

FILIP MAJKOWSKI

(Warsaw)

Rome's Encounters with Buddhism after the Second Vatican Council¹

Abstract

This paper discusses the nature of official relations of the highest hierarchs of the Roman Catholic Church, and in particular the successive popes, with Buddhism and the Dalai Lama. The decisive events which began the inter-religious dialogue were the Second Vatican Council convened by Pope John XXIII and one of its crucial documents *Nostra aetate*. The dialogue was continued by Pope Paul VI who was the first Bishop of Rome to meet with the Dalai Lama. During John Paul II's papacy the Dalai Lama and the Pope met ten times and the dialogue became more intense. It did, however, suffer a blow when in 1994 John Paul II's book-interview *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* was published containing statements about Buddhism generally viewed as unjust and simplified.

Comparatively little has been said and written about relations between the Vatican and Buddhism. One could even say that it is difficult to speak about any relations at all between the most important institution of Western Christianity and Buddhism, which is still predominantly an Asian religion. Ecumenical dialogue, that is the Church's relations with other Christian denominations, both in the West (e.g. the Anglican and Lutheran Churches) and in the East (the Orthodox Patriarchate), as well as the inter-faith dialogue with non-Christian religions, have been important topics since the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). As far as the world's great religions are concerned, the main focus of discussion has been the dialogue with Islam and Judaism, two influential religions, which share at least one common feature with Christianity – faith in one God. This dialogue

¹ I would like to express my deepest gratitude to John Bray for his kind help with editing this article. His editorial and linguistic suggestions were of invaluable help to me. I am very grateful for all his remarks.

has been supported and endorsed by successive popes, particularly since the 1960s, when the Church's most recent universal council took place.

However, in a world where the barriers that used to separate peoples and their cultures are beginning to tumble, it was inevitable that there would be increased contacts between the Catholic Church and Buddhism. Buddhism is no longer a religious system restricted solely to the Asian continent. Particularly since the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959, the West has gained the greatest opportunity ever to discover what Buddhism really is.² To some degree Buddhism has become a sort of fashion in Europe and some parts of the Western world. This has been an expansion that the Roman Catholic Church could not ignore. When the world expressed solidarity with occupied Tibet and the Dalai Lama's influence was increasing, the encounter between the two traditions was inevitable. Three great popes – John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II – opened the Roman Church to the increasingly modernizing world, the people of today and their common problems, more than ever before. Hence, even though Buddhism and Christianity do not share faith in a one and only God, a faith which could have been a common ground of understanding between them, and though the doctrinal differences between the two religions cannot be overcome (e.g. the doctrine of reincarnation), the two traditions and their chief representatives had to find a common language to face the hardships of the present-day man, wherever in the world he may live and whatever religion he follows.

Let us see how the relations between the Catholic Church and the representatives of Buddhism have developed during the last decades. It is difficult to find rich sources on these relations, by comparison with the abundant sources on the Catholic-Muslim or Catholic-Jewish relations. Nevertheless, we can examine successive meetings of the Dalai Lama and Pope John Paul II. We can also reflect upon several instances when the Pope and the Church's highest representatives spoke on the subject of Buddhism. Though such instances were not many, they were noticed and remembered.

1. Several important events in the life of the Dalai Lama and situation in Tibet³ against the background of successive pontificates

When Lhamo Thondup, the current Dalai Lama,⁴ was born on July 6, 1935 in the village of Taktser in north-eastern Tibet the Throne of Peter was occupied by Pope Pius XI

² Naturally, the Catholic Church had previous contacts with Buddhism, e.g. through its missionaries to the Asian continent, as well as owing to the Christian monks interested in monastic life and contemplative techniques of their Buddhist counterparts. However, those were not the contacts between the hierarchs. This article does not deal with such encounters. Its aim is to present mainly the relations between the popes and Buddhism.

³ All the facts from the Dalai Lama's life and events in Tibet mentioned in this article are based on the publication *Tybet. Pamięci niezrównanych wojowników [Tibet. To the Memory of the Grand Warriors]* [14].

⁴ The names under which the Dalai Lama is commonly known – Tenzin Gyatso, were given to him on the enthronement day on February 22, 1940 in Lhasa. The spelling of Tibetan names in this article is based on the book *My Land and My People. Memoirs of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama of Tibet* [8].

(February 6, 1922–February 10, 1939).⁵ That was 27 years before the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, which would become the turning point for the Roman Catholic Church, as well as for the relations between the Vatican and different world religions.

When in November 1939 the four-year-old Dalai Lama found himself in Lhasa for the first time, the Church was headed by Pius XI's successor, Pius XII (March 2, 1939–October 9, 1958). The Dalai Lama was enthroned on February 22, 1940. In November 1949 the People's Liberation Army of China began 'the peaceful liberation of Tibet'. Officially, the Dalai Lama took over the country on November 17, 1950, at the age of 15. All these events happened during a single pontiff's papacy.

