

# Tzu Chi Compassion Society's Peace Work in America

Jonathan H. X. Lee  
San Francisco State University



*“In Buddhism, there is a Bodhisattva who embodies the spirit of compassion. This Bodhisattva, named Avalokitesvara, is so full of love that she cannot bear for people to suffer. When she sees or hears people in distress or difficulty, she goes to them very quickly to offer aid and relief. Exercising wisdom and compassion, she not only helps them out of their material difficulties, but guides them with the Dharma so they may gain the insight to liberate themselves from their suffering and attain true happiness. Actually, all of us can be Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Deep in our hearts, we have the same great compassion.”<sup>190</sup>*

The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation was founded in 1966 by Venerable Master Cheng Yen<sup>191</sup> and thirty female followers. Today, it celebrates its forty-sixth anniversary, as one of the world's largest non-profit relief and charitable organizations. Worldwide this lay Buddhist organization claims

<sup>190</sup> Ven. Cheng Yen: “Bringing Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva to Life”, 3 January 2011

<sup>191</sup> Her name is also transliterated as Zhengyan. At the time of the founding of Tzu Chi Buddhist Compassion Relief, the only other charity organization in Taiwan was a Christian organization (see documentary film entitled *A Glimpse into the Heart of Master Cheng Yen: An Interview by Filmmaker Hsiao Chu-chen*).

more than ten million volunteers and supporters, with branches in fifty countries.<sup>192</sup> Since its humble beginnings, Tzu Chi has provided relief work in over seventy countries, to people suffering from disasters such as the Southeast Asia tsunami, Myanmar cyclone, and earthquakes in Turkey, Pakistan, Sichuan China, Haiti and Chile.<sup>193</sup> Tzu Chi is intimately involved in providing social, educational, charitable, and medical relief to the underprivileged and underserved, throughout and beyond Taiwan, reaching the United States, the world, and even into the geo-politically sensitive Chinese mainland.<sup>194</sup> Tzu Chi's transnational structure grows larger and more intricate day-by-day, and its global mission of environmentalism, healthcare, education and culture, and disaster relief extends worldwide. San Dimas, California is home to Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation U.S.A.'s headquarter, established in 1984.<sup>195</sup> Since then, Tzu Chi U.S.A. maintains more than 80 offices and facilities in the U.S. with over 100,000 volunteers and donors working to make a difference in their local communities. In this article, I seek to examine the role of Tzu Chi U.S.A. in negotiating inter-ethnic and inter-racial relations, linguistic and cultural diversities, and the re-imagination of community boundaries, in and throughout American civil society, vis-à-vis its various relief efforts in the United States, and its implications abroad. I will argue that even though Tzu Chi's organizational structure is transnational in scope, its mission is "global" in ambition.

This article seeks to discuss how Tzu Chi's relief work crosses, transcends, and negotiates the boundaries of religious, linguistic, inter-ethnic and inter-racial relations, together with cultural and national identities. First, I will examine Tzu Chi's medical and general healthcare outreach in California, Hawai'i, and New York, in addition to its international bone marrow bank, which has provided an outlet for a relatively new ethnically Chinese immigrant Buddhist mission society to transplant itself onto

<sup>192</sup> Refer to the Tzu Chi Foundation website, <http://www.us.tzuchi.org> (accessed July 2, 2012).

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> André Laliberté, " 'Love Transcends Borders' or 'Blood is Thicker than Water'? The Charity work of the Tzu Chi Foundation in the People's Republic of China," *The European Journal of East Asian Studies* 2.2 (2003): 248

<sup>195</sup> The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation was established in 1984 as a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization in California. The first office in the U.S. was established in Alhambra, CA.

American mainstream society. A discussion of Tzu Chi's educational and cultural outreach will follow, reflecting degrees of "acculturation," civic responsibilities, and inter-ethnic cooperation. Third, I will explore the national attention gained by Tzu Chi's outreach after the horrific terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, and the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, affecting the boundaries of international U.S.-Taiwan relations. While racial and ethnic tensions pierced America in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Tzu Chi's relief workers provided a platform for new dialogue of inter-ethnic and inter-racial relations between African-Americans and Asian-Americans in general, and Chinese-Americans in particular. Finally, I will argue that even though Tzu Chi's organizational structure is transnational in scale, its mission of peace work is "global" in ambition.

