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THE INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND PHILOSOPHY

Does philosophy have a word to say on the present interfaith dialogue and does it have a word to speak in it? These questions confront us immediately with the problem of the relationship between religion and philosophy, faith and reason, and it is not unthinkable that they may add some new element to this age-old problem.

This article tries to come to grips with these questions, but it limits its viewpoint to the dialogue among the great world religions. In fact, it focuses completely on the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. Much that is happening on the Japanese national scene thereby gets scant attention. For this my apologies.

Is the present interfaith dialogue a viable enterprise? Does it show signs of historical validity by being at once historically "necessary" and "progressive"? Is it a positive factor in the perpetual struggle of mankind to maintain and enhance humanity on this planet of ours? These are big questions, which I am not at all ready to answer, although I cannot escape asking them. So let me at least try to provide a few footnotes.

A certain conviction of the historical importance of the dialogue appears, as a matter of fact, to underlie and support those who engage in it. This conviction may be expressed in a rather down-to-earth way, as when John Cobb says: "My motive for dialogue with Buddhism is rather selfish: I want to learn the truth of the partner, in order to come..."
to a less fragmentary, more fulfilled Christianity."1 Or it may entail an explicit global vision as when H. Dumoulin quotes Toynbee on the East-West encounter being the most epoch-making event of the twentieth century? We may remark here that this kind of conviction implies — to a greater or lesser degree — a few judgments, which we could roughly describe as follows:

1. Religion, which is universally recognized as having been a basic element in the cultures of the past, is even now, and will be in the future, an important element in the "humanity" of human culture. An encounter between two cultures remains superficial as long as it does not deal with these basics.

2. "These basics" are mostly thought to comprise fundamental thought patterns: world view, view of human life. Thus the participants in the dialogue do not seem to share the following present-day feeling about the irrelevancy of the metaphysical question: "sufficient unto life is the technical intellect."

3. Inter-cultural fertilization is one of the decisive opportunities for the progress of mankind, also in religiosis.

On this last point, I would like to say a few more words. Present history is witnessing the inevitable coming-together of two culture blocs — roughly East and West. They are starting to react to one another, somewhat like two chemicals that are brought together, with the production of certain amalgams and the occurrence in each of as yet indefinable inner changes.

It seems clear that this description — insofar as it implies reciprocity and the creation of something new — does not fit very well with what is happening on the levels of positivistic science and technology with their one-sided internationality. Nor does it relate directly with what is occurring on the socio-economic levels (although here the first signs of the influence of Eastern ideas in the area of human relations and management are discernible). This picture is much more clearly visible in the realm of the arts where, for example, modern architecture is inconceivable apart from the Eastern influences on it. To what extent is inter-reaction manifest in the area of philosophy and religion? Leaving aside for the moment what is happening in the East, in the West one can point to two phenomena. First, there has been a slight but unmistakable infiltration of Eastern ideas into the mainstream of Western academic philosophy, with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others. And secondly, on a more popular level, there is the present boom of Eastern spiritual techniques in very diverse Western milieus.

However, while these facts can hardly be denied, their importance can be judged differently. Moreover, while some see in them only signs of decay, others may greet them as signs of hope for the future. It is against this background that the dialogue of the great world religions, especially the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, appears. Quite independently of this background, sociology appears to raise a rather negative voice with regard to the opening up of religious groups to each other. As a participant in the interfaith dialogue, I feel sorely tempted to do battle against this negative evaluation — which, I admit, touches a raw nerve. But since this question is expertly treated elsewhere, I shall restrain my horses and limit myself to a few remarks from a more or less philosophical point of view.

It is good to be reminded by sociology that the fact of the interfaith dialogue is neither, by itself, an indication of the deepening of the religious sense in humanity, nor a sign of expansive energy in the respective religious groups. Let us face it: Dialogue — the turning of an "adversary" into a partner — is seldom started from a position of strength; and the unsettling wave of secularization is certainly one of the godfathers of the present dialogue movement. Moreover, I honestly believe — viewing the dialogue for a moment in its broadest cultural sense — that Western interest in Eastern culture will only become serious and universal enough to be promising for the future when it

becomes motivated by a perceived existential need (and, possibly, “defense reaction”). In other words, it will remain severely limited as long as it only hinges on the frivolous, the thrill of the exotic or the lofty, the unbiased and benevolent search for truth. What I take this to mean is that the value of an historical movement cannot be judged by its motives. History sufficiently validates our belief that good can grow out of “evil”, and virtue out of necessity. Hence we should not be overly concerned with the historical undercurrents of our enterprise.

