

RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY CONVERSATION WITH KYOGEN CARLSON & PAUL LOUIS METZGER

*John W. Morehead**

Hello. My name is John Morehead. I am the custodian of the Evangelical Chapter of the Foundation for Religious Diplomacy. The Foundation for Religious Diplomacy (FRD) exists to build trust between religious rivals who share good will without compromising their spiritual or ideological integrity. The following interview arose out of my relationship with The Institute for the Theology of Culture: New Wine, New Wineskins, and my frequent involvement in its journal, *Cultural Encounters: A Journal for the Theology of Culture*. New Wine, New Wineskins director and *Cultural Encounters* editor Paul Louis Metzger had a longstanding relationship with Abbot Kyogen Carlson of Dharma Rain Zen Center. Paul and Kyogen's deep friendship and collaborative ventures involving New Wine and Dharma Rain carried over to and included multifaith engagement at FRD. Providentially for us, we were able to audio record the interview for a podcast on Wednesday, September 17, 2014. Most unexpectedly and tragically, Abbot Carlson passed away from a massive heart attack the following day. The following is an edited version of the interview that seeks to preserve the core content and spirit of the exchange in written form for a broader context. The actual podcast can be found at <http://www.religious-diplomacy.org/content/podcast-conversation-kyogen-carlson-and-paul-louis-metzger>.¹

John Morehead (JM): I'd like to start by asking the two of you to say a little bit about yourselves. Paul, what do you do beyond your work with the Evangelical Chapter of the Foundation for Religious Diplomacy?

Paul Louis Metzger (PLM): Thank you, John. It's great to be here with you and Kyogen. Both of you have been dear friends of mine, and so it's always a delight to be in conversation with the two of you. For those listening, I'm professor of Christian Theology and Theology of Culture at Multnomah Biblical Seminary at Multnomah University in Portland, Oregon. I also direct The Institute for the Theology of Culture: New Wine, New Wineskins,

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1. http://johnwmorehead.podomatic.com/entry/2014-09-18T21_17_08-07_00.

whose tagline is “bearing witness to Christ in contemporary culture.” One of the fundamental, positive concerns we have at New Wine is to engage in a Christ-centered, biblically based way in our multifaith world. Such engagement involves charity of spirit, biblical conviction, and Christ-centered compassion. One of the most precious relationships we’ve had at New Wine is our work with Kyogen and Dharma Rain Zen Center. We consider Kyogen and the Dharma Rain community dear friends and colleagues in terms of engagement on this very theme of living in our multifaith society.

JM: Kyogen, you are involved with FRD as well as the custodian of the Buddhist Chapter.** But can you tell listeners a little bit more about your background?

Kyogen Carlson (KC): Yes. I am a Soto Zen priest. I was trained in a monastery in Northern California. I was in monastic practice for ten years, then became the resident priest at the Portland temple. We’re now an independent Zen temple but actively engaged with other Zen communities and other Buddhist communities around the country and around the world. That’s primarily my work, including all the things that go along with it. It’s a full-time job. Right now, we are building a new campus, which is all-consuming. So that takes up my time. Then there is the work with Paul, whom I also consider to be a very dear friend. I gave a talk just last Sunday, and I found myself coming back to my relationship with conservative evangelicals. It seems to pepper almost all of the talks I give. There’s something that has informed me about the relationship and it’s been important, and so I keep coming back to it on a regular basis.

PLM: It’s really striking that the new location for Kyogen’s new temple community is just down the road from Multnomah University. So we’re increasingly neighbors. It’s going to be good to be closer.

JM: You’re moving closer to each other in more ways than one. I was impressed as I had the opportunity a while back to come out to Portland and spend some time with Kyogen, as well as you, Paul, and to hear from Kyogen a little bit about his perceptions of evangelicals before you two met. It’s just a fascinating story. Paul, let’s start with you. What was your understanding of Buddhism and Buddhists prior to your relationship with Kyogen? And how did you two come to connect with each other?