## Tzu Chi's "Just Do It" Ethos

Tzu Chi has transplanted its "Just Do It" socially engaged Chinese Buddhist relief work onto the "new American religious landscape."<sup>196</sup> This interpretation of Buddhism reflects Ven. Cheng Yen's core belief that Buddhist teachings are not abstract theories, but rather, concrete and applicable principles that one may apply to one's daily life. Ven. Cheng Yen teaches, "In Tzu Chi, our practice is to enter into society with the spirit of selfless love that the Buddha teaches - the Four Immeasurable Minds of: loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity."<sup>197</sup> This principal is manifested in Tzu Chi's fourfold mission, which encompasses disaster relief, medical and general healthcare, education and culture, and environmentalism, together reflecting a global orientation.<sup>198</sup> *Compassion* coupled with *upaya* (expedient means), two central teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, guide its relief efforts to serve clients without regard to age, sex, race, ethnicity, class, or religious affiliation.<sup>199</sup> Although a religious institution, its primary goal is

<sup>196</sup> Diane Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).

<sup>197</sup> Inner Practice for the Tzu Chi Path, <http://www.us.tzuchi.org> (accessed July 2, 2012).

<sup>198</sup> Tzu Chi's official ideological fourfold mission includes charity, medicine, culture, and education.

<sup>199</sup> Jonathan H. X. Lee, "Chinese Religions in North America," in *Chinese Religions in Contemporary Societies*, ed. James Miller (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 252-254.

not evangelical, but rather, encourages followers to emulate or to become living bodhisattvas who bring “compassion” into “action” to assist others in need. In the early nineteenth century, French sociologist Alex de Tocqueville observed and admired American society because of its voluntary associations and civic society,<sup>200</sup> which continues to this day. Although, social service work is nothing new to Tzu Chi, its relief work in American society has impacted the role of religion in the public sphere and, further, it has comprehensively redefined notions of race and ethnicity, interfaith dialogue and practices, and by extension, has brought new attention to Buddhism and civic service, which legitimates Chinese Buddhism in particular, and Buddhism in general within American society.

### Tzu Chi’s Medical and Healthcare Relief

*“In this world, there are people who see life as a very valuable gift. They feel it to be as precious as a diamond because with it, they can make a contribution to the world and make life better for others. In their thinking, life is to be made use of, and they take care in using it wisely, with love for others.”<sup>201</sup>*

In November 1993, under the leadership of Ven. Cheng Yen, Tzu Chi U.S.A. established its medical outreach free clinic in Alhambra, California, providing Chinese and western medicine, in addition to dental care—that includes two mobile dental units—to the disadvantaged, underprivileged, and uninsured communities of Los Angeles proper. In May, 1997, Tzu Chi U.S.A. founded its second free clinic on Honolulu, Hawai’i, serving the economically disenfranchised indigenous populations of the islands, focusing on providing primary healthcare for school aged children, and free vaccinations. From its base in Honolulu, Tzu Chi extends its medical outreach to the outlying Pacific Islands (e.g. Samoa), just as the Alhambra branch extends its medical services to the migrant Mexican populations of California’s agricultural Central Valley.<sup>202</sup>

<sup>200</sup> See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: The Library of America, 2004). The core of Tocqueville’s idea contends that civil society is the sphere of intermediary organizations standing between the individual and the state.

<sup>201</sup> Ven. Cheng Yen: “Life, Like a Diamond,” 9 April 2010

<sup>202</sup> Buddhist Tzu Chi Free Clinic, Hawaii is located at 100 North Beretania St., Suite 122, Honolulu, HI 96817.

In 1997, Tzu Chi's medical outreach was established in New York City. Tzu Chi's New York mobile free clinic travels around the New York area, delivering and providing basic healthcare to low income families, homeless residents, and the uninsured. Since its founding Tzu Chi's mobile clinic in New York has already served thousands of patients.<sup>203</sup> In 2005, Tzu Chi established a community clinic in South El Monte, CA. Then, again, in 2010, the Tzu Chi Community Clinic at Wilmington, CA was established to offer affordable dental care and acupuncture therapy to the local community.

Ven. Cheng Yen's medical mission started while in Taiwan, whereupon she realized that the primary cause of people's suffering stems from the lack of adequate healthcare and inability to cultivate and sustain healthy living. It was one incident in particular, that motivated her to vow, to provide healthcare for the residents in the rural county of Hualien, in eastern Taiwan, wherein she witness a woman turned away from a hospital, after traveling several hours, because she was uninsured. Ven. Cheng Yen's vision has made its way to America, and the spirit of assisting the uninsured poor remains just as strong, all the while upholding Ven. Cheng Yen's position of non-partisanship and political dispassion. In Taiwan, Ven. Cheng Yen has taken a very steadfast apolitical non-partisan position, which secures and ensures her trust among the people. Therefore, any volunteer or follower who becomes politically active, or run for political office, or is employed by a political party is required to resign as a Tzu Chi worker. Furthermore, Ven. Cheng Yen does not permit the use of Tzu Chi's logo, or the likeness of her image in any political campaigns, be it implicit or explicit.<sup>204</sup> Tzu Chi's apolitical stance plays itself out in America as well.

