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**WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES**

ÖKUMENISCHER RAT DER KIRCHEN – CONSEIL OECUMÉNIQUE DES ÉGLISES – CONSEJO MUNDIAL DE IGLESIAS

## **A Buddhist–Christian Common Word on Structural Greed**

From 22–26 August 2010, thirty Buddhists from the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions and Christians from the Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist, Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions met at Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand, under the theme, “Buddhists and Christians Engaging Structural Greed Today.” The consultation was jointly organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and hosted by the Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace at Payap University. Participants included activists, economists, religious leaders and scholars from Australia, Germany, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, the United Kingdom and USA.

The global financial crisis, into which much of the world plunged in October 2008, has left large numbers of people around the world devastated, distraught and robbed of their human dignity. The WCC and LWF, who have a history of engaging questions of economic justice, recognize that the root causes of this crisis have not simply to do with economic realities but also with spirituality and morality. The Churches’ Commission on International Affairs (CCIA) affirmed that Christianity alone does not have the resources to effectively address this crisis but must cooperate with other religions which, over centuries, have deeply reflected on the question of greed and have significant wisdom to offer.<sup>i</sup> The LWF similarly has made the commitment to “engage with those of other faiths and with the rest of society in efforts to subvert structural greed and develop alternatives that are life-giving and sustaining for all.”<sup>ii</sup>

We, Christians and Buddhists, therefore convened to seek a common word on the present crisis, recognizing that structural greed is at the core of the financial crisis. Recalling a saying of the Buddha, “in a situation of crisis, act as if your turban is on fire,”<sup>iii</sup> we underscore the urgency of the situation. Recognizing also that the crisis has created an unprecedented opportunity to speak to the governments, financial institutions and to our own religious communities, we present the following observations that form our common word.

### **The Present Context**

We, Buddhists and Christians, observe that one of the primary reasons for the global financial crisis is that, over the past centuries, economic processes have been progressively motivated and structured by the goal of maximizing profits for capital owners and thus monopolizing the world market. Following the great recession of 1929, political regulations to control this

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tendency were instituted. The dismantling of these regulations a few decades ago resulted in an environment for the explosion of personal and structural greed, leading to a debt and mortgage crisis, to unparalleled disparities between the super-rich and those who go hungry every day and to the accelerated degradation of the environment.

We, Buddhists and Christians, acknowledge that as individuals and religious communities we participate intentionally or unintentionally in seeking benefits from this system of personal and institutional greed, and so have been complicit in its devastating effects. At the same time, we acknowledge our responsibility to learn about, resist and seek to change the system that destroys the lives of large numbers of mostly poor people in the world.

In recent decades, more people have become comfortable with greed and have begun to believe that unregulated greed is good and that unbridled competition and the accumulation of wealth are necessary for human progress. A steady diet of powerful messages communicated, for example, by corporate-controlled media has served to internalize these messages.

Financial markets that have been deregulated due to the pressures of structural greed have also led to a situation in which money and financial markets take on a life of their own, with the creation of an endless variety of new financial instruments for making quick, hyper profits. More than just a medium of exchange, money has become a commodity from which ever larger profits are promised and expected.

## **Buddhist and Christian Understandings of Greed**

Buddhists understand greed as a human disposition, one of the Three Poisons of greed, hatred and delusion. Greed is a cause of suffering and an obstacle to enlightenment. On the path toward enlightenment, human beings can overcome the overwhelming power of the Three Poisons and thereby become generous, loving and compassionate persons.

Christians understand that they live in structures of domination and greed, traditionally related to the power of sin. Since the time of the prophets, biblical faith resisted these oppressive structures and worked for legal and community-related alternatives. Following in this tradition, Jesus Christ lived a life in opposition to the forces of domination and died in the fierce struggle against these. In his resurrection, Christians believe that he was victorious over these structures and empowers his followers, through the Holy Spirit, to resist and transform similar structures today.

To avoid addressing structural greed and to focus on individual greed is to maintain the *status quo*. As Buddhists and Christians, we are convinced that greed has to be understood both personally and structurally. Individual and structural greed feed each other in their interactive relation of cause and effect. They need each other for their sustenance and expansion.

Self-interest, necessary for human well-being, does not necessarily constitute greed. Insofar as humans can survive and flourish only together with one another, self-interest naturally includes the interests of others. Therefore, when self-interest is pursued without compassion for others, when interconnectedness is disregarded or when the mutuality of all humanity is forgotten, greed results. With greed, whether personal or structural, there can never be enough.

## **Strategies for Engaging Structural Greed**

Greed is manifested at both the individual and social levels, as well as structurally through political, economic and media power. Each level requires transformation and needs a variety of strategies to be effective.

Strategies for addressing greed at the personal and social levels include promoting generosity and cultivating compassion for others. We encourage effective preaching and teaching as well as spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer to motivate Buddhists and Christians towards personal and social transformation.

Counteracting the structural greed embodied in political and economic power structures requires different strategies. They include instituting anti-greed measures, such as the development and enforcement of adequate regulation of financial transactions and policies that promote the equitable distribution of wealth.

Since market-driven global economies have become harmful to small businesses and devastating to local communities, efforts to create alternate economies at the local level must be encouraged. We identified four examples of such efforts from around the world: local exchange and trading system (LETS), in which trading is done in local and regional currencies; cooperative banking; decentralized energy; and localizing the production and exchange of basic commodities such as water and food.

As structural greed also threatens the earth's sustainability, we affirm the need to safeguard the "commons" for all people in participatory ways of organizing and managing the earth's resources.

These initiatives designed to transform structural greed cannot be instituted without strategic, well-organized activist communities. We recognize that some of the best initiatives for such organizing often come from the experience and creativity of those at the margins. We also note that preaching and teaching, both in temple and church, can be effective ways of motivating people to participate in such organized communities. Collective power is enhanced when Buddhists and Christians work together; they are able to have an even more effective and constructive impact when they engage with other religious communities and grassroots civil society organizations and movements.

As Buddhists and Christians, we also affirm that meditation, prayer and other spiritual practices offer people access to spiritual power that gives them perseverance, release from their egos, compassion with those who suffer and the inner strength to love and deal non-violently with those who they have to oppose. As Buddhist teachers have reminded us: we must be peace in order to make peace.

## **Conclusion**

As Buddhists and Christians from a variety of traditions in our respective religions and from many countries, we spent four days struggling with the question of engaging structural greed. Each one of us strove to share authentically from the perspective of our tradition and identity.

We tried to listen deeply to each other, suspend judgment, appreciate each other's beliefs, be self-critical of our own beliefs and attentive to new insights.

This common word testifies to the value of such a dialogue. Our hope is that such ongoing interreligious engagement and cooperation can be a powerful contribution to overcoming greed and realizing a world of greater compassion, wisdom and justice.

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<sup>i</sup> Meeting of the CCIA in Cuba, March 2009, at [www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/international-affairs/commission-on-international-affairs-policy/report-of-the-march-2009-ccia-meeting.html](http://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/international-affairs/commission-on-international-affairs-policy/report-of-the-march-2009-ccia-meeting.html)

<sup>ii</sup> Actions Taken by the Eleventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, at [www.lwf-assembly.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Assembly\\_Outcomes/Consolidated\\_Report-Actions\\_Taken\\_by\\_Eleventh\\_Assembly.pdf](http://www.lwf-assembly.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Assembly_Outcomes/Consolidated_Report-Actions_Taken_by_Eleventh_Assembly.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya* 6.20 Maranassati Sutta: Mindfulness of Death (2).