On March 17, 1959, during a failed uprising in Lhasa, the Dalai Lama secretly fled the capital and went to exile in India. At that time in Rome, a new Pope had already ruled for several months. John XXIII's pontificate was a short one. It lasted less than five years (October 28, 1958–June 3, 1963). However, for the new Pope this time was sufficient to take steps heading towards the Church's reform and the preparation of the ground on which the head of the Catholic Church and the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism would soon be able to meet. On October 11, 1962 John XXIII opened the first session of the Second Vatican Council. This event came during the same period as the publication of the young Dalai Lama's first autobiography *My Land and My People*. The book acquainted the Western world with Tibet's tragic history of the past several years and presented the reader with a handful of first-hand information on Tibetan Buddhism.

The pope who had the duty of closing the proceedings of the Council (December 8, 1965) was Paul VI (June 21, 1963–August 6, 1978). It was Paul VI, who would become the first Bishop of Rome to meet with the Dalai Lama and to travel to the countries where Buddhism was born (India and Sri Lanka). It was also during this pontificate, that the Tibetan Autonomous Region was established (September 1, 1965) and the dreadful Cultural Revolution swept through Tibet in the decade of 1966–1976. It was during the time when the See of Peter was ruled by Paul VI, that the world had the opportunity of getting to know the Dalai Lama better. The Tibetan leader began travelling to various countries outside India, promoting the ideals of compassion and non-violence wherever he went, and calling the world to help his invaded motherland.

The Dalai Lama visited the Vatican on a number of occasions when its host was John Paul II (October 16, 1978–April 2, 2005). An intense inter-religious and inter-monastic dialogue began during his pontificate. It was John Paul II who organized the World Day of Prayer in Assisi on October 27, 1986. During his papacy Tibet was opened for tourists in 1983. Successive Lhasa uprisings broke out in the years 1987–1989 and the Dalai Lama was honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize on October 5, 1989.

⁵ Dates of popes are given here after the official website of the Holy See – Vatican: the Holy See – www.vatican.va.

2. The Second Vatican Council and the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate*

Why was the Second Vatican Council so important for Catholic-Buddhist dialogue?

It seems that in the pre-Vatican II era the Church did not take Buddhism and other non-Christian religions seriously. Buddhism was scarcely the subject of debate inside the Church. Like other traditional creeds, it was marginalized and its role in the salvation of mankind was considered negative [24, 85].⁶ In January 1928, Pius XI admonished the Catholics who attempted to seek dialogue with other religions. The Pope described such actions as erroneous, because founded “on that false opinion which considers all religions to be more or less good and praiseworthy, since they all in different ways manifest and signify that sense which is inborn in us all, and by which we are led to God and to the obedient acknowledgment of His rule. Not only are those who hold this opinion in error and deceived, but also in distorting the idea of true religion they reject it, and little by little turn aside to naturalism and atheism, as it is called; from which it clearly follows that one who supports those who hold these theories and attempts to realize them, is altogether abandoning the divinely revealed religion [21, no. 2].”

John XXIII laid before the Second Vatican Council, as one of its goals, the task of revising this negative attitude towards other religions. The result of debates on this matter was the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate* – one of Vatican II’s key documents. This declaration would be the basis for further actions undertaken by successive popes, aiming not at the obliteration of differences between distinct traditions or making theological commentaries on the precepts of these traditions (though such analyses, often superficial and unfortunate, would also be made), but rather at focusing on similarities shared by people, regardless of their faith, and at common efforts to save world peace.

The declaration *Nostra aetate* promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965 begins with a statement about uniting people and nations, in which the Catholic Church would also like to play a crucial role: “In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship [4, no. 1].”

Further on, the Declaration focuses on the universal role of all the main religions of the world: “Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good,

⁶ In square brackets I put numbers referring to the sources enlisted at the end of the article. The first number refers to a title in the bibliography, the second – to a page in a given source. In case of official Roman Catholic Church documents, e.g. encyclicals or declarations, the second number refers to a text’s passage and is preceded by abbreviated ‘no’.

what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going? [4, no. 1]”

Finally, the document expresses what the Magisterium of the Catholic Church had never previously stated in such an official and emphatic manner, and what made *Nostra aetate* a crucial and decisive text for an open dialogue – respect for and tribute to non-Christian religions: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect the ray of that Truth which enlightens all men [4, no. 2].”

Even though in the whole document there is only one sentence about Buddhism, yet it is meaningful. Also John Paul II would refer to this sentence in future [7, 84]: “Again, Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination [4, no. 2].”

Father Leonard Fic [6, 218] has found in this sentence significant details, easy to miss after only one reading. According to him, in this one sentence the Church clearly distinguishes the variety of Buddhist schools, as well as the aim of Hinayana Buddhism – acquiring the state of ‘perfect liberation’, and Mahayana Buddhism – attaining ‘supreme illumination’. This sentence also refers to the Buddhist Four Noble Truths, when it mentions ‘insufficiency of this changeable world’, that is suffering (The First Noble Truth), and that Buddhism is a system which reveals to its followers the path to overcome this suffering (The Fourth Noble Truth).

Thus, this one sentence of the Council’s Declaration is by no means a demonstration of ignorance, such as might have been implied by the fact that so little attention has been paid to the great world religion in such an important document. On the contrary, it is an expression of respect for the Buddhist tradition, as one which is able to provide people with answers to these basic, ever-present questions about the sense of life and death. This respect is expressed very concisely (the Declaration itself is a brief text) and very cautiously. This caution ought not to be underestimated, as in future a few high officials of the Church (including the Pope himself) would utter comments on Buddhism, that would strike many as devoid of understanding and based on a very superficial interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine. We shall come to this point later on.

