MRIJ INTERVIEW with Mark O'Neill: Taiwan's Tzu Chi Foundation and Master Cheng Yen

《澳门利氏学社期刊》采访马克•奥尼尔：台湾慈济基金会与证严法师

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From time to time, the MRI Journal features interviews with academics, business leaders, and other professionals who are developing positive responses to the changes underway in Macau, Hong Kong, China, and SE Asia. This, the fourth of these interviews is with Mark O'Neill, a writer based in Hong Kong. A few years ago, Mark published a book, *Tzu Chi: Serving with Compassion* (Wiley, 2010), which tells the story of the Taiwan Tzu Chi Foundation, inspired by the work of its founder, the Buddhist nun, Master Cheng Yen. The editors of the MRIJ were interested in getting Mark's story first-hand, for it contains lessons for all of us, on what can be accomplished through NGOs dedicated to philanthropic activities. We hope that all religiously inspired charities can learn from the success of the Tzu Chi Foundation and its remarkable Founder, Master Cheng Yen.

MON: The most important point of Master Cheng Yen's vision of the Tzu Chi Foundation is that, while it was inspired by the Buddha's teachings on compassion, it does not have a specifically religious mission or agenda. Master Cheng Yen is very wise on this point because she doesn't want to be defined as Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant or Daoist, particularly because that would imply that you must join the Buddhist community, you have to believe in Buddhism, in order to participate. But Tzu Chi is an NGO, a charity in which everybody is welcome. This openness to participants from all religions or no religion at all, this inclusiveness, has allowed the Foundation to do successful projects, for example, in the Middle East, in which they have Muslim participants as well as ethnic Chinese, all working together. Being inclusive, you can operate in all these countries.

With the Tzu Chi Foundation, Master Cheng Yen has created the biggest NGO in the Chinese world. In Taiwan, there are four major Buddhist movements, which are called the Four Great Mountains. Each represents a very significant Buddhist movement and they made big contributions in their own way. But her's is the largest one and the most active in society. Tzu Chi focuses on Buddhism in the human world; it's not so much about contemplation or reading the Scriptures or publishing or studying; its focus is active service in the human world.

In this context, I think Master Cheng Yen is really a very important historical figure because China has had no such organisation. Before, China had many charity groups, but they mostly helped people from the same village, from the same clan, the same name, or from the same province. They were centred around Chinese people; but hers is a universal mission. They help everyone but show no preference for Chinese over others. She welcomes members from everywhere and people of all religions, so in the Chinese context this is a breakthrough.

DPM: It certainly is very important, and I share your respect for her work, especially in terms of Tzu Chi's expansion into the People's Republic of China (PRC). How did that come about?

MON: It began in 1991 when China had very serious flooding. Master Cheng Yen wanted to send her volunteers to distribute rice, clothing, blankets and so on. But they'd never been to Mainland China before and there was a huge debate in Taiwan about this. Many people wondered: how can you do this, since they are communists and they're trying to destroy us?

Master Cheng Yen addressed this issue very carefully, insisting that Tzu Chi's mission is to help those who are suffering, regardless of where they are or who they are. The floods in China were severe. These people lost their homes, lost their cattle, lost their fields. It was the duty of the Foundation to help. So, she sent over this team to the PRC, and they handed out relief packages that were greatly appreciated. Since then, they've done many projects in China, but they are very discreet with almost nothing said about it in the press.

DPM: I see that she has a list of ten basic principles, her own version of the Buddhist *Sila* (Rules for Lay People) in which the last one says no participation in political activities or demonstrations[1].

MON: She's very sensible on this point because such political activities in Taiwan can completely divide people into opposing camps, with every week demonstrations, speeches and conflicts of opinion about what to do. They take up a great deal of people's time and energy and money. I'm not criticising what political activists are doing but, from her perspective, it distracts from helping those who are suffering. And this applies everywhere: Don't waste your energy on having a demo or other forms of political protest. Preserve that energy and channel it in a positive way.

