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New Dialogue with Buddhism in Japan

INTRODUCTION

RATHER THAN reporting on the state of the dialogue in Japan, these pages will try to locate it and probe for its meaning in a series of marginal notes. The ‘New’ in my title is, I believe, meant to link this article with the general theme, New Religious Movements. Since this may look like a rather cheap trick, allow me to explain, first of all, how I see these relationships.

Would it be too sweeping a statement to say that the new religious movements pululating in the West but harking back to eastern traditions are merely the scattered symptoms of a deeper trepidation affecting all present-day culture and religion, owing to the fact that, in our ‘global village’, hitherto closed and self-sufficient universes are for the first time brought together and impinging on one another? From this point of view, the Buddhist-Christian dialogue—which is, indeed, equally new—is evidently one more phenomenon of that same subterranean upheaval. Thus, bringing the two together might lead to a deeper insight into both. A few remarks seem to be called for:

(a) We should not forget that the present-day multilateral encounter of cultures was preceded by a period of unilateral encroachment of expansionist western culture on all the others. Thus, for non-western cultures the situation today does not present the same kind of newness as it does for the West, and is rather experienced as the reflux of a tide: from a period of onslaught of western civilisation to its reverse, the victorious reaffirmation of their own cultural values. In direct application to our topic, we must say that new religious movements, instigated by the influence of another culture, are not so new for the rest of the world. Asia and Africa have for a long time already witnessed the birth of new religions, greatly influenced by Christianity and instigated by the need of achieving meaning in a period of change under the impact of a foreign culture. And for the dialogue this sometimes means that the dialogue partner, still resentful of the ‘cultural imperialism’ of the West, interprets the new desire for dialogue on the Christian side as simply a change in strategy or as a sign of weakness and, clothing himself in his newly acquired sense of superiority, puts up an intransigent front. Still, for all this, it may be said that the present situation shows the same fundamental newness for us all: for the first time the conditions have been created that enable us to experience one another and to meet as equals.
(b) The new religious movements bring home to western Christians something experienced long since and much more intensely by the Christian minorities in the East: the fact of the existence of other great religions besides Christianity; in other words, the reality of religious pluralism and of the (at the least geographical) particularity of Christianity. In so far as they really contribute to that awareness in Christianity and, hence, to involving the universal Church in the dialogue with other religions, these movements must be counted a blessing. In this connection, it may be relevant to note that in Japan, once the initial apprehension of a threat to their own identity wore off, the existence of Christian communities in their midst was rather welcomed by many Buddhists, for the possibility of mutual enrichment this affords. In that line, Keiji Nishitani, a Japanese philosopher of strong Buddhist convictions, once confided to me that he would like to see the Christian churches grow stronger in Japan and, therefore, engage in more vigorous evangelisation.

(c) This brings us to the question whether the idea of a ‘Christian dialogue with the new religious movements’ is a sound one. The answer is of course ‘yes’, but there appears to be an important condition, which I would provisionally formulate as follows: In the dialogue with them, the new religious movements should not be considered as entities complete in themselves but always together with their eastern cultural background. In other words, the dialogue with these movements, no matter how important in itself, will find its real object only in the more encompassing dialogue with their cultural matrices, the *philosophia perennis* of Hinduism and Buddhism. I am reminded here of the rather indignant reaction of the same Keiji Nishitani to Harvey Cox’s book, *Turning East*: ‘But he analyses only wild offshoots of eastern religion and has no eye for the real thing.’ Indeed, there are reasons why offshoots of a religious tradition in a different cultural milieu cannot by themselves be considered full representatives of their respective traditions. They tend to be either ‘too pure’: cut flowers not showing any of the mud of life wherein they originated; or hybrids: the products of hasty accommodation to the new ecological environment. This principle, in its universality, applies of course also, *mutatis mutandis*, to the young churches in non-western milieus.