Nostra aetate was an introduction and an invitation to the dialogue with non-Christian religions. It was a gesture of reaching out – a gesture the Church could no longer abstain from, when faced with the necessity of uniting people of different nations and cultures. Vatican II was a large universal synod, which gave the world four consecutive popes⁷

⁷ From the very beginning of the Vatican II, the following took an active part in its proceedings: the then Archbishop of Milan Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini – the future Pope Paul VI; the Bishop of Venice

who would put into effect the Council's teachings (including the teachings of *Nostra aetate*).

3. Dialogue with Buddhism during the pontificate of Pope Paul VI

Already, before the declaration *Nostra aetate* was published in 1965 as a document of the Second Vatican Council (though signed by the Pope), Paul VI had himself undertaken steps to make the dialogue with Buddhism and other non-Christian religions possible. On May 19, 1964 in the Vatican, at the request of Paul VI, Secretariat for Non-Christians was established. One part was the Buddhist section. The establishment of this institution was justified by the need to open the Church to the world which was not only Christian. The Pope wrote about this in his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*, proclaimed on August 6, 1964: "The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make [20, no. 65]." And further on: "Speaking generally of the dialogue which the Church of today must take up with a great renewal of fervour, We should say that it must be readily conducted with all men of good will both inside and outside the Church [20, no. 93]."

About this dialogue Paul VI wrote further that it ought to embrace also "the followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions [20, no. 107]." References to dialogue started appearing in papal speeches and homilies, where Paul VI admonished the Catholics to respect the values carried by the great religious traditions of the world.

Audiences for non-Christians also began. Father Leonard F i c estimates after Francisco Gioia that Paul VI spoke to the followers of other religions, including Buddhists, 89 times [6, 223].

Pope Paul VI met the Dalai Lama once. The audience for the Tibetan leader took place in the Vatican on September 30, 1973. It was the time when the Dalai Lama came on his first journey to Western Europe and began it by visiting Italy and the Pope. He wrote about this visit in his second autobiography: "My first stop was Rome, where I met His Holiness the Pope. (...) My talk with Pope Paul VI was very brief, but I took the opportunity to express to him my belief in the importance of spiritual values for all humanity, no matter what the particular creed. He was in complete agreement with me and we parted on very good terms [25, 215–216]."

That visit, as well as the next visits to the successors to Paul VI, were private and were not listed in the official programmes of papal audiences. The reason for this was naturally political – the Vatican did not want to spoil its already problematic relations with China. The popes had to take into account the fate of the Chinese Catholics and it was obvious that this factor was the reason for the Dalai Lama's visits remaining

Albino Luciani – Pope John Paul I; the Bishop and then Archbishop Metropolitan of Kraków (he received successive nominations over the period of the Council's proceedings) Karol Wojtyła – Pope John Paul II, and the doctor of theology, Father Joseph Ratzinger – the present Pope Benedict XVI.

unofficial. On the other hand the visits were never kept secret. On the contrary, they were frequently the subject of many comments.

Both Paul VI and his successors received the Dalai Lama not as a political, but as a spiritual leader; as a partner in the inter-religious dialogue commenced by the Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Nostra aetate* and the Church's strategy of opening up to the world.

4. Dialogue with John Paul II

After Paul VI's death, his successor in the policy of opening the Church to the world was supposed to be Pope John Paul I (August 26, 1978–September 28, 1978). However, during his only 33-day papacy, he did not manage to take up the dialogue commenced by his predecessor.⁸ In no official papal text, homily or speech, did John Paul I speak about Buddhism.

However, an intense dialogue with the Buddhists and the Dalai Lama himself was taken up by John Paul II. On several occasions the Pope also spoke about Buddhism.

We can find a very interesting piece of information about John Paul II and his attitude towards the Dalai Lama and Tibet's tragedy in the book by Monsignor Virgilio Levi and Christine Allison. The authors write that when he was still a diocesan bishop, Karol Wojtyła often used to celebrate special masses devoted to the cause of Tibet and the Tibetans, and that he held the Dalai Lama in the highest regard long before the exiled spiritual leader became famous internationally. Of course, this was due to similar experiences that the two men had had with the communist system, and due to the fact that from his early youth John Paul II had followed the philosophy of nonviolence [17, 165], as had the Dalai Lama and Mahatma Gandhi – another great non-Christian moral authority for Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II prayed at the spot of Gandhi's cremation on the occasion of both of his trips to India in 1986 and 1999).

In the period of 23 years (1980–2003) John Paul II and the Dalai Lama met ten times.⁹

⁸ He was not able to take up the dialogue, yet in his first speech after election – *Urbi et orbi* (August 27, 1978) – he expressed his desire to continue it: "...vogliamo proseguire con pazienza e fermezza in quel dialogo sereno e costruttivo, che il mai abbastanza compianto Paolo VI ha posto a fondamento e programma della sua azione pastorale, dandone le linee maestre nella grande Enciclica *Ecclesiam suam*, per la reciproca conoscenza, da uomini a uomini, anche con coloro che non condividono la nostra fede... [...we wish to continue, with patience and steadfastness, the serene and constructive dialogue which the late lamented Paul VI had made the basis and the program of his pastoral activities, whose major features can be found in the great Encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*. The purpose is to get to know each other, men to men, including those who do not share our faith...] [10]." Translation from Italian by the author.