** Paul is also involved with FRD as Senior Fellow and a member of the Advisory Council for the Evangelical Chapter of FRD.

PLM: Well, my first real profound exposure to Buddhism was in Japan. My wife, Mariko, is a native and citizen of Japan; however, we've been in America for the majority of our married lives. Still, we had the opportunity to live in Japan. I came back recently from six weeks there, where I had further interaction with a priest under whom I studied Buddhism back in the nineties. I have continued to study Buddhism over the years. Among other things, I believe I'm even able to understand more of my own Christian faith by way of the comparisons and contrasts with Buddhism and its various schools of thought.

I met Kyogen a few years after completing doctoral studies and moving to Portland to teach at Multnomah University. It was 2003. We were part of an initiative to bring about understanding and healing between various civic and religious communities as the result of long-standing racial tensions; those tensions surfaced again at that time with the fatal shooting of an African American woman by a white police officer. Kyogen and I were part of the same group. We approached some of the issues we were dealing with in very similar ways, even though Kyogen was a Zen priest and I an evangelical Christian. After the conversations ended in 2003, I went off to do postdoctoral work at the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton, New Jersey. It was as if Portland came with me. Multnomah County (part of the metropolitan area of Portland, Oregon) was coming up quite a bit in the national news in 2004. The tensions over gay marriage and other cultural and political tensions that played out in Portland, Oregon, also awaited me upon my return. Participants from the Buddhist and evangelical Christian communities in the city and state were often on opposite ends of the cultural and political spectrum. Members of Dharma Rain Zen Center were deeply troubled over President Bush's reelection and the ballot measure in Oregon that banned gay marriage. They were also deeply troubled over evangelical Christianity given that the movement was viewed as a pivotal force in shaping recent regional and national political and cultural events. Kyogen asked me if we could talk further and include our communities. The aim was to build greater understanding so as to move beyond the culture-war rhetoric on the air waves and in the public square. These exchanges led me to a deeper understanding of Buddhism in the American context and enriched my community and personal life.

JM: Kyogen, I know you had some concerns about evangelicals as you understood them before your relationship with Paul. Can you share some of that? What was it like before you met Paul, and how has that changed through the course of your relationship?

KC: I was just thinking about that recently. I really didn't have much of an understanding of where evangelicals fit in the landscape of Christianity, and in American culture. I was raised as a Christian Scientist; so I had kind of a quasi-Christian background—a sort of “New Thought” type of Christianity. I understood the general landscape of Protestant and Catholic Christianity, but I had not really encountered evangelicals in a direct, personal way until I was at Berkeley. There was an evangelical street preacher at Berkeley named Hubert. He was kind of a beloved figure; there was a very genial exchange back and forth where he would call us all miserable sinners, but he would smile when he spoke these words. People would kind of tease him back. He had been a fixture in the area for quite a long time, and then suddenly it changed. There were these younger, very aggressive and angry street preachers who turned up. I guess it was the beginning of the Jesus Movement. Something had definitely changed. Their approach involved that in-your-face, evangelical, or fundamentalist, or whatever it is, aggressive tactic, which I'd never before encountered. It set me back on my heels quite a bit. I heard from others in our community that they had grown up with similar experiences. So that was basically what I understood about it. I think what happens is that the louder and more aggressive voices on any side are the ones you encounter first, which is unfortunate.

This series of events was kind of the background for me. I didn't give evangelicalism much thought after that. But then in the context of the national politics of the nineties and early twenty-first century, it became much more visible as a national movement and a political movement, which I found myself at odds with a fair bit. And it was in that context that I reached out to Paul. I want to mention that in our initial conversation circle in the community project where I met Paul, there were all kinds of views. Paul and I were quite different in our perspectives, but I found him the most engaged in listening and the most engaged in trying to understand and connect. While everyone had their agendas, Paul's seemed mostly to understand and be understood. I'd had a desire to have the difficult conversations with those across the spectrum in a civil manner for quite a while and found it difficult to make happen. We both shared this experience of like-minded people getting together and patting each other on the back. But to reach across the divides where the difficult questions are and to make really reasonable approaches across those divides seemed to be hard to do. I thought, “This is someone I can reach out to in the attempt to do this.” There was some disturbance and concern within our community at one point, and I thought, “It would be really good if they could see what I saw,” which is why I invited Paul to come and address our community. We started out with a smaller subset of our community, the more senior students, the more committed people, and we had a potluck. That experience changed everything—just to

