If we love Christ, we want Him to be understood and loved by all people of whatever background and culture – especially since we know that this is Christ's wish.

If we love people, we want them to meet Christ, since we are convinced that for all men there is no more felicitous encounter possible than precisely the encounter with Jesus, God's grace in person.

This has undoubtedly been the fundamental motivation of all missioners of whatever age or generation. So, it might seem that all questions with regard to the Christ encounter must have been asked and been given some more or less satisfying answer in the past. Still – quite apart from the fact that "eternal questions" never find an "eternal answer" but have to be asked anew by each new generation of struggling humankind – we have the impression today that our question, "Christ and the other religions", has never been asked (except maybe by a few prophetic individuals) in the sense we ask it at present.

I cannot treat this question here, but the title of a recent book by John B. Cobb, Christ in a Pluralistic Age1 gives a good idea of the problem we are faced with: we can no longer live our Christian life, our relationship with Christ, in an authentic way without existential recognition of the fact that other cultures exist with their own religions and saving figures.

This may serve to remind us that the question which the present Japan Missionary Bulletin confronts us with can no longer be a question purely in the third person: a question which affects "the (non-Christian) Japanese", and which concerns us only as far as our missionary methods go. It should rightly become our own question, one that affects our own answer when Christ asks us: "Whom do you say that I am?"

This article wants to present some missionary reflections about Christ's image in Japan, without any pretensions of completeness or thoroughness. The importance of the subject for us, missionaries in Japan, does not need belaboring, I hope, so that I can immediately delineate the scope of these scribblings. I do not directly ask the question: How does Jesus, in fact, appear to Japanese eyes? Sociological research, analysis of literature, etc., will have to clarify this important question for us. Instead, I take a more roundabout way: I want to have a look at some elements of the Japanese situation and especially of Japanese religiosity, which undoubtedly influence the Christ image. And when I say "Japanese religiosity", I single out the Buddhist ingredient in it for consideration, for no other reason than my own incompetence in other fields. Still – leaving aside the question of the relative importance of the Buddhist element

in the religious make-up of the Japanese in general — when it comes to the Christ figure in its totality, there probably are no stronger points of reference in Japanese religiosity than precisely the figures of the Buddha(s) and Bodhisattvas.

When reflecting on the problem of Christ’s image in Japan, we missionaries can, of course, never take a purely scientific attitude, and should never lose sight of the normative questions: How does Christ want to appear to the Japanese? Could it not be that the image of Christ which we represent in Japan often prevents Christ from appearing in the way He himself would want to appear?

Christ, the “Foreigner”

Our first reflection might go to Christ the non-evident. The French Catholic thinker, Jean Guittion, remarks that Jesus is “the One who breaks time into two parts around Himself, creating in back of Himself an absolute past, and in front of Himself an indefinite future, thereby occupying that human time with such a force that... it would be foolish to expect or even to conceive of a new Jesus or a super-Jesus.” The second part of this sentence will come into the picture later on, but now our attention goes to the first part; and we could remark that — unfortunately, at least humanly speaking — Jesus (or rather the history of Christianity) has also, de facto, divided human space into two parts: so-called “Christendom” and the rest of the world. That Christendom may be on the way out right now, but it is still true that “the Westerner breathes Christian oxygen,” so that for him, if he is a seeker of truth at all, the answer to Jesus comes natural: “Lord, to whom else could we go?” (Jn. 6:68). In that way it is perfectly natural for the same J. Guittion to write: “If ever one knew that a semblance of a serious experience on the mystery of human life had been made somewhere, he should try everything to get to know about it. Now, apart from the case of Jesus, I do not see in the past a single appearance even of an experience made on the underside of being, on that mystery which is behind me.”

We could say that, when it comes to the mystery of life or even to spirituality, Christ, until very recently, was a pervading presence in the West without any serious rival claim at all. Not so, of course in the East. Here, the Buddha is a concurrent presence, and moreover a presence much more pervading, evident, and familiar. For indeed, in Japan, Christ is not only not evident but still is, up to a point, a gaijin (a foreigner). For the Greeks and Romans, Jesus was, presumably, primarily a Jew. Not any more in Western consciousness: Jesus has long become “one of us.” In a queer half-parallel, Jesus is not really a Jew for the Japanese either, but a “Westerner”, somebody appearing in the midst of Western culture. The West may have become a kind of screen, hiding the “naked” Christ from view and preventing the Japanese from feeling familiar with Him. Father J. Spae aptly remarks, in this connection, that “it rarely does any good to point out that the founder of Christianity was born in Asia, or at least on the dividing line between East and West,” and he adds: “there is a xenophobia at the heart of Japan’s xenophilia for Christ...”