⁹ The number of the Pope's meetings with the Dalai Lama was possible to ascertain by comparing information from several sources. These included the list of the Dalai Lama's meetings with selected dignitaries published on the official website of the Office of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama [27], as well as the comprehensive publication

The Dalai Lama visited Pope John Paul II for the first time on October 9, 1980.¹⁰ Before the meeting of the two spiritual leaders, the Dalai Lama, during a press conference in Rome, expressed the hopes he had of the coming visit: "We live in a period of great crisis, a period of troubling world developments. It is not possible to find peace in the soul without security and harmony between peoples. For this reason, I look forward with faith and hope to my meeting with the Holy Father; to an exchange of ideas and feelings, and to his suggestions, so as to open the door to a progressive pacification between peoples [26]."

The second meeting between the Dalai Lama and John Paul II occurred on September 28, 1982, also in the Vatican.¹¹

The third and the fourth meetings of the two dignitaries were held outside the Vatican. Both occurred in 1986.

The former, on February 2, 1986, was an unofficial event during the second day of the papal trip to India. It took place in the Delhi nunciature at 8.30 am. We know that there was first a private conversation which lasted for approximately 20 minutes. It was followed by a courteous chat in the presence of journalists [31, 19]. The fact of the audience being unofficial was stressed by Father Maliński who, in his memoirs of that papal trip, wrote: "[Father S t y c z e ń] says it would be better to come to nunciature for the Holy Father's meeting with the Dalai Lama. This meeting is not listed in the official programmes, as it has a private character. I know about it from the programme used by the Pope's entourage [18, 15]."¹²

During this meeting the Pope allegedly said to the Dalai Lama: "I believe that by your presence here I also visited Tibet [31, 19]."¹³

The Pope himself spoke publicly about the Dalai Lama's visit in the Delhi nunciature during the general audience on February 26, 1986 in the Vatican, when he was summing up his trip to India [31, 194].

entitled *Jan Paweł II. Dzień po dniu. Ilustrowane Kalendarium Wielkiego Pontyfikatu 1978–2005 [John Paul II. Day by Day. An Illustrated Chronicle of the Great Pontificate 1978–2005]* [29].

¹⁰ Unfortunately, the fact of this visit has not been noted down in *Jan Paweł II. Dzień po dniu. Ilustrowane Kalendarium Wielkiego Pontyfikatu 1978–2005*, op. cit., which dates the first visit of the Dalai Lama in the Vatican at September 28, 1982 [29, 178, vol. 1]. The above mentioned source, which ought to present a very detailed list of the pope's publications, meetings and travels, also tells nothing of the Dalai Lama's meetings with the pontiff after 1990. The visit of 1980 has been chronicled in *Tybet. Pamięci niezrównanych wojowników*, op. cit. [14, 60], *Indie z Papieżem [India with the Pope]* [18, 40], *Jan Paweł II w Indiach. 31 I–11 II 1986. Homilie i przemówienia [John Paul II in India. January 31–February 11, 1986. Homilies and speeches]* [31, 19].

¹¹ Most sources mention this meeting. Some of them, however, give wrong dates. Father Maliński in his memoirs moved it to August 28 [18, 40] and the Office of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama on their website dated it at October 1982 [27].

¹² Translation from Polish by the author.

¹³ Maliński quotes the same sentence as: "Through you I keep getting close to all of your nation [18, 41] (English transl. – author)."

The occasion for the fourth meeting was the World Day of Prayer for Peace organized on the initiative of the Pope on October 27, 1986 in Assisi.¹⁴ During the joint prayer, on the Pope's right side stood members of Christian churches, and on his left side – representatives of other religions. The first one on the left, next to the Pope, was the Dalai Lama.

Nearly two years later, the Pope welcomed the Dalai Lama in the Vatican again. It was June 14, 1988 [29, 496, vol. 1] [27].

The Dalai Lama's sixth visit to the head of the Roman Catholic Church took place after the Tibetan leader had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. On June 1, 1990 he was received along with the accompanying staff at a private audience. During the conversation, the problem of peace in the world was raised and it was agreed that the path leading to peace is religious life [29, 605, vol. 1].

On June 17, 1994 the Dalai Lama and the Pope met for the seventh time.¹⁵

On May 20, 1996 the Dalai Lama came to see John Paul II again and once again the meeting took place in the Vatican.¹⁶

The Dalai Lama's ninth trip to the Vatican is dated at October 28, 1999. This time the occasion was the meeting of 200 representatives of world religions, organized by John Paul II in St. Peter's Square (the event was similar to the one in Assisi thirteen years before). And once again the Dalai Lama stood right next to the Pope. The assembled religious dignitaries, in their final statement, appealed for rejection of religious extremism and for not using religion as a tool to incite hatred and violence.¹⁷

For the tenth and final time, one and a half years before John Paul's death, the Dalai Lama and the Pope met in the Vatican on November 27, 2003.¹⁸

5. The Dalai Lama speaking about John Paul II

And what does the Dalai Lama himself say about the Pope?