be together and be reasonable. Paul brought his graduate students from the seminary, and it was just a very engaging evening. That was the first door that we walked through together. Later, Paul invited me to address his graduate students at the seminary, which I did. I thought at the time, “I’m going to talk about some of these difficult subjects.” I found that if I extended my hand a little bit, not in defense, but to say, “We’ve made our mistakes on our side, too . . . I confess those mistakes to you, and I think we overstate some of our case in various things, even though I still feel strongly about our positions,” people came to meet me. That was a very affirming experience.

JM: Many times in interfaith dialogue, there is a focus on commonality and very little interest in talking about differences. And yet, the two of you have wanted to come together in diplomatic and civil ways not only to talk about commonality but also to explore deep differences. Would that be a fair way to characterize the approach taken by the two of you?

KC: Absolutely, absolutely, and Paul’s way of putting it is “to speak through our convictions.” I would agree with that completely. What would you say, Paul?

PLM: Further to what Kyogen was saying a minute ago, it’s so easy to bring like-minded people together. While there’s a place for that, we need to bring together people with radically different views from one another. We need to try and engage differences in very concrete but charitable terms, and not only the similarities. This approach is characteristic of Kyogen and me, and also you, John, in your work at FRD. Kyogen alluded to it. I often say in various contexts such as my world religions class that “We need to go through our convictions, not around them, nor to stop short at them.” I find at times that those in my evangelical circle approach others from the vantage point that they won’t listen to them until they convert to Christianity. Listening to the other who is truly different from you is a form of love. There has to be that desire to hear the other—the religious other, in this case. So to stop short of one’s convictions and say in effect, “You’ve got to reach out and you’ve got to come over to this side before I will engage you,” is really problematic. Such a posture (whether it is that of an evangelical Christian or Zen Buddhist) doesn’t reflect the best elements of our respective traditions. Moreover, I find at times people in more liberal circles going around their convictions and leaving their convictions at the door to find some kind of neutral ground; however, neutral ground is never really neutral. From the first potluck onward, Buddhists and Christians alike went through their respective convictions.

Kyogen is the one who initiated the first gathering and it wasn't easy for him. I was just talking about what he did yesterday with someone. I should pause and add that Kyogen and I don't always pat one another on the back. We've gotten into some challenging conversations too, but it's always been from the context of trust and friendship. To return to my previous point, it wasn't easy for Kyogen on a number of occasions to bring someone like myself into his community. Many of Kyogen's members in his parish community might not have liked having an evangelical Christian show up at their temple to talk given all the angst and pain: It would be like, "We can't get rid of them in the culture at large; now you're bringing them into our community?" That had to be a challenge. That first potluck was key; it initiated a series of potlucks. Instead of hiding religion and politics from the dinner table, we dealt with religion and politics. We were able to create and build a level of trust because we were all sitting down at tables to talk together over meals. Potluck discussions have been essential to our ongoing conversations and cultivation of trust involving our communities. I only hope that something like this could be extended elsewhere relationally in similar ways.

JM: There's been mention of the significance of potlucks. Please talk a bit further about this hospitable practice. In addition to the significance of bringing two different religious communities together around potlucks, what other kinds of activities have you pursued over the years that have helped develop your relationship and the relationships between those in your religious communities?