In America, various forms of financial resources are accessible through the local, state, and federal governments to support civic service groups, albeit minimal, however, Tzu Chi U.S.A. has refused to apply and or receive such government funding, exclusively relying

<sup>203</sup> See the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation's website, [www.tzuchimedicalfoundation.org](http://www.tzuchimedicalfoundation.org) (accessed July 2, 2012). Tzu Chi's free clinic medical mission outreach in other countries: Canada established in October, 1996; the Philippines in December, 2001; Brazil in 1996; Indonesia in 1995; Vietnam in 1998; Japan in 2001; and mainland China in 1999.

<sup>204</sup> Guo Chengtian, "Taiwan de minzhu yu zongjiao," *Yazhou zhengjiao guanxi / Religion and Politics in Asia* (Taipei: Weibo Wenhua Chubanshe, 2003), 114.

on private fundraising and donations, fearing that their services to those most in need may be compromised due to limitations and restrictions which may accompany such funds. For instance, in California, as well as New York, Tzu Chi serves many new immigrant Americans, some legal, some not, hence, accepting government funding means they may have to restrict themselves from serving residents in need, which they compassionately refuse to do.<sup>205</sup> Recent developments over immigration legislation present Tzu Chi U.S.A.'s medical relief with new challenges, namely the proposal for immigration reform which condemns both the immigrants as well as those who assist them.<sup>206</sup> Will Tzu Chi U.S.A. be able to continue providing health care to new immigrants without proper documentation, or will they obey the discriminatory immigration law if it should become a reality?

Serving the new immigrant communities comes with linguistic challenges, for example, Compassion Relief's medical outreach in the Central Valley of California, serves mainly migrants farm workers who speak Mixtec (or Mixteca), rather than Spanish, although possessing a working knowledge of Spanish.<sup>207</sup> Tzu Chi's volunteers, although primarily Taiwanese Americans, for whom Mandarin Chinese and or Taiwanese is their mother language, either start to learn Spanish themselves, or seek out volunteers who are capable of communicating in both Spanish and Chinese or English. At times, there is a domino relay translation among English, Chinese, and Spanish, if they are lucky enough to have two volunteers—one bilingual in Chinese and English, the other Spanish and English. Besides English, Mixtec, or Spanish speaking new immigrant Americans, Tzu Chi U.S.A. also serves diverse immigrant-Chinese communities for whom Cantonese is their primary language of communication.

Bilingual Tzu Chi volunteers are few and precious as they are at the forefront of assisting non-English speaking new Chinese Americans, be they Mandarin, Cantonese, or Taiwanese speakers.

<sup>205</sup> Lee, "Chinese Religions in North America," 252-263.

<sup>206</sup> See the article "Immigration fight looms in Senate" at the CNN website, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/03/28/immigration/index.html> (access July 2, 2012).

<sup>207</sup> The Mixtec (or Mixteca) are indigenous people centered in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. Some Mixtecan languages are called by names other than Mixtec, particularly Cuicatec (Cuicateco), and Triqui (or Trique).

Bilingual Tzu Chi volunteers assist patients in hospitals who do not have immediate family or friends to assist them upon entering the hospital as a result of an emergency or other medical complication. Unable to communicate with the healthcare staff, Tzu Chi volunteers are crucial to both the patients and medical personnel who treat them. Tzu Chi volunteers also visit patients, while hospitalized who have no family or friends, and if the situation deems it necessary, they will recite the Guanyin Sutra as a healing technique or to prepare them for the next stage of *samsara*.<sup>208</sup>

Ven. Cheng Yen created a bone marrow bank in Taiwan, in response to the plea of a young lady named Win Wen-Ling, who discovered she had leukemia while studying for her doctoral degree at Ohio State University.<sup>209</sup> Unable to find a matching donor in the United States she returned to Taiwan, and upon realizing that Taiwan lacked any organized bone marrow registry, she wanted to establish one. In order to do so, she would need someone who people can trust, hence, she turned to Ven. Cheng Yen, to beseeched her support. After thoughtful deliberation, and ensured that donors themselves will not be harmed in the process, Ven. Cheng Yen publicly announced in 1994 her endorsement of a bone marrow bank in Taiwan, and encouraged volunteers and members to organize blood drives in their neighborhood throughout the island.

