

Buddhists and Christians Call for Measures to Counter Structural Greed

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A group of leading Buddhist and Christians has underscored the urgency for faith communities to engage with government and financial institutions to transform personal and structural greed and help promote the equitable distribution of wealth.

Thirty leaders, scholars, economists and activists from the two faith groups meeting under the auspices of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) affirmed that Buddhists and Christians shared similar teachings on greed, which should constitute the basis for engaging today's economic crisis.

"Engaging Structural Greed" was the theme of the LWF – WCC consultation hosted by Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand from 22 to 26 August.

Participants stated that one of the main reasons for the current global economic crisis was the drive for the maximization of profits by capital owners, and they lamented the de-regulation of the financial markets. The present situation, they said, was a moral and spiritual issue.

"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," states the consultation's final statement titled, "A Buddhist-Christian Common Word on Structural Greed."

The consultation included Lutherans, Reformed, Anglican and Roman Catholic Christians, and Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhists from 14 countries, and aimed at continuing the host organizations' ongoing engagement with questions of economic justice.

The process to engage the false ideology of neoliberal economic globalization has been a central part of DTS' theological work for more than ten years, emphasized Rev. Dr Martin Sinaga, secretary for Theology and the Church at the LWF Department for Theology and Studies (DTS). "Now, this struggle should be extended to include people of other faiths. Buddhism's strong critique of greed can inspire the church to deepen its understanding and to benefit from the dialogue," he added.

"Christians do not have all the answers," added Shanta Premawardhana, Programme Executive for the WCC's unit for Inter-Religious Dialogue and Cooperation.

Ajarn Sulak Sivaraksa, a leading spokesperson of the Movement of Engaged Buddhists in Thailand, reminded the participants that, "Without inner peace, there cannot be outer peace."

The consultation's final statement recognizes that Buddhists understand that greed causes suffering but that human beings can overcome greed by becoming generous, loving and compassionate. It states that Christians believe Jesus Christ resisted oppressive structures and was victorious over them.

Collective Power

“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,” the statement says.

Structural greed cannot be tackled without well organized communities that act strategically, participants stated. These communities can learn from groups operating at the margins of society and may be enhanced by the preaching and teaching of both temple and church.

“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,” the statement adds.

Prof. Paul Knitter of Union Theological Seminary, a leading voice in interreligious dialogue, commented on the contribution of Buddhists, saying, “At the end of the process, the Buddhists reminded us Christians that all the efforts at the ‘local’ level meant to transform the ‘global’ level, won’t really work unless we are continuously working on the ‘personal’ level.

“Our efforts to transform the world have to be rooted in our efforts to transform our own hearts,” he added, reminding the consultation of the sayings of a leader of the Movement of Engaged Buddhists in Thailand, Thich Nhat Hanh: “We cannot make peace unless we are peace.”

While the Buddhist and Christian leaders underscored the urgency of faith communities’ involvement, they also pointed out that the current financial crisis had also created an unprecedented opportunity to speak to government, financial institutions and their own faith communities.

“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.”

“A Buddhist-Christian Common Word on Structural Greed,” the joint statement from LWF-WCC consultation is available in PDF.