

SECOND INTERNATIONAL INTERFAITH ROUNDTABLE CONFERENCE

Prepared by Dayle Bethel and the editor.

INTRODUCTION

At the First International Roundtable Conference on Religion and Modern Life, which was reported in the March issue of this journal, the participants were unanimous in their desire to meet with Christian missionaries to discuss with them the question of tolerance and missionary attitudes toward indigenous cultures. The following is a very much condensed report of a discussion which took place on September 14, 1963 as a result of this request.

As was noted in the case of the first conference, this too was in the nature of a pilot project intended to discover what problems might arise in connection with such a confrontation, and this report should be regarded in this light. Much was learned from the two conferences which will be useful in the future in conducting more formal and more representative conferences. In spite of its well-recognized limitations, it is believed that the discussion reported below will be of interest to the readers of this journal. Based on experiences at ten roundtable conferences, this was unquestionable the most animated and most interesting.

The participants included two Japanese (a Buddhist and Shintoist), an Indian, Hindu, a Pakistani Muslim, and six Protestant missionaries, all Americans and all ordained. Dr.

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Yoshirō Tamura, of Tōyō University and the International Institute for the Study of Religions, represented Buddhism ; Mr. Kenji Ueda of the Institute for Japanese Classics and Culture, Shinto ; Mr. K. V. R. Jogarao, Hinduism, Mr. A. R. Siddiqi of Pakistan, Islam. The missionary participants were messrs. Morris Wright (Southern Baptist), Richard Merritt (Anglican Episcopal), Norman Nuding (Evangelical Lutheran), Donald Hoke, (The Evangelical Alliance Mission), David Reid (Methodist with the United Church of Christ in Japan), and Dayle Bethel (of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.) The editor acted as chairman.

TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE

Wright : The basic problem before us seems to divide itself into two fundamental areas. The first is. What missionary are you talking about? Different people have different opinions and it would be very difficult to find any one opinion that would represent the views of all missionaries.

A second problem area has to do with our definition of culture. When a missionary comes in contact with a given culture he finds several different kinds of cultural or religious practices. His attitudes toward these practices and his decisions about his relationship to them have important implications for his work and his success as a missionary.

a. There are some practices that can be clearly defined as cultural or traditional. These would be such items as ways of greeting friends, folk songs, folk dances, etc.

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Here the missionary's attitude should be one of sincere appreciation and acceptance, insofar as possible, of these cultural elements. He should avoid any deliberate attempt to change these traditional elements or to introduce elements from his own cultural heritage as an accepted norm for national groups.

b. There are some practices that are not religious in connotation, but which violate the principles of Christian morals. Infanticide and the selling of children into prostitution would be examples. Here the missionary's attitude can be clearly defined. He should not, of course, become involved in a direct, deliberate campaign to change these practices. Rather he will use his influence indirectly to help the nationals who are members of the culture see these practices in a new light.

c. There are some practices in a culture that are clearly religious in their origin and practice. This is when the missionary comes in direct conflict with the religious cult of those among whom he has been sent to work. Here his duty is clear. He is a "called" person, called by God to witness and declare the truth. It will be important for the missionary to be understanding and sympathetic, however, and to appreciate the sincerity of the national's beliefs.

d. There are some religious practices that have become so commonly accepted or so interwoven with folk tradition that delineation of the difference between religion and

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culture become more difficult. The Western Christian tradition of celebrating Christmas and the Japanese traditions related to shrine festivals illustrate this type of problem. The response of different missionaries to this problem varies from the total rejection of participation to partial or complete participation in religious activities of this kind; always, it should be noted, that a sympathetic understanding of the viewpoint of the nationals involved is a key to obtaining any solution to this most difficult problem.

Chairman: I believe there are about 120—30 people in the Southern Baptist Mission in Japan. May I ask what percent of these would agree with the views represented in your statement?

Wright: I would say that 60—70% would find this position generally acceptable. I believe it would represent the main stream.

Chairman: Later on we will want to get down to some pretty specific things — but now I wonder if you would care to comment on this statement? Mr. Merritt.

Mr. Merritt: There is a general disposition within Anglicanism, as I understand it, at least, to be interested in the national culture, especially the aesthetic development of the culture. And I suspect that we would be a little more inclined to appreciate various practices in the Japanese religious-cultural tradition at points where others might hesitate. This interest is a confirmatory interest in that it confirms the

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practice as a beautiful thing in itself. These people are, perhaps without knowing it, letting the Creator God use them and work through them in this particular cultural expression.

There is another aspect of Anglicanism, and we may be a little lazy at this point: it doesn't go into doctrinal points with as much concern as some other Protestant groups do. We probably wouldn't bring up some of the problems that are rather sharply delineated in Mr. Wright's statement.