The appeal of the Buddha figure

Turning now to the Buddhist element in Japanese religiosity, our question could take several forms. To what extent do we find there elements of the religious dimension of Christ? Are there points in that tradition which “pave the way” for Christ, and others that might make people resist the Christ figure or misinterpret it? How can we use these points, or avoid the dangers which they represent in our speaking about Christ? Etc., etc. However, we can only think here of picking up a few of the many threads, and of treating them in a very tentative and provisional way.

“Roughly speaking, the role of the Buddha is comparable to that of Jesus, the Christ, in Christianity...” Not only is the Buddha the supreme Teacher of Truth... but he is the supreme example of Perfect Manhood... Further, there is no doubt that the stories of the Buddha’s earthly life and the presence of his image give to “Buddha” the quality of a personalized center for religious devotion, even almost adoration.” The Buddha has certainly been, for many centuries already, a familiar presence — a presence more familiar than awe-inspiring, more motherly than fatherly, no doubt — in the life of the Japanese people. And I presume that, when a Japanese hears about Christ, he quite naturally compares Christ with the Buddha. I do not mean here a conscious or systematic comparison of two “comparable quantities”, since on that level one rather tends to leave each religion in its own “compartment”. I do mean a rather unconscious measuring of a “new” image against long familiar patterns and standards. If this is true, it becomes important for us to know about the Buddha image of the “average Japanese”, and about the traits which make the Buddha figure attractive to him.

I have the impression — which I cannot really substantiate as yet — that in Japan (and probably also in other “Buddhist countries”, be it in different proportions) the attractiveness of the Buddha consists in a combination of two rather contrasting elements. Let us call these two elements by the traditional names of Wisdom and Compassion. The “Buddha of the Way”, the ideal man who gained victory over himself by unrelenting and many effort, developed a spiritual method and came to unshakable serenity and unquestionable power over, or at least independence from, all (material and other) vicissitudes of life, certainly appeals to the “heroic streak” in the Japanese character. We may make a remark, in passing here, that Christ, who is Himself “the Way”, does not appear to be providing a way in the sense of a spiritual method or even a model of systematic struggle with the self. Christ is not a guru figure, and
certain Japanese may miss that trait in Christ.

This side of the Buddha figure may effectively influence only a small portion of the Japanese population; still, it fits too well the recognized yamato-damashii self-image to be cavalierly overlooked. Nevertheless, the second, more feminine, feature, “the Buddha of infinite Compassion,” appears to dominate the Japanese scene and to account for the lion’s share of the Buddha’s attractiveness. I like to think that, on this point, the Buddha figure came to fill a gap in the Japanese religious world. Shinto, with its celebration of life and its community-directedness, does not seem to offer too much refuge to the person overcome by personal nayami — things which befall people even in “the benign climes of the land of the gods.” Let us remark that the adjective, “infinite,” here is not merely a figure of speech, but must be understood in the most literal sense as “extreme, without any boundaries.” Before it, the line between good and evil completely disappears. The tales of the Buddha (or Bodhisattva) taking the shape of a woman to console a lonely man may be spurious, but they are certainly evocative of a real mentality. Before this compassionate Buddha also, the personal responsibility of the man who has to accept the effects of his deeds, tends to fall away. How much this can be connected with the Japanese sense of amae (dependency) I prefer to leave to others to decide.

