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INTRODUCTION TO THE GOOD HEART

In August of 1994 His Holiness the Dalai Lama led the John Main seminar, an annual international spiritual event held in honour of the Benedictine monk whom Bede Griffiths once called the most important spiritual guide in the church today. The Dalai Lama and Dom John Main met on only two occasions. The first was at a Catholic cathedral where Dom John has been asked to welcome the Dalai Lama as a fellow monk at the opening of a large inter-faith evening. I remember in the run up to the evening how strongly Father John argued for the inclusion of a substantial period of silent meditation. There were religious leaders, from archbishops to native American medicine men, making speeches of goodwill and reciting beautiful prayers. There were choirs, chants and in the cathedral itself all the visual beauties of Christian art and culture. The organisers were frightened at the suggestion of a twenty minute period of silence in the middle of such a large and public ceremony. Father John insisted and Father John got his way.

After the ceremony the Dalai Lama sought out the Benedictine monk who had welcomed him and remarked how impressed he was with the unusual experience of meditation in a Christian church. Standing beside them I could sense the attraction between the two men and the feeling that they may have been speaking rather superficial words but that they were also exploring a deeper, silent level of dialogue. Father John then invited the Dalai Lama to visit our small, recently started community in the city which was dedicated to the practice and teaching of meditation in the Christian tradition. We had only a small suburban house at that time with an extended lay community living in apartments around us. It was a new kind of Christian urban monasticism deriving its life and vision from the rediscovery of meditation in the Christian spiritual tradition. I remember wondering what the Dalai Lama would make of it coming as he might with images of medieval European monasteries in his mind. When his hovering secretary intervened, after hearing Father John's invitation, to say that regrettably His Holiness' schedule was too full and there was no free time for him to accept, I was not surprised. But then the Dalai Lama turned to his secretary and in a tone which lost none of its gentleness but had gained new force, he said he would accept and they would have to make time. The Dalai Lama insisted and the Dalai Lama got his way. He and Father John exchanged a look, smiled and separated.

The following Sunday the Dalai Lama's cortege of limousines pulled up outside the Benedictine Community's house a few hours after we had been swept through by the RCMP. His Holiness joined us for the midday meditation in our small meditation room and then for lunch with the community. We ate as usual in silence. After lunch there was conversation and then Father John and the Dalai Lama withdrew for a private conversation. At the end of the visit we presented him with a copy of the Rule of St Benedict, and he gave Father John the traditional Tibetan white silk cloth of respect. The Dalai Lama drove away. Father John went back to his work of founding the Christian Meditation Community and they never met again after that Fall afternoon in 1980.

By 1993 when I wrote and invited His Holiness to lead the John Main seminar a lot had happened. Father John had died in 1982 at the age of fifty-six. The Community was barely founded at his death but his teaching on Christian mediation had begun to percolate throughout the Church. It continued to expand in the following years and to nourish the deepening of the spiritual life of many Christians'. Twenty-five centres had formed and

there were over a thousand small weekly meditation groups sustaining people's individual practice spread through thirty-five countries. The International Centre of the World Community for Christian Meditation, which had been named during the 1992 Seminar at New Harmony, Indiana, led by Bede Griffiths, had been opened in London. Previous Seminars had been led also by the philosopher Charles Taylor, the critic Robert Kiely, the founder of L'Arche Jean Vanier, the Jesuit scholar William Johnston.

To my surprise and delight I received a quick personal response from the Dalai Lama personally. He remembered his meeting with John Main thirteen years before, he was pleased by the growth of his community world-wide and he would be happy and honoured to lead the Seminar. The brief meeting of the two monks long before had brought us to a wonderful opportunity. The question was, how were we going to grasp it.

The answer was, by letting it go. It seemed clear to me that the opportunity for the Dalai Lama to spend three days with a group of committed Christian meditators with their equally committed non-Christian friends was too unique to use it as just another talk-shop. I had already told His Holiness that our seminars were times of meditation as well as of vocal dialogue. We would have three periods of meditation together each day and these would not be squeezed in, they would be central to the whole event. Naturally, he had no problem with that. The problem now was not that we would be silent but what would talk about.