1. JAPAN’S RELIGIOUS SITUATION

In order to understand what the Christian dialogue with Buddhism in Japan represents, we need to place it against the background of Japan’s religious situation. We cannot think of painting here a full picture of that situation, but must at least touch on the following points.

(a) Japan’s Position in the Buddhist World

After India and Tibet, Japan might be the third most prolific spawner of new religious movements in the West. Of their names, which have become household words in various western milieus, some, like Zen and Pure Land, indicate traditional Buddhist schools, and others, like Sōkagakkai (Nichirensshōshū) and Risshōkōseikai, are the names of Buddhist-inspired ‘New Religions’. All this might make us suppose that Japan’s Buddhism is especially alive and vigorous, and that Japan occupies an exceptional position in the Buddhist world. This last proposition is, in fact, true if we understand it rightly: Japanese Buddhism, the final fruit of the eastward drive of Buddhism in its Mahāyāna variety, is exceptional not so much for its purity or vigour, but rather on account of the unique circumstances it finds itself in today.

For more than a thousand years, Japan’s Buddhism developed in splendid isolation.
from its cradle, India, and from its sister movements in the Theravāda countries (Sri Lanka, Burma, etc.). It even came to be estranged, in the four centuries preceding the contemporary period, from those countries to which it owes the transmission of Buddhism, namely China and Korea. During this long and secluded history, Japan developed several forms of Buddhism particularly well adapted to the religiosity of the Japanese. However, some of these schools—especially Zen and Pure Land—can be regarded as further developments of tendencies present already in Chinese and even Indian Buddhism. This short characterisation may sufficiently indicate that there can be no question of Japanese Buddhism being universally recognised as a leader by the other Buddhist countries. However, the exceptional secular situation of Japan makes for the unique position of its Buddhism. Thus, Japanese Buddhism is the only Buddhism of a fully developed, modernised and wealthy country. As a result, no other country can boast a comparable intensity or scientific standard of Buddhist studies, and Japanese Buddhism became the main financier of Buddhist projects all over the world (the spreading of Buddhist 'Bibles', building of commemorative shrines in Indian holy places, etc.). What is more, after the communist take-over in China, Vietnam, etc., Japan’s Buddhism can be called the only 'free' Mahāyāna Buddhism in the world. (The cases of South Korea and Taiwan being somewhat special.) The fact that, next to India (with Sri Lanka), Japan appears to be the country where the East-West dialogue is pursued most vigorously, may owe much to the same circumstances.

(b) Buddhism’s Position in Japan

Japan cannot be called a Buddhist country in the sense wherein Ireland is called a Catholic and Thailand a Buddhist country: namely in the sense that Buddhism would be the decisive element of its national identity. Although it brought 85 per cent of all Japanese within its orbit, Buddhism always had to co-exist with the Japanese native religion, now called Shinto, which it never succeeded in completely subsuming and which, on the contrary, appears to maintain even today a more direct link with the Japanese identity. To this we must add the fact that Buddhism in Japan does not appear as a unity but as a rich mosaic of many totally independent sects.

Moreover, since the middle of the nineteenth century, Japan has witnessed a ‘rushour of the the gods’, i.e., the birth of many new religions. Among the many reasons for this remarkable phenomenon, the above-mentioned destabilising influence of Western civilisation cannot be disregarded. While all of these new religions tend to be of a syncretistic nature and many find their main inspiration in Buddhism (cf. above), others betray more or less clearly their Shinto origins (Tenrikyō, Omotokkyō, Konkōkyō, etc.).

These few brushstrokes may make the following practical remarks more understandable:

(i) The Christian effort at dialogue in Japan, although in fact mainly directed at Buddhism, cannot restrict itself to Buddhism but must equally encompass Shinto and the new religions.

