

Building a Harmonious Society: Enhancing our Respect for Each Other

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Never before in Western society has it been more essential that religions, and traditions within religions, live in harmony with each other within a predominately secular society. Dominant religious societies have existed together before with varying degrees of harmony, though often with less tolerance of – and even at times contempt for – minority religions and traditions. A backdrop of secularism provides added challenges and opportunities for religions and, especially with regard to the focus of this paper, Buddhist communities.

This paper will explore issues a Judeo-Christian society faces with the political separation of church and state and a diverse religious and cultural migration. New Zealand examples will be used.

In New Zealand (population 4 million) there are 52,400 Buddhists according to the 2006 official census, up 10,000 from the previous census in 2001. Other non-Christian religions are also growing dramatically: Hinduism is up 24,000 to 64,500, and Islam is up 12,000 to 36,200. Most significantly, in 2006, 1,297,104 people (34.7% of the total population, up from 29.6% in 2001) stated that they had *no* religion; the largest group was thus non-religious people. In addition, between the years 1991-2006, New Zealand witnessed a 30% increase of the ethnic (neither Maori nor European/Western) population. Currently the ethnic population makes up 12% of the total population, but is projected to increase to 20% of the total in the next 10 years. While New Zealand struggles to establish a just relationship with the people of the land (Maori) as understood and agreed in the Treaty of Waitangi, it has barely begun to address the issues a multicultural society presents. The bicultural issues between Maori (first people) and Pakeha (English Westerners) are complex and fascinating. Some people argue that New Zealand should be a multicultural and not a bicultural society, a position that sidelines and disregards the Maori and their historically damaged relationship with the Crown/State. The bicultural relationship requires and demands attention but it is no excuse for a lack of attention to ethnic/religious issues. The relationship between Maori and the Crown is a book in itself, so will not be fully addressed here other than to say recently it has become an excellent model for cross-cultural harmony which many countries around the world can learn from.

The Christian context to New Zealand Society

An important background to appreciate is that in New Zealand 150 years of social, political, economic and legal traditions have been built on a Western Christian ethos. The wider issues of Colonization will be set aside for the purpose of this paper. A very positive contribution to a contemporary society in which most universities, schools, social services and hospitals were started through the charitable works of the Christian church. While they may be secular now and mostly operated by the state, their origins are contextually important. The social justice side of Christianity has been a wellspring of inspired institutions and social programs – not just in NZ but across the Western world – whose major contribution is that services and support are provided according to need and urgency, not according to who the beneficiaries are, their connections, how popular they

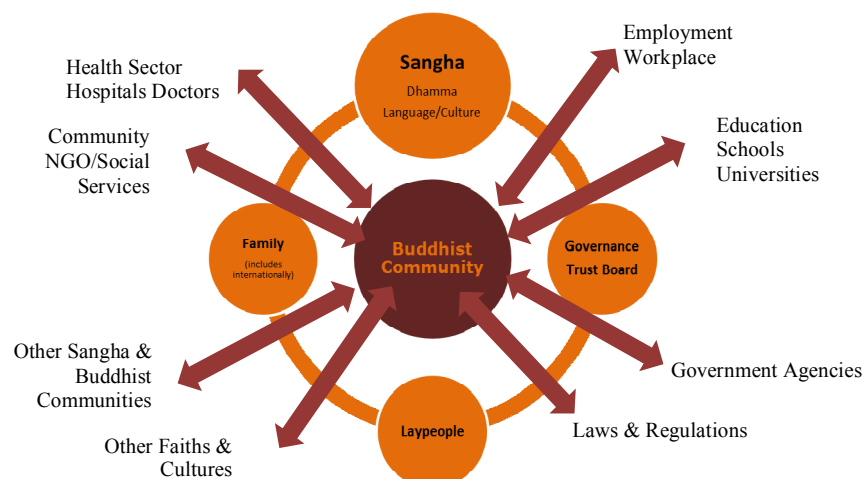
may be or how much money they may or may not have. Most people would agree this is now a mainstream principle imbedded in how these secular institutions operate.