It is also good to be reminded that we should not expect the dialogue to result in any direct sociological advantage for our respective religious group. Indeed we should even beware of its possible dangers for the identity of our group. However, I submit that in order to be motivated for the dialogue, it is necessary to believe that our efforts will be profitable for religion – and mankind – in the future, but not necessarily that our group will profit from it sociologically. Similar remarks could be made in connection with the suspicion that the dialogue is child and father to relativism and scepticism in matters religious, or with the warning that the dialogue tends to degenerate into a collective navel-gazing club or a mutual back-patting society. But to make a long story short:

1. The sociological insights appear to have been gained for the most part from a study of the inter-Christian ecumenical dialogue; and it seems doubtful to me whether all its conclusions can be applied to the wider interfaith dialogue.

2. It is clear that sociological considerations are extremely useful, but by no means sufficient for a judgment on the interfaith dialogue. As summarily indicated above, a certain (philosophical) view of history is equally required for – and unavoidably present in – any judgment. It may be true that a religious group looks healthier as a group when its boundaries are clearly marked and its frontiers rather closed. However, this static view of the single group as such is, in a sense, an abstraction. There is the greater society with its need of mutual understanding and communication. And there is the necessity for a living reality to develop – with all the upheavals and growing pains this entails – or to die. Hegel’s view is not so very abstruse when he says that the still ponds of cultural institutions must be disturbed from time to time by the heavy winds of history lest they putrefy. And, of course, the judgment must finally be a theological one. Religious values are not limited to the sociological ones. And there appears to exist a biblical a priori in favor of the trek into the unknown, that real test and supreme opportunity of faith. Simone Weil’s candid words to Father J.-M. Perrin, whom she highly respected, have often haunted me: “It looks certain to me that there is in you a serious imperfection...your attachment to the Church as an earthly home-country. For you, the Church, while being a link with the heavenly Kingdom, is at the same time an earthly fatherland.”

We now come to the problem which we have sidestepped in our title by connecting “interreligious dialogue” and “philosophy” only by the neutral “and”.

If interfaith dialogue in general can be seen as two or more religions stepping outside their familiar boundaries and encountering each other, the practice of the dialogue up to now indicates that these encounters do not all take place on the same level. A phenomenology of the dialogue could probably be formulated if, for each level, we tried to answer the following questions: What meets? Why (motives)? Whereto (objectives)? Where? Let us try this schema on for size.

1. The encounter on the level of a “common humanity.”

The “what” formulation seems clearly out of place here: it is clearly people, let us say religious-minded people as such, who meet. As a rule, no special objective or orientation is present, and the motive can simply be the perceived unnaturalness, in our present pluralistic society, of not meeting on account of traditional barriers, together with the suspicion

that good, worth-meeting people are also to be found in other religious
groups. To the question "where" the meeting takes place, we could
answer: in common humanity and, up to a point, in a not further de­
flfled common religiosity. All religious differences are viewed on this
level as irrelevant.
2. The encounter on the level of social activity.

Here representatives of religious groups, or at least persons who to a
certain degree reckon on the social and economic assets of their reli­
gious organizations, meet in order to perform joint social service, and to
a lesser degree to further the common cause of religion in society. We
could also say that what comes together here are the various religious
impulses toward action in society and world betterment. They come
together out of a sense of the limited efficiency of separate action. The
place of the meeting is the need of humanity (and the common social
needs of religious groups). As a rule, the religious differences, including
even those related to the motivation for action, are left in the entrance
hall. This of course does not preclude the possibility of very meaning­
ful religious interchanges originating from such occasions.
3. The encounter on the level of spirituality — religious experience.

On this level persons with religious experience in various religious tra­
ditions meet each other for mutual enrichment. In other words, diff­
ferent traditions of religious life-discipline and awareness of the Abso­
lute encounter each other. Why do they seek each other out? Out of
an awareness that valuable religious experience is not limited to one's
own group, and the suspicion that some elements of spirituality may be
found in the other, which are not, or only poorly, represented in one's
own tradition. The meeting place, this time, is most clearly religious:
religiosity itself as a specific element of the human make-up, religious
experience transcending everyday awareness. All established forms of
religion, and especially the differences in doctrinal formulation, are no
longer important as we concentrate on immediate experience. This
immediate experience can be termed pre-reflexive, but it is mostly
presented as essentially transcending all human reflection and forma­

In the fourth place would then come what we are thinking of here,
and what we shall provisionally call the encounter on the theoretical
or doctrinal level.