In comparison, Jesus, the figure of mercy in the West, almost appears as a disciplinarian. No matter how strongly He wants to forgive our sins and desires our salvation, by presenting the possibility of eternal damnation, He finally leaves the responsibility of our salvation to ourselves. And moreover, He never ceases to present a high moral ideal. The poet, Oki Atsuo, tells how He who received baptism once but then became estranged from Christianity: “Up to the moment of baptism everything is fine but, you see, I smoke and drink, and my amorous and other drives are very strong, as is often the case with poets. Therefore, I cannot stand the strictness of the rules of Church-oriented Christianity. Jesus Christ is extremely noble and beautiful and, of course, I still revere Him and long for Him, but I cannot follow that nobility and beauty. . . . Christ negates human nature, the human condition. . . .” On this provocative but certainly not exceptional text many comments could be made, and it is easy enough to point out that Oki is evidently the victim of a wrong image of Christ projected by the legalistic moralism of several Christian Churches (not excluding the Catholic Church, although in this case the stress on smoking and drinking has a distinctive Protestant flavor) — but they are certainly evocative of a real mentality. Before this compassionate Buddha also, the personal responsibility of the man who has to accept the effects of his deeds, tends to fall away. How much this can be connected with the Japanese sense of amae (dependency) I prefer to leave to others to decide.

In connection with this Buddha image, several conclusions could be drawn already for our catechetics, but I have to leave that work to the reader. I will only say this: I believe that the New Testament blend of personal responsibility with the freedom of the children of God is not only unique in itself but, if rightly presented, is attractive to the Japanese and can make a very positive contribution to the Japanese religious scene.

6 Oki Atsuo, in: Shinran, Tokyo, 1958, pp. 53-54.
7 It could be said that precisely against this image Endo Shisaku is waging a one-man crusade.

### Appealing traits of the Christ figure

Approaching our question now from the opposite side, it would be good for us to know which are the traits in the Christ figure (and the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth) which the Japanese Buddhist is ready, precisely because of his Buddhist background, to love immediately or, on the contrary, to be shocked by and to reject out of hand. Although each of us has some experience and developed a certain feeling in this matter, a more systematic study of how Jesus is spoken of in Buddhist literature, for example, would be of great profit to us. Here are only a few indications. Last year a certain Catholic urban church proudly displayed on its bulletin board along the street the text of Matthew 6:20, in Japanese calligraphy but in the version: “Jibu no tame ni Ten ni takara o tsuminasai.” I do not feel competent to judge about the best way of rendering this Jesus word into Japanese, but I cannot but feel that in this presentation of a Gospel word out of context the accent comes to lie heavily and unduly on the “for yourself” (much more heavily than in any Western translation I know of), and that a Buddhist is easily shocked — and rightly so — by such a concentration on the self. How many times do we ourselves commit similar bunglers without even knowing it?

We all know how the Japanese love Christ’s nearness to nature. His stress on the sincerity of heart, His mercifulness to sinner and underdog, His presentation of the God of love, “in contrast to the God of justice, of judgment and revenge as revealed in the Old Testament.” And those of us who happen to have browsed in some Buddhist-inspired literature will have noticed that Christ’s occasional paradoxical sayings are often quoted, as well as those words that stress the necessity of renouncing the self. Another often-quoted Jesus word is: “. . . so that you may be the sons of your heavenly Father; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and the good and He pours rain upon the just and the unjust.” (Mt. 5:45) Here, God’s “indifference” is appreciated, or the idea is found that, on the absolute spiritual level, all dichotomies — especially that of good and evil — are transcended.

If Buddhists feel such an affinity to many features of the Jesus figure, it is not surprising to hear Ikeda Daisaku call Jesus a bodhisattva. Indeed, D.T. Suzuki declares: “Perceiving an incarnation of the Dharma-kaya in every spiritual leader regardless of his nationality and professed creed, Mahayanaists recognize a Buddha in Socrates, Mohammed, Jesus, Francis of Assisi, Confucius, Laotze, and many others.” So, in a sense, Jesus is “taken in” by Japanese Buddhism.
This, however, could prove to be a mixed blessing, for the adopted Jesus is, of course, the "acceptable" Jesus figure, mostly made up of the "agreeable features" sketched above and deprived of his "scandalous traits."