Generally, these are very warm and cordial words, such as those from the *Freedom in Exile* autobiography: "The present Pope is a man I hold in high regard. To begin with, our somewhat similar backgrounds give us an immediate common ground. The

¹⁴ An official invitation to participate in the event was extended to the Dalai Lama and other religious leaders on January 25, 1986.

¹⁵ The only source, however, referring to this meeting is the Office of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama on their website. [27]

¹⁶ Information about this meeting was provided, e.g. by the CNN [3]. The American television station also explained that the reason why the visit was not put on the official schedule of the pontiff's audiences was the fact that the Vatican was attempting to improve its relations with China, where the Catholics were not allowed to pay allegiance to the Pope.

¹⁷ On the details of that event, as well as on the difficult situation of the Chinese Catholics, one may read on the World Tibet Network News website the articles by Ellen Knickmeyer [13] and Jeff Israely [9].

¹⁸ The Dalai Lama spoke again about the common experiences with "the totalitarian, atheistic system" that he and the Pope shared [14, 150].

first time we met, he struck me as a very practical sort of person, very broad-minded and open. I have no doubt that he is a great spiritual leader. Any man who can call out 'Brother' to his would-be assassin, as Pope John Paul did, must be a highly evolved spiritual practitioner [25, 221]."

The Dalai Lama stressed on many an occasion that what brought him and the Pope together, was firstly, their common experience with the totalitarian and antireligious political system, and secondly, similar views on the values of spiritual life and care for the young generations who, not infrequently, turn away from these values [19, 96].

On the other hand, the Dalai Lama did not conceal his disappointment with the Pope's remarks on Buddhism from the book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, or with his lack of understanding on certain questions, such as protection of the natural environment. The Tibetan leader spoke about the latter in his 1997 interview given to Wayne Teasdale. He said that once he tried to talk the Pope into issuing a joint statement on the natural environment and that he also gave the Pope much information on this matter. He presented the materials to him and briefly mentioned the importance of ecology in today's world. But the Pope did not respond. The Tibetan leader had the impression that the Pope was not interested at all in the natural environment. [19, 97].¹⁹

In the same interview the Dalai Lama revealed interesting information about his request to the Pope concerning financial support for the Tibetan cause. He said that during their meetings the Pope showed his concern and that once the Dalai Lama even asked him for funds that would be devoted to educational purposes, to which John Paul II agreed at once. These, however, never materialized. At that time some 50 Tibetans were about to leave for Tibet as volunteer teachers, and that is why the Pope was asked for financial support. The project has never been implemented, because the Chinese refused to give permission. The money requested from the Pope was 50 000 US dollars. Privately there was much support, but generally in public neither the Pope, nor any other Vatican dignitary, has ever spoken about the Tibetan issue [19, 102].

Yet, the Dalai Lama expressed his understanding for the Pope's not giving any public statements on Tibet's freedom. In the letter of condolence sent after John Paul II's death, the Dalai Lama wrote about the uneasy fate of the Chinese Catholics and the Pope's responsibility for them [28].

6. John Paul II speaking about Buddhism and to the Buddhists

During his nearly 27-year pontificate John Paul II met, apart from the Dalai Lama, more representatives and followers of Buddhism than any of his predecessors. On many

¹⁹ Of course, it should be stated here that John Paul II expressed his concern for the environment numerous times in his speeches, as well as in the Church's official documents. One example may be the Pope's fervent appeal for the protection of environment made on the World Ecology Day, June 5, 1991 in Białystok during his fourth pilgrimage to Poland [1, 145–146].

occasions he wrote and spoke to them in the Vatican and during his travels around the world.²⁰

Pope John Paul II based his dialogue with non-Christian religions (and most of his teachings in general) on the tradition set up and commenced by the Second Vatican Council. This represented a continuation of opening the Church to the world and of the invitation to dialogue extended to all the people with the Council's declaration *Nostra aetate*. Elements of this policy were, for instance: organization of the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986, and a visit to a Buddhist temple in Bangkok in 1984.

On June 28, 1988 John Paul II raised the Secretariat for Non-Christians, established 24 years earlier by Paul VI, to the level of a Vatican dicastery and renamed it the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue.

All of the Pope's meetings with Buddhists were very cordial. Naturally, it is impossible to list them all here. On September 26, 1979 John Paul II received a delegation of monks and lay followers of the Japanese schools of Buddhism: Zen, Pure Land, Shingon and Nichiren [15, 36–37]. During his pilgrimage to Tokyo he greeted Buddhists and the faithful of other Asian religions, meeting with their representatives: "You are the heirs and guardians of the venerable wisdom. This wisdom has formed high levels of moral life in Japan and in the East [12, no. 3]."²¹ On May 6, 1984 in Seoul, the Pontiff greeted Buddhists, saying: "May I address a particular greeting to the members of the Buddhist tradition as they prepare to celebrate the festivity of the Coming of the Lord Buddha? May your rejoicing be complete and your joy fulfilled [11, no. 4]." During the same trip to the Far East, on May 10, 1984, the Pope visited the highest Buddhist dignitary of Thailand – Vasana Tara. Before entering the temple John Paul II took off his shoes, and during a short conversation he invited Vasana Tara to pay him a visit in Rome [23, 19].²² Earlier that year, on Palm Sunday, for the occasion of the first World Youth Day, the Pope met in Rome with, among others, the delegation of young Buddhists from Japan [22, 92]. On September 9, 1987 he welcomed the Zen monks who had participated in an inter-monastic exchange in Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries [15, 65–66]. He very warmly spoke to the worshippers of Buddha during the welcoming ceremony at the airport in Colombo, Sri Lanka on January 20, 1995: "Particularly, I express my deep respect to the followers of *Buddhism*, which is a dominant religion in Sri Lanka, with its *Brahmaviharas*, the four main values of *Metta*, *Karuna*, *Mudita* and *Upekkha*: cordiality, compassion, kindness and justice; for its transcendent values and the happiness of *Shanga*, so clearly expressed in the *Theragathas* [15, 83–84]."

