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Fo Guang Shan Buddhism and Ethical Conversations across Borders: “Sowing Seeds of Affinity”¹

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On the basis of a study of an international Buddhist movement, this article defines “ethical conversations across borders” – acts of ethical deliberation, evaluation or argument that take place in cognisance of multiple ethical regimes – and proposes the conditions under which they can take place. Fo Guang Shan, described in the first part of the article, is a Buddhist movement that originated in Taiwan, but which now has branches around the world. It seeks to promote the cultivation of virtue among its members and among other people with which it has contact. The teachings of Master Hsing Yun, the movement’s founder, advocate two methods through which this project can be realised, “sowing seeds of affinity” and “convenience”. The second part of the article generalises observations made in relation to Fo Guang Shan and draws the conclusion that all “ethical conversations across borders” require two things, namely, the identification of similarities or “affinities”, and an account of difference that stipulates the units between which the conversation is to be carried on.

¹ This paper is partly based on fieldwork conducted in London and Taiwan in 2009 and 2010. Much of that fieldwork was conducted with Joanna Cook and in discussion with James Laidlaw and I am grateful to both for their collaboration. I am also indebted to the ‘Taste of Chan’ collaborative research participants at Fo Guang Shan Temple, in London. I have presented versions of this paper to research seminars in the anthropology departments of Cambridge and Durham Universities, and I am grateful to both institutions for the invitations and the helpful suggestions that resulted. Matei Candea, Naor Ben-Yehoyada, Nick Evans, Caroline Gatt, Paolo Heywood, James Laidlaw, Hallvard Lillehammer, Alice Wilson, Hantian Zhang and two anonymous reviewers all provided detailed comments on written drafts that proved very helpful in clarifying my thought.

Leena Kaunonen (ed.)

Cosmopolitanism and Transnationalism: Visions, Ethics, Practices

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Introduction

Ethics across borders

What does transnational or translocal ethics look like? Cosmopolitan open mindedness is all very well, but once the mind is open to other ways of life, what does it do with them? How does the open mind apprehend and value the values that are not its own? Can it do so only by the lights of a universal cosmopolitan ethic, or only in relation to its own 'local' values? Or does open mindedness mean not judging, not valuing values at all?

Open mindedness is, of course, only one way to pursue ethics in a context of global ethical diversity. What of the missionary, or the colonialist, or the human rights advocate – what of those convinced that they are right about some ethical questions and that others are wrong? Can such people reasonably believe that others will come to accept their priorities by force of argument? And if so, how is such an argument to be made persuasive?

Academic attempts to explain the diversity of moral thought and practice tend to gravitate towards one of two poles on a spectrum running from relativism to universalism. At one pole, differences in values are interpreted as the result of different processes of acculturation or socialization, evidence of incommensurable ways of understanding the world and human beings' place in it. On this view, encounters across ethical difference are bound to end in misunderstanding. At the other pole, apparent disagreements about values are taken to reflect the operation of a universal moral or economic rationality under different circumstances or on divergent economic and political interests. On this view, ethical discourse is so much empty rationalization intended to obscure the baser motives from self and other. In a global context, the implication of this view is that missionaries and campaigners only do what they do in order to justify the domination by their own societies of others, and, conversely, that the adoption of the values of powerful societies by members of less powerful societies is nothing more than mimicry in bad faith.

Both approaches have provided us with useful insights into human motivation and action, and, although their advocates sometimes suggest otherwise, we do not need to see them as mutually exclusive. Indeed a number of anthropologists have explored the ways in which the two can be combined by studying how individual interest can be – must be – expressed in forms that are constrained by the structure of cultural knowledge. However, there is an important dimension of ethical experience that occurs at the real

and imagined interface of ethical traditions that neither methodological relativism nor methodological universalism, nor a combination of the two can accommodate.

What is needed is a way of thinking about encounters with ethical difference in which the reaction is neither incomprehension, nor cynicism, but a genuine recognition of the ethical in the other. The need has made itself apparent to me during the course of my research on a contemporary Buddhist movement, Fo Guang Shan. My argument is that such encounters are characterised by what I call *ethical conversations across borders*. (As the term is rather unwieldy, I will simply use *Conversation* as a shorthand.)

Fo Guang Shan

Fo Guang Shan is one of a number of Buddhist organizations that have emerged in Taiwan since the end of martial law in the 1980s. Originally founded in the 1950s and 1960s as a publishing business, and later a single temple, by its leader, Master Hsing Yun, Fo Guang Shan rapidly expanded in the 1990s and soon became a multi-million-member association with branches across the world. The movement is run by monastics, mainly female, but the key to its growth and influence are the lay members, who, as well as making regular cash donations and supporting specific fund-raising campaigns, also pledge their time as volunteers to help the organization run its administration, worship, education programmes and social work initiatives.

Fo Guang Shan is active in a wide range of areas. It runs a globally distributed daily newspaper, the *Merit Times*, a number of television channels, museums, libraries, orphanages and schools, three fully-accredited universities teaching a full range of secular subjects, and a travel agency. At the end of 2011, the organization opened what it claims is the largest Buddhist pilgrimage site in the world, the Buddha Memorial Centre, next to the original Fo Guang Shan temple in Kaohsiung.