Let us first remark that, taken in a broad sense, this is the most
accessible and therefore most widely practiced dialogue, for the simple
reason that its “what” is most objectifiable. It is bottled in words and
put on the shelves of bookshops. The Christian in Europe who picks up
a book on Buddhism with a certain religious expectation, and the
obōsan in the Japanese countryside who declares that he loves to read
the Bible because it is easier to understand than the Sutras, can be said
to practice this dialogue. However, here we want to concentrate on a
stricter and more specialized version of this dialogue, and try to push
our analysis somewhat further than in the preceding cases — but, ad­
mittedly, not yet very far. These lines are best considered as the
trotting first steps of a waddling baby.

When we start asking about the specific nature of this “interfaith
dialogue on the theoretical level,” we are immediately confronted by
the problem of the paradoxical nature of every human encounter. The
I-consciousness of individual A cannot present itself to individual B
without objectifying itself (and so, stepping outside itself and becoming
“something else”). By the same token, in order to reach the I-con­
sciousness of A (the real A), B must try to break through all these
objectifications. In his usual radical way, Hegel said that individuals
can really recognize one another only by killing one another. In our
case, we could formulate the difficulty: When religions step outside
themselves to meet the others, is it still the religions themselves that
meet?

When we now ask our question, “What meets in this encounter?”,

4. I fear that a distinction between theology and Gospel would not be of help
here. Therefore, I leave it out of consideration.
we could say immediately: “the theologies” of different religions, the doctrines wherein the religions have systematically expressed their religious ideas according to a particular thought system, or again “the refractions of a religious way on the level of thought.” But then we are faced with the problem: To what extent does a theology really represent a religion? It is rather evident that religious thought is, at best, “once removed from” religious reality and practice, and that the necessity of the link between any given religion and the theology wherein it expresses itself can always be questioned. Everyone who has experienced the difficulty of dialoguing with a Japanese intellectual who simply identifies Christianity with, say, Barthian theology, will know that I am not exactly woolgathering here. And anyone who has ever tried to grasp the reality of Japanese religiosity through Buddhist theology — although, of course, things are still more complicated here — could equally be called as a witness.

De facto, however, world religions do not only need this objectification of themselves on the rational level — the reader will have to grant me this, for here is not the place to prove it — but these conceptual expressions have become an important part of their inward as well as outward identity. Indication of this can be found, for instance, in the amount of anxiety created in many catholics by some changes in emphasis and the relativization of some formulations (“transubstantiation” for one) in post-Vatican II theology. And the participants in this dialogue in Japan have all experienced how tenaciously the “non-conceptual East” clings to a theology of mu or kō. If theology plays such a big role in the identity of a religion even for those who live it from the inside, it can be expected to do so to an even higher degree for outsiders.

We might, in passing, draw a double conclusion here. Firstly, the dialogue between two world religions cannot simply and permanently side-step the issue of theology, but must pass through this mediation. And secondly, sufficient precautions have to be taken so that theology is not treated as a self-sufficient quantity, but always as referring to that which it — more or less authentically — objectifies. I have the impression that a few generations of methodologists might find ample occupation in these questions.

Let us turn now to the question: Where can two different theologies meet? When the inhabitants of two impregnable castles, each on its mountaintop on either side of a river, want to have contact with each other, they must at least lower a drawbridge or a couple of ladders. Or, better still, both may leave their fortresses and come together, at a shouting distance, on neutral ground by the river. Omnis comparatio claudicat (All comparisons are defective), of course, and while my image of mutually impregnable castles may be rather close to the mark — since we have before us closed systematic discourses, each developed within the walls of a religious tradition — the meeting place in-between and about equidistant from both might prove a chimera. Anyway, in order to meet, it seems necessary for both theologies to present themselves in, or project themselves on, a tertium quid. If we may judge from what happens in the dialogues on other levels, it is necessary that such a tertium quid, while transcending both, be no stranger to either but rather common to both — in a word, something “umgreifend” (“encompassing” or “embracing”).