**Christ's less appealing features**

Of these traits of the Christ figure that are less acceptable to Japanese Buddhists, we now have to say a word. Above, we mentioned Christ's stress on personal responsibility, and it has often been pointed out that the bloody figure of the crucified Jesus is shocking as the exact antipode of the serene Buddha figure. After having explained that Christ does not call Himself God in so many words, but nevertheless claims rights and powers that in Judaism were clearly considered as divine prerogatives, Jean Guitton says: "What, to the reader without faith, causes a certain unease and irritation in the Gospel, is surely, besides the miracle stories, these extreme pretensions or claims, hard as they are to reconcile with mental balance."13 J. Guitton is, of course, thinking here of the Western non-believer but, *mutatis mutandis*, it could be applied to the Japanese Buddhist also. In what sense? Tentatively, I would say: What shocks the Japanese Buddhist is not so much the claim of a far-reaching identity with the Absolute, "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10, 30) — that identification is also present in the Mahāyāna Buddha figure14 — but rather the fact of claiming that identity in person and for one's person only. In order to make this a little clearer, let us try a short analysis.

There is, first, the fact that Jesus puts Himself in the center of the economy of salvation which He announced, in a way the Buddha never does. Romano Guardini explicitly treats the difference between Jesus and the Buddha in this respect in his *The Essence of Christianity*.15 (wherein he forcefully defends the thesis that the essence and distinctive characteristic of Christianity can not be sought anywhere but precisely in the person of Jesus Christ). While "the person of the Buddha is not situated in the religiously essential," but only carries and represents it, "the living motive in the Christian religious attitude is Jesus himself."16 The decisive salvific moment now is Christ himself. Neither His doctrine, nor His example, nor the power of God working through Him, but

...ments hereby: "The Mahāyāna is indeed in principle as eclectic as Hinduism, and could easily assimilate to itself any foreign religious system as a new sect." This, however, might be an exaggeration. While Hinduism permits itself the whole gamut from monism to monothemism, monotheism does not seem to be compatible with Mahāyāna.

14 We cannot think of explaining or substantiating this here, but it is certainly true that a Christian reading Mahāyāna texts can equally be struck by the enormity of the Buddha's claims. The already quoted W. L. King explains how even in Theravāda Buddhism — although there, in contradiction to Mahāyāna, the insistence that the Buddha is only a man is very strong — the Buddha figure looms already very large. "Though the Buddha theoretically is only a man, he is a man of such proportions that he is truly God-like, an incalculable distance beyond the average man in every way... The oneness of the Buddha that discovered saving truth is rock-bottom reality for Buddhist faith..." (op. cit., p. 52).

his Person as such."17 Or, as J. Guitton has it: "He presents the adherence to His being, in fact the movement of love for his 'I' as the necessary condition for the eternal salvation of men."18 And Guardini points out how precisely here the scandal lies: "To the demand to recognize an "other" person as the supreme law of the entire religious sphere of life and thus of the own existence, a man responds with immediate defensive refusal."19

While the Buddha, in as far as he appears to sentient beings, is a "plural reality," essentially repeatable, Christ stresses the absolute unicity of his identity with the Father. "Jesus comports Himself not as being "son of God" (which, according to Jewish mentality, could be acceptable for all the members of the chosen people), but as being THE SON. His doctrine, His mysticism, His solitude, His way, His truth, is precisely to be that Son at an uncommunicable degree... Jesus puts Himself totally apart... In the many passages wherein Jesus speaks either of His Father or of the Father of men, He does not put these two relationships — that of Himself to the Father and that of men to His Father (who is, nevertheless also their Father) — on the same level."20 There are people who try to lay the blame for the unicity and apartness of Christ on the later developed theology of the Incarnation,21 but it seems to me historically sounder to find a strong stress on these traits already in the whole New Testament. And, on the other hand, somebody may think that, in Japan, the Mahāyāna way of thinking knows at least one exception, namely in the person of Amida, who alone would be the bridge-builder between the unreachable Absolute and that powerless sinner, man. And I have no doubt that functionally, i.e., in the devotional life of most Amida believers, Amida mainly appears in that way, and thus as a very Christ-like figure. However, the general Mahāyāna vision of the essential plurality of Buddhas and of the non-apartness of the Buddha from the believer is at work also there, especially not only, I think — in the theology. Anyway — if I may become personal for a moment — the "allergy" which Japanese Buddhists feel toward that apartness of the Christ figure and which is perhaps most evidently present in Zen, has never struck me more forcibly than when I encountered it in Amida believers. To give only one example: "We, therefore, are to be by His Will the same kind of people who..."22

22 Synopsis of the Jōdo Shinshū Creed, Kyoto, 1922, p. 59. — In the same Shinshū, the idea of the identity of Amida with the believer is expressed in many ways, a.o. in the *Kūkai doctrine*. Another example can be found in the book, edited by the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, *Shakyo Taiken to Kotoba* (Religious Experience and Language), Tokyo, 1978, pp. 114-115.
“vertical relationship”. Also in Japan, the social stress on the human value and beauty of loyal service of a Lord never succeeded in influencing the fundamental principles of this theology. In the religious sphere, too, the vertical relationship tended to stay within the “human nexus”: the master-disciple relationship and service to the country and its leaders.