DPM: All of that is very commendable. But let's fast forward a little bit. My impression is that, given the success that they had in 1991 developing this approach to the flooding disaster, it made it that much easier for them to operate in China during the great Sichuan earthquake of 2008 where they were able to be quite effective.

MON: That's correct. They built a good reputation in mainland China, and so they became the first registered foreign NGO in China, allowing them to do a lot of work to help the victims, with a lot of projects ever since. Today, of course, most of the work is done by local Chinese volunteers, not people flown in from Taiwan. Master Cheng Yen said how it works: The movement will only grow if local people join and continue to work at it. You can't assign people from Taiwan permanently. So that's what happened in mainland China, and has happened since in the Philippines, in Asia, Africa and other places.

DPM: You indicated that, in China, you had people from Taiwan initially going there, helping to get it started but then as quickly as possible you're transitioning to indigenous leadership.

MON: One very important development was the establishment of the medical mission. This is really an amazing thing. The institution is called TIMA (Tzu Chi International Medical Association); they have invited doctors, nurses, dentists, and medical professionals to sign on, and they organise these clinics in places where there is no medical care or very poor medical care.

This is a model that's proved very successful, as they've organised thousands of medical professionals now volunteering services in the TIMA. They go to places mostly in developing countries where the medical system is not very developed and is certainly expensive and they're providing free care, so it's an enormous benefit. But, of course, you need to have an organisation. You need to have somebody who brings them all together, finds out where the need is, and of course they must have a place, I mean preferably a hospital or school, or a place

1 Here is the traditional rendering of the Ten Tzu Chi Precepts: The first five are taken from the Buddhist Pancasila (Sanskrit: pañcaśīla), which states the basic ethical norms for all Buddhist laypersons. To the original five, Master Cheng Yen has added a second set of five, reflecting the concerns of anyone living in a modern society:
1. Do not kill
2. Do not steal
3. Do not fornicate
4. Do not lie
5. Do not drink alcohol
6. Do not smoke, use drugs, or chew betel nuts
7. Do not gamble or speculate
8. Be filial to your parents and be moderate in speech and attitude
9. Abide by traffic laws
10. Do not participate in politics or demonstrations

where they can meet the patients, and it must be reasonably hygienic. As you know, all this takes a lot of organisation. So that's what TIMA does.

DPM: Let's explore the question of organisation some more: it strikes me it's a huge challenge managing volunteers and being able to coordinate them effectively. Can you say more about how that is managed?

MON: Tzu Chi has a number of professional employees, people with salaries that she pays full time to organise and coordinate the projects. They are attached to her Taiwan corporate headquarters in Hualien. It was always a miracle to me to see how you organise a medical clinic in, say, the triangle of Sri Lanka or Burma or a remote site like San Rocque Parish in Cebu.

Master Cheng Yen doesn't have a magic plan for everything or a single formula from headquarters that she gives you. She leaves it up to people on the ground who know the geography, politics, and religion, to come up with solutions and projects, and she broadly supports them as long as they are doing things consistent with the Foundation's mission.

For example, in Indonesia many of the volunteers are wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs. I think they are moved by the fact that they're wealthy. They're surrounded by so much poverty, so they must give back some of their wealth. I remember meeting a volunteer in Indonesia, a big developer, who had very good relations with the military who are very powerful there. When the 2004 earthquake and tsunami hit Aceh in Indonesia, the next morning he secured a military plane and he put volunteers and supplies on it and they flew to Aceh and they started distributing. That was possible because the volunteer had very good connections.

DPM: There is a thread running through so many of your stories, a combination of principle and pragmatism. Master Cheng Yen finds a way to get things done that are consistent with her principles, one of which is that you must be very careful about the battles that you choose to fight. What must be contested and what not. But in connection with the medical mission, you also mentioned a specific programme for soliciting bone marrow donations.