We considered the usual kind of philosophical and religious themes for such a Buddhist-Christian event and felt they did not do justice to the uniqueness of the opportunity. Then we decided to let it go. We would make a gift to His Holiness of what was most precious, holy and profound for us as Christians and we would ask him what he thought and felt about what we were giving. We would ask him to comment on the Gospels. He accepted without hesitation remarking only that, of course, he knew little about what he was going to speak about. It struck me as a most impressive sign of his self-confidence and of his humility. Two or three years earlier he had stunned his audiences in London by his learned and scholarly presentations of Buddhist philosophy, a performance any academic would have been proud to have achieved. Now he was willing to come before a Christian audience, albeit a sympathetic and contemplative one, and talk about what, *he* said smilingly, he knew nothing about. Once he had accepted this idea, the Seminar became an event of great anticipation. It was a gamble, a risk of faith on both sides. We had no doubt that the time of meditation and presence together would be worthwhile by itself. Anyone who has spent any time with the Dalai Lama knows that his presence bestows peace, depth and joy. But even with the Dalai Lama it might bomb as a dialogue.

Why, instead, it succeed in a way no one could have anticipated is what I would like to reflect on now. The Dalai Lama's commentary on the Christian Gospels at the 1994 John Main Seminar, *The Good Heart*, which constitute the heart of this book, became a historic event. Its implications reach far forward into the continuing dialogue between the great and the minor religious traditions of the human family in the coming millennium. Reading this book will suggest what that dialogue means for the future of the world. It provides what we need to meet the challenges to world peace and universal co-operation in the decades ahead: a *model of dialogue*.

REAL PRESENCE

The Seminar originated many years before in the way that the Dalai Lama and Dom John Main had been present to each other. They did not have much time to talk but the time they had together allowed an important communication to take place. The Dalai Lama has also spoken about this factor of real presence in his description of his meetings with Thomas Merton. It was the chemistry of presence that ensured the dialogue at the John Main Seminar. Afterwards the Dalai Lama remarked to me that he had learned more about Christianity during the Seminar than at any other time since his conversations with Merton thirty years before.

The importance of presence is one of the most important lessons *The Good Heart* has to teach us, Buddhist and Christians and the followers of all faiths, if we are learn better how to respond to the contemporary challenge to dialogue. This might sound vague or platitudinous but it is in fact only because presence of this kind is non-verbal and non-conceptual. It is difficult to describe but it is the first thing we experience in dialogue. *How* are we to each other? The success of the verbal dialogue depends directly, builds directly upon, this foundation of mutual presence. Words cannot achieve it if it is not there. And without it words can go wildly wrong.

In his opening remarks the Dalai Lama spoke about the importance of all the different forms of dialogue being practised between religions today. He affirmed the importance of scholarly dialogue. But he said that he felt the most important and - a characteristic term for a Buddhist - the most *effective* - was not intellectual exchange but the conversation between sincere practitioners of their own faiths when that conversation arises from a sharing of their respective practices.

The idea here is common to Christian and Buddhist thinkers. In the early Christian monastic tradition the Fathers spoke warmly about the importance of *praktike*, the knowledge born from experience rather than conceptual knowledge. Cardinal Newman spoke of the danger of living your faith simply from a position of “notional assent” lacking lived, personal verification. John Main’s insistence on the need for Christians to recover the contemplative dimension of their faith was based on the assertion that we must “verify the truths of our faith in our own experience”. What is new about this idea in the context of *The Good Heart* is that it is applied to dialogue between different faiths and not just to the deepening of the discovery of one’s own. This is very challenging and, to many sincere practitioners, also disturbing. It suggests that there exists a universal, underlying level of common truth which can be accessed through different faiths. When those faiths are in experiential dialogue with one another it the truth can be experienced through their willing suspension of exclusivity towards one another. If this is true is each particular faith no more (no less?) than a particular door into the great audience chamber of Truth? As we will see shortly, the Dalai Lama addresses this challenge very subtly and directly.