(ii) The mutual relationships among these many religions and sects form an intricate network, which sometimes appears as a subtle power struggle, whose complicatedness is further aggravated by the many tie-ups with economic and political powers. Traditionally (i.e., till the end of the Second World War), these relationships were officially regulated by the State. Since the end of the Pacific War, however, a kind of inter-religious dialogue has developed that seems mainly geared to supplying that now defunct regulatory function of the State. Needless to say that the character of this multi-religious dialogue is not necessarily very religious. It often strikes one as, in the first place, diplomatic, and certainly avoids what a westerner would consider to be a necessary part of all dialogue, namely, a talking through of one’s differences.

(iii) The Church, too, is necessarily involved in this dialogue and, for reasons we cannot now go into, even enjoys a privileged position therein. We cannot flatter ourselves, however, that this would in itself constitute a real dialogue as envisaged by Vatican II and required by our times. On the other hand, this encounter of the religions requires such an intimate knowledge of the ever-changing situation that a ‘Quicksand, danger!’ sign should be put up for the benefit of all outsiders (including Roman instances).

(c) Christianity’s Position in Japan

Only three relevant traits of the Catholic Church in Japan can and must be mentioned here. To begin with, it is a tiny minority (barely 0–4 per cent, four per thousand, of the population) surrounded on all sides by Japan’s diffuse religiosity and powerful religious organisations. Psychologically, therefore, it stands in need of a strong feeling of identity over against these religions; and naturally looks for that identity in ‘authentic’ and readily recognisable forms. Secondly, a stronghold of the Catholic Church is the district of Nagasaki where the feeling is alive of being the heirs of the Kirishitan martyrs—those martyrs who were persecuted with the strong complicity of some Buddhist sects. And thirdly, most of the Church leaders have never felt the need for theological and pastoral updating thrust upon them by a changed circumstances or movements at the grassroots. Indeed, many of the reforms promoted by Vatican II do not make any difference in our missionary situation. Unfortunately, one baby eminently relevant to the Japanese situation—the new and positive evaluation of the other religions—thereby tends to get thrown out with the bath water.

From these, two facts become understandable. Firstly, the dialogue with other religions in Japan, other than a movement of the Church as such (either in the sense of the Christian general or of the leaders) towards a new openness to these religions, is mostly, at this stage, the affair of a small but active minority. And secondly, the dialogue has not had any noticeable effect (yet) on the general run of catechesis, liturgy, para-liturgy and other Christian forms. It looks as if, on this point, we are sorely behind what is happening in India.

2. SOME DATA ON THE DIALOGUE WITH BUDDHISM IN JAPAN

We must restrict ourselves here to a bird’s-eye view and refer the reader to the bibliography for further detail. Putting aside the more ‘diplomatic’ dialogue mentioned above, which makes possible a certain degree of collaboration for indisputable causes (world peace, e.g.) and which engendered two organisations with international scope, the World Conference of Religion and Peace (WCRP) and the United World Federalists of Japan, I want to focus here on the encounters of a more intrinsically religious nature.

On the Christian side, this dialogue is mostly carried on by a few free-lance religious apologists and scholars and by four institutes: the Protestant NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto (given its present form in 1959 by Tetsujiro Ariga; director: Masatoshio Doi), and three Catholic centres: Oriens Institute for Religious Research in Tokyo (founded in 1959 by Joseph Spaë; director: Raymond Renson), Institute for the Study of Oriental Religions at Sophia University, Tokyo (founded in 1970 by Heinrich Dumoulin; director: Thomas Immoos), Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (founded in 1975; director: Jan van Bragt).
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(a) Encounter on the doctrinal level (philosophico-theological approach)

To be mentioned here, among others, are the Round Table Conference on Religion in Kyoto, initiated by the NCC Center and gathering Christians and Buddhists of different schools four or five times a year for a discussion of common problems; the Conferences on Japanese Religions, a week of conferences with panel discussion, organised every year by the Sophia Institute around the theme: 'Christianity and . . . (a Buddhist sect or other religion)'; and the Nanzan Symposia, which bring together for three days, once every two years, five-Christian and five Buddhist scholars for an in-depth discussion of a basic religious topic. There is also the biannual Conference on Religion in Modern Society (Cormos), where scholars and leaders of different religions meet to discuss contemporary problems from a multi-religious point of view.