Within two years, Tzu Chi's Bone Marrow Bank became one of the major bone marrow bank in East Asia. Today, Tzu Chi's Bone Marrow Bank is connected to those of other countries, making it more efficient, and hence, crossing national, as well as, potential ethnic and racial boundaries.<sup>210</sup> Today, there are 354,549 donors registered with Tzu Chi; and nearly 3000 transplants have been performed.<sup>211</sup> It is here, that notions of race and ethnicity potentially become dissolved. For instance, a German man, who had successfully

<sup>208</sup> The reference to the Guanyin sutra is the chapter in the *Lotus Sutra* entitled "Guansiyin busa pumen-pin" (The Universal Gateway of the bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds). See *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 298-306.

<sup>209</sup> Her Rey-Sheng, *Great Love as a Running Water: Witnessing of the Development of Marrow Transplantation* (Taipei: Jing Si Publications Company, 2006), 9.

<sup>210</sup> Tzu Chi's Bone Marrow registry is linked to the U.S. National Marrow Donor Program, Japan and Germany's Bone Marrow Banks.

<sup>211</sup> See the Buddhist Tzu Chi Stem Cells Center web page, <http://tw.tzuchi.org/btccsc/english> (accessed July 2, 2012).



received a bone marrow donation from Tzu Chi, expressed his feelings of gratitude and desires to visit Taiwan, coupled with the fact that he never thought he shared the same blood with “Asians.”<sup>212</sup> Consequently, people who receive benefit from Tzu Chi’s bone marrow registry are not limited to one ethnic group - the Chinese or Chinese Americans - although it was established to meet their needs, which has great implications for changes in America’s inter-ethnic and inter-racial dialogue, because racial ideologies may slowly be deconstructed at the level of flesh-and-bone. For example, non-Chinese recipients of successful bone marrow transplantation - as illustrated by the above example of the German man - may arrive at a new understanding of race and ethnicity when they discover that they had received bone marrow from a non-white donor, and vice versa.

## Tzu Chi’s Educational Programs

*“In Tzu Chi, as we walk our path, we are also continuing to pave the path for others, so that they may join us on our journey. This is important because we should not only care about our own enlightenment, but should vow to help all living beings to enlightenment. Without wisdom and insight, it will be hard to continue with this.”*<sup>213</sup>

Tzu Chi’s educational mission started after its disaster and medical relief programs were firmly in order. To this end, they have built elementary, junior high, and high schools throughout Taiwan, in addition to a university located in Hualien, which houses a graduate school of nursing. Tzu Chi has also established schools in the United States. Since 1996, Tzu Chi has established 20 Chinese schools across the United States. These schools emphasize humanitarianism and character building in their educational curriculum. Moreover, they offer Mandarin language and Chinese culture course. Founded in 1996, the Hawaii Tzu Chi Academy has become the largest local Chinese school in Honolulu. “Currently, there are 11 classes, with 100 students (ages between 4-15), 13 teachers, 10 staff members, and numerous volunteers who

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<sup>212</sup> Her, 93.

<sup>213</sup> Ven. Cheng Yen: “Inner Practice for the Tzu Chi Path,” September 2, 2010



serve as room mothers/sisters/brothers to assist the teachers and students in class, or as room fathers to direct traffic thus assuring safety on campus.”<sup>214</sup> Besides Tzu Chi schools, Tzu Chi U.S.A. established many other educational programs, such as “Everybody Read” in addition to a newly establish scholarship foundation to assist economically disadvantage high school students as they enter college.

Although “Everybody Read” is an educational program, it is simultaneously an implicit interfaith activity as well. Volunteers, from any and all religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, are all welcome to participate. They meet once a month at a local elementary school, providing reading lessons, storytelling, arts and crafts, and gifts for elementary school students in disadvantage inner-city public schools. The majority of “Everybody Read” volunteers are younger generation Taiwanese Americans, because they are bilingual in both English and Chinese, unlike their parents and grandparents, for whom English is not yet a primary language of communication. A self-described Catholic Latina Tzu Chi volunteer at “Everybody Read” reflects on her experiences and says:

I was made aware of Tzu Chi through a youth group friend who introduced me to the “Everybody Read” Tzu Chi staff. She learned of it through an online volunteer website. I’ve volunteered with the “Everybody Read” for about half a year before I moved away. I am a late teen Catholic (sorry, I’m not Buddhist or Daoist) who enjoys volunteering and experiencing new things. Even though my time conniving with them was short, I enjoyed every last minute. They were a pleasure to volunteer with, and have a positive attitude towards others. They are the nicest people I’ve met and they made me feel welcomed even though I wasn’t part of their religion. They are open for anyone who is searching for a little help. While volunteering they were very compassionate and patient towards the children, their patience made the kids enjoy them as much as I did.<sup>215</sup>

<sup>214</sup> See the Hawaii Tzu Chi Academy (accessed July 2, 2012).

