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**Promoting Interreligious Communication Studies:  
A Rising Rationale**

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**Abstract**

In this age of postmodern worldwide interreligious conflicts and battles, intercultural communication scholars and educators are commonly urged to actively promote interreligious communication studies. In this scholarly context, the present study attempts to pursue three objectives: (1) to sketch out growingly critical interreligious conflicts and battles across the world; (2) to comparatively recognize major religio-ethical characteristics of the three great world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam); and (3) to propose the urgent implementation of interreligious communication studies.

Keywords: interreligious communication, paradigm, religio-ethical precept, world religion

### Introduction

The war on terrorism, say America's leaders, is a war of good versus evil. But in the minds of the perpetrators, the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon appear to have been justified as ethically good acts . . . . How can different ethical systems become so polarized that, to paraphrase the great German Max Weber, one person's God is another person's devil? In the world today, is such polarization leading inevitably to a violent "clash of civilizations"? Or can differences between ethical systems be reconciled through rational dialogue rather than political struggle? (Madsen & Strong, 2003, p.1)

Since the end of the Cold War, violent interreligious and interethnic conflicts and battles have been endlessly repeated not only in the Middle East but also in many parts of the world. For some opaque reasons, however, political scholars and leaders directly or indirectly engaged in such crucial issues commonly appear to have failed to systematically investigate and discuss possible deep causes of such long-standing exchanges of violent retaliatory attacks from interreligious perspectives. In this respect, the controversial prophetic theory of Huntington's (1996) "clash of civilizations" has come to be extensively reevaluated, attracting both professional and lay persons' attention.

Although interreligious communication is thus becoming an increasingly urgent and significant field of study for intercultural communication scholars and educators in search of new enlightening paradigms, very few of them have attempted to conduct such challenging scholarly tasks. Books, book chapters, and journal articles on intercultural communication, for instance, commonly neglect to deal with interreligious issues. To meet such urgent academic demands, the present study aims to achieve the following three purposes: First, to briefly describe interreligious and interethnic conflicts and battles repeatedly breaking out in various parts of the world; second, to comparatively investigate the three great world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) and their fundamental religio-ethical precepts; and third, to propose the promotion of systematic interreligious communication studies as a new enlightening study paradigm.

The propositional study will serve as an innovative signpost for ardently issue-conscious intercultural communication scholars and educators who are currently seeking new scholarly perspectives and paradigms.

#### Sketching Out Interreligious Conflicts and Battles

In February 2006, European newspapers published cartoons of the prophet Muhammad and unexpectedly caused a series of violent chain reactions in Islamic societies and nations against Western secularity and freedom of expression. Burk, Harding, Smith, and Beaumont (2006) explain the unexpected interreligious incident's fundamental causes by stating:

Crude in execution and thought, the cartoons offended not merely because they breached the Islamic prohibition of representations of Muhammad, but because they bluntly depicted the prophet, seen as a man of peace and justice by Muslims, as a man of terror and violence. (p. 17)

As the contemporary Westcentered, anthropocentric, individualistic, materialistic, money-centered, and worldly globalization propagates its hegemony, not simply Muslims but also a variety of non-Western societies and nations of the world are currently making continuous efforts to resurrect, revitalize, and sustain their religious, ethnic, and sociocultural traditions and identities.

Recent and present-day interreligious and interethnic conflicts and battles may be said to be the natural epitomes of such postcolonial and postmodern ideological movements. On the surface, their causes may appear to be politico-economic, territorial, and mostly controlled by the Western powers, but more deeply viewed, the potential causes of the rises will prove to be based on their long-standing and deep-rooted religio-ethical traditions and identities. For "Apparently, religion plays deeply influential roles in the building of the most fundamental and latent parts of culture, such as attitudes, beliefs, cognition, values, and worldviews" (Ishii, 2006, p. 17).

In addition, it is noteworthy that in the recent and contemporary world, as

Machida (2004), a comparative religious studies scholar, critically stresses, the majority of the regional interreligious and interethnic conflicts and battles are monotheistic (Judeo-Christian and Islamic) in nature. This observation is further empirically supported by Kawamura (2006), Koike (2002), Nijuichi-Seiki Kenkyukai (2000), and others. To help improve, if not solve, such interreligious and interethnic issues, intercultural communication scholars and educators are commonly urged to conduct systematic studies on potential interrelations among religions (not only monotheism but also polytheism, animism, and shamanism), cultures, communication, and social order. Along this line of thought, Dean (1995), a cross-cultural and cross-religious philosopher, asserts that “Cross-cultural philosophy of religion offers fresh ways of thinking about and doing philosophy of religion and constructive religious thought” (p.3).