Fo Guang Shan sees itself as a global organization, but also as the heir to a specifically Chinese tradition drawn from Buddhist and Confucian sources. It has a very clear account of the ways in which ethical values and practices from one culture can appeal to people of another, and of the limitations under which that process takes place. The aim of Fo Guang Shan is to “sow seeds of affinity” by exposing people to the best of Buddhist and Chinese culture, and to adapt Buddhist culture to make it “convenient”, so that people with different abilities, personal habits, cultural backgrounds and social conditions can find something that is easy for them to adopt and will help them to lead better lives. At

the same time, Fo Guang Shan teaches that its own ethical practices can be constantly improved and that lessons can and should be learned from other traditions.

This active, self-conscious effort to reflect on ethics, to influence others – others defined by variously constituted borders of difference – and to acquire ethical wisdom from them, in short to conduct an ethical conversation across borders, makes Fo Guang Shan a valuable case study for the development of a more general understanding of genuinely transnational ethics.

Ethics

The term “ethics” has a wide variety of meanings in ordinary and technical usage, and for this reason it is necessary to say a little about what I mean when I use the term. First, to address the question of scope, for the purposes of this paper, when I use the term “ethics” I am using it in the broadest possible sense. That is to say, I am referring not only to that aspect of thought and action that has to do with rules, laws, duties and rights that we easily think of as ethical (and which some philosophers have distinguished from the “moral” in the light of arguments first advanced by Elizabeth Anscombe 1958), but also to questions of character, happiness and even aesthetics. Ethics as I use it here takes in anything that contributes to answering the Socratic question, “How should one live?” (Williams 1985, 1; Laidlaw 2002, 316), or any action taken or proposed because “it is presumed to be productive of some objective good” (Shweder 2012).

Second, in relation to the question of normativity, let me clarify that I am using “ethical” in a descriptive rather than a normative sense. Used descriptively, “ethical” means “to do with how we ought to live”. Used normatively, it means, “right”, or “good”.

Consider the ancient Spartan practice of exposing new-born infants to the elements in order that the weakest among them should perish. We may think this was unethical behaviour in the normative sense (we think it was wrong). But regardless of what we think of it, to the extent the Spartans adopted this practice as a means of achieving ends that they thought were good, we can agree that this was an ethical practice in the descriptive sense. To deny that it was ethical, in this specific, descriptive sense, would be to claim that it was done unthinkingly, unreflectively, without reference to a notion of the valuable or the good. Habitual or coerced action could be described as ‘unethical’ on those terms.

In what follows, then, when I describe particular Fo Guang Shan practices as ethical, that can be taken to mean that they are designed with the attainment of some good in mind.

In the first part of the article, I introduce the teachings of Fo Guang Shan leader, Master Hsing Yun, and explain some of the complexities that arise when putting these teachings into practice. In the second part of the paper, taking the Fo Guang Shan case as a starting point, I consider the question of *Conversations* from a formal or abstract point of view and draw some tentative general conclusions about the conditions under which it might be possible to speak ethically across borders. In a nutshell, my suggestion will be that any party to an ethical conversation across borders needs two things: (1) successful identification of one or more points of similarity, or *affinities*, as I call them, borrowing a term from Fo Guang Shan and (2) an *account of difference* that provides a conceptualisation of the borders across which the conversation is taking place, and of the relatively homogeneous units between which it is carried on.

Master Hsing Yun and Fo Guang Shan's ethical conversations

Fo Guang Shan ethical teachings

Although Fo Guang Shan is a relatively young religious movement, it has developed a distinctive body of teachings, mainly in the form of books, pamphlets, journals, speeches and videos by the founder and leader of the organization, Master Hsing Yun. These have been translated into many languages and disseminated among members and non-members through a variety of channels. Books are sold, but also often given away for free. Many of Hsing Yun's writings and speeches are available to download from the internet, and they form the basis of lectures and Dharma talks after services. There is a daily newspaper, DVDs and even television channels. There are short courses ending in examinations, but there is no attempt to enforce orthodoxy on the membership, and many members read widely about Buddhism and other spiritual traditions.

Hsing Yun sees Fo Guang Shan Buddhism as heir to Chinese Pure Land Buddhism (as well as to Chan Buddhism), but he adapts some of the central Pure Land teachings. On Master Hsing Yun's telling of it, the Pure Land tradition teaches that this world is impure, and full of suffering. Under these conditions, humans are distracted by suffering to such an extent that we have no real hope of learning from Buddhist teachings and reaching enlightenment through our own efforts. However, with the help of buddhas and bodhisattvas, humans can aspire to be reborn in one of a number of Pure Lands, where the Dharma is preached perpetually, and where, in the absence of pain and imperfection, everyone can reach enlightenment instantaneously.

Master Hsing Yun, in explicit contrast with traditional interpretations of Pure Land teaching, argues that the world of living human beings is not irredeemably impure, only relatively impure. In fact, medical and technological progress have reduced the suffering of many human beings. There have also been developments in moral wisdom such as the recognition of human equality (including equality of the sexes) and the increasing international acceptance of the principles of human rights. As a result, Hsing Yun teaches, our world is becoming a better approximation of a Pure Land. As the world has improved through human effort, so the opportunity and capacity of its inhabitants to cultivate wisdom and virtue has increased; wiser and more virtuous individuals will contribute to purer societies and a better world, leading to a virtuous cycle. In order to promote this cycle, Hsing Yun calls on Buddhists – and everyone else – to cultivate virtue in themselves and promote it in others. So although many of the premises of Hsing Yun’s “Humanistic Buddhism”,² as he calls it, are the same as those of traditional Pure Land teachings, the orientation towards the world we live in is quite different: it is broadly optimistic (though recent years have seen Hsing Yun and his monastics voice more concern over growing global problems, especially environmental ones) and activist, rather than pessimistic and quietist.