Are we thinking, here, of human reason and of its systematic use in philosophy? This may be so, for I do not know of any place where Christian and Buddhist theologies meet more intensely than precisely in the “philosophy” of the Kyoto school. But let us not jump too many trenches at a time, and rather consider this hypothesis a moment longer. Now that the word “philosophy” is out in the open, it can maybe serve us as a kind of vector in a field where they do certainly not abound. Is the meeting of world religions on the doctrinal level a matter of philosophy? Can this kind of dialogue be called the philosophical aspect of the interfaith dialogue? Could we possibly say that it is the meeting of the philosophies of different religions? What could that mean, “the philosophy of a religion”? In the first half of this century, France knew heated discussions centering around the notion of a “philosophie chrétienne,” but I cannot refer to them since I do not
have the necessary documentation at my disposal.

I surmise that a distinction is useful and necessary in this respect. "The philosophy of a religion" could mean, first of all, the systematic explication of the logical presuppositions of a religious attitude and doctrine. These presuppositions, as the word itself indicates, are not expressed in the doctrine, and are not, as such, an object of faith. However, once they are explicated — rightly or wrongly — they tend to be seen as part of the doctrine and as truth from an absolute standpoint. As examples, we might possibly cite the chain of conditioned origination (or, at least, the elaborations thereof) in Buddhism, and the doctrine of God's "personality" in Christianity. I have used the term, "rightly or wrongly," because matters are extremely delicate here. Indeed half of what is usually considered to fall under this first category might rightly belong under a second one: the traditionally concomitant worldview or "ideology" of a religion. In an attempt at a definition, I would view it a philosophical doctrine, adopted or elaborated in view of the rational clarification, the support, and defense of a religious position, and purporting not to presuppose that dogmatic position.

The relationship between this kind of religious philosophy and the religion in question is, in principle, a freer one, of course, than that between that religion and its philosophical presuppositions. In fact, however, this distinction is not often taken into account, and the identification between a religion and its worldview or "ideology" tends to become rather strong. Witness the far-reaching identification of Christianity and a philosophy of being in the West, and of Mahayana Buddhism and a philosophy of nothingness in the East. Over a long period of time certain shifts and displacements can take place here. Christianity appears to have shifted from a more Platonic worldview to a more Aristotelian one during the Middle Ages, and might, since modern times, be engaged in shifting from a more "nature-oriented" philosophy to a more "subject-oriented" one. An inquiry into the impulses that provoked these shifts would be very instructive for us, no doubt, but space and competence are sorely lacking.

To summarize the above: If any extrapolation is allowed from the Christian and Buddhist cases, world religions appear to show a tendency toward an intimate symbiosis with a "co-natural" philosophy. For the interfaith dialogue a meeting of these philosophies may prove to be both a necessity and an opportunity. It is a necessity since all interfaith talk about religious doctrine inevitably either falls back on a discussion of these philosophical notions, or is rendered a "dialogue of the deaf" because these notions are not brought into the open. And it is an opportunity, but here it becomes important to know: an opportunity for what? Let us first, however, make a general hypothesis: Perhaps religions are easier to approach in these exteriorisations of themselves; and perhaps they have found, especially in these projections of themselves on the philosophical level, a common, "umgreifendes," ("encompassing") element, namely philosophy itself.

But at this point I must have stepped on a trip-wire, for a huge protest sign seems to go up before my eyes: Does all this mean that the battle of the religions will ultimately be decided in a gigantic philosophical debate? And the image is here of an Islamic prince or a shogun organizing a debate among representatives of various religions and finally deciding himself who the happy winner was by presenting the heads of the vanquished to the only remaining contestant. No, indeed, I do not fancy philosophy in the role of supreme judge and unifier of all religion (as Hegel seemed to envisage things). First of all, "judging" religions in that sense is not at all what the interfaith dialogue is about. Secondly, a unified philosophical system which would be required for such judging — does not exist any more than a unified religious system. It would be a moot question whether Eastern and Western philosophies are in any way nearer one another than Eastern and Western religions are. And thirdly, I do not believe that religions can project themselves exhaustively onto the field of philosophical reason: they leave behind their constitutive "mystery."

What then is the theoretical dialogue all about, if judging the vari-
ous religions from a superior standpoint is not its business? I would like to say that it aims first of all at a “mutual understanding” that is critical and guided as far as possible by reason, and that therefore concentrates on the structure of the respective religions as a whole and on their fundamental presuppositions. And I would further dare to say that the “light” which hereby is shed on the religions is less the light of a neutral pre-existing system of reason than a light engendered for the first time by the meeting itself. In that light, the respective “theological concepts” which actually form a big part of the objectum quod of this enterprise, together with the notions of the respective “co-natural philosophies,” will hopefully lose some of their closedness and enter into a dynamic relationship with those of the other side.

