who are in touch with their times. Participants in the East-West Spiritual Exchange Program should see themselves as pioneers of the new spiritual culture that will emerge in the twenty-first century.

Toward the end of his life Arnold Toynbee said that historians a thousand years hence will not be interested in the twentieth-century conflict between capitalism and communism but will focus on the fact that the first significant interaction between Christianity and Buddhism took place in this century. I believe the East-West Spiritual Exchange Program is a testimonial to Toynbee's vision. I, for one, view the growth of such exchange with cautious optimism.

And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are. —Thomas Merton, Calcutta, 1968

Technological and cultural changes have brought the great religions face to face with one another—have made it so that they simply cannot go on living on the same planet, each in its own secluded corner, completely ignoring one another. A need for mutual communication has begun to be felt and has found its initial expression in various endeavors of interreligious encounter or dialogue.

The uses of dialogue

Future historians and sociologists will have much to say about the cluster of motives that impel individual religionists and religious organizations to engage in this encounter. It is already being said that an acute sense of the ebbing power of religion in a rapidly secularizing world is causing religions to huddle together in a joint defensive posture. But while ready to admit that the painful awareness of the crisis one's own religion is going through (an awareness which may actually be strongest in Christianity) may be a decisive factor in one's willingness to learn from others, I still think that most participants in the dialogue are not primarily looking for possible benefits to be derived from the exercise but rather taking up, in a positive way, an inescapable challenge which is thrown at all areas of human culture by our revolutionary times.

This does not mean, however, that dialogue can ever be an isolated fragment of the religionist's life. It becomes an intrinsic part of her or his religious life project, which—while always showing a desire for communication or communion with others—can exhibit different centers of gravity: the more intellectual search for truth, the more sociopolitical demand for justice and peace, and the naked quest for the Absolute. It is along these lines that interreligious dialogue came to put forth the three branches that are usually distinguished: doctrinal dialogue, encounter in social action, and spiritual exchange.

One can, then, speak of two opposite poles in the approach to dialogue. There is the pragmatic pole: the actual situation of our planet makes it obligatory that we put our differences in religiosity in brackets and unite in the struggle for a livable, just, and peaceful world. It is in this joint action that we shall learn to appreciate one another's religiosity. And there is the ideal pole: the endeavor to meet the other head-on, in the very core of his or her religiosity. In both cases, however, the same presupposition appears to be at work: our religions have something in common. On the one hand, they have a real ethical and social concern that can motivate people for positive action in the world; on the other hand, they have an intentionality toward the same Absolute. In the Christian churches the conviction appears
to be growing that spiritual exchange is the centerpiece of the dialogue, now officially sanctioned both by the World Council of Churches and by the Vatican. And, thanks mainly to the efforts of the Committee for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (abbreviated, from the initials of its French name, to DIM) and partly as a fruit of the three Spiritual Exchange Programs of recent years, a sincere desire to meet their counterparts in the East and an awareness of their indispensable role in the interreligious dialogue appear to be spreading rather rapidly among members of monastic orders in Europe, especially Benedictines and Trappists.

Three considerations

Here we must ask again about the ways of thinking involved in this movement. While not an exhaustive list, the following three may be mentioned as sufficiently attested to. First, when one wants to meet another religion, it is only natural to try to reach the other's "purest form," or core, and therefore to reach out to people who live their religion in an especially intensive and radical way; and monastics seem to fit this description both in Buddhism and in Christianity. It is the idea which Thomas Merton refers to at the beginning of the talk already quoted: "In all the great world religions there are a few individuals and communities who dedicate themselves in a special way to living out the full consequences and implications of what they believe." *

Second, there is the discovery of a truly amazing fact: the unbelievable similarity, going beyond all doctrinal differences, of the monastic way of life in both East and West. "In the past few years, monastic traditions which had actively ignored each other for 15 centuries have begun to discover people on the other side of the globe leading lives similar to their own in many respects: with a rule, with community... The attraction exercised by the Absolute and the Eternal and the resulting detachment from the transitory features of life, is a constant element of universal monasticism." 