<sup>215</sup> Interview, March 8, 2006.

Our self-identified Catholic Latina's reflection highlights Tzu Chi's interfaith consciousness and inclusive approach to civic work in the American public sphere. Another example comes from a self-identified bilingual "Asian mother" who expressed:

I am an Asian mother who have volunteered with Tzu Chi approximately two years or so. The program I am currently actively participating is the "Everybody Read" program. I also join them during the year-end delivery of goods and gift cards to the needy, and have visited with patients in the "New Start Home" program. Some memorable experiences I have had while volunteering would be receiving a big hug from a small girl and hearing her say 'Thank you and I will miss you' after the "Everybody Read" program. I also witness how several needy families survive in cramped living spaces, watched patients in the "New Start Home" program cope with their limited ability to move. Tzu Chi is a great organization... It believes in the equality of all beings and the Buddha-nature potential in every person...

The motivation to volunteer expressed by the aforementioned ladies are common to all Tzu Chi's volunteers, however, the personal profile and linguistic abilities are markedly different because the majority of Tzu Chi volunteers are middle aged, and or semi-retired or retired Taiwanese/Chinese housewives and mothers for whom English is not a viable language of communication.<sup>216</sup>

Besides educational programming such as "Everybody Read" Compassion Relief U.S.A. has been active in community fairs, both interfaith and secular. For instance, each year, the Santa Anita community holds a back-to-school fair and here, Tzu Chi provides new clothes, shoes, and school supplies for economically disadvantaged children, catching the attention of the local press and evening news.<sup>217</sup> Recently, Tzu Chi established a scholarship foundation to support economically disadvantaged high school students throughout the U.S., moreover, they continue to sidestep

<sup>216</sup> Julia C. Huang and Robert P. Weller, "Merit and Mothering: Women and Social Welfare in Taiwanese Buddhism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57.2 (May, 1998), 3.

<sup>217</sup> I first saw Tzu Chi on the Channel 4 evening news, participating in the Santa Anita community fair, during the summer of 2004.

restrictions, by making the eligibility requirements vague, hence, not restricting their scholarship to “legal residents” alone, as is state and federal financial aid.<sup>218</sup>

## Tzu Chi's Cultural Outreach and Acculturation

*“With the spirit of Great Love, may our volunteers sow seeds of goodness in the wounded land. May all the seeds sprout and flourish and further give rise to countless other seeds of goodness.”*<sup>219</sup>

Similar to other modern large scale transnational lay Buddhist groups,<sup>220</sup> Tzu Chi makes full use of in-house publishing facilities, radio and television broadcasting, video and internet conferencing, and the use of the internet to maintain close contact with followers around the globe. Publications of books, magazines, and journals, for example, *Tzu Chi Shijie* 慈濟世界 (Tzu Chi World) or *Tzu Chi Quarterly – Buddhism in Action*, are available in simplified and or traditional Chinese, English, Spanish, Japanese, and German.<sup>221</sup> In 1995 Tzu Chi founded Da'ai 大愛, Great Love, television and radio, as a way to reach people worldwide, purifying TV culture, constantly reminding followers of their successes, and work that still needs to be done, in addition to hearing and seeing Ven. Cheng Yen's daily *dharma* lessons, in which she transitions, smoothly, between Taiwanese and Mandarin.<sup>222</sup> Da'ai's dramas are series of shows that are didactic, providing examples of individual heroism, filial piety,

<sup>218</sup> Tzu Chi Scholars 2012 application. Beside academic excellence and graduating high school senior requirements, they require demonstration of financial need, and intent to enroll in an accredited U.S. college full-time, with no mention of “legal” residency common to other scholarship programs in the U.S. See Tzu Chi Scholars 2012 web page (accessed July 2, 2012).

<sup>219</sup> Ven. Cheng Yen: “The Most Beautiful Scenes of Life,” 27 May 2010

<sup>220</sup> Taiwan based Foguang Shan, Dharma Drum Mountain, etc.