In contemporary society, Christians are often misunderstood as a monolithic group of people with one perspective and one voice. Nothing could be further from the truth. In each denomination (i.e.: Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, etc.) evangelical and fundamentalist elements can be found among Christians who are progressive and pro-social justice, and right wingers will often speak publicly as if they represent all Christians, adding further confusion in the public’s minds. But evangelical Christians are not necessarily the same as fundamentalist Christians. To make matters even more confusing, while many people will say they are Christian on census forms, they may only go to church once a year – for instance at Christmas with their families. This means they are not active in their religion, which creates a very different character from the Christian theology of the 1950s and ‘60s that was more rigorously practiced.

While Buddhists have been in NZ since the mid-19th century, the most significant migration of the religion’s adherents into the country started in the mid-’70s with refugees from Southeast Asia following the fall of Saigon. An overhaul of the immigration system in the late 1980’s brought a more equitable and fairer selection process for those who wishing to migrate to NZ. With this came a humanitarian policy that provided refuge (in the secular way) to many refugees, notably from Southeast Asia, and a spike of migration in the 1990’s with more and more Mahayana Buddhists migrating to NZ. While the latest census is currently being conducted, the Mahayana Buddhists make up the largest population of Buddhists in New Zealand, although the Theravadan traditions are more established. There is only one Tibetan refugee in NZ, with a few dozen Tibetan Buddhist centers of predominately Western converts making this strand a very small proportion of all Buddhists in NZ.

Before coming to New Zealand, many communities, such as those from Southeast Asian countries, endured much suffering as a result of war, famine, and/or civil conflict, on top of which, after migrating, came negotiating around being separated from family in a foreign culture and society. Traditional monks and nuns of these communities (the Sangha) have no training in dealing with such challenges – most often they too are trying to learn a foreign language and foreign customs. Furthermore, laws and social customs are very different in the West and secular services have scant knowledge of how to cope with the traumatized immigrants either.

As shown in the diagram below, ethnically based Buddhist communities in Western countries have complex and multi-layered relationships with their wider communities. I developed the diagram in order to appreciate the demands, tensions and challenges that Buddhist communities face.



Often this complex relationship is not appreciated, especially when demands of time and resources are made of these communities. Nonetheless the importance of engagement with other Buddhist and religious communities is important if we are going to grow together in harmony. The following are examples of both intra-faith, i.e., within the various Buddhist traditions, and inter-faith activities, i.e., between religions.

Intra-faith Activities in a non-Buddhist Country

In most Buddhist countries, one tradition is dominant although it may have a number of lineages or offshoots. The term 'tradition' here refers to the major streams of Theravada, Mahayāna and Vajrayāna.

The following are some examples of intra-faith activities that have been successful in the New Zealand context. Each sought to enhance the quality of life and spiritual well being of the overall Buddhist community in NZ and enhance our ability to speak within the wider NZ community.

New Zealand Permanent Residency for Ordained Sangha

Since 2003 it became increasingly difficult for Buddhist Sangha to receive permanent residence (PR) in NZ, though over the past four years significant work has gone into seeking change in immigration policy to better accommodate non-Christian Ministers of Religion.

Immigration has become extremely complex in most Western countries as they grapple with the many conflicting needs of their societies, i.e., employment, skills required and humanitarian considerations.

The fundamental problem is that many laws and regulations were originally designed to accommodate a Western Christian society. As minority communities grow, it takes time for outdated laws to be cleared and the appropriate regulatory or political will found to make necessary changes.

In New Zealand with very little interaction between the various traditions of Buddhism, it took a long time before the picture emerged that many Buddhist communities struggled to get PR for their Sangha. Many just continually renewed their Sangha's temporary work permits or rotated Sangha from their home country every three years. In one known case the community just kept two monks as overstayers and eventually the Immigration Service sent the younger monk home and granted PR to the older one. The community was very lucky not to experience the full might of the law which could have seen people jailed.

If the Sangha did receive PR, it was usually after significant financial payments to immigration consultants (\$4,000-\$15,000) and/or appeal to the Associate Minister of Immigration for special consideration. This is simply unacceptable in a country that speaks of justice, equality and ethnic harmony.

