

# **Religious Culture Exchange Between The East and West**

**Professor Preecha Changkwanueng**

Religious expansion can be seen as cultural exchange among different cultures according the rough principle that the stronger or more civilized cultures will win over and change the more inferior culture. There has been a saying “win the battle field, but lost in culture field”. The examples include The Roman who conquered the Greeks at war but was dominated in term of culture, especially religious beliefs. During early Ayuttaya period, Siam defeated Khmer but harmonised most of Khmer culture into itself. The Western nations had supreme military power and commerce over the East like India and China but took on cultures on the consumption of tea, spice, luxurious royal court styles as well as knowledge and beliefs, and popularised in the Western world. With the concept of the true emperor of Buddhism, King Ashoka The Great, converted the wheels of war chariots into Dhamma wheels, and promoted Buddhism in all directions in the same manner he had done with his military aggression. The weaker religions such as animism and superstition were harmonised into Buddhism into the worship of Angels and Gods. The influence of Hinduism had long influenced Buddhism leading to the concept of the worship of the kings as avatar of Narai (Vishnu). The regime once called “God-Like King” was then changed to “Assumed-God” which was equal to Goods by the high level of Dhamma that the King held. Sometimes, the kings were referred to as King of Dhamma or Dhamma King, as Dhamma King’s regime.

From historical perspective, cultural exchanges between The East and West, or among Eastern nations, usually occur from commercial trades and aggression. Islam as a religion travelled to Indonesia on merchant sloops and grew so wealthy and stronger to take over cities. King Louise XIV from France spent a good deal of efforts to convert King Narai the Great of Siam and his royal family to Christianity for trade and commerce reason, and possibly, political reason. Muslim kings march their troops over India and converted them to Muslim successfully. Pakistan and Bangladesh, as Muslim countries, are the evidence of the past success. Western cultures, particularly Christianity, entered the East simultaneously with trade, and then rather latently captured the ruling power for coercion, not trade. The knowledge of the target land is one aspect of strategic information. Religious expansion was a national mission of the countries being

conceptually influenced by the Church such as France under King Louise XIV and her mission to influence Siam in Ayuttaya period. Later the explored strategic information interested many academics to focus their pure academic effort on the East. They travelled to explore the country for new knowledge, and then brought back to the West. So not only the main Eastern religions interested Western academics, but also tribal religions and belief did too in term of scientifically anthropological study, rather than in term of true faith and expansion.

From those mentioned cases, it can be seen that Christianity culture entered the countries as the culture of the aggressor and the attempt to civilise the East according to the West. Churches were settles in various territories by missionaries expanding religion. Those were the similar attempts of setting up trade stations and trade representatives. Religion penetration was intentional and systematic. That differed from the manners that Westerners studied Eastern religions in academic forms, not to take on as a believer. The study and popularisation from Eastern religions did not involve settling more temples or performing rituals. Most of the Westerners who had studied Eastern religions at that time did not have true faith in Eastern religion but maintained their true faith in Christianity.

Nowadays, information travel in virtually no time, so fast it relies almost no other forms of travelling. The war to expand territory is almost impossible and religions no longer rely the military aggression for their expansion. Freedom in religion and academic study, as well as fast and multiple communication channels have become vital factors in cultural exchange, including religion, instead of trade and wars.

When considering in the aspect of power, in any given period of history, faith is the source of respect, and respect construes loyalty which is the source of power. Faith in supernatural being makes traditions, rites and rituals, and shamanism, important parts of folkways on prosperity, plague, or war. In concrete term, faith has been expressed in religious art forms such as Venus of Willendorf, or Stonehenge. These shows that the knowledge of profession was subject to knowledge of religion since religions ensure prosperity. As a result, the knowledge of religion was the most important.

When religions moved towards more abstract forms, there were more complicated regulations. The knowledge of religions became special subject being studied among priests such as polytheism of Ancient Greeks and Hinduism in India. Lives with full faith of Gods' power made people rest their lives and hopes in Gods' wills and power. These led to the creation of mythology, legends, books of religions, and rites incorporating into the power of such period. Though there were also other recognizable powers at that time such as Greek Philosophy which is naturalism offered its criticism to religion. As a result, Socrates was executed. But such power of knowledge virtually could not resist the stronger power of polytheism. Such strong influences have been concretely evident through the great constructions of the kingdoms or ancient states, on religious purposes such as Ziggurats of the Sumerians, Pyramids of the Egyptians, all Greek and Indian temples and worship sites. All mentioned wonders only have publicly testified the importance of the religions. Human happiness and suffers were the will of Gods. Religion was the highest power of society. The current importance of materialism and consumerism were simply denounced as fault beliefs which were to be eliminated or ridiculed.