It should be remarked that this “critical mutual understanding” does not simply mean here that A comes to understand B, and B comes to understand A. It rather means that A and B come to a better understanding of A and B. For it appears to be a law of this dialogue that one can learn about the partner only to the degree that one critically re-learns about oneself. Indeed, in the other’s light, one’s own uncritical assumptions, one’s own never questioned tie-ups of religious doctrines, theological notions, and philosophical certitudes all of a sudden throw unfamiliar shadows. So John Cobb’s above-mentioned motive for dialogue may be selfish, but it is realistic enough. This does not exclude, however, other possible motives or rather objectives of the dialogue: understanding the other, making oneself understood by the other, and even the dream of some kind of synthesis. If I may refer again to the Kyoto school, it appears that here all these motives are at work together. Nishida tried, as it were, to elaborate a “substructure” of his own philosophico-religious convictions in the categories of the West in order to make the West understand, but also to “justify” his faith for himself and others.

What all this implies is, I submit, that the theoretical interfaith dialogue can never be seen simply as the enterprise of rational philosophy as some neutral third party even though the philosophical attitude and methods will have to play a big part in it. Under “philosophical attitude” I understand here, first of all, that unrelenting search for fuller truth that is strong enough to overcome all bias and to recognize truth wherever it is found. Professor Kumazawa Yoshinori made the remark that Christians have stronger motivation for dialogue and appear to change more in the dialogue than, for example, Buddhists. I have the same impression, but cannot think of analyzing it here. Only, could this have to do with the way the “search for truth” is built-in in Christianity? “Philosophical attitude” traditionally implies a never-ending criticism. It involves breaking through the assumptions of one’s culture and asking for their “why?” It requires delving into the presuppositions of one’s culture and thus discovering their relativity and one-sidedness. As John Cobb has said: “Some Western philosophers have been able to think through to categories that transcended Western common sense and in doing so to come closer to grasping Buddhist thought and experience . . . Schopenhauer and Heidegger illustrate how philosophical thought can break through the established categories of the Western mind and open it to an understanding of Buddhism.”

As for philosophical methods, I am thinking here, or course, of logical analysis in general. But I must also specifically mention in this connection that relatively young offshoot, comparative philosophy, which I found described the other day as a “method of reading, interpreting and criticizing the philosophical systems, models, and categories elaborated by the West, in the light of the theoretical models and the most characteristic doctrines of the metaphysical traditions of Asia.” Of course, this discipline is still young and cannot yet boast of any well-founded methodology, but the efforts spent there will certainly be a

6. G. Vallin, in Revue Philosophique de France et de l’Etranger, 1978, nr. 2, p.65. I must, however, deplore the one-sidedness of this “definition”: in reaching out to the East, the West here does not budge one inch from the center.
great help for the dialogue. This does not imply that the "philosophical dialogue" can simply be identified with comparative philosophy, or even that the attitude in both can be completely the same. I would provisionally characterize their difference as follows: While the interest of comparative philosophy ranges indiscriminately over all the philosophical disciplines, the theoretical dialogue will equally be interested in the whole as such, but will by its religious intention make a choice of specialized fields. While the former proceeds, ideally, from a detached, neutral, standpoint, the latter is practiced in an attitude of openness, yes, but at the same time of commitment to one spiritual tradition. For it is, after all, the "philosophical aspect" of the broader interfaith dialogue, an element in a religious process aiming at spiritual communication. While the former can handle the philosophical concepts as an independent structure, the latter will have to show a stronger groping for "something behind the concepts." It will have to harken back incessantly to a religious doctrine, and ultimately to a religious consciousness and praxis. Thus, to pick only one example, comparative philosophy might content itself with an investigation of the logical possibilities of the concept of nothingness over against those of being, but the dialogue can never forget the ethico-religious element of "selflessness" embedded in the Eastern spiritual tradition.