What is important here is simply to note the relevance of real presence for this kind of new and indeed pioneering dialogue. It is human, ordinary, affectionate, friendly, trusting. All the four hundred people felt this the instant His Holiness walked into the hall at the opening of the Seminar. This quality of presence should not be underestimated when we think about modern inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. It should certainly not be dismissed as an emotional element subordinate to the realm of pure ideas. If, as the Dalai

Lama believes, the proof and authentication of all religion is the realisation of the Good heart, a human being's innate qualities of compassion and tolerance, the same standard can be applied to dialogue, which has become today an important religious activity.

In the past religious action could be viewed more narrowly in terms of the celebration or exploration of one's own beliefs or rituals. Today an additional element has entered human religious activity, entering with empathy and reverence into the beliefs and rituals of other faiths without adopting them as one's own. The fruit and authentication of this new activity, largely unknown to earlier generations of humanity or even regarded by them as unfaithful blasphemous, is the same as that of all religion: compassion and tolerance. Dialogue should make us not only feel better about others but make us more conscious of our selves and more true to our essential goodness. Dialogue makes us better people.

We cannot achieve this in the abstract. Dialogue demands not just clarity of ideas and a certain degree of knowledge about one's own and the other's position. It asks a personal involvement. The objectivity, detachment and intellectual organisation needed for dialogue are not ends in themselves - any more than efficiency or the profit motive should be ends in themselves for any business or social group. The intellectual discipline required for dialogue allows the natural tendency to egotism to be filtered or contained and this releases the individuals involved to find the deeper level of their own consciousness where dialogue opens onto the common window of truth in an experience altogether beyond the conceptualising mind.

No one portrays this truth of dialogue more warmly and clearly than the fourteenth Dalai Lama. From the beginning of The Seminar he exuded his characteristic blend of humour and kindness, his quite un-selfimportant approachability, his real interest in the individuals he is with and his un-condescending concern for their well-being. He has not just presence in the Hollywood sense of charisma but *real presence* in the sense that a Catholic speaks of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. By this I mean only that his presence does not consist merely in what his words or gestures communicate. One feels in his presence a highly achieved and integrated underlying reality, which is made freely present to those in his company. It is an uplifting, nourishing experience for those who are not frightened by it.

The Dalai Lama's real presence was crucial for the success of the Seminar. His self-confidence and ease with the risk he was taking set others at their ease and gave us all confidence that we had nothing to lose except our fears. It became too the basis of a friendship that is also the bedrock of fruitful dialogue. Dialogue will certainly reduce our fears and suspicions of one another. It will make us better friends even wit those we thought of as enemies or threats. Yet friendship, or at least the readiness to be real friends, is also a pre-condition for good dialogue. To be friends is to trust and to vulnerable. It involves running the risk of sharing something precious and then being disappointed that it is not being valued or has been treated badly. As the days of the seminar passed the intensity of human friendship among all the participants grew as it radiated, so people remarked, from the stage where the Dalai Lama and his Christian interlocutors sensed that the risk they had taken in coming together was entirely justified and was even becoming highly enjoyable in itself.

Friendship occupies a central place in Christian thought and tradition. The Christian ideal of friendship is built upon a long classical western tradition which did not understand it, as

we often do today, as a diluted form of intimacy. Cicero or Augustine would not have understood modern journalists who say that a couple are “just friends” as if the only really interesting relationship is that which goes “further” than friendship. For them and for many of their preceding and succeeding generations, friendship was the goal of all the formative experiences of human relationship. Education in the widest sense was a preparation for the achievement of friendship which allowed one to share the deepest and truest part of oneself with another.

St Aelred of Rievaulx, a thirteenth century Yorkshire monk, wrote a treatise called *Spiritual Friendship* about the Christian understanding of this classical ideal, based on Cicero’s great work *On Friendship*. Aelred speaks of the disciplined preparation and mutual testing which precedes the full flowering of friendship when the ineffable sweetness of trust and confidence, intimacy and openness flow out through the friendship to the world around them. Significantly, he says that such friendship cannot be based on anything less than the essential goodness of each friend. There cannot be friendship based on exploitative desire or hatred of others because these betray human nature. Partners in crime do not make good friends. Friendship is the perfection of human nature. This leads Aelred to describe without embarrassment particular instances of personal friendship in his own life as well as the joy he feels as he walks around his cloister feeling that there is none there whom he does not love and none whom he does not feel loved by. For Aelred the perfection of human friendship is an epiphany of the real presence of Christ. Christ, he says, makes the *third* between us. It is a beautiful and profound understanding of the humanity of the risen Jesus.