In the Middle age, such power grew stronger and was concentrated and centralized to the sole God. The development from polytheism to monotheism also took place in India such as Vedanta sect. Besides, there were developing processes of systematic thinking, or rationalism, and the line of thoughts reflecting the temporariness of secular world. The current world of existence only demonstrated to the people the happiness, sufferings, good, and bad. So all could choose to live their lives leading to the final destination; the ultimate truth. The current life in the secular world is merely the path towards the next real and tranquil world. Religious power preceded society so that the Church had power over the Kingdom. Material wealth was spent for religion. The hedonistic or secular lifestyle was considered low and evil. Different religious belief was suppressed and condemned as fault and heretic. Ultimately religion can execute people's lives and excommunicate the unreligious king which was the punishment of the whole kingdom. Religion could exercise such strong power only because people had strong faith in religion, and the knowledge of and from religion was the sole, most valuable, and most trustworthy, so that people found all answer from the Bibles.

In ancient Thai, or Siam, states such as Sukhothai, or Ayuttaya which had Buddhism as their national religion, although King had the highest power, nonetheless religion was the essential power supporting the throne. That was because in Thai, or Siam, as a state, King must be just, a Just King who ruled morally, and had duty to nourish Buddhism as state's religion. Royal power was then curbed or limited by religion's boundary. When being immoral, he might be overthrown. Therefore, even Sukhothai or Ayuttaya was commercially prosperous, materialistically wealth, but religion was held and raised as the highest faith. King was the patron of Buddhism, and other faiths and religions. Religion was also the most important knowledge or science towards the truly happy life. Religion was thus the power admired and accepted to be the highest power. King can punish the priests who caused religion deterioration. Such action would be seen as the act of the protector and servant of the religion, not as the act of overpowering religion.

We can assume that religious power has been the main power of the world throughout the history. The power of materialism cannot match the power of religion. The contemporary and current clashes of values have been the battles among religion believers of different religions. Those have led to clashes and conflicts such as the Crusades, or the conflicts of Roman Catholic and Protestant, Hinduism and Islam. Materialism at that time was not the rivalry of religion since religions conquered materialism in all area because materialism could not offer advanced science or knowledge to offer the significantly better answers to key questions such as the Universe, and the relief of human sufferings than religions.

Since 15<sup>th</sup> century and on, Science, as the knowledge of materialistic world, had developed rapidly, which eventually led to technological development. That in turn improved trade, and resulted in strong industry of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Astronomy offers explanation to the Cosmos. Darwinian Theory of Evolution yielded the explanation that human did not descend from God. Advance medical science improved human physical sufferings. Inventions and innovation of science and technology became the force of knowledge that people have developed trust as if the new good. It also evolved to be the competing force to religion in the matter of the values and the nature of the Universe, world, and human as we have witnessed all the contemporary history. Faith in science has urged scientific enquiry of knowledge, the fruit of the knowledge grew to

technology which can improve livelihoods. The benefit of science is obvious and palpable. Furthermore, science is present without changing human's hedonistic nature which contrasts religious teachings. This required no self-control. Secular happiness has been made sophisticated, and complicated to please all diverse senses. Secular life was no longer about just survival but is about good and convenient living. More people have more faith in technology and wish for this kind of pleasure which is more of the secular and current happiness. The rich can seek personal sophisticated pleasure while the poor struggles for sudden and instant pleasure of the secular and current world. The more economic differences among social and economic classes, the more desirable hedonistic or material happiness is. Thus materialism then became major force of contemporary society and forced religious enlightenment and mental happiness of religion to gain the status of 'second class' ideal. The current force religions need to fight these days has been fast growing materialistic culture, not another religion as before. The legendary strength of religions in the old culture has been continually diminished due to the much slower adaptation. So it could not resist the change imposed by materialism. The competing religions might need to stop rivalry and start cooperating to counterbalance materialism and direct materialism to the best benefit of humanity. When considering religions in this light, we might need to alter our ways of thinking on religion culture exchange. East-West religion culture exchange has been occupied of conversation. If so, that should presume the religions of the East and the religions of the West. But in fact, there is no East or West religion but only human religion. The classification was raised by the country of origin which was the result of egocentrism. Egocentrism leads to the concept of being 'active' and 'passive'; active or giver is more civilized side than the passive or recipient. The Prophets never divide the world, nor people, only offer their teachings to people. This means to share the happiness to those who learn and practice the teachings. Religions do not belong to the West or East but humanity. Those prophets practiced their duties by teaching humanity to fit the local environment and mindset. All believers are obliged to understand all religions mutually in order to achieve peace for the world when religious believers meet. The encounter of religions is the rediscovery of the same principle and the meeting of the believers is the reunion of the religious relatives. Religious egocentric attitude is conceptually narrow and narrow-minded. Those do not reflect the spirit and the will of prophets or Gods. Human is obliged to practice teachings for better life, and does not waste time discussing the superiority of their religion or to expand their religions to others. This

