The Place of Doctrine and Philosophy in Religious Experience.
A View from the East

To ask about the relationship between doctrine and religious experience is to stand in a particular intellectual history where the grounds for making that relationship problematic are already well established. When that question is imposed on a tradition where no such grounds exist—as is the case in the majority of the world’s religions—one would expect the question itself to become problematic. What usually happens, however, is the opposite: the requisite data are gathered on foreign soil, objective descriptions are made, and hypotheses are formed that can be dragged back to the homeland for comparison and contrast. Whatever the answers, it is clear from the outset that the propriety of the question is going to be reconfirmed in the process.

I have no quarrel with the validity of the question. The differences between more or less rationally formulated “doctrines” on the one hand, and the inherent irrationality of those events we loosely refer to as “religious experience” on the other, are too obvious, and too interesting, simply to ignore. Nor do I think it completely wrong-headed to introduce this distinction indiscriminately into situations where the categories do not exist in the hopes of finding their functional equivalents and shedding light on more of the rich variety of the phenomenon of religion. By nature, science is promiscuous and there is no reason the science of religion should be any different. My concern is rather with the overvaluing of the question. In a word, I am not sure that the conflict between established doctrine and personal experience is anywhere near as central to the religious environment in which I live and work as many scholars of religion assume it to be. Before turning to that matter, a word about how the imposition of foreign models is handled academically in Japan.

It is commonplace in the Japanese academy and, from what I know of the rest of eastern Asia, in those of its neighboring countries as well, to complain that western—and basically Christian—models dominate the study of religious out of all proportion, whereas models based on the religions of the east rarely get a hearing out of their own frame of reference. Part of the reason lies in the facility with which the west has been able to put up with a dimmed awareness of its own identity by “neutralizing” many of its cultural assumptions in order the more easily to “universalize” them. But part of the blame also rests with the general failure of eastern Asian scholars to generate universal models of their own, resting content with a qualified acquisition of what is served up to them from abroad. The process goes something like this: A western theory is studied, analyzed, and applied as is to the Japanese situation. Important data that the model overlooks is picked up to demonstrate the “western character” of the theory. Adjustments are made to accommodate the model to Japan and at the same time to argue its difference from all other places where the model has been applied. The end result is two theories: a universal theory for the rest of the
world, and another adjusted for Japan. And there the process draws to a close, without the next and obvious step being taken, namely, to re-universalize the theory. In the world of the physical sciences, such stopping short would be unthinkable; in any field that touches on the distinctive identity of Japanese culture (philosophy, anthropology, psychology, sociology, religious studies), it is entirely acceptable.

It is rare to stumble upon thinkers attempting to forge a theory whose universality is not compromised by the place they maintain within it for what is distinctively Japanese. This is one of the things that has attracted me to the thought of the philosophers on whom I will draw here to provide a “view from the East” on the question of doctrine and religious experience. As I will try to show, the ground from which they speak of religious experience places at the center questions that, in the main, have been peripheral to the Christian west. I mean to suggest that the relevance of their questions for the West may need to be revalued in the light of the radical religious pluralism that has become part of the religious consciousness of the day and yet remains for many, as it did for Karl Rahner nearly fifty years ago, “the greatest scandal and danger for Christianity”.

1 The primacy of doctrine

The battle between religious experience and religious doctrine over primacy of place is far more marked in western Christianity than it is in the Buddhist east. The reasons seem to lie in a different way of valuing the propositional content of doctrine. The heart of the matter is clearest if stated simply and without attention to the nuances that accompany the way doctrines function in the concrete.

In the Christian tradition, the cognitive content of doctrine is inseparable from truth claims about objective reality. Obviously doctrines are not just ontological claims. They serve as unifying and authoritative symbols for a communal tradition. They shape liturgical practice, art, and literature. They provide a framework for the expression of “religious” experience and a ground for moral precepts. But they also, and necessarily, articulate facts about a transcendent reality that lies beyond the reach of ordinary knowledge if not entirely beyond the reach of human experience. This higher realm not only created the world as we know it but guides it through time and is free to intervene in the natural course of events and thus to make itself manifest in the form of supernatural events. By interpreting history in the light of these manifestations the believer is able to discern a different rhythm in history and to gain a glimpse of an end of history when the veil that separates the natural from the supernatural will be lifted. In any case, what transcends history can never be collapsed, simply and without remainder, into the human impulse towards self-transcendence.