Christ does not, in this view of human nature, represent a barrier or intellectual problem separating us from others. He is not some *thing* we speak about and dissect. He is the unobtrusive presence in which we become really present to one another. He can be named or he can remain unnamed; in either case his reality is neither increased nor diminished. Theologically, the idea of friendship is also central to Christian faith. Jesus declared himself to his disciples at the Last Supper to be their friend. “I call you servants no longer. A servant does not know what his master is about. I call you friends because I have made known to you to you everything I have learned from my Father.”¹ The Holy Spirit which would flow into the realm of human consciousness from the glorified Body of Jesus is also described in the images of friendship. She is an advocate, that is someone *on our side*, to remind us of what we have forgotten, to repair the damages of our mindlessness. Modern feminist theology has recognised the centrality of the symbol of friendship in Christian faith and rescued it to serve as a foundational metaphor of the human relationship to the divine.

What is so powerful about this ideal of friendship is the way it can reconcile the absolute and the personal. You can disagree about the choice of carpet colour and remain friends. You can be a Buddhist and be friends with a Christian. In friendship differences can be respected and even enjoyed. In other relationships differences can zoom out of proportion and become ethnic, religious or ideological divisions which we demonise as the threatening *other*, project our shadow upon and conflict with. Friendship is the supreme expression of compassion and tolerance with a respect for the primacy of truth over all subjective tendencies. But friendship reminds us that the objectivity of truth does not reject the subjective. It integrates the particular and the universal, achieving the “coincidentia

¹ Gospel of John 15:15

oppositorum”, the reconciliation of opposites that the fifteenth century cardinal and philosopher Nicolas da Cusa said *is* God.

There is a simple test to see whether one’s pursuit of truth has lost contact with this touchstone of friendship. If one hears on the news that a catholic has been shot in Belfast, or an Israeli soldier on the West Bank, or so many Chinese baby girls have disappeared from an orphanage or so many Tibetans have been killed, does one hear a news item about ethnic or religious groups. Is the Israeli soldier or Palestinian demonstrator killed a Jew or an Arab or individuals who are a Jew and an Arab? How do the figures strike us - as individual tragedies or as statistics which are being used as political weapons?

In the course of the John Main Seminar, as in all his spiritual teaching, the Daali Lama did not use the occasion to speak on the Tibet issue. However deeply he must carry the crucifixion of Tibet in his heart his personal grief does not intrude on others. Nevertheless, all the participants gave their unreserved support to the Dalai Lama’s cause for Tibet and they did so all the more freely because he was able to be with them in personal friendship. He does not turn friendship into political expediency. I suspect this is what makes him such a refreshing politician and exemplary spiritual leader. It is because he has the gift of friendship so powerfully that the Dalai Lama is so beloved and respected around the world. This gift may also be the key to his great gift for dialogue, respecting differences while seeking unity. In this perspective, the warmth of human friendship does not water down the concentration of pure truth. Truth is not merely the right ideas well expressed. Truth without the human warmth of friendship is a pale shadow of reality.

MODEL OF DIALOGUE

If the success of dialogue depends upon the spirit of friendship enjoyed among the participants it is because we converse with one another in our own particular dialects. Even within our mother tongue there are dialects and accents which seem strange at first but which we learn to understand and respect. There are also more widely spoken dialects of the universal language of truth which are today learning to listen to each other. *The Good Heart* was a model of dialogue as mutual listening.