To conclude this "voyage without a compass," I want to touch on a few questions, which I consider important and which might throw some sidelight on the points under discussion. In the above, I have stated that Christianity as well as Buddhism shows a tendency to identify with a "co-natural philosophy." In its generality this is true enough, but it is time now to add that the conclusion should not be drawn that in both cases the relationship between religion and philosophy is the same. Right from the beginning of my acquaintance with Buddhism, I have been baffled by that relationship in Buddhism, and it might be important for people who want to engage in this dialogue -- which we could, at this point, describe as a dialectics of religion and philosophy -- to be aware of that difference in relationship. I do not think that I can pin that difference down completely, but I can at least try to give some pointers? In connection with Buddhism, we find a strong and harmonious unity of philosophy and religion, while in relation to Christianity, there is always present at least a tension and sometimes even a kind of dichotomy between the two. This in itself constitutes no value judgement, for tension can be creative, but in the present dialogue it can lead to all kinds of problems and often puts the Christian dialogue partner at a serious disadvantage. Why would this be so?

Firstly, as has been pointed out often enough, while the core of the Buddhist doctrine consists of universal statements which everybody can, in principle, experience for himself, the very core of Christianity consists of contingent historical events centering in an individual, Jesus of Nazareth. Secondly, -- and this is seldom said so boldly, and therefore will need somewhat more explanation -- Christianity never worked out its own philosophy, but contented itself with adopting Greek philosophy. Thus philosophy in the West, firmly rooted as it is in Greek civilization, is not geared to an explanation of the Christian religious experience, but rather to the foundation of the "natural phenomena" of everyday consciousness. It is mostly stressed -- especially in studies on S. Thomas Aquinas -- that, in adopting Greek philosophy, the Christian thinkers have adapted it to Christian views. I do not deny this, but it remains true that the fundamental inspiration and basic categories remain very Greek, and that Western culture has never taken the data of revelation as a radical starting point of philosophizing. It has never endeavored to build a logic radically centered on revelation


8. To what extent the "Jesus fact" can be treated in the "philosophical dialogue," is certainly a major problem, for the treatment of the individual and the historical is certainly not the forte of philosophy East or West.
or religious experience as Nagarjuna and other Buddhist philosophers appear to have done with the "Four Holy Truths".

Christianity has never let the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation radically influence its "philosophical doctrine" concerning the divine attributes. And it has no logic to "explain" biblical expressions like, "He who loses his life will gain it," or "I live, not I, but Christ lives in me." We have left all this on the level of "spiritual discourse" and built our logic on a different experience of the worlds of nature and history-building man. The result is that, while Buddhism shows — in the words of H. Dumoulin — "the most intimate relationship between experience and doctrine . . . Metaphysical speculation, religious practice and mystical experience come very near each other and form a unity," Christianity must appear from the outside as "driving an odd span of horses."

Applying the categories set up above, we could say the following: Christianity does not have a "Christian philosophy" in the sense of a "systematic explication of its logical presuppositions." Jean Guitton puts it thus: "To the absence of a philosophy bearing on the implicit ideas necessary to the understanding of the Christian fact is due in part the divorce between reason and faith, which is so harmful to the unity of the spirit . . . " Again this is no outright condemnation, for we could very well imagine that that absence itself is due for the most part to a strong awe before the divine mystery, together with an unwillingness to taint it with human categories, and the conviction that man can never put himself on the divine standpoint, the only place where these things could be explained. It could be due, in a word, to a very thorough "negative theology."

However, in the meantime, our dialogue partners, used as they are to the Buddhist way of things, must often be driven to despair. When they accuse us of being dualistic in putting God and man at an infinite distance from one another, we answer: "That is not true, for the unity of God and man in Christ incarnate is precisely the core of Christianity." But they have all the right to come back with: "We do not find that idea in your philosophy, where you stick to a rather Aristotelian God." We could say then: "Don't judge Christianity by Western philosophy." But that is not a sufficient answer. The real answer is a bit awkward: "Don't judge Christianity by the philosophy it has identified itself with in most of its history."

Christianity undeniably has what we can call a "concomitant philosophy," i.e. a philosophy which has been adopted for the clarification and support of its doctrine. This is fundamentally Greek philosophy, certainly qualified and adopted for a better fit, but still in many instances more of a betrayer than a translator of the Christian idea. If the comparison is allowable, I would say that this philosophy does not fit Christianity any better than the Chinese script fits the Japanese language. I cannot resist quoting here a few strong expressions by Charles Hartshorne. He speaks about a Western "technique of reasoning which will not allow the religious idea even to be expressed." In his opinion: "A new day seems to be dawning in religious thought . . . Some bad guesses of early secular reason, often accepted by theology as part of its own message, have been increasingly subject to criticism, both theological and philosophical. From now on, the religious idea may at last have a good chance to be judged on its merits, not on those of a spurious substitute."