Universalism, relativism and pluralism

Master Hsing Yun teaches that the principles of compassion and wisdom according to which the world is to be improved are not mysterious; the truths of Buddhism, such as impermanence, emptiness and the importance of compassion, are simple and transparent, accessible to everyone, and have probably been acknowledged in all traditions to some degree. What, for him, makes the Buddha and other sages great and worthy of devotion is not that they attained esoteric knowledge that eludes other beings, but rather that they achieved a practical mastery that enabled them fully to inhabit virtues that most people do know, but can implement only imperfectly.

2 The idea of Humanistic Buddhism or Buddhism for the human world is found in slightly different forms among various contemporary Buddhist groups in Taiwan. The basic idea can be traced to Master Tai Xu, a modernist Buddhist in the early twentieth century who thought that a reformed Chinese Buddhism could play a role in returning the country to its former greatness, but that, in order for China to benefit from its heritage of Buddhist wisdom, the focus would need to be shifted away from death and the dead and towards life and living human beings (see Pittman 2001). Fo Guang Shan Humanistic Buddhism can also be seen as a form of ‘Engaged Buddhism’ (Queen and King 1996; Queen et al. 2003)

This optimism about the accessibility of fundamental moral truths means that Fo Guang Shan is confident in its ability to engage with and judge other traditions, regardless of cultural difference, by applying common human reason to universal truth. In this respect, Fo Guang Shan's ethics is universalist, and Hsing Yun frequently makes this claim explicitly. "Buddhism has always embodied universalism, the concept that geographic limitations do not exist," one of his essays explains, "Buddhism belongs to the world and to all people" (Hsing Yun 2010, 33). "Human reason itself," he writes in another, "is a reflection of deep reality. There is but one truth and it applies equally to all of us. No one can stand above this truth, and no one can escape the consequences of turning away from it" (Hsing Yun 2000).

One way in which he explains the universality of Buddhist truth is by drawing on the Chan Buddhist teaching of universal Buddha nature. So for instance, in his book, *The Buddha's Light Philosophy*, he writes,

After the Buddha attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree, he taught that all sentient beings possess Buddha nature, the potential to become a Buddha. . . . From this concept arises the idea that all sentient beings are equal, and all dharma realms are one. These insights are the foundation needed for human beings to reach eternal peace, and they provide guidance that can benefit the entire world. (Hsing Yun 2010, 4)

The existence of this truth, immanent in human reason, and realised in its perfection by Sakyamuni Buddha establishes the ethical commensurability of different times and places:

There is one truth for all of us, and this truth is the truth taught by Shakyamuni Buddha. The Dharma is true on every continent and in every realm of existence. (Hsing Yun 2000)

Thus Hsing Yun explicitly rejects cultural relativism, arguing that the Dharma,

applies to all because it is an objective truth that cannot be changed by our subjective interpretations of it. (2000)

The realisation of the goal of Humanistic Buddhism, the building of a Pure Land on earth, thus require the propagation of the truths of Buddhism around the world

so that the lay wing of the organization, the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA) becomes,

a true international community, which transcends nationality, ethnicity, and tradition.
(Hsing Yun 2010, 29)

When the Association was established, the objective of spreading Buddhism around the world was named by Hsing Yun as one of its missions, and he often reminds members of their obligation, saying for example:

BLIA members should stand locally and think globally. They should plant *bodhi* seeds on every continent, allowing the Dharma to be introduced worldwide. (Hsing Yun 2010, 33)

However, while Hsing Yun's ethics is strongly universalist, its universalism is complicated by the belief that the eternal values that Buddhism teaches never exist in the abstract. They must always be realised in some particular form, conditioned by specific contingencies of culture, history, and by technological and economic development. "Buddhism is of this world," says Hsing Yun, quoting a Chan sutra, "it cannot exist apart from this world." So the task Fo Guang Shan Buddhists set themselves is to find ever more specific ways of skilfully embodying the virtues that Buddhism teaches, with each way being particularly appropriate to a specific form of life, or attractive to a specific kind of person. Traditional Chinese culture succeeds in orchestrating frequent opportunities for people to cultivate virtue, but it provides only one way of doing that, appropriate for people who have grown into certain habits and who live in certain historical societies, with all of their contingent specificities.

In a speech addressed to BLIA members, Master Hsing Yun recalled a visit to an American university. His academic host, the Master reported, said to him,

You are welcome to propagate the Dharma in the USA. But it seems that you have repeatedly tried to impose your Chinese culture on the Americans; as if you are trying to subjugate the American culture. (Hsing Yun 2004)

Taken aback, the monk reflected. "It became apparent to me," he said,

that I have been insensitive to their local cultures. I was reminded that the purpose of my visit is to contribute and serve, just as Buddhist devotees make offerings of flowers to the

Bodhisattvas. Therefore we must respect the cultures of other countries and societies; and to accept the unique characteristics of these cultures. We learn from the sutras that the Eastern Pure land has its own characteristics which are different from the special features of the Western Pure land. Similarly, there are differences between practicing in secluded monasteries and practicing Humanistic Buddhism in society. (Hsing Yun 2004)

In general, Hsing Yun's position could be described as a variety of moral pluralism. He urges respect for cultural difference, but rejects outright relativism. He defends an objective view of morality, yet rejects the view that a concrete morality derived from one historical context could be universally valid (see Shweder 2012).