A last trait in this “less acceptable picture of Christ” is Christ’s historical particularity. As R. Guardini has it, “Basically, Christianity is not a doctrine of truth or an interpretation of life. It is that too, but therein does not lie its essence and core. Its essence consists of Jesus of Nazareth, His concrete existence, His work and destiny — it consists, in short, of an historical person.”23 James Dupuis, Jesuit missionary in India, points out that the reconciliation of this historical uniqueness of Jesus with the universal significance of the Christ event has always been a difficult task for Christian theology,24 but that this difficulty is further aggravated in what he calls “the Indian context” — and what we could call the context of Buddhist-inspired religious thinking — because here religion is essentially understood as a universal doctrine of truth and a way of life based on experience obtainable always and everywhere; and because here “history is often understood as having but a relative and phenomenal value; the Absolute being by nature transhistorical. . .”25 Indeed, in this context, it is as hard to explain why we Christians are not satisfied with the idea (a sacred myth or a logical structure) of Christ, and attach all that importance to the historical reality of Jesus, to the extent that believing in Christ means for us passing from the idea of a savior to the acceptance of the historical reality of that idea in Jesus of Nazareth — as it is for us to understand how a Pure Land Buddhist can entrust his whole existence to Amida, without apparently even questioning Amida’s real existence.

Lessons for us?

To summarize our short analysis of the apparent difference between the figure of Jesus and the religious figures familiar to Japanese Buddhists, we could maybe say that in Christ’s unique, irreducibly and materially real, historical personality, the union of God and man is “localized” (and thereby the otherness of God and man preserved), while in the plural and potentially universal Mahāyāna Buddha, the union of man with the Absolute is universalized (and an original non-duality of Absolute and man expressed). Time and space did not permit us to develop the features of the Buddha image that were mentioned. Evidently, a closer look should be had at the Mahāyāna tenets of the three Buddha-bodies and of the Buddha-nature in all sentient beings.

23 R. Guardini, op. cit., p. 12. - And Jean Guittion is equally emphatic: “One can define in several ways the Christian message. But one cannot define in various ways its essence, structure, constitutive relationship. This essential relationship, which makes that Christianity is neither a myth nor a philosophy, nor even a pure theology, is this union of fact and idea in the unity of a real, historical, person, which can only be reached by way of history and witness.” (op. cit., p. 27).

24 “Essentially conditioned as it is by time and space, how can the phenomenon “Jesus of Nazareth” have universal validity in the order of the divine-human relationships? See James Dupuis, Jesus Christ and His Spirit, Bangalore, 1977, p. 230.


Also, the Bodhisattva figure would merit much more attention. But, leaving all this for another occasion, I cannot put my pen down without at least confronting myself and the reader with the question: what does all this suggest for our kerygma and catechesis? Not being ready to give a real answer to this question, I must limit myself to a few hints.

1. First, and foremost, I would feel highly rewarded for my pains in writing these lines, if they provoked in the reader a higher degree of awareness of the problem and of determination to look for its solution.

2. No matter how important in view of our present question, Buddhist speculations are far from being the only component of Japanese religiosity. Therefore, it is very possible that there are other strands in that religiosity which, at some point, show more affinity with the Christ figure and, thus, constitute a better preparation and point of reference.