²⁰ In the book *Buddyzm i hinduizm w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II (1978–1999)* [*Buddhism and Hinduism in the teachings of John Paul II (1978–1999)*] published in 2000 by Papieska Akademia Teologiczna [Papal Academy of Theology] one may find a selection of speeches and writings addressed to Buddhists [15].

²¹ Translation from Italian – the author.

²² During that journey the Buddhist Association Parien Dhamma sent a letter to John Paul II, in which they complained that the hierarchs of the Catholic Church in Thailand had insulted the Buddhist Three Gems. One may find this letter, together with other examples of allegedly offensive actions aimed at the followers of Buddhism, on the website: www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s_ot/s_ot_parien_dhamma_letters.htm [16].

John Paul II's pontificate abounded in such meetings and greetings, and certainly the Pope's willingness to carry on with a cordial and open dialogue cannot be underestimated.

However, the dialogue and the sincere exchange of views were shaken when, in 1994, the Pope's book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* was published.

This book-interview is a record of the conversation between the Italian journalist Vittorio Messori and John Paul II. The Bishop of Rome talks in the book about many issues: the fall of the communism in Europe, divisions among Christians, the cult of the Virgin Mary. He also touches upon the subject of non-Christian religions, including Buddhism. With his words from *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* – much less cautious than the short reference to Buddhism in *Nostra aetate* – the Pope incited a fiery discussion, as many commentators believed that his understanding of Buddhism was very superficial.

"The <enlightenment> experienced by Buddha comes down to the conviction that the world is bad, that it is the source of evil and of suffering for man. To liberate oneself from this evil, one must free oneself from this world, necessitating a break with the ties that join us to external reality – ties existing in our human nature, in our psyche, in our bodies [7, 85]."

These words were frequently quoted by the commentators on the Pope's remarks in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Among Buddhists there was a common opinion that John Paul II while "scanning" the Buddhist doctrine, stopped at the First Noble Truth – the truth about suffering, and focused on it. This led him to a false conclusion that suffering and the evil of the world are obsessions of the Buddhist spiritual tradition. Referring to suffering, of which Buddha spoke, the Pope concluded that Buddhism knows "almost exclusively <negative soteriology> [7, 85]." Soteriology means here the way of achieving salvation or liberation. In Christianity this way is Christ – the source of endless love to man. In Buddhism there is no one to act as an intermediary between man and salvation, that is, to save man. Instead there is a path which, according to the Pope, is the path of complete renunciation and detachment from the world, as if denying its worth. Hence, for John Paul II Buddhism appears to be a system of negative and pessimistic philosophy, seeing the material world and human experience as worthless. The Pope speaks about this also in another passage of the book, where he sketches the differences between Buddha and Christ: "Less still is He (Christ – author's note) similar to *Buddha*, with his denial of all that is created. Buddha is right when he does not see the possibility of human salvation in creation, but he is wrong when, for that reason, he denies that creation has any value for humanity [7, 43]."

Buddhism teaches that the source of evil and suffering is not the material world, nor human experience, but ignorance which is the basis for all the negative emotions. It is not the world as such, then, that one must abandon and be freed from. It is ignorance.

According to Buddhism, ignorance leads to attachment – yearning and desire which, in turn, become the direct cause of suffering. Simultaneously, the Buddha taught that both attachment and other feelings and emotions, even though they become the causes of suffering, are at the same time, in a sense, tools to be used in order to free oneself

from it, that is, to attain salvation, as it is called in Christian terminology. The path to liberation does not mean merely rejecting them. On the contrary, they must be accepted, understood and subsequently transformed. The Pope understands this path as becoming indifferent to the world: “We do not free ourselves from evil through the good which comes from God; we liberate ourselves only through detachment from the world, which is bad. The fullness of such a detachment is not union with God, but what is called nirvana, a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world. *To save oneself* means, above all, to free oneself from evil by becoming *indifferent to the world, which is the source of evil*. This is the culmination of the spiritual process [7, 86].”

“We do not free ourselves from evil through the good which comes from God” – this thought leads John Paul II to another conclusion – “Buddhism is in large measure an *<atheistic> system* [7, 86].” The problem is that the words ‘atheism, atheistic’ are generally pejorative in the ears of Christians and followers of other theistic religions. Particularly, when they have been uttered by a man who, for all his life, fought with another atheistic system. With this one sentence, which was an unjust simplification, the Pope built, most likely unconsciously, an obstacle in the process which led to tightening relations between people.