Sowing seeds of affinity and convenience

One might wonder how the aims of spreading the Dharma and increasing virtue can be squared with the principle of respecting other cultures. There are two ways in which Master Hsing Yun speaks of doing both. The first is what he calls "sowing seeds of affinity": presenting audiences with a wealth of diverse manifestations of virtue, in the hope that some of them will appeal, drawing the target into a broader engagement in which both sides can learn about skilful living in the human world. Fo Guang Shan Buddhists call this strategy "sowing seeds of affinity".

The second way is what Hsing Yun calls "convenience". Buddhism needs to be adapted, or made "convenient", as Fo Guang Shan members say, so that it can be accepted by people for whom its traditions are alien. But the aim of convenience is not just to win people over to Buddhism. It is also to fashion Buddhist practices in a way that will not prove disruptive in the new setting. Because, according to Fo Guang Shan teachings, people's relationships with friends and family and with society at large are part of the conditions upon which their capacity for virtue depends, the aim must be to find a way of manifesting Buddhist truth that enhances rather than damages those relationships.

The flexibility of the principle of convenience might be mistaken for a form of encompassment, in which other traditions are approved in so far as they conform to the greater or higher truth of Fo Guang Shan Buddhism. This position is avoided because of an implicit distinction between Buddhism as Universal Truth, and Fo Guang Shan Chinese Buddhism as a historical tradition. Truth is unitary, but its manifestations are

numerous, and though Chinese tradition may have much to teach the world, it is not necessarily the most perfect in every respect, and where opportunities arise, it must be adapted to learn from other traditional or innovative ideas and practices. In fact, no tradition, including Fo Guang Shan's own, is thought to have a monopoly of virtue or wisdom, partly because, as societies interact, the conditions in which everyone has to act are changed, and opportunities and requirements for virtuous life change with them. Ethical diversity is only to be expected given the diversity of environmental, technological and social conditions to which virtue must respond.

Thus Fo Guang Shan as an organization aims to learn from other traditions in order to adapt to changing circumstances, just as it aims to promote Chinese Buddhism. Master Hsing Yun has gone to great lengths to incorporate into his teachings aspects of some quite disparate ethical traditions. One of the more surprising sources of ethical inspiration on which Hsing Yun has drawn is managerial capitalism; although the optimism that Fo Guang Shan exhibited in relation to capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s has dimmed somewhat, as concerns about consumerism and greed have entered into its vocabulary, Master Hsing Yun sees in the modern economy certain principles that are consonant with the fundamental truths of Buddhism.

For example, the opportunities it provides for advancement through hard work encourage the development of self-discipline and focus, by stimulating growth, it provides the wherewithal necessary to relieve suffering and cultivate wisdom, and most importantly, its emphasis on efficiency promotes the acquisition of "skilful means" by which one's goals can be achieved effectively. Identifying these virtues in contemporary business culture, Hsing Yun has sought to incorporate some of its practices into Fo Guang Shan organization. He has, for instance, encouraged the development of business enterprises under the auspices of BLIA in order to generate funds with which to fund Fo Guang Shan's activities. Management training culture has also been adopted by the movement; monastics are required to take regular refresher courses in management and leadership, and some of Fo Guang Shan's educational institutions teach accredited MBA courses.

In a similar way, international human rights discourse has been drawn on to modify, or at least to justify the modification of, traditional Chinese Buddhist practices. Human rights culture, Hsing Yun argues, is based on the principle of equality of all human beings, which is essential to the Chan Buddhist doctrine of Buddha-nature. However traditional Buddhism promoted a great deal of inequality, particularly between men and women; taking a lesson from other traditions, then, Fo Guang Shan Buddhism has encouraged women to become monastics and includes women among its leaders.

One of the biggest challenges to Buddhist traditions, according to Master Hsing Yun, is the emergence of modern technology, since many established Buddhist ways of doing things were the products of technological limitations that no longer apply. Thus, as the opportunities have arisen, Fo Guang Shan has embraced broadcast media and the internet as channels to communicate its message. The temples have been furnished with the latest mod-cons, including air conditioning in the meditation halls. Traditional limitations should not be idealised as a form of asceticism if they get in the way of achieving the goals of self cultivation, Hsing Yun writes,

With respect to modern technology and culture, all is subject to change and needs to be constantly upgraded. We should apply Buddhism in a modern way, by adapting to current changes and finding new solutions. This method allows Buddhism to remain the essence and knowledge to be used as a tool. (Hsing Yun 2010, 22)

The two principles of convenience, the adaptation of ethical models in order to make them suitable for an individual, community or culture, and sowing seeds of affinity, exhibiting virtue in order to elicit admiration and draw partners into an on-going dialogue, are frequently alluded to by Fo Guang Shan monastics and devotees. While leaders in the organisation see their role as adapting the tradition to the prevailing circumstances, they do not simply deliver the adaptations to their followers without comment; every localisation or reform is explained and commented on in an effort to remind devotees to learn to adapt virtuous practices to fit their own lives in whatever way they can.