### **Comparatively Recognizing the Three Great World Religions and Their Religio-Ethical Precepts**

Contemporary people are often said to have been extensively “globalized” by the Westcentric ideology of science and technology and lost their traditional religion-consciousness. “Today,” however, “far from being buried in the dustbin of history, religion is making a comeback. Contemporary religious revival is not restricted to any one religion. It has become a universal phenomenon” (Baker, 1997, p. 3). In the discipline of communication studies, communication theorist Penman (1992) discusses the phenomenon of postmodern paradigm shifts, arguing that “In the new paradigm, moral issues replace those of truth: judgments about ‘good’ constitute a discourse of morality rather than one of truth” (p. 235). Under these paradigm-shifting circumstances, it is now high time for intercultural communication scholars and educators to comparatively investigate and recognize religio-ethical precepts, particularly those of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, which are widely referred to as the three great world religions.

#### **Buddhist Religio-Ethical Precepts**

“Buddhism is one of the major world religions, comparable only to Christianity and Islam for its geographical expansion and historical continuity” (Tsuchiya, 2003, p. 59). Since early Buddhism was founded in ancient India some twenty-five centuries ago, numerous sacred sutras and scriptures have been written by various holy priests and high-ranking scholars, especially by those of *tripitaka* (the three divisions of the Buddhist scriptures, namely the Buddha’s teachings, his commandments and precepts, and various comments on the Buddhist doctrines). Unlike Christianity and Islam, in Buddhism there is no such thing as *the* sutra or scripture equivalent to the Holy Bible or the Qur’an. Consequently, the Buddhist religio-ethical precepts can be said to be what has been essentially extracted and concisely integrated from such various sutra and scripture sources.

The numerous and various Buddhist religio-ethical precepts are usually represented by the Five Precepts and the Ten Good Precepts, parts of which overlap each other in content. The Five Precepts have long been familiar not simply to Buddhist adherents but also to secular lay persons in Buddhist societies and nations. Keown (2005), a scholar of Buddhist ethics, stresses this point, saying, “This is the most widely known list of precepts in Buddhism, comparable in influence to the Ten Commandments of Christianity” (p. 9). Scholars of Buddhist ethics and philosophy (e.g., Keown, 2005, p. 9; Snelling, 1987, p. 57; Watanabe, 1993, p.51; Yorizumi, 1994, p. 130) commonly list the Five Precepts as follows:

1. Refrain from killing living creatures.
2. Refrain from taking what is not given.
3. Refrain from committing adultery.
4. Refrain from telling lies.
5. Refrain from drinking intoxicants.

One of the most fundamental points to be heeded here is that these requirements are expressed not in the form of modern human rights but of universal ethico-moral duties.

Along with the Five Precepts, the Ten Good Precepts also have traditionally

exerted strong influences on Buddhist ethics and philosophy. According to Buddhist scholars (e.g., Hayashima, 1991, p. 171; Keown, 2003, p. 70; Watanabe, 1993, p. 52), the Ten Good Precepts, which are of particular importance in Mahayana Buddhism and partially overlap the Five Precepts, are:

1. Not to kill.
2. Not to steal.
3. Not to commit adultery.
4. Not to tell lies.
5. Not to use slanderous speech.
6. Not to use harsh speech.
7. Not to talk idly.
8. Not to covet.
9. Not to get angry.
10. Not to hold false views.

These religio-ethical precepts have been widely believed to govern human thought and behavior by way of the body (Precepts 1, 2, & 3), speech (Precepts 4, 5, 6, & 7), and mind (Precepts 8, 9, & 10) (Keown, 2003, p. 70; Watanabe, 1993, p. 52).

In engaging in interreligious studies, intercultural communication scholars and educators are to compare, on a basis of nonfavoritism and nonethnocentrism, these traditional Buddhist religio-ethical precepts with their counterparts of Christianity and Islam.