The ways the “facticity” of transcendence has been understood stretches across a spectrum marked off by a naïve, literal objectification at one extreme to a highly

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1 As a specific example, I have pointed this out in the case of models of the psyche. “Bunretsu shita jiko no iyashi: Nihon no shinsō shirinigaku ni okeru jirema” [Healing the divided self: the dilemma of Japan’s depth psychology], in: Shūkyō to iyashī [Religion and healing], Tokyo 1990: Kobunsha, 96–108.

metaphorical expression of limit-experiences at the other. The question is not whether the transcendent rhythm of history is as factually real as the historical world of ordinary experience, but how best to articulate truth-claims based on the received symbols of the faith. There is no need to entertain that question here, even though it would bring into the picture interpretative models that would soften some of what is about to come. For our purposes it is enough to consider two general forms of the direct manifestations of the transcendent.

First, there are events of the distant past expressed in a foundational creed that is obligatory for believers. They include everything from the primordial state of creation, of which no record remains, to the incarnation and resurrection of the divine in the person of Jesus Christ, to which certain documents attest. As past events, they are not open to direct experience, but they do need to be accepted as factual occurrences that took place at specific points in time – located, again, somewhere on the spectrum between objective, publicly verifiable data and the mythical stutterings of a community united by what has been seen with the eyes of faith. The number of such events recognized as definitive for Christianity, and the amount of detail attached to them, may differ widely, and the interpretation of particular doctrines associated with them may become clear only through reasoned reflection on written texts that have been approved as sacred, but the belief in facticity is foundational.

Second, there are manifestations of the transcendent that take place in the lives of individuals who share in this core of beliefs. Although these events do not generate new doctrines obligatory for all Christians, they serve to corroborate the truth of these doctrines and to confirm the accuracy of what is believed. These range from highly private states to more or less publicly observed, miraculous ruptures of the laws of the natural world. It is in the harmony of this living contact with transcendent reality that the doctrinal content of Christian faith is passed on from one generation to the next.

Problems arise when this lived experience is expressed in a language that contradicts, or at least advances in a nonconformist way, accepted doctrinal content. This leaves two options: either doctrine is taken as normative for the experience and the conclusions that derive from it, or the experience is accepted as a normative hermeneutic for reinterpreting sacred texts and received doctrine. In the one case, the experience is made subservient to the doctrine; in the other, doctrine is reinterpreted.

These, in the boldest of strokes, are the lines along which the relationship between religious doctrine and religious experience are drawn in the Christian tradition. Given the fact that the point at issue is the facticity of a history that transcends but interacts with our own, it is not hard to understand why the keepers of institutional Christianity should tilt the balance in favor of doctrine and rein in any deliverances of personal experience that raise suspicions about it.

If we step outside of the Christian faith and look at what is going on in this struggle over primacy, it may seem to be no more than a tug-of-war over what amounts to no more than a fantasy world. And indeed, it looks like just that to growing numbers of people in the very lands that once nurtured Christian doctrine as the pillar of civilized behavior. But if we look more closely – as I believe we must, in view of how remarkably the central symbols of Christianity have been able to survive the criticisms that have accompanied advances in the natural and human sciences – we see that the struggle between doctrine and experience is not just a Christian problem. It
points to a fundamental ambiguity in the human condition itself: on the one hand, the irrepressible desire for \textit{objective certitude} about things that we are not equipped to know; on the other, the participation, often against our will, in events that break through the ordinary rationalities of everyday life and seem to provide \textit{personal certitude}. It is just this ambiguity that discloses itself, for example, in the unexplainable power of symbols and myths, taught us in our youth and then ignored as meaningless, to suddenly rise to the surface and hold out meaning in the face of great joy or great tragedy.