Fo Guang Shan ethical conversations across borders in practice

The aim of Fo Guang Shan is not necessarily to bring those who have not accepted Buddhism into the religion in the manner of a conversion. The goal is, first, to help people to live a good life and, second, to improve the state of the world. As I noted above, according to the Fo Guang Shan view of things, these two goals are mutually reinforcing and mutually limiting. Those who, for example, take up voluntary social service, are thought both to improve their own lives, and to contribute to making the world a better place, which will, in turn, help to provide the conditions that other people need to improve themselves.

There are many factors that can contribute to a good life. The activities that Fo Guang Shan undertakes are designed to address one or more of those factors, and the intention to do this is frequently explicitly discussed. Much of the activity is conceived as being educational, either directly, as is the case with lectures and publications, or indirectly, as in the case of exhibitions and concerts that are designed to develop in the audience an appreciation of beauty. Taken together, these educational activities are described as “life education”. One of the participants in the London study, a young professional, who volunteers and teaches regularly at the temple, explained why life education is necessary:

Buddhism teaches us about the happiness of life, which, in turn, helps us to deal with the difficulties and challenges in our daily life. Having a happy life is important for everyone. Unfortunately, the reality is the school does not teach us the ways to achieve true happiness.

The implementation of these ideas is complex. For a start, Fo Guang Shan *Conversations* take place over a wide variety of borders of ethical difference, some of which are related to national or cultural borders, some of which are not. The methods of sowing affinities and convenience might be used by a nun to understand the relation of Buddhist traditions to the different religious traditions of co-celebrants in an inter-faith service, such as the one the nuns, or “venerables” as devotees call them, based at the London temple take part in every year under the auspices of the Borough of Westminster. It equally provides a rationale for cooperation between different Buddhist traditions, such as the ecumenical Buddhist conferences that Fo Guang Shan organizes so energetically every year, or between Mandarin and Cantonese speakers within local Fo Guang Shan communities. And it can be applied by lay devotees to understand their cooperation with other members, or to guide their creative attempts to integrate Fo Guang Shan teachings and practices into their own lives.

A second source of complexity is that Fo Guang Shan teachings emphasise the importance of pursuing multiple channels of communication with various audiences in order to sow seeds of affinity that may take root in unexpected ways. Thus, Master Hsing Yun writes:

There are many ways that lead sentient beings to the path. People are not only guided by Dharma services, but may also be guided through literature, art, books, paintings, vegetarian food, or tea. All these can guide people to Buddhism. The BLIA has designed various activities to appeal to different people. Some examples are: Dharma discussion

groups, Dharma protectors' seminars, meditation classes, and Sunday classes for adults and children. . . . Providing a multitude of activities is akin to the methods used by Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, who manifests in a myriad of forms to teach the Dharma to each sentient being in the best way. . . . By using loving kindness and compassion as the foundation and skilful means as the method, we emulate the spirit of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva who manifests in different forms, travels to different lands, liberates sentient beings, and uses limitless loving kindness and compassion with boundless skilful means to teach the Dharma. (Hsing Yun 2010, 21f)

A good example of Fo Guang Shan's approach to *Conversations* is the annual International Youth Seminar on Life Education, held at the original Fo Guang Shan temple complex in southern Taiwan. This is just one of the more elaborate of a large number of similar events that Fo Guang Shan temples and branches of the BLIA organize around the world. I attended the International Youth Seminar in the summer of 2010, when around a thousand participants between the ages of 18 and 35 from some forty countries took part. The largest delegations were from Taiwan, mainland China, the US, Australia and the Philippines. Local temples around the world (or Fo Guang Shan libraries and galleries in the case of the Chinese mainland, where temples cannot be established except by organizations that accept the control of the State Administration of Religious Affairs) had advertised for participants and had chosen in most cases a mixture of devotees, often members of the Young Adult Division (YAD) of the BLIA, and sympathetic non-Buddhists. Some of the non-Buddhists I spoke to were considering adopting the religion, but many others were committed members of other traditions. For instance, the large Philippine contingent included an active YAD chapter, but also a devoutly Catholic university lecturer.

The seminar took place over ten days. Most of that time was spent at the Fo Guang Shan headquarters, the main temple, in Kaoshiung Province in the south of Taiwan. The programme was intensive. Days were spent in a mixture of lectures, discussion groups and practical activities. Towards the end of the seminar the participants, together with their monastic guides, were taken on the road for a two-day coach tour that took in Taiwan's natural beauty spots and a series of Fo Guang Shan temples, culminating in a closing ceremony in a large BLIA administration centre and temple complex in the north. As well as receiving certificates from Master Hsing Yun, participants were greeted by Ma Ying-Jeou, President of the Republic of China, a firm ally of Hsing Yun. Throughout the event, all costs regarding accommodation and food were borne by Fo Guang Shan, and there was even a cash grant towards the cost of travel.

The participants were divided into groups of about a dozen people, from a mixture of countries, and each of these groups was allocated one or two monastics as guides for the duration of the seminar. The venerable who led my group, like many of the others at Fo Guang Shan headquarters, held a higher degree and had had a very successful career before ‘leaving home’ to become a monastic. Every day began with early morning chanting and prostrations in one of the temples – this was optional, as my guide explained to me, because it is very difficult for young people to get up early in the morning. At eight o’clock each morning, the participants were gathered for a gentle, coordinated exercise routine, accompanied each day by a short talk on the importance of being aware of one’s body and exercising for health and energy. All food was vegetarian, and one meal a day was eaten with elaborate monastic etiquette, in which the participants were trained.

