

## Windows into Buddhism and Buddhist - Russian Orthodox Christian Dialogue in Buddhist Regions of Russia focussing on Kalmykia

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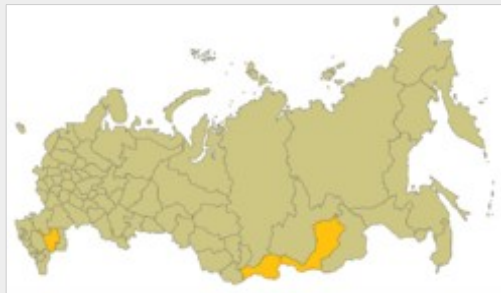
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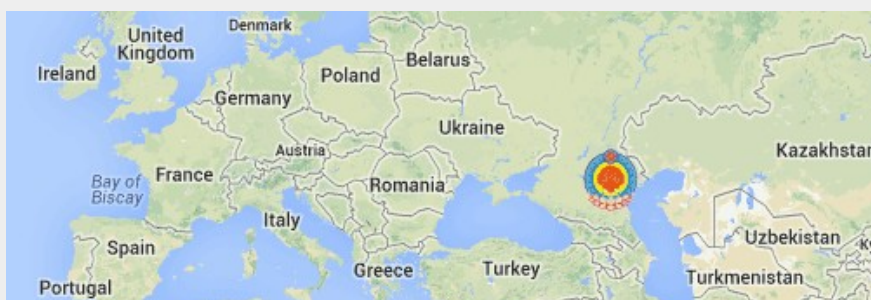
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Areas in Russia with a Buddhist tradition

As a Buddhist with my ancestors practising the Dharma (Buddhism) since ancient times, I feel proud that Buddhism has spread such a lot. Part of it is indubitably due to the strenuous efforts of missionaries like Shantarakshita and Kamalashila, who were responsible for establishing Buddhism in Tibet. The Tibetans in turn spread Buddhism to Mongolia. With the migration of some Mongol people into Russia, Buddhism spread to parts of Russia. Historically, Buddhism was incorporated into Russian lands in the early 17th century. Buddhism is considered as one of Russia's traditional religions, legally a part of Russian historical heritage. Besides the historical monastic traditions of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva, Buddhism is now widespread all over Russia, with many ethnic Russian converts. Buryatia and Tuva are in Siberia while Kalmykia is in eastern Europe.



Location of Kalmykia

Buddhism primarily spread into the Russian constituent regions geographically and/or culturally adjacent to Mongolia, or inhabited by Mongolian ethnic groups: Buryatia, Zabaykalsky Krai, Tuva, and Kalmykia, the latter being the only Buddhist region in Europe, located to the north of the Caucasus. After the fall of the Soviet Union, a Buddhist revival began in Kalmykia. It was also revived in Buryatia and Tuva and began to spread to Russians in other regions. The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni was built in 2005 AD in Elista, the capital of Kalmykia. The Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni is the largest Buddhist temple in Europe.

As a Buddhist, I share with many others a belief in the potential of interfaith dialogue. The objective of interfaith dialogue is to discern parallels and affinities (but emphatically not to impose similarities) in order to build closer friendships between the great religious traditions. To do this, interfaith writers deploy a discipline called comparative theology to facilitate a discussion between the doctrines and texts of those traditions. Similarities (and even disagreements) that arise from such studies can be fertile ground for planting rapport and respect.



**Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni**



**The Interior of the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni**



**Statue of Lord Buddha in the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni**



Religious Service in the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni



Another Buddhist temple in Kalmykia

On 23 September, 2015, a meeting of the Interreligious Council of Kalmykia (of which the leader of Kalmyk Buddhists, Telo Tulku Rinpoche, is a member) was held in the republic's capital of Elista. The purpose of the council is to maintain inter-religious and inter-ethnic harmony and prevent ethnic and religious conflicts. Founded by Kalmykian Buddhists, the Russian Orthodox Eparchy of Kalmykia and the Kalmykian Islamic spiritual administration, the council holds yearly conferences and brainstorms ways to consolidate traditional spiritual values in Russian society. Some of their activities are: preventing youth crime, promoting culture and education and lobbying for family values and the preservation of historical and artistic heritage. It was only recently that Russian Orthodox Christianity and Buddhism were able to rebuild themselves in Kalmykia, which saw horrific destruction of religious institutions under the excesses of Soviet rule. The meeting in September, 2015, was held to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Orthodox eparchy in Kalmykia and the concurrent tenth anniversary of the completion of the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, the largest and most important Buddhist temple in Europe. This meeting gathered Buddhist, Russian Orthodox Christian and Muslim representatives from Russia's three Buddhist republics (Kalmykia, Tuva and Buryatia). Archbishop Justinian of Naro-Fominsk, the ruling bishop of the Diocese of Elista and Kalmykia, made a point that was particularly poignant for those assembled: "We all complete each other. We can be assured that we've preserved our faith, doctrines and canons. We saved our religions without mixing them and at the same time we have all remained friends."

This meeting was only one of several encouraging trends. In Europe and the United States, Buddhist-Christian dialogue has taken a very positive turn since the Second World War. Decolonisation in Asia led to the establishment of what I call "discussions in good faith" after the much more adversarial encounters between Buddhists and Christians in the days of European imperialism. Since the 1960s, this phase of goodwill has been dominated by the denominations of Western Christianity (Roman Catholicism and Protestantism), denominations whose contact with Buddhism was facilitated by the former seafaring



empires of Great Britain and France. Aside from the attention garnered by popular figures like Thich Nhat Hanh and Thomas Merton, there are numerous monographs and academic journals exploring Buddhist-Christian dialogue, like the *Journal of Buddhist-Christian Studies*. Common topics include: differences between the ways in which love, compassion and ethical practices are conceived in Christianity and Buddhism; Buddhist responses to Christian teachings like Trinitarian doctrine; parallels between Christ's self-emptying (kenosis) and Buddhist selflessness (anatma); and Christian responses to Buddhist insight (pragya) and enlightenment (bodhi).