MON: Among Asian people, there is a great reluctance to donate any part of one's body to others. I mean your own family members maybe, but in general to donate to other people, including organ donations after death, is against the culture. Yet there are many people who do not have the organs that they require and need other people's help. Master Cheng Yen did research and found that you can donate bone marrow without damage to your own body. It's not a simple operation and it's got to be done precisely within a certain time limit. But she established a pioneer project and, as far as I know, it's the biggest bone marrow bank in Asia and was the first in Asia. While most other nations' banks may be limited to people in their countries, say, Chinese for Chinese because they have similar DNA, but in the Tzu Chi project some of the bone marrow has gone to Israelis and Norwegians and Germans. This, again, is a remarkable story indicating the universality of Tzu Chi's mission.

DPM: What kind of persuasion or educational programme did they develop in order to get people to come in and donate bone marrow?

MON: It was extremely difficult, and it's taken a long time. It was a very long process to persuade people to sign up, and as I say they have volunteers to work with both donors and recipients. It's not a casual thing. People would go with you; they will come first to your house and explain what is involved. If you're persuaded, they'll go with you for the signing and, if they find a match, the volunteers will be with you throughout the whole process. They'll go with you to the hospital where you and the recipient are matched, and then they also work with the families because often the older people, grandparents, will be very much against this. So that also requires a lot of time and patience; this has developed over the course of years. Now thousands of people have signed up.

DPM: Let me ask you this then. One of the vehicles for this campaign of education or persuasion is Tzu Chi's television station.

MON: It's called *Da Ai* Television, which means "Great Love". Initially Master Cheng Yen was reticent about publicity because these things should happen by word of mouth, that is, discreetly. But she discovered that modern society has developed social media, with dozens of TV channels, radio stations, and an enormous competition for the attention of people. At first, she made programmes to broadcast on the existing channels. In time she was persuaded that, if you want to influence society, you must have your own station. I think it was quite a difficult transition for the Foundation. At their headquarters they have lights; everywhere, they have cameras. Many of their meetings are filmed and she gives a talk every day. She's ready to try doing new things. So now it's a big operation: they had all kinds of programmes, news programmes, health programmes, dramas, and documentaries.

DPM: How has the TV station contributed to the development of the Tzu Chi mission: is this part of the cable TV package in Taiwan and other places?

MON: The *Da Ai* channel allows members to follow the movement's progress all over the world, since Tzu Chi has become global. This is essential because it means that, though you're far from Taiwan, you can follow what's going on. It has a significant audience in Taiwan now, not a majority, of course, but *Da Ai*'s viewers are not only Tzu Chi members. I think they have a lot of viewers, especially older people.

DPM: This is a question that concerns all human organisations as they get bigger and bigger: how do you manage them well?

MON: I asked one of the professional staff in Hualien this question. In every organisation I've ever worked in, people fight each other over money, privileges, or other things. But I asked, why doesn't it happen here? He replied, "In Tzu Chi, we have predictable disagreements about what to do. But because of the culture that permeates the ambience of the Foundation, people speak to each other respectfully. It's a very polite tone and so our conflicts are very muted."

DPM: This raises the whole question of how to manage a corporate culture. My impression is that that Tzu Chi's version of the Buddhist *Sila*, the ten principles that Master Cheng Yen has proposed, is very important. I would imagine that, as you move up the ranks in membership or

at least in responsibility within the organisation it becomes even more important. I assume leaders must be compliant with those standards.

MON: I think you put your finger on something important. She doesn't run her organisation like a government department with an HR division, that monitors compliance by sending out inspectors. No. I think she does it through her rules and her guidelines. So, if you join, you agree to these rules and you follow them. She manages from inside rather than from outside.

I just remember one volunteer telling me that there was a person who had a senior job in the hospital, a highly skilled doctor very well qualified, but it was discovered that he had a mistress. They allowed him to continue being a doctor, but he couldn't continue having a leadership position in the organisation because of it. I just heard that one story, but I never heard any cases of people stealing money or the corruption you find in almost every government or multinational corporation.

DPM: Another Tzu Chi initiative is a major recycling programme in Taiwan. How did that develop within the Foundation's mission?