question is the simplest but also the most unrealistic as well as the least enlightening, and the most remote from the purpose of religion. The differences in the teaching languages or examples are merely the differences in methodology of expressing the principles to humanity. When religions tell story as analogy and simile to teach their principles, there is no necessity to prove the historical or scientific precision as the merit of the story. The essence or the merit of the stories is the comprehension that one might get and then lives one's life accordingly. Ancient Greeks and Indians worshipped polytheism which was similarly originated from Arayan. Christianity and Islam share the same foundation of the faiths in Moses and Jesus. Buddhism and Hinduism have existed and co-existed in Indian culture. Some Indian kings were Hindu while others were Buddhist. Only people's faith limited the expansion of the religions. Christianity expanded into Europe first, and then Africa and Asia later. Islam went to Arab peninsula first and then to Africa and Asia. Buddhism started up in the subcontinent, and then travelled to the peripheral area. Religions travelled along the political expansion and trade route expansion. So that was typical encounter of human in the past which led to religious expansion. There were only the origin and the destination of religion. The expansion could be in all directions or one certain direction, without considering East to West or vice versa. True religions for humanity should not be divided by geography, origins, or ethnic of prophets. Despite the differences in their origins, religions offer salvation or the way to relieve suffering and to happiness to humanity and world. Despite the differences among races and ethnicities, we are all human. The division among human happened later from lust and stupidity. There is indeed no difference in geography and location since we are in the same world which belongs to no one or no nation. It was only late assumption of egocentric, and possibly selfish, human. The concept is speculation. The Prophets have seen the truth and gone beyond partiality and egocentrism to humanity and peace as centre. It is philosophy of giving.

Regardless of locations, East or West, some people are more selfish and others are more generous. Both of them can be found co-existed in society, neighborhood, and even the same house. This thought can replace East-West dyad but the dyad of the two types in all slices and dimensions of societies. Prophets see the ultimate suffering stemmed from philosophy of selfishness or of taking and the ultimate happiness from philosophy of giving. They suggested the reduction or relinquishment of lust and passion for precisely that reason, they meant to help

reduce sufferings and increase happiness of humanity for the same reason. Philosophy of any schools offer nothing new as Alfred Whitehead cited that all [western philosophy] was merely Plato's footnote. That is because Plato started all discussions already. Whitehead's claim is indeed insightful though it left its analysis on 'mind' which is the source of all thoughts. Even Plato's footnotes can be various, or even contrast itself. When considering mind as the source of all thoughts, there are two kinds of philosophies; one comes from mind with or focusing on lust and passion, and one comes from the mind without or relinquishing lust and passion. The sources of thought render the whole concept of such philosophy including its key foundations. They are either the footnote of the lust-center concept or the footnote of lust relinquishing concept i.e. craving, pride, and belief.

East – West are consisted of people of different minds and tastes. So-called westerners might like Easter religions or vice versa. Even the eastern and western might appreciate different teachers, priests, or gurus. Despite of the differences, all are religion believers in the same manner of the people of the likeness of the same items in different colors. The explanation of enlightenment in self-center or non-self-center manners is only for people who are here and not yet enlighten, to demonstrate loosely the ultimate goal and encourage to practice the principle and teachings to the ultimate goal of relinquishing of lust. The discussion of average persons on enlightenment will be nothing more than personal logics and beliefs which are far from the ultimate truth. It will be logical discussion, but not the access to truth which require practices. It is the same manner of discussion of what is behind the mountain. Each will eventually come up with the logical conclusion. Ultimately the final and true answer could only come from the true and physical exploration of the site. The enlightening matter in religions definitely depends on the practice. No matter the belief of theism or atheism, the practice is ultimate and the true answer will only come from 'walking the way' and self-evidence. Religious discussion is the exchange or expansion of thoughts. The exchange of religions to other countries is religion culture exchange or religion expansion, is simply phenomena of thoughts and religious institutions. That is not core or principle of religion since it does not involve practice on the noble path. It comes from the appreciation of religious way of life or its principle or teachings. The intentions of western missionaries did not vary when travelling to the East or the West; it was the same intention of expanding religion without the special preparation to each destination, east or west. Religions

have no nationality, ethnicity, and no east nor west. They only aim to pass beyond sufferings. The attempt to create religious differences is secular effort, not the spiritual attempt of prophets. It is neither nature of religions. Happiness and suffering are impartial to all human regardless of time and space or ethnicity. The concept of religion has gone beyond that too and aimed to lift human from such suffering and to a better place regardless of person, time, and space. With the beginning by practice, religions are the simplest. If starting by discussion, religions are the most difficult thing. The line of thoughts and influences, the directions of authors writing on Buddhism, the pioneer of religious dissemination and so on are purely academic interest. They are the body of knowledge on time and space, story, feeling, thoughts and faith of people on Lord Buddha and his teachings. So do other religions. The intertwining and reflection in educations of The East and The West is essentially the study of human on themselves. If such education leads to mutual understanding and help, that would be great. If such education leads coercion, colonization, to exploit and take advantage, that would be very bad. When Confucius heard that Chu Viceroy lost his bow and spoke kindly that 'Chu Viceroy lost his bow, and Chu people would recover it', he criticized that Chu Viceroy was narrow-minded. The Viceroy should have said that 'Human lost his bow and human would recover it'. That is the true spirit of religious and civilized being.