But a little caveat may be in order here. Nobody will object, I believe, to one's saying that the contemplative monastic tradition is the true center of Buddhism or fully expresses the core and essence of Buddhism. But the same may not be true of Christianity, in which, it may be argued, the monastic life is not so original and expresses only one pole of the Christian ethos, the other pole being active love in the world. This would explain why, in Christianity, the contemplative monastic tradition branched out into a panoply of religious orders and congregations geared to welfare work, education, and so forth. Be that as it may, one of the conclusions reached at the Meeting of Representatives of Christian Monastic Communities in Asia (Bangkok, December 8–15, 1968) remains valid: "Monasticism in our regions is the institution of the Church that is closest to the non-Christian religions, and can be, therefore, the best means for us to meet with them." **

The third consideration could be called a mystical one. In a nutshell: words and forms divide us, but there is something beyond words and forms that unites us. The thought then approaches that one can best discover that reality in the monastic life, which, by definition, strives for utter simplicity in forms and for silence beyond words. Father Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) formulates this as follows: "Lodged in the innermost depths of the human heart there is an instinct which is anterior to any specific religious formulation. It is in this appeal welling up from the heart that the great dhammas effectively meet and that they all share a common tension which carries them beyond themselves and makes them discover, in this very going beyond, their most intimate truth... Therefore, it is only normal that monks of all traditions discover one another to be brothers beyond the boundaries of their respective dhammas, in this transcendence of the 'signs' of which they are the witnesses."

Thomas Merton wrote in the same vein, albeit with a little more circumspection: "Without asserting that there is complete unity of all religions at the 'top,' the transcendent or mystical level—that they all start from different dogmatic positions to 'meet' at this summit—it is certainly true to say that even where there are irreconcilable differences in doctrine and in formulated belief, there may still be great similarities and analogies in the realm of religious experience.""
Mutual gifts
I have just enough space left for two short and very disparate remarks. First, although it is true enough that the dialogue is not primarily motivated by a desire to gain concrete benefits from it, a humble willingness to receive and learn from the other is certainly a contributing factor. The question of what Christian monks can expect to learn from their Buddhist brothers is not, then, a vacuous one. Many things could be adduced in this connection, but here I must limit myself to pointing out—without due explanation—only a few of them.

From one angle, Christian monasticism can be defined as a way of life through which one tries to give God’s reality its full place and to live as consciously as possible in His presence. Needless to say, this is not as easy as it sounds. For one thing, it presupposes a delicate balance between familiarity with God and an ever-growing awareness of His unfathomable mystery. In this respect, contact with Buddhist monks can make Christian monastics reexamine the relationship in their lives between living with the God who revealed Himself and the never-ending search for the “hidden God,” the balance between “God beyond me” and “God in me.” On a more practical level, the dialogue has already produced in some Christian monks a reappraisal of some time-honored formal structures of their own tradition which were no longer properly understood and some of which had been recently rejected as “senseless today.”

Commentary

A Historic Experiment

Seiko Hirata

Since 1979 a historic experiment that should be of great interest to religious circles around the world has been underway. This is the East-West Spiritual Exchange Program, whereby European Catholic monks and Japanese Zen Buddhist priests have taken part in each other’s monastic traditions and practices.

I deliberately call this program an experiment. To experiment implies an unknown outcome. In the scientific world, experiments sometimes “fail,” in that they do not yield the expected results. But to abandon further experimentation for that reason is to bar the way to progress. The experimenter must not give up, but must analyze the “failure” and keep searching for new directions. To experiment is to move forward, bit by bit, through the process of trial and error.

The East-West Spiritual Exchange Program is just

In connection with the idea of mutual gifts, I cannot refrain from quoting a beautiful text written by a European monk as a reflection after the visit by Japanese Zen monks in 1987: “In the final analysis, these spiritual exchanges are not so much for mutual enrichment, as one could have imagined, but much more for a mutual impoverishment—I mean a better reception of that spiritual poverty which is a beatitude. . . . It consists in better discerning the essential while precisely disengaging it from its dogmatic or ritual expression.”*

My final remark is geographical. It so happens that the spiritual exchange we are most conscious of in Japan is that between Japanese monks and European monks. We should not forget, however, that things are also happening in North America. The Christian monastics of America have their own branch of the DIM, called the North American Board for East-West Dialogue (NABEWD), which has, for instance, been developing an exchange program with Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns living in exile in India. America also has the yearly Christian-Buddhist Meditation Conference, organized by the Tibetan Buddhist Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. Also important is the establishment, at the end of 1987, of the North American Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, which includes an important section on Spirituality and Monasticism.