Chairman: Let me ask this question: What is the most extreme and objectionable attitude which we find in some of our associates? Mr. Nuding, would you give us your reactions to these remarks?

Nuding: In the Lutheran Church there are two main streams: the confessional—which has developed from German sources, and the pietistic—which comes from a Scandinavian background. Now when these groups come to Japan, it is usually the pietistic groups which become very much concerned with this problem, which pick up specific points and emphasize them, write pamphlets and books, and, in extreme cases, make something akin to laws to govern believers. The confessional background, on the other hand, does not tend to do this so much. There is more of a tendency to leave many things up to individual discretion and to the circumstances that would arise in any particular situation.

Chairman: Mr. Hoke, would you care to give your position?

Hoke: I represent what might be called the Reformed or

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Presbyterian stream within the Protestant tradition. The Reformed attitude toward culture has been pretty much as Mr. Wright, and to a degree, Mr. Merritt, have expressed it. The main emphasis is that Jesus Christ is not only a great teacher and prophet but, as we believe, he is our God as well, he is brought into a culture with the preaching of the gospel, and the Christian seeks to make him lord of his cultural environment.

The attitude of the Christian is to identify himself as completely as possible with his culture for the purpose of purifying all immoral elements — by Christian standards — in that culture. The Reformed attitude, then, is to try to find everything good in a culture and to identify oneself with it, but at the same time to bring the Christian message to bear upon those elements of the culture which we feel are morally lacking.

Insofar as possible we ought to let the Christian message and the Christian church grow up and express itself in the environment of a particular culture to the end that it will be most acceptable to those people. To the extent that Christianity has failed to do this, the blame can be laid to its proponents, rather than its message, I think.

One other thing might be added here that is sometimes a basis of misunderstanding. I believe that the Protestant tradition, at least 95% of it, has endeavored to refrain from political action in any country to which it goes. Now, when the people of a given country accept Christianity and then participate in political movements, they do so — not in the name of the church — but as Christian citizens of their

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country. Sometimes misunderstandings arise because Christian missions have been interpreted as political movements. But in the Protestant tradition we have attempted to refrain from that, although there have been some notable and regrettable exceptions.

Reid : My first reaction is that the question of tolerance or intolerance is quite outside the horizon of most missionaries. Most missionaries are absorbed in the general task of witnessing for Christ and, as far as a particular culture is concerned, tend to let the chips fall where they may.

Chairman : Does this mean, then, that you think there is not much attacking or criticizing of the Buddhist or Shinto faiths in Japan by missionaries, in Bible classes or in preaching? In other words, is there no open, overt attack and adverse criticism of indigenous religious practices by missionaries?

Reid : In my experience, no. I don't know of that kind of criticism.

Merritt : This may be a little to one side, and I would like to insert it as a question, but it is my impression that the Japanese clergyman is perhaps stronger and more outspoken in his attack upon certain Japanese customs than the missionary. Very often the missionary would like to see him be a little less severe in his criticisms, to restrain him, or help him to understand what the missionary thinks are values in Japan's culture — more than the pastor seems to.

Wright : I think Mr. Reid's statement is true. But I think that most missionaries are not aware of this conflict, and this is unfortunate. If they were aware of it they could exercise

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more caution and be more effective. Because they are not aware of it, they jump in the pool and start splashing water and they get so busy splashing that they don't have time to look up and see how big the pool is or what kind of a pool it is. With all of this constant activity they have very little time to give thought to these basic issues.

Chairman : Mr. Nuding, what would you say ?

Nuding : I know of very little attack on the culture as such. Perhaps when you find it, it is from the people with the least experience. There may be a few people who came to Japan with some preconceived notions and tend to see things in black and white, and therefore can make their attack rather clear, but when people gain a little experience they find that this isn't a very intelligent approach.

Chairman : Dr. Hoke, do you want to comment ?

Hoke : I would like to divide the subject in this manner. In the groups with which I am associated there is quite outspoken discussion within the body of believers, and they hit some of these things head on. But as far as the evangelistic activities are concerned, I would agree, that while a few of the more immature are a little bit outspoken and crude, nevertheless as a person gets a little older he realizes that, whether he is right or wrong, he won't win any friends by this kind of direct attack. But within the churches themselves there is very often a pointed dealing with the non-Christian religious practices, and the bringing of them under the judgement of Christian scripture.

Chairman : Mr. Bethel, would you care to comment before

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we open up the session to general discussion?