KC: Well, I think the potlucks that ensued after this were designed to go in a progression. Originally members of Dharma Rain Zen Center and members of the Multnomah community would agree to meet once a month for a potluck either at our temple or over at Multnomah. We would arrange for a central question that people would want to address. It might be something like, "How do you arrive at your convictions? What is the process by which you arrive at this decision?" Sometimes it was more about the faith journey itself: "What do you do if you have a question concerning what your faith tradition is telling you? How do you resolve that tension? What challenges have you had? Have you worked through your challenges, and has it made you stronger?" People also shared their personal stories about how they relate to their faith system. It is a very profound thing to hear somebody share in a very personal way how they come to the position that they hold. When they're across the table from you, and you've just shared a meal with them, you cannot dismiss their perspective at all. There's something transformative about that experience. While you might not agree with them regarding their perspective, you may have a deeper understanding about what it means to the other person and why it's important, and an understanding of how it works in

their lives. Those types of things humanize people's faith positions rather than bumper-sticker-label them. I have a thing about bumper stickers; they label other people's perspectives too often. Our dialogues were the opposite of such labeling.

JM: Paul?

PLM: Further to what Kyogen is sharing, we received a grant from Multnomah Seminary's accrediting body, the Association of Theological Schools, to work with Dharma Rain Zen Center over an entire school year. At potlucks and a retreat funded by the grant, we dealt with divisive issues, such as Jesus's uniqueness, his claims regarding his deity, heaven and hell, same sex marriage, abortion, and the like.

KC: And also war, and the death penalty.

PLM: Yes, we sought to deal with all the "elephants in the room" in a context where we were trying to build trust. It was interesting because some of the Buddhists had experienced trauma based on associations with evangelicals in the past. They had these memories and recollections from family conversations where they felt rejection from family members because of their Buddhist convictions or lifestyles that surfaced. Over the course of the year, the trauma dissipated and greater trust developed. On one occasion, I asked one of the Buddhists why she felt differently about us than her evangelical father, whose interaction with her had left a deep wound in her life: "Why do you feel different about us, when we may hold the very same beliefs and convictions that your father does?" She responded by saying, "Well, you're inquisitive." I've often made the following contrast since that conversation: "Be inquisitive, not inquisitional." Further to what Kyogen was saying, we need to humanize people, not demonize them. They are not "isms" or "ists," as members of Buddhism and evangelicalism. These are real people who inhabit such religious traditions. We have learned to move forward case by case and not resort to generalizations. What I am saying can sound like a sound bite, but really one has to enter into these conversations to know that they reflect heartfelt intentionality and goodwill. We need to press in to engage in like manner across the religious and cultural spectrum. So much is at stake in terms of the common good in our global setting today against the backdrop of various culture wars.

JM: During the course of your relationship over the years, were there moments when you learned something new about either Buddh-ism or evangelical-ism or Buddhists or evangelicals—the systems or the people

themselves? Were there things that struck you and that you don't think you would have picked up if it wasn't for your relationship?

KC: I think for me it was the understanding that two things could be true at the same time. For example, Paul and other serious evangelicals really believe that there is no salvation except through Jesus, and that those of us who don't follow through that particular doorway are lost in some way. And yet, at the same time, they can still be open, loving, caring, and non-judgmental about it. And so, prior to these encounters, those two things didn't really seem to coexist in my experience. But still, prior to these encounters, I had this intuition that there are less strident voices near the center of these divides that don't stand out. You have to make some effort to contact them and to create a space in which those more moderate voices on both sides can meet each other. Against the backdrop of the public domain being dominated by polarizing bullhorns, creating space in which this more reasonable encounter can take place is something that's worth making the effort to do. So, yes, I learned a lot about that, and it's one of the things I puzzle over. I think of it as the immovable object in the room: people will not go around it. It will not yield. It's just there. It's not a metaphor. It's there. That's the way it is. When I accept that this is the case with my evangelical friends regarding their convictions, then I can move around it. I mean that I can accept it—I don't know whether "moving around it" is the right word, but it is part of the equation. It's part of who Paul is. And that's okay.

JM: Yes, interesting insight there. Paul, what about for you?