This ambiguity is part of the human condition and not the \textit{Christian} human condition. In the Buddhist east, it is treated differently. There doctrine is by and large understood in a way that does not invite conflict with religious experience. All teachings, from the simple noble truths thought to come from Gotama Buddha himself to the complicated machinations of the Abidharma, are considered \textit{upāya} or "useful means". It does not matter if descriptions of a paradisal Pure Land beyond death or a transmigration of the soul on its way to nirvana are believed in literally or interpreted symbolically. In both cases the teachings are aids to a level of awareness that is beyond the distinction of literal and symbolic interpretations. For this reason, to reduce a teaching to the level of historical fact or to rationalize its content according to some other hermeneutic norm is to put it at the service of something else. As such, the doctrine may be useful, but it is no longer useful for the transformation of perspective that is the aim of all Buddhist teaching and practice.

It is not difficult to see why so many, Buddhists as well as Christians, see Buddhist doctrine as closer to a philosophy than to theology. In terminology, the overlaps with Christian faith are numerous, but in practice all teachings are bound up with the clarification of perception and the transformation of perspective. Where Christianity requires specific beliefs about a transcendent realm beyond the pale of the human, Buddhism sees all talk of such a realm as a stepping stone to seeing through the distinction between self and reality in the world of the here and now. As such Buddhism's approach to doctrine is not mere epistemological critique but is a \textit{performative} philosophy. The accuracy of doctrinal description may be measurable in terms of its consistency to tradition or texts, but its truth is measured by the experience to which it leads. In other words, the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition that lies behind the conflict Christianity sees between doctrine and experience is brought to the surface in the notion of \textit{upāya} which sees all doctrine and all experience as aimed at replacing the darkness of ignorance, or \textit{avidyā}, with clarity of insight.

It is not quite right simply to conclude that Buddhism reverses the Christian insistence on the primacy of doctrine over experience. To be sure, the conflict within Christianity can be defined in terms of doctrinal content, or more specifically, of the source of information that is needed for humanity to overcome its fallen, earthly state. But when we think in eschatological terms — that is, from the standpoint of the image of the final state of the saved, where belief in doctrine is no longer distinct from human knowledge — the experience of salvation becomes primary for Christianity as well.\footnote{We may note here that George Lindbeck, who sees all questions of possible correspondence between the Christian language of faith and metaphysical structures of the Godhead as "superfluous"
doctrinal primacy (for any religious understanding, Christian or Buddhist) presupposes. The fullness of time lies in the here and now for anyone who has eyes to see. As long as there has been human consciousness, salvation from its darkened state has not needed a final, future intervention of a transcendent power. ²

Now if the relationship between experience and doctrine is not defined in terms of differences in the content of belief but rather in terms of the experience of the transcendent in the here and now (in theological language, a “realized eschatology”), then Christianity would be able to resolve the conflict in much the same way as Buddhism does. Leaving aside all problems of the role that doctrinal clarity has played in Christian history for insuring institutional continuity, two obstacles block the way to this redefinition of the problem. The most obvious of them is the harsh and inveterate distinction between the lumen naturae and the lumen revelationis, between the deliverances of faith and reason, between the methods of philosophy and those of theology. A second, and subtler obstacle that lies at the root of the first, is the lack of humility towards doctrine. In matters of acknowledged mystery on which the scriptures are silent and no doctrinal proclamations have been made, there is a certain degree of incertitude and reserve. On “creedal” question, such a posture would be the equivalent of disbelief. I do not see any way to counter the remnants of this hubris head-on. Few theologians flatly accused of a lack of humility in the appliance of their profession are likely to respond humbly to the charge, even if the accusation is leveled by their peers. Insisting that Christianity has something to learn from Buddhism on the question would hardly help matters. A simpler but more indirect tactic is called for. Happily, we have the means at hand in the mystical tradition.