Shortly after the Seminar the general dialogue taking place between Christianity and Buddhism suffered a painful and disappointing setback. It arose from the controversy sparked by remarks by His Holiness Pope John Paul II on Buddhism generally in his best-selling book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. These remarks expressed a view of Buddhism that was vehemently contested by many Buddhist monks and teachers. Feelings ran high. Sri Lankan Buddhist leaders boycotted the Pope’s visit. Thich Nhat Hanh expressed his hurt and anger in his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. Friendship seemed to stumble all round. The Vatican issued damage-control statements saying that the pope did not mean to dismiss Buddhism as a life-denying philosophy. What then, his critics responded, did he mean by saying that the Buddha’s “enlightenment” “comes down to the conviction that the world is bad, that it is the source of evil and suffering for man “or that “nirvana is a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world”?

It looked as if the Pope, representing a long tradition of Christianity, was caricaturing and dismissing Buddhism without understanding it. Buddhists tried to be compassionate but many could not avoid the opportunity to lump all (or most) Christians together and caricature *them* as intolerant, arrogant and exclusivist. The feelings of some western

Buddhists towards their own Christian upbringing were plainly aroused as well. This is what happens to dialogue when friendship breaks down. As with any other relationship breakdown, there is little to be gained by trading insults or dragging up past offences. There is even less point in trying to discuss the meanings of the terms in question - nirvana, void, enlightenment - until good will, trust and friendship has been restored. Many of us hope *The Good Heart* can help to do that.

Among other ways in which *The Good Heart* helps dialogue to develop is to distinguish between the many different traditions within the traditions. The Dalai Lama on several occasions says that his comments represent a particular Buddhist view but that there are other Buddhist perspectives to take into account, some of them quite opposed to what he has said. Christianity certainly has no fewer internal dialects of belief. Any religion that can contain a Pope John Paul II and a Reverend Iain Paisley will never risk uniformity. Even more, however, *The Good Heart* should remind Buddhists what many Christians have now discovered, that the "Church" is a very general term. It can mean a cold building on a wet Sunday morning, a global religion, a mystical tradition, a spiritual body extended backwards and forwards in history from the birth of Jesus, the cultural group I was born into and brought up in and have mixed feelings about. Perhaps one cannot separate institutional and spiritual Christianity, any more than one can separate form and content, body and mind, but the distinction is important to preserve. There are many examples in history of Christians who have remained outside the institutional church but knew with the full force of their being that they belonged to the Church. Who therefore "speaks for" Christianity? Who "speaks for" Buddhism?

In what ways, then, does *The Good Heart* suggest a model for the resumption and redirection of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue? And indeed for dialogue in general: between Catholics and Protestants, Hinayana and Theravada, Republicans and Democrats, male and female.

Above all, that it is modest. *The Good Heart* does not show the Dalai Lama trying or pretending to give a complete or exhaustive commentary on the Gospels or to have the final word about how a Buddhist monk sees Jesus, his teaching and life and the deeper truths of Christian faith such as the Resurrection and the Holy Spirit. The Dalai Lama's approach and his interaction with his panel of Christian conversationalists is exploratory rather than definitive. It is seeking truth not declaring it - as St Benedict says that the monk is one who "truly seeks God". But in this seeking something is always found. "Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you", Jesus taught. Reading the Scriptures with a good heart takes us beyond the bleakness of the deconstructionist pessimism about meaning. There *is* something to be found but it is found in the *seeking*. St Gregory of Nyssa put it this way: to seek God is to find him; to find God is to seek him.

One of the earliest Christian thinkers, St Irenaeus, said that God can never be known as an object, as a reality outside ourselves. We can know God only by participation in God's own self-knowledge. These early theologians were writing their thoughts about God and the mystery of Christ from the mystical experience of the inclusivity - or non-duality - of God. The first theologians were, and today the best ones still are, expressing their experience of prayer, not just of thought. Dialogue in such a context among such people becomes fluent, fluid and dynamic. Truth is sensed as something that emerges as we enter a clearing where the obscuring clouds of ignorance, prejudice and fear have, at least momentarily, been lifted. The Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, means precisely that, a

clearing. This is something that can only be done step by step, moment by moment. It means staying in touch with the delicate balance which friendship requires, the balance above all between speaking and listening. Great schemes to translate Buddhism into the Christian dialect and vice versa lack the modesty which *The Good Heart* began and ended with.