<sup>221</sup> English books Published by Tzu Chi: Books on Ven. Cheng Yen's teachings including the following examples: *Still Thoughts*, Volume One and Two, *Enveloping the World with Great Love*, *Great Love across the Taiwan Straits*, *The Thirty-Seven Principles of Enlightenment*, *People Have Twenty Difficulties*, *The Sutra of the Bodhisattva's Eight Realizations*, *Overcoming the Ten Evil Forces*, *Three Ways to the Pure Land*, *The Master Tells Stories*, Volume One and Two, *Rebirth – Transformation in Tzu Chi*, *Inspiring Aphorisms—The Phrase that Benefits Me Most*. *Stille Gedanken*, the German translation of *Still Thoughts*, Volume One and Two are also available. In addition, Tzu Chi publishes a series of children's books, for instance, *A Child's Heart Reflects the Moon*, *The Little Monk Called “Amo”*, and so on.

<sup>222</sup> See Da Ai Television web page, <http://en.newdaai.tv/> (accessed July 2, 2012).

compassion, and humility, all the while reinforcing the importance of Tzu Chi's charity and relief work, and now, made available via the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS), in the Bay Area, Los Angeles Area, New York Area, and Houston Area, and other cable networks around the world, in addition to live online video streaming. While conducting field research, one expatriate shared with me that she watches *Da'ai* every afternoon, after her morning recitations of sutras, commenting that one day, she would like to visit Tzu Chi's headquarter in Hualien, Taiwan.

Tzu Chi has been active, since it transplanted itself on American soil, assiduously endeavoring to be inclusive, although difficult because the majority of their staff and or volunteers are non-native English speakers, for whom, Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese are their primary or secondary languages. Even so, Tzu Chi takes care to serve their larger communities through their social services and energetic participation in American holidays, for instance, during Thanksgiving - they provide baskets of essential holiday goodies, during Christmas - gifts and foods, to local economically underprivileged residents, all the while, serving the diverse ethnically Chinese immigrant communities. Beyond cultural, medical, and educational outreach and programming, Tzu Chi is active in local interfaith community activities as well.

Tzu Chi takes every opportunity to be involved in interfaith activities and community meetings. They also welcome, open heartedly, request from other religious groups who need assistance to help their followers. For instance, if a Christian church refers someone who needs money, for rent or food, over to Tzu Chi, they do not hesitate in receiving and assisting them. Tzu Chi realizes that it is located in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious environment, in Taiwan and throughout the world, hence disregards religious affiliation in its outreach programs, because all people are capable of meeting with hard times, and in need of compassionate aid.

## Tzu Chi's Disaster Relief

*“ When we give with a heart of willingness and joy, when we overcome all problems to provide support and comfort to the suffering, a resonance of love will naturally be generated.”*<sup>223</sup>

Tzu Chi's international outreach started in 1984 with overseas Taiwanese expatriates. From a humble beginning of 30 female followers, Tzu Chi now claims ten million members worldwide, with branches in 50 countries, and to date, has implemented rescue and relief work in over 70 countries. In the U.S. alone, there are more than 80 Tzu Chi branches / chapters, including several free health and dental clinics. Tzu Chi's global relief workers respond to victims of natural as well as human caused disasters in South and Southeast Asia following the December 26, 2004 earthquake and Tsunamis, in addition to Afghanistan, Iran, El Salvador, Haiti, and the U.S. Tzu Chi U.S.A. became a national player in relief work following the terrorist attack of 9/11, and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that shattered the gulf coast.

While chaos and terror filled the minds and hearts of all Americans immediately after the terrorist attack of 9/11, Tzu Chi's New York office joined forces with the American Red Cross, at ground zero, to provide emergency medical aid. Tzu Chi's medical volunteers, Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA),<sup>224</sup> quickly mobilized in the hours after the morning of 9/11 ready to assist the injured. Beyond the immediate large scale relief efforts, Tzu Chi also paid attention to the minor details of post-9/11 relief, for instance, providing food and water to rescue workers. Tzu Chi U.S.A. has committed itself to long term recovery efforts, continuing to financially assist working class families—factory and restaurant laborers—survive, day by day. Jarcy Zee documents Jackson Chen's relief work, immediately after the 9/11 attack, noting, “ That evening, he and the other Tzu Chi volunteers began their relief efforts by supplying more than two hundred sets of pillows and

<sup>223</sup> Ven. Cheng Yen: “The Most Beautiful Scenes of Life,” 27 May 2010

<sup>224</sup> TIMA was founded in 1996 by a group of healthcare professionals under the auspices of Tzu Chi, and relies solely on donations and funding raising activities. TIMA provides the highest possible quality healthcare to individuals around the world who are in need of medical attention at minimal or no cost to the patient. Currently, TIMA has 17 branch offices worldwide in 9 countries including: Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines, United States, Paraguay, and Brazil.