Why then did this Pope of openness and dialogue, who always welcomed so cordially the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist representatives visiting him, and who often spoke so warmly about values represented by Buddhism, suddenly use such unconsidered, as they seemed, statements? Perhaps, as José Ignacio Cabezón [2, 130–131] suggested, it was the sign of a certain irritation, arising from the fact that Buddhism, owing mainly to the Dalai Lama, was becoming more and more popular in the West and that the distorted image of Buddhism in the writings of John Paul II derived most probably from the growing fear of Buddhism, seen as a competition in the sphere of the spirit, and particularly, of contemplation. Papal documents from the early years of his pontificate expressed a careful admiration for Buddhism. But, in 1994 John Paul II stated that he perceived Buddhism as a threat to Asia and the Christian West [2, 131].

Perhaps John Paul II was indeed concerned about the growing interest in Buddhism among Christians and that is why he introduced this juxtaposition: Buddhism as a “negative soteriology”, and Christianity and “<Western civilization> which are marked with a *positive approach to the world* [7, 88].”

Having in mind the popularity of Buddhism, John Paul II also wrote in his book: “For this reason it is not inappropriate *to caution* those Christians who enthusiastically *welcome certain ideas originating in the religious traditions of the Far East* – for example, techniques and methods of meditation and ascetical practice. In some quarters these have become fashionable, and are accepted rather uncritically. First one should know one’s own spiritual heritage well and consider whether it is right to set it aside lightly [7, 89–90].”

The Dalai Lama was also asked to comment on the Pope’s remarks about Buddhism included in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. According to him the Pope did not understand Buddhism. The remarks on *dharma*, found in John Paul II’s book, were sad and funny

at the same time: sad, because the Pope was obviously heading towards argument, and funny because they were very superficial [19, 97].

Had it not been for *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul II's pontificate would not have had any blemish in terms of dialogue with Buddhism. No other head of the Roman Catholic Church had ever been so open and sincere towards non-Christian religions. John Paul II spoke on various occasions about these great religions with admiration. Through frequent meetings he also showed his appreciation for the Dalai Lama. When *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* was published and raised heated discussions, the Vatican admitted that the Pope's remarks on Buddhism were 'unintentionally' included in the book – but they were included even so. They became most probably the longest reference to Buddhism in the history of papacy.

After the passing away of John Paul II, the new leader of the Catholic Church became Benedict XVI (April 19, 2005). Until today the Dalai Lama and the new Pope have only met once. This happened on October 13, 2006 in the Vatican [27]. The meeting was not followed by any official statement from the Vatican. The two dignitaries were not even photographed together.

The election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, seen by many as a conservative and a tough defender of Catholic doctrine, raised fears that this Pope might slow down the ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue which started in the 1960s.²³ Though the first two years of his papacy did not seem to support these fears, some of his later decisions, e.g. removing excommunication from the Society of St. Pius X's bishops and, more recently, the establishment of a new canonical structure to welcome Anglicans who wished to "return" to the Catholic Church, were regarded as steps backwards in the dialogue.

Certainly the Buddhists hoped upon his election that Benedict XVI, like his predecessor, would be a pope of dialogue and reconciliation.

Sources

1. Burakowska, Elżbieta (ed.), *Naucz nas być wolnymi. Czwarta pielgrzymka Jana Pawła II do Ojczyzny. 1–9 czerwca i 13–16 sierpnia 1991. Przemówienia i homilie [Teach us how to be free. John Paul II's fourth pilgrimage to the Homeland. June 1–9 and August 13–16, 1991. Speeches and homilies]*, Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, Warszawa 1995.
2. Cabezon, José Ignacio, "Stosunek wspólnoty buddyjskiej do Jana Pawła II [Buddhist response to John Paul II]", from Sherwin, Byron L., Kasimow, Harold, (selection and editing), *Jan Paweł II*

²³ He was accused (among other things) of being against the ecumenical initiatives of John Paul II, such as the Day of Prayer in Assisi (this was strongly denied by cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz [5, 190]), or of coming back to the claim that Christianity is the best creed, superior to other religions, and the Catholic Church is the only way to salvation. This is how the *Dominus Iesus* document, issued in 2001 by the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, which was presided over by Ratzinger, was read. (It should be emphasized that the document was not a personal writing of the cardinal, but an official document published by the Congregation. Ratzinger himself admitted that official writings issued by the office of which he was a Prefect, do not necessarily have to, and not always do, reflect his personal beliefs.)