Another aspect of modesty is the admission of ignorance. The Dalai Lama began by saying that he knew little about Christian scriptures or theology. He was eager to learn. He hoped he would not give offence. He certainly did not want to shake the faith of the Christians taking part in the Seminar. It is not easy to admit ignorance because it makes us vulnerable and makes us seem less interesting or less powerful. If knowledge is power, ignorance is weakness. But when you do admit the limitations of your knowledge at the beginning of a dialogue several things are set free. One of them is trust. People do not feel they are about to be manipulated or persuaded. They therefore can begin to, let down *their* defences. The admission of ignorance must therefore be one of the first steps in non-violence. Another quality liberated by this humility in dialogue is spontaneity. If you are free from having to show how clever or learned you are - the temptation of scholars in dialogue - then you are free to respond immediately and freshly to what is before you. This is precisely what happened at *The Good Heart*. The Dalai Lama did not know much "about" the Gospels. But what he did know about, through his Buddhist learning, his monastic training and his own spiritual evolution, allowed him to respond to Christian symbols and ideas as if he actually knew them very well indeed.

As a result of this the Christians were surprised to discover that a Buddhist was helping them to understand stories and texts that had been familiar to them perhaps since childhood but which they were now discovering in new ways. The Dalai Lama has often made it clear that he does not advise people to change their religion although he respects people's right to do so if they choose. Better, he says, to rediscover the deeper meaning and power of your own tradition. It was surprising to find that a Buddhist could help Christians to deepen their faith by clarifying it in the very process of contrasting it with Buddhist belief, even when there were clear conflicts or untranslatable ideas between the two. This could only have been possible because the dialogue was exploratory not declamatory. The Dalai Lama was sincerely curious and stimulated by what he was doing. He listened deeply to the questions that were raised in the panel discussions. Above all, people saw that he was listening, that he was curious. Dialogue is more like a piece of experimental theatre than a highly polished, commercial show. Sometimes it works better than other times. It requires commitment. It demands maximum participation by all concerned. It is not mechanical. It is not dogmatic. The ideas must be bartered and wasted if they are to illuminate.

And he asked many questions. Before each session I spent some time with him in a quiet room preparing the gospel texts which he was to spend an hour commenting on. He asked questions, listened to the background I gave on the texts and my explanation of some of the key terms and ideas. If he was ignorant, as he said, about the gospels, his phenomenal receptivity and the alacrity of his mind in constellating new ideas more than made up for it. I was reminded of a phrase St Gregory the Great uses of St Benedict in his *Life*. Benedict he said had dropped out of school in Rome and betaken himself to a hermitage in a state of *wise ignorance*.

The Dalai Lama's intellectual training and brilliance are unobtrusive. He does not flaunt them. But he employs them as skilful means in the pursuit of truth. Christians were particularly aware that his gifts were searching out meanings and subtleties in their often over-familiar scriptures and thus were enriching and renewing their faith in ways they could only wonder at and be grateful for. If knowledge is power the Dalai Lama's knowledge trained onto the gospels created a power of insight which he never used in any manipulative way. He was not arguing with Christians about the meaning of the gospels. He was, with great detachment, giving them the benefit of his reading, discussing this with them, and then leaving it to them to use as they wished.

LIKE AND UNLIKE

St Benedict makes one of his Tools of good works the injunction "never to give a false peace". False friendship is a danger in dialogue which it is just as important to avoid as caricature, misrepresentation or dismissive judgement. Professional translators refer to certain words that have a formal likeness in both languages but different meanings as "false friends". The Good Heart stayed true to the principle of friendship and respected the differences as much as the similarities.