#### **Christian Religio-Ethical Precepts**

In the advanced nations of Western Europe and North America, apparently affected by the ideology of science-technology supremacy and money-oriented materialism, traditional Christianity has declined and secular atheists are increasing rapidly (Kawamura, 2006, p. 1014). On this contemporary religious phenomenon, Jasper (2003), a scholar of Christian history, expresses his positive viewpoint, declaring:

Throughout the world Christian traditions still exert a considerable influence on cultural practices and social attitudes, and although there is decreasing church attendance in some parts of the globe, in other areas communities identifying themselves as Christian are more than holding their own. (p. 178)

This statement evidently argues that fundamental Christian religio-ethical precepts are based on the traditional Ten Commandments in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible, the core text of the Christian religion.

The entire Ten Commandments (*Holy Bible*, 1991, pp. 74-75) could be concisely condensed into the following list:

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.
3. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: . . . .
4. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; . . . .
5. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.
6. Thou shalt not kill.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his servant, . . . .

The Ten Commandments can be divided into two; the first half (Commandments 1-5) are stating the religio-ethical precepts or duties concerning the relationships between God and human beings, and the second half (Commandments 6-10) are dealing with the

human-to-human social norms (Shinmen, 1994, p. 223). To make the two divisions more familiar to secular lay persons, according to Funato, Iida, and Takayanagi (2001, pp. 104-106), the first five are to be understood and memorized by using the five fingers of the right hand, and the second half with the left hand.

It is of utmost importance for intercultural communication scholars and educators interested in interreligious religio-ethical issues to comparatively recognize that the second half of the Ten Commandments are almost identical, coincidentally or not, to the Buddhist religio-ethical norms of the Five Precepts and the Ten Good Precepts.

### **Islamic Religio-Ethical Precepts**

Islam, the youngest of the three major world religions, has recently been widely stigmatized by non-Muslims as a dangerous terroristic religion. Muzaffar (1997), a scholar of Islamic philosophy, attempts to correct this Westcentered negative image of Islam as follows:

In the absence of in-depth, honest analysis of the underlying causes of violence in various parts of the Muslim world, the erroneous impression is created that terrorism is somehow integral to Islam. The truth is, Islam prohibits aggression under any circumstances. . . . Muslims are reminded that they should not commit aggression but they have a duty, nonetheless, to resist aggressors and oppressors. (p. 148)

Despite this internationally spread negative image, according to Kawamura (2006), the population of Muslims is steadily growing, as an interesting religious phenomenon, in Western Europe and North America.

The Qur'an in Arabic is fundamentally different in nature from Buddhist sutras and the Holy Bible in that it can not and should not be translated into other worldly languages because, at least for Muslims, Arabic is the only divine language in which Allah is believed to have given His original messages to Muhammad (Nakamura, 2001, pp. 187-188; Rekishi no Nazo wo Sagurukai, 2005, p. 64). As for this religio-linguistic difficulty, Woodward (2002) says that "[T]ranslation of the Qur'an are considered mere 'interpretations' of the language of God's original revelation" (p. 62). Hence it is extremely difficult for non-Arabic speakers to concisely extract Islamic religio-ethical precepts or norms directly from the Qur'an; they have to depend on "interpretations" as secondary or tertiary research sources.

The fundamental Islamic religio-ethical precepts or duties are usually divided into two dimensions: First, the Six Beliefs concerning Allah-human relationships; and second, the Five Practices for Muslims to observe.

The Six Beliefs (Ayish, 2003, p. 83; Hosaka, 1994, pp. 229-236; Nakamura, 2001, pp. 191-192):

1. Belief in Allah.
2. Belief in His angels.
3. Belief in His books.
4. Belief in His messengers.
5. Belief in the Last Day.
6. Belief in His plan.

The Five Practices (Hosaka, 1994, pp. 229-236; Nakamura, 2001, pp. 191-192):

1. Practice of confession of faith.
2. Practice of prayer.
3. Practice of donation.
4. Practice of fasting.
5. Practice of pilgrimage.

More practical details of the religio-ethical precepts or duties, especially those concerning human relationships in Islamic society, are described in the Islam law (Hosaka, 1994, pp. 229-236; Nakamura, 2001, pp. 191-192).

Intercultural communication scholars and educators are encouraged to investigate, on a basis of religious nonfavoritism and nonethnocentrism, possible deep and latent religious causes of current violent movements occurring in many parts of the world.

Additionally, Islam is not simply a religion but also a way of everyday personal and social life, and a solid foundation of nation-state politics.