Telo Tulku Rinpoche and Archbishop Justinian at a meeting of the Interreligious Council of Kalmykia on 23 September, 2015

However, given the rich interaction between Buddhism and Russian Orthodox Christianity over the past few centuries, it is a pity and waste that we Buddhists have few chances to meet, discuss and share with thinkers of the Eastern Orthodox Church (which encompasses the Russian Orthodox Church). My observation is not unique. Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch, believes that Orthodox Christianity and Buddhism can learn from each other. In the vein of sympathetic Western Christian figures like Rowan Williams (former Archbishop of Canterbury), he said that Buddhist meditation “allows us to discern the process of growth and finally to awaken ourselves. . . And the methods to achieve this liberation from the ‘passions’ are similar [in Hesychastic spirituality, a mystical tradition of still prayer in the Eastern Orthodox Church]: cleanse the mind of ‘thoughts’, achieve apatheia (passionlessness) and ‘wakefulness’. This last word is as important in hesychasm as it is in Buddhism, because the word Buddha means ‘awake’” (Clément 1997, 220–21). He also said: “According to Buddhism, the person does not exist. The Christian, however, affirms the existence of the person. But Orthodoxy does not identify the person with the individual, with the ‘individual substance of a rational nature.’ . . . [And precisely here] the efforts of Buddhism can be helpful for us” (Clément 1997, 221–23).

In a more systematic article called “‘The Language of Fullness and the Language of Emptiness.’ Dialogue Between the Russian Orthodox Church and Buddhism? A Paradox,” Ton Lathouwers presented persuasive evidence and arguments in favour of a narrative of “remarkable similarities between Orthodox religion and the East.” Although he quotes many Japanese and Russian thinkers throughout his study, his reference to Catholic theologian Thomas Ohm and Russian Orthodox archpriest V. V. Zen'kovskii is particularly pertinent: both “point to the fact that the Asian religions as well as Eastern Christianity have great difficulty with the over-valuing of the rational approach in Western Christian theology. Furthermore, both accuse Western Christianity of emphasising the transcendent nature of God, neglecting His immanence” (Lathouwers 2014, 383).

The Interreligious Council of Kalmykia focuses on social, political and cultural advocacy. However, if Buddhism and Russian Orthodox Christianity can form a united front on social and political issues, there is no reason why comparative theology cannot be part of a holistic project of friendship-building. As Lathouwers pointed out above, apparent differences between Eastern Christianity and Western Christianity might highlight similarities between Eastern Christianity and Buddhism. While the life of the Russian Orthodox Christian disciple is grounded in the creeds and councils that the Church confesses to, conformity to those creeds is not as important as consistency with “living biblically” as taught by the Bible, the fathers of the Eastern Church and liturgy. Similarly, while a correct understanding of Buddhist doctrines is critical, the experience of insight through non-attached wisdom (pragya) and ethical living takes precedence over what the Zen schools in particular caution as intellectualisation and reification.



Telo Tulku Rinpoche and Archbishop Justinian listening to guest speakers

Both Russian Orthodoxy and the Buddhist schools emphasise the experiential over the dogmatic. Inner transformation takes top priority. Ironically, this has led to a critique aimed at both traditions by Western Christianity: that neither Buddhism nor Russian Orthodoxy gives enough emphasis to social justice and societal transformation. There is great potential on this front to mount a counter-narrative together.

A broadly shared concept between our two traditions is the binary of natural and unnatural living. In Buddhism, the most important liberating experience is insight, which frees us from the falsehood of Samsara. In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Original Sin or Adam’s fall is not seen as a state of guilt or alienation from God (which is the common view in the Augustinian theology of the West) but an unnatural state of being which ends in death: in this respect, death is seen as the result of an illusory way of existence. In a striking resemblance to the reasoning of Buddhist ideals about Samsara, the “circle of life and death” is a false mode of being. It is ended by participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, the insight into life unbound by mortality. In a similar way, Buddhism sees our conventional method of living as an unnatural illusion brought about by ignorance and holds that life and death in this world can be transcended.

Finally, both traditions lean towards apophatic language. There is a striking concordance in spirit, if not in expression, between Orthodox Christianity and Buddhism about the inexpressibility of the transcendent or divine. This is not to say that God is unknowable (God has revealed himself through the Trinity and His acts) nor that enlightenment is inexpressible (Lord Buddha spent much of His life articulating the nature of Nirvana). However, both argue that the true nature of the transcendent is better experienced than

endlessly verbalised or argued about.

As with every project in comparative theology, caution and patience are needed in order to respect the differences of each tradition. They function as critical bulwarks against erroneous parallels or connections. However, Lathouwers is right when he concludes in his article (which I recommend as a good starting point for discussion): “Against the background of these similarities the absence of a living dialogue between the two religious traditions that, from within, share such striking commonalities with each other, is even more distressing. It is a real paradox in Russian Orthodoxy. We can only hope for an opening here” (Lathouwers 2014, 384).

I have tried to add to Lathouwers’s and others’ work with some broad rubrics that demonstrate the possibilities of reflecting creatively but cautiously on the potential spiritual affinity between our traditions. There seems no reason to believe that Russian Orthodox Christianity cannot enjoy an affinity with Buddhism, where we bear each other’s heart and soul to one another, embracing all that is similar—and different—about us.

### **References**

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