular has helped me to learn Jesus' teaching about taking out the plank from my own eye before taking out the speck from someone else's eye (Matthew 7:5) through recourse to his own tradition's wisdom on non-objectification. The greater the number of people involved, the further apart we are with little to no opportunity to engage person to person; as a result, the more ideological we become. Ideology leads us to turn Buddhists and Christians and Muslims and Hindus and other spiritual people (whoever is not us) into isms and ists. This is one of the reasons why we need to cultivate practices of hospitality; otherwise, objectification and even hostility increases. The smaller the number of people and the more intimate the setting the messier in a beautiful way the encounters can become. As a result of our potlucks and retreat this past year, lasting friendships have been forged, and we are longing for more. It could get even messier though, as we seek to involve others within our communities who are far more cynical and objectionable to what we self-selected Buddhists and Christians are about. Our lines are even blurring as to who "our" communities really are, and who we are in relation to one another. That's what table fellowship can do to you.

### *Nibbles and Snacks Between Interfaith Meals*

During the closing conversation of our Evangelical-Buddhist retreat on hospitality and neighborliness, one of the Buddhist abbots, Gyokuko Carlson (Kyogen's wife), advanced the discussion and led us forward beyond the retreat. She was not content with allowing the weekend to come to an end. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Life itself never really ends for Buddhists—the cycle continues on!

Even more surprising was the charge she gave to all of us to be "lead goats" in our respective movements. I am not sure how this struck the Buddhists' ears, but to my Evangelical ears, it was surprising in that Matthew 25 teaches us that we are to aspire to be sheep, not goats. For an Evangelical Christian, being a goat is not a good thing!

Of course, the abbot did not have Matthew 25 in mind. She was challenging us to be willing to risk and welcome others in our respective communities to participate in our

courageous conversations. The abbot shared with us how herds of goats will not venture to nibble at a bush until the lead goat risks and takes the first bite. We were lead goats, who had risked to nibble at the bush of being neighborly to one another. We had to make sure we would not now retreat, but advance to the next bush. In other words, she was encouraging us to nibble on snacks until the next time we sit down for another shared meal.

The abbot had listened attentively during the weekend to Buddhists and Christians share of their mutual appreciation for the courageous conversations we had participated in over the past several months. The weekend gathering served as the culmination of all those get togethers. Many of us were amazed and relieved that we could converse with one another civilly, compassionately, and inquisitively, even on hot topic issues that had charged our respective communities and pained our personal lives over the years. Healing had occurred, and lasting friendships across the religious and cultural divide were being built. However, we were afraid that others in our communities would not be so sympathetic and neighborly. We wanted to protect one another from those who would be hostile and indifferent. After all, we were now friends, and our friendships were fresh and fragile like new blossoms on a bush. We wouldn't want wolves in sheep's clothing to come and devour them!

Still others in our communities, though hesitant, would not be resistant. They would nibble at the bush without devouring the blossoms, if we would be willing to risk and continue nibbling before them. It may cost us to risk in this way. But it would be worth it. After all, for us Evangelicals, Jesus' exhortation in Matthew 25 calls us to inconvenience ourselves and care for him by caring for others. One of the chief differences between sheep and goats according to that passage is that the sheep care for "the other" whereas the goats who are self-conscious and self-concerned do not.

The fruit of Jesus' Spirit will lead us to risk pain and suffering to care for our neighbors—whether they are Evangelicals or Buddhists or others we invite to the table—even nibbling at the bush of hospitality over and over again. Based on the Buddhist abbot's call, this is what we plan to do: to continue nibbling at the bush of hospitality over messy potluck dinners and desserts with microbrews (non-alcoholic, of course) and green tea over the coming months and years.

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ATS Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Practices in a MultiFaith Society