The New Zealand Buddhist Council with members from a range of Buddhist groups was set up in 2007 to address problems such as this. In particular, three members of the council set out to change the immigration situation for the benefit of all Sangha in New Zealand. The first thing was to understand specifically what the problems were and how the Immigration Service viewed the issues. We knew it was complex: most people roll their eyes in confusion when it comes to immigration issues.

To clarify this I wrote a paper explaining the issues and the problems as clearly and reasonably as possible; titled the "Buddhist Quagmire", it served to humorously highlight the complexity, confusion and fruitlessness of the Immigration Service's demands that Sangha applying for PR to satisfy the same criteria as lay people. Very briefly, the issues were:

- **Offer of Work** (i.e., the Sangha's duties and responsibilities were not understood clearly by the Department of Labor)
- **Remuneration** (i.e., the Department of Labor did not understand the vows against remuneration taken by the Sangha and required them to be paid over \$40,000/yr)
- **Qualifications** (i.e., the NZ Qualification Authority did not recognize ordination or monastic training – to make matters worse, without recognized qualifications the job did not exist in the eyes of the Immigration Service and if the job didn't exist, the offer of work didn't exist)
- **English language** (i.e., university-level English was required if the Immigration Service thought appropriate)
- **Age** (i.e., the older the Sangha, the fewer points they received for the PR application, which failed to recognize that with respect to the Sangha, age is expected to breed wisdom, a prerequisite to perform pastoral, advisory and religious duties most effectively.)

We held a public meeting of all concerned Buddhist centers in early 2007 and invited the Minister of Ethnic Affairs and representatives of the NZ Immigration Service to be present. It was very well attended and

1. raised the issue from being an individual one to one that was community wide;
2. demonstrated to both the Minister of Ethnic Affairs and the Immigration Service that the issue was not isolated but in fact endemic and serious for our communities; and
3. solidified the Buddhist communities' understanding and confidence surrounding this issue.

We next obtained the Minister of Ethnic Affairs' agreement to support any reasonable application for PR to the Associate Minister of Immigration. This was only ever going to be a short-term solution but would help prevent any of the Sangha from having to leave NZ. To support this I wrote another paper on how centers should prepare their case to the Immigration and the Minister. It was circulated to as many Dharma centers as possible to help them avoid expensive consultants and be clear on what the Immigration Service needed to know.

Unfortunately, while we had a short-term solution, we didn't progress on fundamentally changing the policy. To make things worse we had a change of government in 2008.

Knowing how particularly acute this issue was for the Buddhist community, I knew it had to affect other non-Christian communities also. I approached the executives of other peak national religious organizations and, as expected, learned they too had issues with the policy, though their positions were not as precarious as the Buddhist community's.

This effort concluded, for the first time in New Zealand, with a united approach to immigration officials by the five major religious national organizations: the Federation of Islamic Associations, the NZ Sikh Council, the Indian Central Association, the NZ Jewish Council and the NZ Buddhist Council.

As a result the Minister of Immigration requested his department to review the policy around Ministers of Religion. In May 2010, the department released a consultation paper that contained for the first time a pathway for Ministers of Religion. Again the five major religious national organizations submitted a joint position, this time endorsed by the Catholic Church of New Zealand. In February 2011, the Immigration Service released a summary of submissions and while much work still needs to be done around

issues of age and English competency, we have been advised that a new policy will be in place by July 2011. A start has been made.

The success of this approach is that European Buddhists used their understanding of the political system to effect change. It has required an incredible amount of persistence at bureaucratic and political levels but as I explained to one very helpful political assistant, if I ever appear focused or passionate about this issue it is because there are only three things in my heart and the Sangha is one of them.

Participating in Formal State Events

In January 2008, Sir Edmund Hillary passed on. He was greatly revered the world over, not just for his ascent of Mount Everest but for his generosity to the Buddhist Sherpas of Nepal. Buddhists from all traditions participated both in his funeral and the traditional 49th day prayers with his family. It was the first time in New Zealand that non-Christians participated in a state funeral.