2 Mystical knowing

Everything I have read of mystical Literature suggests to me that the state of awareness of which the mystics write and the way of life that confirms it radically affect their understanding of the doctrinal framework within which their experience takes shape. I believe it mistaken to define that experience in terms of its agreement or disagreement with an articulated creed, however essential a role that plays in forming the experience. On the contrary, religious experience dislodges doctrinal beliefs from the central position from which they can claim to be normative of the truth or falsehood of what is experienced. One does not have to accept everything mystical as somehow “truer” than theological utterances to realize that questions of doctrinal accuracy are not the main issue. One does, however, have to accept the possibility of

in the sense that they “are not doctrinally necessary and cannot be binding”, turns to the mythical language of the eschaton, which he considers “indispensable to Christianity”, to open belief in salvation sola Christi to include the salvation of unbelievers. See his The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age, Louisville 1984: Westminster John Knox Press, 55–63, 106; and The Church in a Postliberal Age, Grand Rapids 2002: Eerdmans, 77–87.

For this reason, as interesting as Mark Heim’s application of Nicholas Rescher’s “perspectival rationalism” is for resolving doctrinal differences between Buddhists and Christians by drawing attention to their distinct aims, it makes assumptions about the centrality of information about a transcendent, other-worldly reality that do not hold. For a thoughtful evaluation of Heim’s Salvation: Truth and Difference in Religion, Maryknoll 1995: Orbis, see FRILAND, Patrik: A More Pluralistic Pluralism?, in: Swedish Missiological Themes 93/1 (2005), 43–59.
an understanding of faith for which doctrine, even the core kerygma of the creed, are not the axis on which the mystical tradition turns. Rather, doctrine becomes a means of expression of what is known, a medium to assist in appropriating an experience that is at the same time critical of itself and of all media of expression. And this, I am persuaded, is closest the Christian tradition comes to the Buddhist posture of seeing doctrine as an śāṇaya in the service of something greater, and to the rooting of religion not in the events of the past or events to come, but in the here and now.

You will forgive me if I restrict myself here to a single, paradigmatic example, and that only in very short shrift, namely, the German sermons of Meister Eckhart.

Like many in the mystical tradition before and after him, Eckhart was not given to stress the importance of enraptured states, and in a sense was even skeptical of such experiences. The emphasis he placed on the limitations of language was not so much a function of the extraordinariness of the experience as it was of locating the ineffable dimension of even the most ordinary events of contemplative awareness. This was what underlay his attempt to relocate the center of Christian faith from the articles of the creed to “knowledge” – as William James would have said, not knowledge about but knowledge by acquaintance. This required going to the final metaphysical root of the creed: the definition of God in terms of existence and will. In its place, he defines God in terms of insight. As he puts it, “It does not now seem to me that God understands because he exists, but rather that he exists because he understands.” In one of his sermons, he puts it even more clearly:

I would be as wrong to call God a being as if I were to call the sun pale or black. When we receive God in being, we receive him in his courtyard. Where is he then in his temple, where he shines in holiness? Insight is the temple of God. Insight is nobler than willing. Willing takes God under the cloak of goodness. Insight takes God bare, when he is stripped of goodness and being.

To claim that the existence of God is not the center of faith is not as unchristian as it might at first seem. We need to believe in the existence only of what we do not know; the existence of what we know is simply not a problem. To one who is aware of God through insight, the question of God’s existence is therefore odd, even irrelevant. Knowledge of God by experience thus entails an erasure, or at least a dimming, of the dividing line between the light of reason and the light of faith. For Eckhart, all knowing is grounded in a single source common to the knower and the known – the “spark of the soul” is the Seelengrund from which all human faculties flow and at the same time the Gottesgrund where the divinity is present in its entirety – and it is to that source that one must turn one’s attention first and foremost.

This way of unifying the knower and the known involved two strategies for Eckhart that, from the doctrine-centered view of Christian theology, could only seem contradictory. On the one hand, he used scriptural imagery as a primary source of

6 Parisian Questions (1302–3). Elsewhere, from a different perspective, he puts being above knowledge. See for example Sermon 82, Walshe, II: 244–5.
8 The term experience was not, of course, used in the middle ages as we use it today. Eckhart preferred other expressions, such as “being equal to the truth of” (Sermon 87, Walshe II: 276).
guidance in his thinking; on the other, he insisted on breaking through all imagery to get to the ground from which images spring, the ground at which the very distinction between the human and the divine fades into an abyss beyond all comprehension, “where no image ever got in” but only “God’s perfect insight into himself”. Such radical insight into knowledge of God, he was convinced, was the culmination of faith. As a result, insofar as salvation history was focused on the state of consciousness of the particular soul in the here and now, scripture itself bowed to the primacy of knowledge.