Lectures took place in a large auditorium. Several of these were given by Master Hsing Yun himself. These dealt with aspects of Buddhist theory, such as emptiness, with the meaning of Humanistic Buddhism, and with the importance of cultivation and life education itself. Most of the other lectures were given by Fo Guang Shan venerables and dealt with the Buddhist perspective on life and death (“death is the final examination, we must prepare”), ecology, art, and so on. There was a talk by the mountaineer Jiang Xiu Zhen, the first woman to climb the world’s seven highest peaks, who spoke about her career, and there were dramatic presentations and films, one of which presented the life of an ancient Chinese physician who had sacrificed his life for the sake of his students. Participants were also given practical activities, such as a meditation session and Chinese calligraphy, and tours of the temple complex, including the enormous Buddha Memorial Centre, which was then under construction.

At least twice a day, the monastic guides would assemble their small groups of participants to ask them to reflect on and discuss the lectures and other activities they had experienced. In those discussions, as in every other activity, the theme of life education was reiterated. Although it was clear that we were being introduced to what our hosts saw as the best of Fo Guang Shan Buddhist teachings, the emphasis was on learning about how to live well, not on accepting Buddhism as a package. In fact, when a number of participants, including many of the mainland Chinese participants, asked to take refuge in the Buddha during the camp (effectively to accept conversion to Buddhism in a formal ceremony), in the presence of Master Hsing Yun, the monastics whom they approached were at first discouraging and finally gently refused, arguing that it was more important that they should pay attention to the different lessons they were learning, reflect on them when they returned home and put them into practice as best they could.

A similar multi-channelled approach is adopted by the three nuns who lead the London Fo Guang Shan temple. A service of worship is held at the temple every week on Sunday afternoon, incorporating chanting and prostrations, followed by a short talk by the abbess. Other religious services are held for specific festivals, such as Chinese New Year, or the Buddha's Birthday. Like most Fo Guang Shan institutions, the London temple offers a number of courses, including meditation, introduction to Buddhism (students study the writings of Master Hsing Yun), Chinese dancing, and Mandarin Chinese, and there is a "Bodhi Garden" (something like a Christian Sunday School) for small children. There are occasional lectures by visiting Buddhist leaders. There are cultural events, such as tea ceremonies and art exhibitions. There are many opportunities for volunteering, either helping in the temple itself by cooking, cleaning or manning the small shop and reception, or by visiting old age homes and prisons. The venerables also make frequent trips to local schools and participate in inter-faith services.

The nuns recognize that certain aspects of the Buddhist and Chinese culture that Fo Guang Shan offers will appeal to particular sections of the population they serve. Some embrace the devotional aspects, for example, but balk at the courses in Buddhist theory and history, others prefer the reading and study and rarely attend the services of worship. Many of the people who are drawn to the temple by the meditation classes are rather surprised to learn that worship plays such an important role in the life of some Buddhists. "The nuns here are excellent meditation teachers," a meditator in his thirties told me, "but the thing is, they have taken Buddhism and they have turned it into a religion." The nuns I have spoken to who serve communities outside of Taiwan are acutely aware of cultural differences between different groups of temple users, for instance, between earlier generations of Hakka- or Cantonese-speaking migrants, and more recently arrived Mandarin speakers, or between the Chinese community and other ethnic groups. Rather than attempting to persuade their followers to embrace all of these activities, the venerables and lay teachers focus on providing them with practices that do appeal while taking every opportunity to prompt reflection on the opportunities to apply the lessons of Buddhism to cultivate happiness and virtue in whatever other ways might be appropriate to their own lives.

Issues arising in Conversations

Standards and affinities

Contemplating the many forms that Buddhism has taken in its spread across Asia, and the prospect of further adaptation as it spreads to other parts of the globe, the founder and leader of Fo Guang Shan, Master Hsing Yun writes,

So long as the principles of the Dharma are not altered, we should emphasize and promote the retention of the local cultures and needs. (Hsing Yun 2004)

This statement is easy to understand, but it is clear that to put it into practice would require an elaboration of the distinction between indispensable moral content and merely contingent cultural convention. That is to say, one would need to consider specific Buddhist practices, and to extract from them the principles that justify them, disentangling those principles from arbitrary custom that might be abandoned altogether and from pragmatic arrangements that are designed to achieve goals that might be achieved in some other, equally or more effective way. The same process would be necessary for any enterprise that sought to apply the principles of some local set of practices more widely. It may be no easy matter, for although psychologists have long held that the distinction between moral rule and social convention is innate and universal, knowing that there is a difference is not the same as knowing where the line can be drawn that divides the two.