It is very tempting in dialogue between the two traditions to opt for a safe zone of generalities. By doing so you avoid conflict and leave with a glowing feeling of mutual congratulation. This struck me strongly once when I was taking part in a dialogue with Buddhist and Christian meditators. We had discussed how we had come to the paths we were on and the approaches we took to the difficulty of persevering on those paths. It was useful and in its way inspirational. But I felt that we were sharing too safely. We were not risking what was most precious and particular to us personally with each other. So, instead of my scheduled afternoon talk I asked permission to speak on Jesus. I could sense there were suspicions and fears were raised that it would spoil the good atmosphere. I felt a twinge of the post-imperial guilt spiritually-correct Christians today can hardly help but feel especially when talking to people with whom they share much common ground but who have "left the church". But I did not think I would have said much about what meditation as a Christian meant for me if I did not also speak about what Jesus means for me and how I was exploring the mystery of his real presence in my life. I realised that to stand up and say that "Jesus Christ is my personal saviour" might cast a gloom over the proceedings (like being sad at an Irish funeral). I did not want to do that anyway. It is too precious to me to apply platitudes to it.

What I tried to share was the value and meaning of the *person* of Jesus not only the *ideas* of Christianity. That was clearly to throw a spotlight on what was a big difference, a great distance between Christian and Buddhist meditators. But in doing that, in seeing and acknowledging the distance between us we were brought closer. In recognising that difference we saw new and deeper similitudes.

At The Good Heart we were led into this awareness immediately and without hesitation by the Dalai Lama. He said from the beginning that the purpose of his commenting on the Gospels was not to assist in the construction of a synthetic universal religion. He does not believe in a single universal religion and does believe in respecting, indeed reverencing the unique characteristics of each religion. Many Christians who are in touch with their broader tradition more than most fundamentalists are, would agree with this. But for different reasons.

The Dalai Lama said several times in the course of the Seminar that he was a Buddhist. There were moments that he needed to remind us (and himself?) of this. I do not mean that he ever felt anything but a complete (and very complete) Buddhist but that, when recognising some of the real strong parallels between the teachings of Jesus and of the Buddha, he smelt the danger of false friends intruding. Then he would say how important it was to recognise the casual significance of both parallels and differences. The meaning of these points of convergence and departure between religions is to be found in the spiritual and psychological needs of their respective practitioners. Different people have different needs which the unique particularities (the “differences”) of the religions can alone meet. This sounds quite acceptable tolerant and liberal and suitable for our new global pluralism. But it raises difficult questions.

Maybe a highly realised practitioner, a very holy person, can practice this degree of tolerance genuinely. For many of us, however, it will always, in practice, present the danger of creating a split between what we want to believe and what we actually believe. If, after all, the different religions are valued on the basis only of their psychological suitability where does that leave the integrity of absolute truth? If Buddhism and Christianity are relevant only to the subjective circumstances of individual Buddhists and Christians what is their claim to be truth-full? I raised this question of religious relativism with the Dalai Lama and he responded by saying that there were schools of Buddhism that acknowledged the possibility of *different* absolute truths existing simultaneously. We did not go further into this, perhaps because we all realised that we were entering upon very technical philosophical territory which is not a path which dialogue has necessarily to go down. So we laughed and moved on.

However the question lurks disturbingly at the heart of dialogue. Christians can be concerned that tolerance edges over the borderline of faith. Does respecting the truth of the Buddhist taking refuge in the three refuges of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha compromise the nature of Christian faith as a call to discipleship of Jesus? Is Christ one way and the Buddha another. Jung thought so when he said that each represented the True self for West and East respectively? But this challenges the very idea of the completeness of the Incarnation of God in the human being of Jesus, “in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells embodied”.

Or does it? The early Christian Fathers were the first practitioners of dialogue and had to wrestle with this question of “uniqueness” from the start.. They had to be because their faith was the new arrival on the world stage and also because they deeply respected the achievements of the pre-Christian philosophers. History did not allow them to dialogue with Buddhists but for them the partners in dialogue were the Greeks and Jews. Their approach was not to deny the truth which had been discovered and expressed in those traditions. Instead they pondered how it related to the truth they saw embodied in Jesus. This question, this dialogue, deepened and clarified their insight into Jesus and the Gospels and led to the great theology of the Logos. Heraclitus long before Plato had said that the Logos is the wisdom which shapes and governs all things. It is the unified field theory that makes everything fit. The early Christians responded to this through the Gospel of John in particular and they came to see that the incarnation of the Logos in Jesus in no way diminishes or invalidates other, pre- or non-incarnate epiphanies of Truth. Quite the reverse seeing Jesus who he is opens one to see the Logos more clearly where one failed to see it before. There are differences in manifestations of the Logos. Uniqueness is therefore

integral to the different paths human beings will follow. But there is one truth, one God. One Word and many dialects.