These conferences, however, are only the tip of the iceberg. The above institutes also carry on, in a more quiet way, ongoing dialogues with some Buddhist groups, engage in joint study of Buddhist Scriptures, etc. And anyway, the conferences tend to send the participants back to their studies for a deeper research on the other religion and, maybe more so, an intense theological reflection on their own traditions. It must be noted that, in Japan, this more personal research and reflection predate by far our era of inter-religious conferences. Indeed, since the thorough adoption of Western civilisation in the nineteenth century, Japan has become a country that falls heir to two completely different cultures, with the result that for its more reflective citizens some kind of synthesis of East and West has become a necessity of life. This has given rise to a substantial amount of literature wherein the Buddhist-Christian relationship is investigated. Outstanding in this field, both for their depth and genuine openness to Christianity are the works of the so-called Kyoto School of Philosophy, of which the main representatives are: Kitaró Nishida (1870-1945), Hajime Tanabe (1885-1962), Keiji Nishitani, Yoshinori Takeuchi, Shizuteru Ueda, and others.1 Their influence has begun spreading abroad, especially in Germany and the United States.

(b) Encounter on the level of praxis (experimental approach)

Again in the line of conferences, but aiming this time at a sharing of spirituality, there is the Oiso Conference, which for fifteen years has been gathering Buddhists (mostly Zen) and Christians every year for sharing of religious experience.2 There has also been the rather unique East-West Spiritual Exchange Program that in September 1979 gave thirty-four Buddhist monks and nuns a chance to share the monastic life for three weeks in Benedictine and Trappist monasteries in Europe.3 But best-known might be the movement, often called 'Christian Zen', whose initiator was Father Enomiya-Lassalle. It incorporates the Zen form of 'meditation', and often also the kōan exercise, into Christian spirituality and organises retreats in Japan and abroad along the lines of a Zen sesshin. At a guess (for no statistics are available), it counts a few hundreds of adepts in Japan, mostly Catholic nuns and lay people. It gave rise to two centres of Christian-Zen spirituality, the Shinmeikutsu (of Fathers Lassalle and Kakichi Kadowaki) near Tokyo, and the Takamori Community of Fr Shigeto Oshida in Nagano prefecture. While not recognised as fully Zen by most Zen people, it greatly contributes to the evaluation and adaptation of the contemplative element of Christianity in the Japanese setting.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

This all too short treatment of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Japan leaves us with many questions: What is the aim of this dialogue and what does it presuppose and imply? How far is the need for dialogue felt by the Buddhists also? How can it become an affair of the Japanese Church? And many more. To the question, What is 'new' in the dialogue, I would venture the following answer. The Church is invited now to shed its western provincialism and to actualise its universality in the eastern context. To missionaries and Christians in Japan is given the theological possibility of living their evangelising efforts as an 'exchange in love', with the consciousness of receiving more than one gives. Our Christian converts are given a chance to incorporate their own spiritual past into the newness of Christ's message. And the new willingness of the Church to meet the other religions on an equal basis has already brought about a real change in the perception of Christianity by the others: from arrogant adversary to strong ally-competitor—with for the others the concomitant possibility of receiving from Christianity without loss of face.

However, the 'Encounter with Buddhism' is a Herculean task which cannot be brought to a good end by the 'outposts of Christianity in the East' alone. It is an urgent task for the universal Church and especially for all its theologians. Herein the role of our local institutes can only be that of catalysts and bridges for a two-way traffic.

May this sound as an urgent appeal!

Notes

1. A good insight into the ways of thinking of this school and their relationships to Christianity can be gained from H. Waldenfels Absolute Nichts. Zur Grundlegung des Dialogs zwischen Buddhismus und Christentum (Freiburg/Basel/Wien 1976—English translation by J. W. Heisig Absolute Nothingness (New York 1980)).

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