PLM: Further to what Kyogen was saying regarding the immovable object, we did an event at Powell's Books in Portland related to a book that I had written (*Connecting Christ*) on how to discuss Jesus in a world of diverse paths. Kyogen had shaped (and continues to) some of my thinking on how to engage those of other spiritual paths more constructively, not simply truthfully, but also meaningfully. Our conversations shaped my essay on Buddhism in the volume (which includes a response by Kyogen) and the book as a whole. We've been working on other writing projects together. Having said this, I want to return to Kyogen's point on the immovable object. Kyogen used that language at the Powell's Books event. He spoke of there being an immovable object for evangelicals. For Zen Buddhists—Kyogen, please correct me if I'm wrong, the focus is on the process of inquiry and critical reflection rather than a fixed object upon which one reflects. One Christian in the audience at Powell's Books asked Kyogen, "Abbot Carlson, what is this immovable object for evangelicals to which you refer?" Kyogen responded, "The Gospel of John." I should add that in our conversations we read Christian and Buddhist texts, including the Gospel of John. So, that is

why Kyogen referenced this Gospel. Then Kyogen asked me to respond since we were talking about the Christian tradition. I said, “Look, you know, it’s Jesus Christ. That’s the immovable object, though he is a life-giving, personal reality.”

One of the things I love about Kyogen is his open perspective to reflect with curiosity on subjects. In keeping with his tenacious and lively adherence to Zen practice, he has never imposed on me his trajectory and said, “Well, you really mean this even though you’re saying that . . .” In our conversations, some very thoughtful, bright, irenic Buddhists have said, “Well, we’re really saying the same thing.” For all their good will, I don’t like those sweeping assessments. Now, if we are saying the same thing at points, that’s fine. However, at the core of our two traditions, we are discussing major differences involving the identities of Buddha and Jesus. While Kyogen disagrees with my perspective on ultimate reality, he has never said, “Well what you really mean to say, Paul, is this . . .” Such an overriding assessment would corral me and wouldn’t allow me to speak from my own perspective, no matter if I am right or wrong. Kyogen does not make such sweeping assessments because he’s trying to understand. It’s the process of inquiry, whereby one engages the other in a non-objectifying, non-judgmental sense. Time and time again, Kyogen has approached people of diverse perspectives in this open, non-judgmental manner. He models for me Jesus’s words about being sure to remove the plank (“redwood forest,” as I like to say) from one’s own eye before taking out the speck (or “toothpick”) from someone else’s eye. I’ve always found that the leadership at Dharma Rain Zen Center (including Kyogen’s wife and co-Abbot, Gyokuko Carlson) cultivates this mindset and related practices. It’s difficult. It’s hard for me as well as many of my fellow Christians to practice openness, non-grasping and non-objectification, though such values and practices are found in the Bible in distinctively Christian ways. Given their practice and the Bible’s call not to judge, Kyogen and his Zen community have helped me to reflect back on my own tradition and draw from it rather than react from the vantage point of culture war impulses and my carnal passions. Thus, I’ve learned more about my own tradition through interaction with my Buddhist friends as they live out their values. Through our exchanges, I have learned more about the need to allow those from other traditions to speak from their own vantage point in ways that shed light on our differences and what Buddhists and Christians might even have in common through the differences.

JM: One final question for you gentlemen. Please take a few moments and say something to your own religious communities. What would you say to them as a result of what you’ve learned over the years through your relationship about the value of these honest, non-compromising, and yet

respectful, civil, and diplomatic conversations. This is what we call “religious diplomacy” at FRD. Why would you encourage members of your own religious communities to be involved in such dialogues and to do what you folks are doing? Kyogen, let’s start with you.