Even with this accommodation to the problem of tolerance, however, difficulties remain. It might seem that Christians are smuggling all other faiths under its wing through insisting on the uniqueness of the Incarnation. Judaism is true but it is prophetic. Krishna is true but he was mythical. Philosophy is true but it cerebral. Buddhism is true but it is psychological. Christ is true because he is completely human. There is a sense in which Christians do say precisely this, or believe it whether they express it or not. That is part of the uniqueness, the difference, of orthodox Christianity, that it *does* believe this.

Buddhism accommodates to the problem of tolerance also in its unique way and runs the risk of subtle intolerance in doing so. When a Buddhist, perhaps especially a western Buddhist, says that all religions are compatible because they represent different needs of different individuals it is difficult for them not to add “at different stages of their journey”. Behind this is the feeling - which I never sensed at all in the Dalai Lama in either private or public discussion - that the notion of a personal God is acceptable but represents a rather immature stage of spiritual development, a kind of balancing third wheel on a child’s bicycle. Christian theology recognises the danger of this kind of infantilism - it calls it anthropomorphism - and also recognises that there are stages of life by which faith matures. The Dalai Lama seemed to accept this quite naturally while leaving the question open about the “true nature of the Father”. He did not seem to mind using the word God in the discussions and we left the term flexible while they lasted.

If the purpose of dialogue is to get at the answers to these areas of difference and similarity *The Good Heart* failed. But of course the purpose of dialogue is to illuminate the parallels and divergences of belief in order to dispel the dark forces of delusion and fear, anger and pride which can lurk in the spaces between people and their religions. To this degree the purpose of dialogue in religion is difficult than, say, having dialogue between political or economic rivals where some kind of practical answer acceptable to all the contestants is being sought. In religion answers of this kind are often dangerous achievements. They are false friends and run out on you as soon as difficulties start.

Dialogue exposes not only the areas of coincidence and departure between religions but also the hidden inner forces which so readily make religions the most implacable of rivals. In the history of religious intolerance and persecution of outsiders Buddhism, like Jainism, has a much better record than most. However there are different forms of intolerance, some more political others more psychological, and they all have their root in the tyranny of the ego. The powers at work here are ignorance and fear. The less we know about another person or group the more likely we are to project our worst feelings and prejudices onto them.

When Francis Xavier first landed in India to preach the Gospel he considered all the Hindus devil-worshippers. He knew nothing of Vedanta or the mystical experience underlying the popular religion of the country. It is still a little scary for a westerner to be led into the heart of a Hindu temple and witness their chants and rituals of such overwhelming sensory power. On the other hand when Francis Xavier’s contemporary and fellow-Jesuit, Mateo Ricci, went to China he soon realised that dialogue and inculturation were the best ways to achieve his mission, although his superiors in Rome disagreed and

removed him. The same situations recur today but more openly and it is easier to identify and correct them.

Certainly, in the cause of a more widespread tolerance between religions, more Christians need to have at least some personal acquaintance with the major texts of other traditions. Reading the Bhagavad Gita or the Dhammapada would help transform the way many Christians read (if they do at all) their own Scriptures. On the other hand the same work to overcome ignorance or prejudice applies to Buddhists who are often quick to lump all Christians together as narrow-minded and intolerant. In Asia Christianity is still identified with memories of western imperialism or hostility to its modern economic forms. In the West, especially among Buddhists reared in Christian homes, their image of Christianity can remain woefully childish and the faults of the institution applied too impulsively to the faith itself.

SOME TERMS OF REFERENCE

In the programme for the Seminar there was a glossary of Buddhist and Christian terms which we thought would help people follow the conversations better. The glossaries were not meant to be dictionary definitions but they help to understand how the wavering line between similarity and difference in the two traditions can be held.