Now one might feel inclined to conclude: If this is really so, Christianity would do better not to enter into this kind of dialogue. However, I would rather say the following: Not even all the difficulties render the dialogue ill-advised. It is true that we have to humbly ask for the partner's patience, but it is not as if the partner does not have his problems too. And the main benefit of the dialogue for us

might precisely be that it helps us to work out for the first time, at least on some points, the philosophical presuppositions of our faith.

Looking back on my peripatetic scribblings, I fear that they do not come up to expectations. I appear to have made some soundings as to what we are doing on the theoretical level of the interfaith dialogue, but perhaps I was expected to evaluate how well or how badly we are doing it. If this is any excuse, I would say that only history will be able to judge. In the meantime I suppose we are conscious enough that what we are doing is only a poor beginning — all trial and error — but nevertheless the beginning of an Herculean task. And certainly as far as this dialogue in Japan is concerned, a special salute is due to that giant, Nishida Kitarō.

Can we do anything more than we are doing already to promote this dialogue? Certainly not through massive organization, I believe. The pace of this dialogue cannot be forced. What we can do is probably to build a few more bridges by introducing serious Eastern thinking on religion to the West — which supposes (good) translation; and to lure a few more first-class minds into the dialogue. I am thinking here in the first place of theologians and philosophers, and the lure could precisely be that this dialogue may prove to be the present opportunity for the development of theology. It is an opportunity for thorough self-critique and for the discovery of overly neglected elements in our tradition.

But what we must certainly try to do is to improve our attitude, our state of mind. In the editorial of the Summer 1978 issue of the Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Leonard Swidler offers some “Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue.” They are worth a meditation. To pick out only two of them: “Thirdly, each participant must define himself. Only the Jew, for example, can define from the inside what it means to be a Jew . . . Fourthly, each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions of where the points of disagreement are.” Very sound but by no means easy advice. In my free translation, this means that we should not enter the dialogue as long as we have a chip on our shoulder, or even as long as we feel like a professor, a man who knows. A man with a chip on his shoulder is a man who has something to prove, mostly to himself. He will turn the dialogue into an exercise of apologetics for his own views. He will stick to his own problematic and “push them down the throat” of the partner, who then can only choke on his own thoughts. He is a man who cannot afford to see the relativity of his own “magic of words.” In view of the “cultural imperialism” of the West since modern times, we should not be surprised to find that not a few of our dialogue partners, at least in the beginning, show something of this syndrome.

And the professor does not give the other the time to define himself or to show his mystery. He “knows” the other already, and can take him apart and reconstruct him before our very eyes. The delicacy of the task of dialogue can be measured from the fact that even such sensitive thinkers as the masters of the Kyoto school did not always avoid the pitfall of constructing their own logical Christianity.

Finally I wish that in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, where both of us like to speak of a possible synthesis of East and West, both of us would cease trying to show that we in fact have the whole synthesis already on our side. We tend to feel that we are capable of “subsuming” the other without really changing ourselves, that we possess everything the other has, plus alpha. This is my omega.
For a couple of years the Ecumenical Group for the Study of Interfaith Dialogue has met in order to evaluate the theological implications of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Japan. (Cf. report elsewhere in the journal) On March 29–30, 1979, the group invited two prominent Buddhists, Professor Nishitani Keiji and Professor Bandō Shōjun, in order to have a Buddhist evaluation of the dialogue.

Professor Nishitani Keiji is well known as a key person in the ongoing dialogue between Buddhists and Christians. He hesitates to define himself as a Buddhist, and seems to prefer so search for a standpoint beyond, or beneath, established faiths — something more basic, directly related to the common humanity of man. Still his thinking is deeply influenced by Buddhism; he tends to develop his thought in Buddhist categories, and is hence generally regarded as a Buddhist thinker. At the same time he has taught Western philosophy and is well acquainted with the Bible, the Church fathers, and modern theological traditions. Throughout his life he has developed his thought in constant dialogue with Buddhism and Christianity, Eastern and Western philosophy.

In his address Nishitani discussed the problem of dialogue in three points. First of all, he described what he characterized as the “empty mind” (kyoshin). It means the willingness to radically empty one’s mind, a sort of total openness, in which the self-assertive emphasis on one’s own principle disappears. This “empty mind” belongs basically to the nature of all religion as religion, Nishitani said. Each religion

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