The problem is easier where the rule is one that we are aware of, that is manifested in legislation, say, or is self-consciously celebrated as a local custom. However, many of those objectified rules depend on categories of thought or social arrangements or habits that are usually taken for granted and are rarely reflected upon. To a significant extent, our moral lives are not based on abstract principles, but on what philosopher J. E. Tiles, in his book on cross-cultural ethics, developing a concept with its roots in the thought of Hegel, calls “concrete moralities” (2000, 27). Concrete moralities are something like what anthropologists call ‘total institutions’ in which a whole way of life, incorporating custom, social arrangements and even environmental conditions is implicated in moral thought and practice. The problem posed for *Conversations* by these concrete moralities is that they naturalise the categories on which ethical deliberation depends. “Most of the time,” Tiles writes,

people live within their concrete moralities as comfortably (or otherwise) as they live in their houses or tents, and they do not feel called upon to justify their practices and attitudes or to examine what if any basis these might have. (Tiles 2000, 74)

Especially when we are in familiar settings — in our own tents, so to speak — the differences between tradition, habit and pragmatic efficiency on the one hand, and ethical considerations about value and duty on the other are frequently omitted from consideration: there are a limited number of given, concrete ways of living life, and most of our choices will be made from among them. Even innovations justified on moral grounds will silently incorporate much that is conventional. But when people speak ethically across borders, they must face the problem of finding ways to render the ethics of different regions commensurate. They must decide on a place to draw the line that divides a universal or shared essence from contingent cultural convention, to decide whether it is the form of the specific practices that are valued, or the principle that underlies them, or the goal to which they contribute.

Tiles suggests that a common approach to the resolution of this kind of conflict of concrete moralities is to seek a common standard of measurement that can be applied to competing ethical considerations. I want to suggest that ethical conversations across borders are always based on finding this kind of common standard, or point of communication, which I will call, after the fashion of Fo Guang Shan Buddhists, affinities. Tiles discusses three possible methods for arriving at a common standard when facing disagreement. They are:

(1) *Using reason to move from particular cases to universal abstract principles.* Tiles takes the Socratic dialectician as the pattern for this approach. As a contemporary example we might take movements such as Karen Armstrong's Charter for Compassion, which aims to unite disparate religious traditions around the Golden Rule, which supporters claim is universal ("The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves").

(2) *Identifying shared exemplary models, against which different ethical considerations are to be measured.* Tiles identifies this approach with Confucius.

(3) *Using an empirical approach to determine functions or ends and judging competing ethical considerations according to their contribution to achieving those ends.* Tiles

associates this approach with Aristotelian virtue ethics: the thing is to understand the nature of man, and whether particular practices contribute to the perfection of that nature or prevent it. More recent examples would include twentieth-century state socialisms that, starting from a theory about the nature of economic relations and the ethically positive trend of world history, judged policies according to whether they advanced or retarded the liberation of the Proletariat.

To Tiles' three kinds of standard, I suggest we add several more – though this is unlikely to exhaust the possibilities:

(4) *Agreeing on a common meta-ethics*. For example, Eugenio Menegon, a scholar of the Jesuit's missions to China, has argued that the Jesuits and the Confucian literati with whom they interacted in China were able to admire in each other an organic approach to knowledge, in which the aspiration of scholarship was to reveal the connection between physical and metaphysical orders of knowledge, including moral knowledge (Menegon n.d.; see also Mungello 2009,137 f).

(5) *Agreeing on a common enemy*. This approach, like agreeing on shared exemplars, allows ethical conversations to be carried on in the absence of agreement on or even any specification of underlying principles. Mungello gives an example of this in the Jesuit case: both Jesuits and Confucian literati reviled Buddhist monks, each side for its own reasons (2009, 14). For a contemporary example, consider the agreement that can be reached between otherwise ethically divergent states through the condemnation of terrorism and terrorists.

(6) *Agreeing on the importance of practices*. We can agree on the value of maintaining certain embedded practices, such as forms of etiquette, or rituals, even if we have interpretations of them that are quite contradictory.

Accounts of difference

In order to engage in a *Conversation* one needs to have in mind two or more ethical units. Neither the units, nor the differences or borders that separate and define them, are givens. The borders need not be territorial at all, still less national or regional geopolitical ones. Border thinking is not limited to thought about nation states: other ways of imagining difference such as galactic polities, historical periods, world religions (Masuzawa 2005, Cook et al. 2009), literary civilizations (Pollock 1998), ethnicities, clans and castes all produce interfaces across which differences can be observed. Borders can be complicated and the units they separate may not be divided by the same kinds of difference.

For an empire that sees itself as universal, like the historical Chinese empire, the key border may be between those inside the empire, and those outside it (traditional Chinese thought made room for a third category between Chinese subjects and ‘raw’ barbarians, the ‘cooked’ barbarians, who were on their way to becoming Chinese; see Fiskesjö 1999). For the European jurists who developed international law in the nineteenth century, one set of borders divided ‘civilized nations’ from each other, another divided those countries from ‘barbarous’ and ‘semi-barbarous’ states; legal arguments were a proper way to settle disputes between the powerful European and Anglophone states, but force, not persuasion, was appropriate in dealing with the less developed countries (Orakhelashvili 2006).

For the border to be meaningful, it will need to separate units of relative internal homogeneity, but it is not important whether the border or the homogeneity on either side of it is real. The point is that when people engage in ethical deliberation in the form of a *Conversation*, the form their deliberation takes is dependent on their accounts of difference.