[I]n this critical time of Western-Arab Islamic disharmony, the elaboration of normative culture-based perspectives on how people on both sides of this divide manage their communication acts and rituals should serve to narrow gaps of misunderstanding and misperception. (Ayish, 2003, p. 91).

Thus those who attempt to conduct interreligious communication studies always need to remind themselves that sociocultural values, beliefs, attitudes, worldviews, communication styles, and behavior patterns are basically formed, at both conscious and unconscious levels, by religio-ethical precepts and norms. In this respect, interreligious communication studies will be a challenging field for contemporary intercultural communication scholars and educators who have somehow conventionally neglected to deal with interreligious conflicts and battles from communication perspectives.

### **Proposing Interreligious Communication Studies as a New Paradigm**

Recently, the growing significance of systematically studying interreligious communication, which has long been somehow neglected by intercultural communication scholars and educators, has come to be asserted as a newly rising intercivilizational and interreligious religio-ethical communication paradigm. Tu (1997), a scholar of Confucian humanism, for instance, emphasizes this essential point in this age of international disorder, proposing that “[A] truly significant inter-civilizational dialogue is required as a step beyond the Enlightenment mentality of the modern West for initiating a world-wide universal conversation on ethics” (p. 19).

It appears to be a promising scholarly movement in the recent intercultural communication field that an increasing number of scholars have come to realize the growing necessity of conducting intercultural communication studies from interreligious perspectives to generate new challenging study paradigms (e.g., Chen 2001; Chen & Starosta, 2005; Chuang, 2004; Dean, 1995; Garret, 1999; Ishii, 1998, 2001, 2004; Ishii, Klopff, & Cooke, 2003; Kellenberger, 1993; Kincaid, 1987; Tsujimura & Kincaid, 1990; Machida, 2004). In planning and implementing projects of interreligious communication studies, there are two essential points for scholars and educators concerned to bear in mind. First, as Miike (2002, 2003, 2006) and Hara (2006) have consistently asserted, it is now extensively important to positively rethink and reevaluate non-Western, particularly Asian, perspectives on culture and communication as well as those conventionally developed in the Euro-U.S. context. Second, interreligious communication studies should go beyond the current stage of comparing unique characteristics of different religions to the stage of systematically studying and promoting interreligious dialogue and communication (Takeda, 1997). Tu (2002) further stresses these cautionary points from a nonethnocentric, interreligious, and intercivilizational point of view:

Unless we truly believe that we can and must learn from faiths of other peoples, “dialogue” can easily degenerate into a strategy for conversion. The plurality of faith, as a defining characteristic of spirituality in the 21st century, demands that all ethico-religious traditions enter into the dialogue among civilizations for mutual learning. (p. 87)

In order to cope with contemporary interreligious problems and issues, the following four-stage problem-solving research methodology, qualitative or quantitative, would be the best to employ. The first stage is to *describe* the present situation of a given interreligious problem or issue. The second stage is to review the first stage and *explain* possible causes of the problem or issue. The third stage is to review the two previous stages and *predict* a potential future of the problem or issue. The final fourth stage is to review the three previous stages and *prescribe* practical ways of solving the problem or issue.

In planning and practically conducting interreligious communication studies, Cheng’s (1997, pp. 126-129) five principles are worth considering:

Principle 1: To recognize historical differences and appreciate cultural

- Principle 2: To observe nondominance and mutual respect and mutual
- Principle 3: To converge into the great ultimate and infinite truth.
- Principle 4: To hold the belief in equal access and mutual enrichment.
- Principle 5: To develop creative advancement and mutual

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It is thus a growingly urgent task for paradigm-conscious scholars and educators of intercultural communication to turn their scholarly attention to the interreligious communication studies field.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The present study to propose interreligious communication studies as a currently rising rationale to intercultural communication scholars and educators has attempted to pursue the following three goals: First, to briefly describe the status quo of growingly grave interreligious and interethnic conflicts and battles; second, to comparatively investigate and recognize representative religio-ethical characteristics of the three great world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam); and third, to propose the urgent task of planning and implementing interreligious communication studies as a new challenging paradigm. In concluding the propositional study, Tehranian and Chappell’s (2002) assertion needs to be noted:

Globalization has brought different cultural values into direct contact and sometimes conflict. The way to resolve these conflicts is not to pit one camp against another, e.g., the West against the rest; for the human race to survive, it is now necessary to open up all channels of communication for dialogue, negotiation, and creation of values commensurate with the challenges of our own times. (p. xxix)

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