3. No matter “how the pieces fall,” it is our duty as Christian missionaries to preach and witness to the integral Christ. Only then can we expect to hear Christ’s words applied to us: “Everyone who shall acknowledge Me before men I will acknowledge before My Father in heaven” (Mt. 10:32). And the recognition of the necessity of dialogue does not change our duty by one iota. Dialogue would lose all its sense and possible fruitfulness if one partner happened to reduce beforehand his message to the dimensions of the other. I believe, moreover, that, besides the doctrine of divine creation, that of the historical reality of God’s entry into the world of nature and men is one of the most fruitful contributions or complements that Christianity can make to Japanese religiosity. Indeed, while Mahāyāna Buddhism believes in a kind of eternal and necessary “incarnation” of the Absolute into the universe, and in the pullulation of Buddha figures, intends an universalization of this incarnation, the result often seems to be, not that the Absolute is present to the world and history and makes them real by His presence, but rather that it makes the historical, the particular, the material disappear before itself. Christ’s incarnation, on the other hand, is seen as a real descent of God into a different “substantial” reality. Thus, in order to meet God, we need not necessarily leave this historical world (neither materially, nor ecstatically — by reaching a different plane of consciousness). In this way, too, religion is squarely situated in the midst of history and human reality, and working in and for the world can be seen as (religious) cooperation with the Lord of history.

4. However, the Fathers of the Church recognized what they called a divine “economy” — what we would rather call “pedagogy” — in Christ’s progressive self-revelation. This kind of “economy” may be permitted to us, too; and we have ample room for applying it, especially in our pre-evangelical approaches and dialogues, by starting out with the more “acceptable” features of Christ. And moreover, we owe it to Christ and to the Japanese people not to compound the difficulty of their encounter by a man-made theology whose categories are alien to our listeners. I know that this is quite an order and that none of us is able yet to avoid that pitfall. But we can at least make a beginning, and a combination of two methods suits itself here. One is to pay real attention to the motives, ideas, feelings at work in Japanese religiosity. This may lead us, if not to the discovery of other categories in which to present the Christ mystery in a new and more adapted way, then at least to a more...
understandable way of explaining our traditional categories.

Secondly, we can probe the Christian tradition for categories and ways of presenting Christ that might be more congenial to the Japanese than the ones relatively recent theology has accustomed us to. I gladly use this occasion to mention that this second point could be called the guiding life-principle of the late Father Vincent Pouliot, O.P., founder and longtime director of the Thomas Gakuen in Kyoto. Again, I cannot develop this idea and must be satisfied with a few pointers:

a/ Modern, especially Protestant, theology is strongly influenced by the idea of the autonomous individual self, as it came to the fore in Western consciousness since the Renaissance and found its expression in modern philosophy. In a sense, this consciousness, too, can be considered to be a result of the Christian ferment, but it is becoming progressively clear that it is a one-sided outgrowth which endangers (other) Christian values and, at the same time, unduly estranges Christianity from Eastern values. This idea of the self tends to cut man off from nature and to obscure the constitutive relativity and openness, so basic to the original Christian idea of “person”. Medieval Christian thinking — although, from our modern point of view, it can be said to be “deficient” in many points: the dynamics of history, etc. — appears to have a picture of man in the universe, at once more balanced and more congenial to the Eastern ways of thinking.

b/ Above, I have painted a picture of Christ’s unique, historical, salvific personality, and have contrasted this with the Buddha figure. I believe that this picture is correct as far as it goes, and that its presentation can awaken us to difficulties we are likely to encounter in our preaching of Christ. However, it is not the whole picture. The Fathers of the Church can provide us with perspectives on the Christ figure that go an amazingly long way in bridging the gap with Buddhist ways of thinking on the relationship between the Absolute and the Buddha, on the one hand, and between the Buddha and the believer, on the other. To give only the slightest indication of this, we could say that, firstly, several Church Fathers, in the footsteps of St. Paul, endeavor to combine the historical reality of Jesus with the universal, cosmic reality of the Logos; and that, secondly, they consider how the Christian exists in Christo, in the pneumatic reality of Christ, and there has a real share in Jesus’ own sonship of the Father. They are certainly not ready to view our sonship of the Father as a pious metaphor, or to stop at the legalistic view of “adopted sons”. They took God at His word, realistically, ontologically if you want. It looks as if the mainstream of “Christian philosophy” has seldom dared to pursue that line, because the Greek premises did not seem to permit it.

Still, with all this, the “scandal” of the historical Jesus remains: “This Christ, universal and contemporary to humanity, this mystical Christ growing in humanity, would be without truth and without roots, if Jesus had not existed in the most ordinary sense of that term, from the womb of a woman unto that womb of the earth where all human forms find repose.”26

26 Jean Guitton, op. cit., p. 442.