Bethel : One thing has been running through my mind. That is to what extent religion and culture can be separated. It seems to me that religion and religious concepts are an integral part of any given culture. Often when religious ideas or concepts are introduced into a culture, to the extent to which they are accepted, they affect and bring about indirect changes in many different aspects of that culture. For example, the whole idea of individual liberty and the dignity of the individual, which is so characteristically a part of Christian belief, has implications all through the culture, in the family system, in the courtship system, etc. I think we should keep this relationship between religion and culture in mind.

Chairman : Now, if you gentlemen would like to ask any specific questions you can do so at this point.

Siddiqi (Muslim) : On the particular matter of religion and culture, Islam simply divides it into faith and customs. In regard to faith there is no compromise. If there are things which conflict with the faith of Islam, they must be rejected. On the other hand, there are some customs that do not have religious significance, such as the veiling of women, for instance. In such things it is very easy to compromise.

Chairman : Mr. Jogarao, do you have any questions at this point?

Jogarao (Hindu) : I would like to know, what is the aim of Christianity? Every religion has an aim. It cannot be aim-

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less. What is the aim of the Christian religion? That is my first question. Others will follow from it.

Hoke : The aim of Christianity is that we receive the revelation of the One True God, which came through Jesus Christ, and we endeavor to take the knowledge of that One True God to all the world. In coming to know the One True God, one obtains salvation and the forgiveness of sin and thereby the right to heaven.

Jogarao : Is it your conviction that knowing God and attaining salvation can come only through the Christian faith? Isn't that what Jesus said? To quote from his teachings, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me." You all firmly believe that godly salvation is possible only through the Christian faith. Am I right?

Hoke : Yes.

Jogarao : Christianity says that only through Christianity can a man realize God and obtain salvation. Islam teaches the same view. But Hinduism says that God can be realized by any religion. Godly realization, that is the ultimate aim of life.

Now, Christianity is not the only way to achieve this. It can be by Islam ; it can be by Judaism, or any other religion. It is the aim that is most important, not the religion. To realize God, one needn't follow any one particular religion alone. God is omnipotent, omnipresent, everywhere present. So it is up to man to attune himself to God and realize these things. Religion is only a vehicle.

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So we don't say that you can realize God only through the Hindu religion. We say that you can certainly realize God in the Christian faith or the Islamic faith or any other faith which a man may choose. This is the sharp difference between your faith and the Hindu point of view.

We also believe that God has said that "to check evil and to see that order is established, I shall be appearing in different shapes, at different times, to suit different occasions." Our interpretation is that when a particular occasion arose, Jesus appeared as God's manifestation to proclaim to that particular people, when they were going astray, the right way. This is the right way for you. Likewise, Mohammed came, met a need, and passed away. In India also, when the necessity arose, great people have appeared. But the basic message is always the same, that truth is one. Ultimate, basic truth is always the same. This is the basic premise on which Hinduism rests.

So, in summary, you think that only through Christianity can a person realize God. In Hinduism, we feel, we can realize God in Christianity, or Islam, or Hinduism, or in any other religion. *It is the way of thinking that is important, not the religion.*

Chairman: Now let me ask Mr. Ueda this question. There is a general impression that Christian missionaries and Christianity are intolerant. Why is that?

Ueda (Shintoist): I think that the most adverse criticism and severest attacks upon Japanese indigenous religions do not come from the foreign missionaries, but from the Japanese

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clergy who are trying to identify themselves as Christians. In order to be Christians they tend to reject everything Japanese. I thought that this attitude was due to foreign missionaries, but I have found that this is not the case.

I personally welcome your type of missionary work in Japan.

Our only purpose is, I believe, to serve the happiness and better the life of the Japanese people. Religion is not a matter of ideas. It is a matter of action and life practices. So if a person is psychologically mature enough, he can tolerate any type of idea.

Chairman : Mr. Siddiqi, why are Christians considered to be intolerant?

Siddiqi : Because they not only bring the Christian religion, but they also want the people to dress like them, shave like them, and so on. There is another thing that is very objectionable. In general, foreign missionaries are very well-supported by various organizations and foundations and in many cases they tend to misuse their financial support by purchasing converts, so to speak. Then, too, when missionaries come, there tends to come with them, almost automatically, all the vices of Western societies : drinking parties, social dancing, a very close association of men and women in public life, and similar things which are not desirable in Islamic society.

Wright : As I have been able to analyze what you have been saying, it seems that use of missionary money is at the very heart of the problem. It would seem that it is not so much

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the message of the missionary, but the methods which he sometimes uses that are objectionable.

Chairman : Mr. Tamura.