blankets to stranded victims sleeping on bare cots set by the Red Cross in Weehawken, New Jersey.”<sup>225</sup> Tzu Chi U.S.A. relief workers faced resistance in their efforts to contribute because “the U.S. government and most other organizations did not know about Tzu Chi.”<sup>226</sup> As such, Tzu Chi U.S.A. volunteers relied on the Red Cross and the Salvation Army who provided Tzu Chi U.S.A. relief workers access. To mitigate future problems in their relief effort, “On June 18, 2008, representatives from the American Red Cross and the Tzu Chi Foundation signed a memorandum of understanding at the Tzu Chi Humanities Center in Taipei. The two organizations will combine their respective strengths and cooperate in disaster relief operations, emergency preparedness and response, cross training, and other cooperation actions in the United States.”<sup>227</sup>

Hurricane Katrina was the sixth-strongest, costliest, and deadliest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded in U.S. history. The storm surge caused major damage along the coastlines of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, however, it was damage to the levees separating Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans, Louisiana that flooded roughly 80 percent of the historic city, subsequently causing gargantuan social and public disorder, leaving many people homeless, in addition to extensive injuries, and fatalities. The September 19, 2005 international edition of *Newsweek* conveys America’s racial and economic inequality depicting an African American baby with tears streaming down her cheeks, entitled “Poverty, Race, and Katrina: Lessons of A National Shame.”<sup>228</sup> Then, Senator Barack Obama, bewailed, “I hope we realize that the people of New Orleans weren’t just abandoned during the hurricane... They were abandoned long ago – to murder and mayhem in the streets, to substandard schools, to dilapidated housing, to inadequate health care, to a pervasive sense of hopelessness.”<sup>229</sup> Better yet, let us call to mind former First Lady Barbara P. Bush’s statement, “So many of the people in the arenas here, you know, were underprivileged anyway. So this is working very well for them,” referring to the crowded 10,000 plus strangers

<sup>225</sup> Jarcy Zee, “9/11: An Indelible Memory”, Tzu Chi USA Journal (Fall 2011), 36.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> See the Tzu Chi Foundation website, [www.us.tzuchi.org](http://www.us.tzuchi.org) (accessed July 2, 2012).

<sup>228</sup> *Newsweek*, international edition, September 19, 2005.

<sup>229</sup> Jonathan Alter, “The Other America,” *Newsweek*, (September 19, 2005), 14.

cramped into the makeshift evacuation center.<sup>230</sup> Not to mention Yahoo News' coverage, which described waterlogged whites as "carrying food" whereas blacks holding food were depicted as "looters."<sup>231</sup>

Let us journey back to April 1992 when a mostly white jury acquitted four white police officers accused in the videotaped beating of African American motorist Rodney King, which instantaneously erupted into a massive inner-city riot whereupon thousands of young African American and Latino males<sup>232</sup> participated in what has often been characterized as a "race riot" in which racial and ethnic tensions turned from a "black v. white" issue, to one of inter-ethnic discontent involving African Americans and Korean Americans. During and after the riots, the cultural misunderstanding and inter-ethnic, inter-racial tensions between African Americans and Korean Americans were of principal concern for the rebuilding of Los Angeles. Post-Katrina offers new fertile ground for increase dialogue between African Americans and Asian Americans, many time viewed as modeled-minority citizens or as "honorary whites" who are sheltered, privileged, and secluded away in their upper-middle class communities. Tzu Chi workers were at the forefront of post-Katrina relief efforts, donating millions of dollars to families and taking into their own homes countless dislocated survivors. At one moment, Tzu Chi volunteers withdrew \$50,000 dollars from their own personal accounts to purchase gift-card and vouchers for families in need because banks were not open. In total, "Tzu Chi U.S.A. mobilized over 1,000 volunteers to distribute emergency cash worth 4.12 million dollars to 22,487 households, or over 58,553 people. A fundraising campaign was held in more than 30 countries to raise funds to assist the disaster survivors."<sup>233</sup> Post-Katrina relief work provides fertile possibility for inter-ethnic and inter-racial solidarity between African Americans, white-Americans, and Asian Americans, as they come into contact with one another, and stereotypes give way to positive experiences, encounters, and memories.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>232</sup> Young white males from outside the district looted as well, but the media mainly showed African Americans and Latinos.

<sup>233</sup> About Tzu Chi, see [www.us.tzuchi.org](http://www.us.tzuchi.org) (accessed July 2, 2012).