In the case of Fo Guang Shan *Conversations*, it is clear that no one set of borders takes priority. Fo Guang Shan addresses a number of different groups of outsiders across borders it conceives: non-Buddhists in Taiwan, mainlanders across the Strait, westerners in general across the border of East/West cultural difference, followers of other forms of Buddhism, and of other, non-Buddhist religious traditions. Particularly important is the border between traditional Chinese and modern culture, as understood by Master Hsing Yun, because it is the *Conversation* carried out across that divide that explains and justifies most of the innovations that distinguish Fo Guang Shan practice from its Chinese Buddhist antecedents.

However, though the borders involved in Fo Guang Shan *Conversations* are diverse, they are united by a common and specific account of difference: the view that ethical differences are due to differences in culture, and that cultures are in part the result of more or less successful attempts to adapt virtue to prevailing circumstances.

Conversation partners

Conversations, as I have described them, make possible at least two distinct roles for interlocutors. The first is the role of interlocutor as a bearer of values. The second role is the role of interlocutor as an addressee. In the first sense, when Master Hsing Yun speaks to his followers of capitalism and management culture as being a source of moral values with which Buddhist values can be compared, both units are serving as bearers of values – Buddhist values and business values are being simultaneously distinguished and juxtaposed in Master Hsing Yun’s ethical reasoning. However, the lessons that Hsing Yun draws from the *Conversation* are intended for Fo Guang Shan; Fo Guang Shan members, as Buddhists, rather than as business people, are the addressees of the deliberation.

One can think of many *Conversations* that take this form: deliberations carried on by parties who, though they may disagree with one another, see themselves as being on the same side of a border, separated by ethical difference from a party who is not present. This is the case in cultural renaissances, in which thinkers attempt to draw moral lessons for their contemporaries from ancient authors who lie beyond the border of temporal disjunction (Goody 2009). The widely read anthropologist Margaret Mead famously drew ethical lessons from the Samoan islanders whom she had studied. In so far as her reasoning depended on the acknowledgement of ethical difference between Samoans and Americans, her work constitutes a *Conversation* in my sense, even though her intended audience, her compatriots, were situated on the same side of the border defined by that difference (Mead 1928).

In the case of Fo Guang Shan, the purpose of the conversation is partly to draw people together: not all *Conversations* will have such an amicable goal. The aim of a *Conversation* may be to reach an amicable understanding as a basis for cooperation, or to find things to admire in an unfamiliar way of life, but it may also be to persuade, to condemn or to shame. In order to disagree effectively with an enemy, it may be necessary to find a shared value about which to wrangle.

There are well attested examples of this in the history of Christian missionary activity: in many cases the subjects of the missionaries' attentions accepted prescriptions about what a proper religion would look like but turned the values they learnt against Christianity and claimed that their own traditions were superior religions, *on Christian terms*; they were, as Ludek Broz puts it, in the context of an article about religion in the Altai Republic, converted to religion – as a moral category – but not to Christianity (2009; see Masuzawa 2005 for an argument that similar processes were at work in the emergence of the category of 'world religion' in the nineteenth century). Perhaps the most well known case of this kind is the refiguring of Sri Lankan Buddhism as a form of rationalist philosophy described by Gombrich and Obeyesekere in *Buddhism Transformed* (1988). They relate the way in which reformers such as Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), having been trained in English missionary schools to look down on Buddhism as an idolatrous and therefore superstitious faith, rejected many of the traditions of Buddhism as perversions of the Buddha's teachings on just those grounds, but reasserted an atheistic and philosophical core that they claimed was more rational and modern than the Christianity of the colonizers.

Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to explore a particular kind of ethical deliberation, which I have called *ethical conversations across borders*, or simply *Conversations*. I have argued that *Conversations* succeed in overcoming the conflict between universalism and relativism by elaborating *accounts of difference* that distinguish two or more ethical units, while simultaneously identifying one or more similarities or *affinities* between the parties.

I introduced Fo Guang Shan, an organization that places a particularly heavy emphasis on the importance of *Conversations*, and explained how it mobilizes concepts of affinity and difference in its teachings and in its practice. Fo Guang Shan *Conversations* are based on an account of difference that sees the human world divided into cultures at various scales, from the global, through the national, to the local or even the individual. Each culture is seen as a more or less successful attempt to adapt culture to local conditions.

The affinities deployed in Fo Guang Shan *Conversations* in order to bridge the border of cultural difference vary depending on context. In teachings about the importance of engaging with ethical difference, Master Hsing Yun stresses affinities at a high level of

abstraction: values such as equality, freedom from suffering and wisdom. Fo Guang Shan monastics and lay devotees tend to put the mission of speaking ethically across borders into practice by relying on more concrete goods such as musical and artistic skill, taste and comfort. Fo Guang Shan *Conversations* are sometimes aimed at adapting practices from one ethical culture for use in another, on the principle of “convenience”. Sometimes the objective is to “sow seeds of affinity” by exhibiting a concrete manifestation of universal values in order to draw others into a long-term dialogue in which mutual learning and adaptation can take place.

The phenomena that I discuss in this article in relation to a specific religious movement must be ubiquitous, among other religious groups, but also in many other non-religious contexts. Existing social scientific models of transcultural ethics attempt to understand the nature of cultures, or of the universal characteristics of ethical thought that transcend cultural difference. What the Fo Guang Shan case shows is that the actors’ own models of difference and similarity define the shape that ethical conversations across borders will take. Understanding this is more important than ever at a time when, in Europe at least, well established paradigms for understanding the interaction and coexistence of cultures have been thrown into question.

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