To achieve this outcome was difficult in a prominently Christian society with the Church of England the traditional religion. Sir Edmund was quoted as saying he was not particularly religious but if he had been, Buddhism had the most appeal to him. Even given this, there was much resistance to any non-Christian involvement in his funeral. Eventually the hosting church was reminded that this was a state funeral and that did not mean an Anglican funeral. The fundamental problem was that the ceremonies Department in the Department of Internal Affairs had organized state funerals since the 1980s when NZ was very different from what we know today. The department had no idea of how to be appropriately inclusive and had no relationships with non-Christians or knowledge how to negotiate the issues. The Hindus were seen as 'cultural' and therefore not a problem. Even though Buddhists were given prior approval to fly traditional Tibetan/Nepalese prayer flags in trees around the church, the flags were later ordered removed as a security risk. Instead the flags were put up at the local convenient store across the street from the church for the lying-in and funeral. Sir Edmund would have appreciated the irony. While prayer flags are not part of a Buddhist funeral ritual, they certainly honored Sir Edmund Hillary who was not only the first man to reach the summit of Everest but also the summit of many people's hearts through his generosity of personally building over 70 schools and hospitals in Nepal for the Sherpa community. His immediate family appreciated the 49th-day prayers because the state funeral had been so public and stressful. We included many traditional Buddhist prayers in both events during the state funeral and the subsequent prayers.

Sharing in our Civic Responsibilities



The screenshot shows the New Zealand Parliament website. The main headline is "Collection of Buddhist texts presented to Parliament". The article text reads: "Members of New Zealand's Buddhist community met at Parliament on 12 July to present a special copy of a collection of Buddhist texts to Parliament. The Dhammapada, a collection of 323 verses, contains the Buddha's essential teachings for the benefit of a wide range of human beings. The spokesperson for the group, Joan Buchanan said that the copy of the Dhammapada presented to Parliament was particularly special as it has been blessed by the Dalai Lama and also in Buddhist temples around the country. The Buddhist community wishes to present it to Parliament as a gift to the New Zealand people." Below the text is a photo of the Dhammapada book. A "Comments" section is visible at the bottom of the article.

Inspired by a similar event in Australia, a specially prepared **Dhammapada** was presented to the New Zealand parliament in July 2010. The text included Pali, Chinese (representing the first Buddhist who came to NZ) and an English translation by Ajahn Munindo, who was born in New Zealand and was ordained as a *bhikkhu* in Thailand over 25 years ago. While creating our own book took a huge amount of time and energy, it avoided the debate about which of the 84 English versions should be used and most importantly provided an inclusive narrative for Mahayana Buddhists

who respect the text but are less familiar with it.

The project was officially launched by the blessing of the text by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in December 2009 in Auckland. The text then travelled to 30 Dharma centers from the top of the North Island to the bottom of the South Island.

In July 2010, over 30 Sangha from across NZ gathered at Parliament to present the Dhammapada to the Clerk of the House. This project provided Buddhist communities of NZ with active involvement in a civically inclusive activity that honored our religious beliefs and was intended to benefit all New Zealanders.

Buddhist perspectives on Death and Dying



Hosted by the NZ Buddhist Council, a forum entitled *Buddhist Perspectives: Caring for the Dying and Deceased* in July 2010 brought together perspectives from the Zen, Thai, Tibetan, Sri Lankan and Asian Mahayana traditions. An historic event for NZ Buddhists, it was organized as a follow-on to the presentation of the Dhammapada to Parliament. Never before in this country had five traditions come together to share their perspectives and learn from each other.

Another first was that all three traditional prayers in the temple were used both at the beginning and end of the program. The day was well attended by many healthcare professionals as well as Buddhist lay people.

Planning Events that Include a Variety of Buddhist Perspectives

It takes commitment and effort to develop opportunities and events for different traditions to participate in. Each community is so busy with their own activities they need:

- To be provided with events that are easy to attend;
- An appeal to the Sangha and lay leadership of the community. This is especially important for ethnically based communities who respect traditional leadership;
- Respect and inclusion of their tradition according to their protocols and rituals. This can be more difficult for Western converts to Buddhism who often struggle to understand the importance of traditions and the cultural context of protocols;
- To be shown the event's relevance to the dharma.