- i dialog międzyreligijny [John Paul II and interreligious dialogue]*, Wydawnictwo WAM, Kraków 2001, pp. 123–131.
3. CNN News Briefs – May 20, 1996 – Pope John Paul Meets the Dalai Lama, from www.cnn.com/WORLD/9605/20/newsbriefs/pm.html (June 13, 2007).
 4. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate* Proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, from www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (June 13, 2007).
 5. Dziwisz, Stanisław, *Świadectwo. W rozmowie z Gian Franco Svidercoschim [Una vita con Karol]*, Przemysław Häuser, Warszawa 2007.
 6. Fic, Leonard, “Dialog chrześcijaństwa z buddyzmem [The dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism]”, from Ziemiński SVD, Henryk (ed.), *Dialog międzyreligijny [Inter-religious Dialogue]*, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 2004, pp. 209–258.
 7. His Holiness John Paul II (ed. by Vittorio Messori), *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Jonathan Cape, London 1994.
 8. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *My Land and My People. Memoirs of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama of Tibet*, Srishti Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi 1999.
 9. Isrealy, Jeff, “Pope, set to meet Dalai Lama, also faces delicate China issue”, from www.tibet.ca/en/wtnarchive/1999/10/28-2_3.html (June 13, 2007).
 10. John Paul I, Radiomessaggio “Urbi et Orbi” di Papa Giovanni Paolo I, from www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_i/messages/documents/hf_jp-i_mes_urbi-et-orbi_27081978_it.html (June 13, 2007).
 11. John Paul II, “Address of Pope John Paul II to the spiritual leaders of other non-Christian religions. Chapel of the Nunciature of Seoul (Korea) Sunday, 6 May 1984”, from www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1984/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19840506_capi-religioni-tradizionali_en.html (June 13, 2007).
 12. John Paul II, “Discorso del Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II ai rappresentanti delle religioni non cristiane. Nunziatura Apostolica, 24 febbraio 1981, from www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1981/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19810224_giappone-tokyo-non-cristiani_it.html (June 13, 2007).
 13. Knicmeyer, Ellen, “Pope, Dalai Lama Denounce Extremism”, from www.tibet.ca/en/wtnarchive/1999/10/28-2_1.html (June 13, 2007).
 14. Kozieł, Adam (text and translation), *Tybet. Pamięci niezrównanych wojowników [Tibet. To the Memory of the Grand Warriors]*, Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, Warszawa 2004.
 15. Lach, Sabina, Kijas OFMConv, Zdzisław J., (collection and editing), *Buddyzm i hinduizm w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II (1978–1999) [Buddhism and Hinduism in the teachings of John Paul II (1978–1999)]*, Papieska Akademia Teologiczna, Kraków 2000.
 16. Letters to Pope John Paul II regarding the intrusion of the Roman Catholic Church onto Buddhism, from www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/s_ot/s_ot_parien_dhamma_letters.htm (May 12, 2007).
 17. Levi, Virgilio, Allison, Christine, *John Paul II. A Tribute in Words and Pictures*, William Morrow & Company, New York 1999.
 18. Maliński, Mieczysław, *Indie z Papieżem [India with the Pope]*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1991.
 19. “Papież Jan Paweł II i dialog chrześcijańsko-buddyjski. Z Jego Świątobliwością XIV Dalajlamą rozmawia Wayne Teasdale [Pope John Paul II and Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama/ interview by Wayne Teasdale]”, from Sherwin, Byron L., Kasimow, Harold, (collection and editing), *Jan Paweł II i dialog międzyreligijny [John Paul II and interreligious dialogue]*, Wydawnictwo WAM, Kraków 2001, pp. 95–105.
 20. Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*, Encyclical on the Church, August 6, 1964, from www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam_en.html (June 13, 2007).
 21. Pius XI, *Mortalium animos*, Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on religious unity to Our Venerable Brethren the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops and other local Ordinaries in peace and communion

- with the Apostolic See, from www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19280106_mortalium-animos_en.html (June 13, 2007).
22. Poniewierski, Janusz, *Pontyfikat. 1978–2005 [Pontificate. 1978–2005]*, Wydawnictwo ZNAK, Kraków 2005.
 23. Sobiepan, Jarmila (ed.), *Jan Paweł II na Dalekim Wschodzie. 2 V 1984–11 V 1984. Homilie i przemówienia [John Paul II in the Far East. May 2, 1984–May 11, 1984. Homilies and speeches]*, Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, Warszawa 1988.
 24. Solarz OFMConv, Franciszek, „Stosunek Kościoła do religii niechrześcijańskich w świetle soborowych schematów Deklaracji *Nostra aetate* [The Church's attitude towards non-Christian religions expressed in the Council's drafts of the *Nostra aetate* Declaration]”, from *Z i m o ń SVD*, Henryk (ed.), *Dialog międzyreligijny [Inter-religious Dialogue]*, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 2004, pp. 85–121.
 25. The Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile. The Autobiography of His Holiness The Dalai Lama of Tibet*, A John Curtis Book, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1990.
 26. The Dalai Lama's Biography: Contact with West and East – www.tibet.com/DL/biography.html (June 13, 2007).
 27. The Website of the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama: www.dalailama.com (June 13, 2007).
 28. TIBET-VATICAN Dalai Lama mourns John Paul II, “a true spiritual practitioner”, from Asia News – www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=2937 (June 13, 2007).
 29. Turowski, Gabriel (ed); Sosnowska, Jolanta (ed.), *Jan Paweł II. Dzień po dniu. Ilustrowane Kalendarium Wielkiego Pontyfikatu 1978–2005*, tom 1. i 2. [*John Paul II. Day by Day. An Illustrated Chronicle of the Great Pontificate 1978–2005*, vol. 1 and 2], Biały Kruk, Kraków 2005.
 30. Vatican: the Holy See – www.vatican.va (June 13, 2007).
 31. Wiczorek, Adam (ed.), *Jan Paweł II w Indiach. 31 I–11 II 1986. Homilie i przemówienia [John Paul II in India. January 31–February 11, 1986. Homilies and speeches]*, Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, Warszawa 1990.