MON: The recycling programme is another very important programme that Master Cheng Yen started in 1991. She was in a city in central Taiwan to give a talk, and was going through a night market. It was maybe six or seven in the morning. The night market had not been cleared, and the streets were covered with litter. She was quite struck by this; she went on to give her talk. Everybody was happy with the talk and at the end she says, "Instead of applauding me, use your hands to recycle." That's what she said: use your hands to recycle. So now in Taiwan they have 4,500 recycling stations. Many of the recycled items are then sold to factories for reuse. The recycling centres earn money and the money goes to support the TV station. But you know they've taken it further. Now Tzu Chi has a company that makes its own products from these recycled materials, for example, blankets, only they are made from plastic bottles discarded every day. When they go to disaster areas to give out relief, they use these blankets.

I went to talk with people at the recycling stations. Many are elderly, and I asked, why are you here? Why are you not at home watching TV, playing mah-jong? And people said I did all that already, but my children are busy when they're at work. They have no time to spend with me. "But I come here to the recycling centre, and I'm surrounded by other people, and so I have company. The TV is on, so I can listen to Master Cheng Yen speaking. I have a vegetarian lunch there. After 8 hours here I feel my life has value, so I don't drink anymore. I don't take drugs anymore. My life by itself has a value. I'm very pleased to see my children. I'm very pleased to see my grandchildren, but they aren't the only thing in my life."

DPM: This seems to be an aspect of Master Cheng Yen's approach to everything Tzu Chi does. The organisation is very professional but in all these activities they benefit not only the recipients but also the persons doing, for example, the recycling.

MON: Right. There's a slogan Master Cheng Yen has in Chinese: "Help the poor and educate the rich." That means that when you have a relief operation—distributing rice, vegetable oil, or other necessities—these always must be handed

out one to one. A volunteer gives it to the victim. It can't be done through a third party. You must do it yourself and this ensures that money is not diverted. Nobody steals the rice or tries to sell it on the black market. The point of this personal contact is also to educate the volunteer. When he picks up the rice, he hands it to the Kashmiri or Indonesian or the Malaysian, and then he must thank the recipient for giving him the chance to be of service. This has a very moving effect on the recipients as well as on the donors. Often, the recipients are the poorest people, and no one ever shows any respect for them. But here is this nicely dressed person bowing in front of them, giving them rice. It becomes a two-way benefit. The donor realises how blessed he is in his life, by comparison to the person receiving the aid. This is the "education" Master Cheng Yen is talking about.

That's also what I felt when I was in the recycling centres. How smart. I realised there are thousands of people in Taiwan, especially elderly people, who are not well employed, since Taiwan has a good medical system. You have a lot of elderly people who are living on their own since they're healthy enough, but they are a resource that's not used. So now they work in these recycling centres and so this is now become a very big operation. The government now is much more cognisant of this and you have different boxes for recycling out everywhere. It has become much more of a national effort. I think Taiwan is far ahead of Hong Kong in this respect.

When I interviewed the volunteers from projects in China, or Haiti, or Pakistan or the Philippines, where these terrible disasters occur, they told me that we are at five minutes to midnight, five minutes to global catastrophe, if we don't act very soon. Master Cheng Yen is inviting us to live a much plainer life, in which there is no drink, no cigarettes, just eat what you need, no meat of course, dress with the clothes you need but without excessive display. This is what is driving the mission. Tzu Chi is increasingly focused on addressing the global challenge.

DPM: Mark, I want to thank you for your insights into the Tzu Chi Foundation and Master Cheng Yen's leadership. We can all learn from their success how to become more effective in putting our good intentions into practice. For more details on the Tzu Chi Foundation and its history, readers should consult the comprehensive article in Wikipedia: "Tzu Chi" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzu_Chi), as well as the Foundation's own website (https://www.tzuchi.org.tw/en/). Besides his book, *Tzu Chi: Serving with Compassion*, published by Wiley in 2010, Mark's other publications are available at his website: https://www.mark-oneill.com/.

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