## Tzu Chi U.S.A.: American or Global Civil Society?

“Only by transforming the hearts of humanity can our world be saved.”<sup>234</sup>

The new American religious landscape is multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic (racial), hence, American civil society is permeated with such complex characteristic as well. Economic disparity continues to grow and the growing split between the haves and have-nots continue to become more distinct. The high cost of healthcare places many Americans at risk. The possibility of equal access to higher education remains bleak for many American of color, as recent trends in freshmen admission among African Americans may demonstrate, or the perpetual low rate of college admissions or even high school graduation for Cambodian Americans, Lao Americans, and Hmong Americans; or the discriminatory new educational policy that separates native-English students from new immigrant American students from receiving a high school diploma or a certificate based on satisfactory performance on an existing examination. Supporters of this new policy in some school districts of California view it as fair and proper, rewarding students who worked hard and learned their basic three R's (*reading, writing and arithmetic*). On the other hand, opponents see it as another racist policy to disenfranchise new immigrant Americans, ignoring their home language and socio-economic status.

Robert Bellah first coined the term “American civil religion,”<sup>235</sup> albeit overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and Protestant, which has since been a topic of major discussions and critiques.<sup>236</sup> According to Bellah, Americans embrace a common civil religion with certain fundamental beliefs, values, holidays, and rituals, parallel to, or independent of, their chosen religion. In *Beyond Belief*, although Bellah spoke of “religion” generically, contending that “religion” instead of disappearing is again moving into

<sup>234</sup> Ven. Cheng Yen: “A Time of Crisis, A Time for Great Awakening”, 8 March 2011

<sup>235</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religions in America.”

<sup>236</sup> Robert N. Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion*; Gail Gehrig, *American Civil Religion: An Assessment*; Cynthia Toolin, “American Civil Religion from 1789 to 1981: A Content Analysis of Presidential Inaugural Addresses”; and James Treat, ed., *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America*, Vine Deloria, Jr. with an introduction by James Treat.

the center of our cultural preoccupations, to which I like to add, in the guise of “civil society.” Can we rightfully describe Tzu Chi’s socially engaged relief work as a new form of “American civil religion” *a la* Bellah? Will Tzu Chi U.S.A.’s efforts forge a new understanding of race and ethnicity, religious pluralism, and civil society in America, and will it influence how other religious groups, other ethnic-American community, or future new immigrant Americans transplant and “acculturate” themselves into American society and soil? Central to Tzu Chi U.S.A. growing its roots on American society, it must invest in a public relations campaign to increase become a visible part of American civil society.

The post-9/11 atmosphere in America makes their efforts more daunting as American national identity is considered by the majority to be threatened by competing ideologies and theologies of social order.<sup>237</sup> Samuel Huntington argues, these diasporic cum transnational identities are the singular cause of a weakening American national identity.<sup>238</sup> The xenophobic rhetoric in America post-9/11 is a tremendous challenge to Tzu Chi U.S.A.’s continued “civil society” work on American soil. Ironically, the most influential actor in the production and extension of modern globalization processes seems to be unable to negotiate its own byproduct - namely, the process that Michael Kearney calls the “peripheralization of the core.”<sup>239</sup> Accordingly, diversity is seen as the gravest internal peril to American solidarity and identity. Therefore, we must ask: Is Tzu Chi U.S.A. an “internal peril” because it is Buddhist instead of Christian, “yellow” instead of “white”, “minority” instead of “majority”? Here, the transnational characteristics of Tzu Chi manifest itself clearly! Its membership is mainly composed of new-Taiwanese-American immigrants, majority female, and mostly localized in communities where Taiwanese Americans have settled. Although Tzu Chi shares the same fundamental goal as Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish civil/religious groups that dominated the American arena in the past, namely helping those in need and bettering the common good of American society. Tzu Chi’s social work is the “public face of

<sup>237</sup> Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity*.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> Michael Kearney, “The Local and the Global: the Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism.”

religion"! It is "public religion" in the public sphere. The critical question is: does Tzu Chi qualify as "American civil religion" or is it "something else"?

On a larger scale, we must ask: Is Tzu Chi's work part of a larger growing "global civil society" based on an emerging reality of global civil action and global inter-connectedness?<sup>240</sup> Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier and Marlies Glasius proposed that "global civil society is about people, organizations, and the values and ideas they represent, but with the major difference that these are, at least in part, located in some transnational arena and not bound or limited by nation-states or local societies."<sup>241</sup> Furthermore, they suggest that global civil society encompass the meaning and practice of human equality in an increasingly unjust world, and provides individuals with means and alternatives to search and develop new forms of civic participation and involvement in a global world.<sup>242</sup> In this way, Tzu Chi U.S.A. is part of a larger emerging "global civil society" which bespeaks its mission of "global compassion" that is not limited by its transnational structure.

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<sup>240</sup> Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier and Marlies Glasius, "Global Civil Society in an Era of Regressive Globalization", 3.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

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