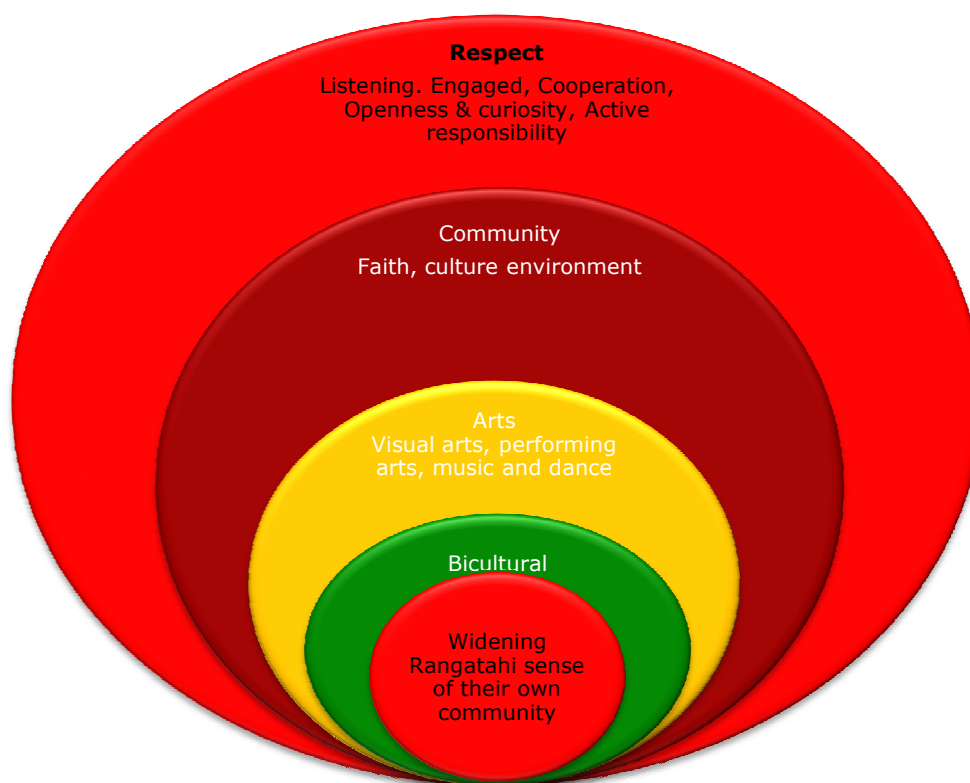
Relationships take a long time to nurture, with many cups of tea. Westerners need to understand and listen more to the ethnic communities and not give up so easily when they don't respond as the Westerners might hope. Emails and even the phone are not good vehicles to enhance relationships – this is especially true where ethnic communities struggle with English as a second language.

Inter-faith Activities to Encourage Harmony

Anti-religious sentiment and in particular Islamophobia is rampant around the world. Often the media fuels this by propagating bigoted information. As Buddhists with an understanding of interconnectedness, we instinctively know that the polarization and marginalization of people will only serve to entrench extreme views and aggressively

widen the divide between, in this case, the religion and its detractors. Breaking the isolation is the only solution.

A challenge for Sangha is to understand that in a predominantly secular society there is a role for teaching Dharma and another for sharing Buddhism with the wider community. It is inevitably easy for Sangha accustomed to Buddhism as a dominant religion to confuse these two roles. Sharing Buddhism seeks to clarify misunderstandings and to keep things simple for Westerners to understand. It is *not* an invitation to propagate the teachings. Westerners are very sensitive to evangelicals and anyone they feel is too zealous will suffer a backlash. Sangha who understand how to share Buddhism with Westerners are, in my experience, very hard to find.