KC: Well, one thing that I have found myself doing on a number of occasions—particularly when I’ve been asked to speak at some peace rally—is to say, “It is an illusion to think you can create peace in the world if you can’t create peace with your neighbor.” There’s a saying in the anti-war movement that winning a war is an illusion. I’d say that the same thing is true with the culture wars. You can’t win. What you need to do is just stop waging war. To do so, you really need to reach out and come to understand your neighbor. If we can do that with each other, we have some hope of becoming workers for peace and harmony. So that’s what I’d do to challenge people. I would encourage them to take up in a serious manner the effort to understand what’s close by and that is tearing the country apart. We need to be advocates for healing instead of rallying people to our own side in opposition to what we perceive as the danger of “the other.”

JM: Good words, Kyogen. Paul, what would you say to the evangelical tribe?

PLM: Well, there are several things. There are different trajectories within evangelicalism. As with any movement, there’s a lot of diversity. Many conservative evangelicals are afraid of compromise. I believe we can have constructive, mutually enriching conversation with those of other religions without one compromising one’s faith convictions. One can hold firmly to one’s convictions with passion and with heartfelt intent while still engaging one’s neighbor well and one’s religiously diverse neighbor well. On the flip side, there are some more liberal-minded evangelicals who perhaps don’t care so much about doctrinal particulars (I would find such lack of concern for biblical doctrine misguided). The sacrificing of particulars of the Christian faith for the sake of engagement leads to boredom. Healthy exchanges with people of diverse paths involve charity *and* conviction. We have to live in the tension of biblical conviction and compassion rather than drift toward one end of the tension or the other.

Evangelicals also have to guard against bait and switch tactics in our interaction with people of other faith paths. As a committed evangelical, I’d long to see everyone come to know Jesus Christ personally by faith. I don’t hide that conviction. I also welcome people of other paths sharing their deeply held convictions with me. As an evangelical, I believe the evangelical community has to guard against engaging people solely for the purpose of

seeking to convert others. The Great Commission flows from the Great Commandment, which is to love the Lord God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. If I do not care for my Buddhist neighbors except to share the gospel with them, I really don't love my Buddhist neighbors. Love for them includes desiring to share the gospel, but also desiring to share life with them as friends, whether they accept Christ or not. I shouldn't be about bait and switch—where I'm only there to lead people to Christ—because I don't think that's love (I'm simply there to engage them as a means to an end of something else). Many of the Buddhists in our exchanges were wary at first, wondering when the shoe would drop, when the door would be locked from the outside, and they'd be forced to have to deal with our Christian claims and not let out the door until they'd converted. We lose trust when such coercion occurs. It's very damaging. Listening and sharing life are forms of love that complements sharing the good news. Again, the Great Commission flows out of the Great Commandment. Evangelicals' rightful concern for evangelism must not use or displace hospitality and neighborliness. We must cultivate enduring friendships that involve trust and guard against coercion such as bait and switch tactics. The cultivation of trust and enduring friendship is critically important for our communities. Such values and aims as these noted here are also critically important for our world as a whole.

JM: I think we've covered a lot of ground here. Do you folks have any last comments that did not get voiced through the course of my questioning?

KC: Not that I can think of. I think we covered it pretty well, actually.

JM: Well good. Well gentlemen, I want to thank you both. You have very busy schedules, and I appreciate your working with me to schedule this time to come together. I really value your relationship, my relationship with you, and your ongoing work in religious diplomacy.

KC: Well, thank you.

PLM: Evangelicals always like to have the last word. I was hoping at least to share a further word, though not a last one.

JM: Sure, yes, go ahead.

PLM: Kyogen and I have talked about this matter. I have also talked about it with you, John. I really hope we can work with other religious communities to foster this kind of interaction. It would be great to partner with Muslims and with people of other religious traditions. We can never win the culture

wars, as Kyogen put it so well. However, we can stop these wars, as Kyogen also said. How can we stop them apart from hospitality and neighborliness and apart from bringing the best of our respective traditions to bear on these wars so that we can stop vitriolic exchanges? So, that would be my desire as a good evangelist for the FRD cause!

JM: Well, thank you again. That's a great way to end our conversation. Paul, Kyogen, thank you so much. We appreciate everything you do.

KC: Alright. My pleasure.