Tamura (Nichiren Buddhist): I think it can be said that Nichiren Buddhism is — in some respects — an intolerant religion. Nichiren said that if the national tradition or culture is not against the universal, wonderful law, then you can follow it. But if the national culture or tradition is against the universal, wonderful law, you should not follow it. For example, if the relation of parents and children interfered with feudalistic affairs or the feudalistic system, he criticized it as being against the universal law. So I think that Nichiren's attitude in regard to intolerance is very political or socialistic, but I dislike a religious movement that attempts to force conversion. I also dislike attempts to connect religious power with national power. Such people become excessively intolerant. Nichiren did not advocate such extreme intolerance. His intolerant attack or criticism was not against individuals but against social evils. In a word, it was the control of things social or national by the universal law.

Ueda : What do you mean by national power?

Tamura : National political power.

Ueda : Are any organizations using that kind of power?

Tamura : Yes, at least one insists that it should become established in this country through national political power.

Hoke : Before Dr. Tamura came, some of us were engaged during the recess in an interesting discussion. Maybe he can

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help us. Why has Sōka Gakkai, in such a short time, been able to capture the enthusiasm and loyalty of such a large number of people, when Christianity hasn't and many other religions haven't? Apparently your type of Nichiren Buddhism hasn't inspired the same kind of loyalty.

Dr. Tamura : I think Sōka Gakkai has caught and built on characteristically Japanese concepts and the situation of the Japanese people, especially the youth of today.

Merritt : Sōka Gakkai, then, builds on the type of thinking which is native or natural to Japan.

Hoke : In a word, what is that type of thinking as distinct from the occident?

Dr. Tamura : Two important characteristics of the Japanese people are ancestor worship and a deep concern for present benefits in this world.

Merritt : Is that what you mean by *goriyaku*? If you are faithful to the ancestors it will bring benefits or be beneficial for the individual?

Hoke : Is this, then, a matter of the content of the faith that is so shaped as to fit the Japanese mind and situation, or is the content of faith there and presented in such a way as to fit the Japanese situation?

Dr. Tamura : I think the Japanese situation of today is that the Japanese people, especially Japanese youth, have lost their convictions and spiritual certainty. Sōka Gakkai's strong method of promotion has captured their minds.

Hoke : Let me recapitulate what you have said. You feel,

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then, that the appeal of Sōka Gakkai — this way of thinking which Christianity has failed to capture — is due first of all to ancestor worship and, secondly, to material benefits, the self-centered approach.

Let me ask one further question. Does Sōka Gakkai appeal to pure ancestor worship or does it appeal to the ancestors as they symbolize the Japanese national spirit?

Dr. Tamura : To me ancestor worship is a kind of fundamental folk belief of the Japanese people. It is a kind of animism, for it is said that we should worship and comfort the souls of ancestors, lest they should curse us. Therefore, this is not patriotism based on a national spirit. On the other hand, nationalism is also a factor in the appeal of Sōka Gakkai, but it is not based on ancestor worship.

Ueda : Is there really a nationalistic emphasis in Sōka Gakkai? I don't think so, because they engage in missionary work.

Dr. Tamura : Then what do you think about the Sōka Gakkai insistence that we should establish a Sōka Gakkai religious state by national power, by the so-called *kokuritsu kaidan* (officially established ordination platform)?

Chairman : The question would be whether the platform becomes more than merely established. Mr. Ueda's question, I think, is very pertinent. It is this: Is the proposed ordination center at Mt. Fuji, merely the center for Japanese Buddhism, or does this become the center for a universal faith?

Dr. Tamura : Of course, they insist that people from all over the world should come to Mt. Fuji.

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Chairman : The time allotted for this discussion is nearly up.

I would like to devote a few minutes at this point to a consideration of what we might do in the future in these interfaith roundtable discussions. I have come to the conclusion that unless a person has strong personal convictions he cannot really be tolerant. He can be indifferent ; but he can be tolerant only when he has strong convictions. Therefore the problem becomes the way in which a person expresses his convictions without violating the principle of tolerance.

Hoke : I would suggest that one question which might profitably be discussed is the point at which given religions are tolerant and where they are intolerant. A clear definition in this regard would be an excellent launching point from which to discuss intolerance.

Chairman : These are the kinds of questions I think we ought to raise. Another example, and a case in point, is the assumption of Shrine Shinto that everyone should naturally participate in a Shinto ceremony, and that not to participate is a sign of intolerance or exclusiveness. In effect, in such situations, the Christian or the Moslem is being asked to violate a fundamental principle of his faith. Ultimately this comes down to a question of whether a person has a right to convictions. Does having respect for the traditions and practices of a country mean that a person must violate his own convictions ?

Well, our time is up, gentlemen ; thank you for your participation.