The conceptual framework for the Spirit of Rangatahi

Some New Zealand Examples of Interfaith Activities

Spirit of Rangatahi (Youth) is a program designed to widen young people's sense of their own community. In this context youth is defined as those 11-17 years of age (secondary school). The attraction of this program is that for everyone there are 'other' cultures and religions to learn about. When we piloted this program, we organized participants to visit five world religious communities in and around their own community. They really enjoyed learning from the experience, even though they probably didn't realize they were learning. As part of their journey they used art to help them understand and connect with the communities and that led to the creation of a major public mural over three days which stands today, free of tagging, on the main street of Newtown, Wellington. The program has now obtained funding and has been developed to include Pacific Island cultures, and the environment as a specific module.



Learn about Other Faiths for adults came from the experience gained from facilitating this learning with young people. It was originally a two-day program that included visits to places of worship of four faith communities, but has been successfully adapted into a professional development day for government officials, and health care and social service professionals. Traditionally many people in NZ come from a Christian and/or Maori background, and this program provides them with an opportunity to meet people from other faith communities and visit their places of worship. Part of the problem interfaith councils in NZ face is that they are made up of individuals from minor and often non-mainstream religions. Mainstream religions may not recognize them, so they find solace in the interfaith community. This not only applies to Christian offshoots, but also to organizations that call themselves Buddhist and Hindu; while sincere in themselves they often don't reflect the mainstream beliefs of these world religions. The result is that the wider education about the six main world religions, which also reflect the population of NZ, gets left behind. *Learn about Other Faiths* is the only program in NZ that seeks to share a basic understanding of the six major world religions. Important success factors for this program include:

- Each faith community represents themselves in an over-arching, inclusive way that respectfully presents the diversity within the faith community. Far too often interfaith exchanges are ad hoc with little consideration as to how a person is representing their respective religion;
- Facilitators have been carefully selected for their ability to:
 - reflect the wider religious context (i.e., be inclusive of the wider religion);
 - provide a bridge to their religious community for the wider NZ community;
 - actually live the religion they speak for and be active within their own community.

While these criteria for facilitators are aspirational, they guide knowledge and expertise towards a high quality community development model of religious exchange;

- Everything is organized for the participants from food to transportation.

Participants are taught very basic and practical skills such as how to enter a place of worship and what to ask about beforehand. The program was a feature of an excellent 25-minute National Radio documentary – see:

<http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/spectrum/20100509> - (click the link at the bottom of the web page to listen to the 20min documentary)

Due to the success of Learn About Other Faiths in Wellington, another session is now being planned for Auckland for late March 2011.

While organizing and running the program is a lot of work, the result is a very direct and measurable creation of understanding and breaking down of prejudice. I encourage all participants to ask respectful and direct questions but if they don't, I do because I know they are probably wondering about such questions anyway. For example, I may ask, "Can you please tell us about honor killing; terrorism; or fundamentalism?"

(whatever the case may be)” It may be the only time the program participants get to hear contextual answers to these issues. Of course, community facilitators are chosen for their ability to provide informed and illuminating answers to such questions.

Faith Matters is an emerging organization representing major world religions in NZ whose come together to address issues of mutual concern. I first convened this group to help the NZ Buddhist Council with immigration issues. This forum has been useful to address other issues facing the wider ethnic communities.

An issue that needs addressing is the religious communities need to articulate their needs with regards to health care issues.

Buddhist Context for Wider Engagement

While I am only a student of the Buddha there are some early Buddhist context, that I am aware of, for increased engagement with the wider community that may inform our current endeavors. For example, the story of Pukkusāti who spent a night in a pottery shed with the Buddha is very interesting as to whether being a Buddhist is significant to become an Arahant. Also, from the 3rd century B.C., the great Indian Buddhist Emperor Asoka’s honored and supported all other religions in his vast empire. Rock Edict XII states:

“One should not honor only one’s own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honor others’ religions for this or that reason. So doing, one helps one’s own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise one digs the grave of one’s own religion and also does harm to other religions. Whosoever honors his own religion and condemns other religions, does so indeed through devotion to his own religion, thinking “I will glorify my own religion”. But on the contrary, in so doing he injures his own religion more gravely. So concord is good: Let all listen, and be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by other”. (What the Buddha Taught by Walpola Rahula)

“You shall respect each other and refrain from disputes; you should not, like water and oil, repel each other - but like milk and water, mingle together.”

The Buddha (Cūṅgosiṅga Sutta)