One can hardly read Eckhart’s sermons without noticing how he allows his imagination to roam freely over a passage, stopping to rest on a particular word or phrase to draw it into a different context. His thoughts are controlled by a particular question in focus rather than by a sense of duty to received doctrine. When the focus shifts, so does his use of words. The ordinary theological language he uses at one point to move from one thought to another is just as likely to be turned inside out in another context. The apparent inconsistency is resolved if we follow him in taking particular doctrines as a means to know rather than as an object of knowledge. The general doctrinal framework is never challenged, but individual items of doctrine are unraveled to invite one to see with it. For example, in one place he explicitly compares God to a candle that one uses to look for something. “And when you have found what you were looking for, you throw the candle away.” But what one finds is—nothing: “One who possessed the whole world with God would have no more than if he had God alone.” The candle one seeks with is the image of God, scriptural and doctrinal teachings. What one sees with it is the emptiness of all things and a God stripped bare of everything we know about God. By this he means not sense knowing or rational knowing, but a knowing of the “soul” that has the power to catch a glimpse of God naked, stripped of all images, in the purity of the present moment. This power knows no yesterday or the day before, or tomorrow and the day after, for in eternity there is neither yesterday nor tomorrow, there is a present now: that which was a thousand years ago, and that which will occur in a thousand years, is present there, and so is what is beyond the ocean. This power seizes God in his dressing-room.

One cannot help feeling that the Buddhist notion of all doctrine as upāya aimed at awakening one to the emptiness of all things would have been immediately intelligible to Eckhart. But there is one critical difference. In the Christian west, the mystical tradition has belonged to counter-traditional, underground current. It has been defined in terms of the main, surface tradition and without it cannot exist. Reading through the text of Eckhart’s condemnation—indeed, the only medieval theologian tried by the Inquisition for heresy—makes it clear that the model of the judges was one that put authorized doctrine at the center. In the Buddhist east there is no such split in tradition. Everything is on the surface because it is experience that sits at the center. To be sure, there are fundamentalist forms of Buddhism, but their aim is not to unseat or dispose of the notion of upāya but only to insist on some particular means as superior to others. And just as surely there are esoteric movements in the Buddhist world, they tend by and large to be sectarian, not counter-traditional in the

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9 Sermon 40, Walshe, 1:284.
10 Sermon 90, Walshe II:160.
sense of the Christian west. Today, within Christianity itself, there are signs of a shift away from that duality. Before turning to this question, we may pause to consider what thinkers in the east who have tried to see Christian doctrine through non-Christian eyes have to say about the relationship between doctrine and experience.

3 The religious philosophers of the Kyoto School

Earlier I mentioned that the Buddhist attitude to doctrine is in the nature of a performative philosophy. The corollary of this is an understanding of philosophy that is not, in principle, cut off from religious doctrine. In the sense that the hermeneutical principles and metatheoretical reflections that govern the reading of doctrine are also seen as a means to self-transcendence and a transformation of life, it is also a "spirituality." Although the philosophical traditions of the east have systematically been excluded in the west's definitions of philosophy, one of the major impulses to put an end to the parochialism comes from a group of twentieth-century Japanese philosophers who have tried to use the tools and sources of western philosophy to offer new answers to traditional questions, and pose new questions, from a fundamentally non-western perspective. I refer to the thinkers of the "Kyoto School", whose beginnings are traced to Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) and his immediate circle of disciples. Everything I have said above is confirmed in the standpoint they take to Christianity, but in very different terms. Here I can only hint at the coincidences.

If one had to select the single most important idea running throughout Nishida's thought, it is the idea that the starting point of philosophy is the conscious experience of the unity of subject and object. In his maiden philosophical work, he referred to this as "pure experience," an idea he took from William James, who also spoke of overcoming the dichotomy of subject and object. Nishida's debt to James's idea is limited. For one thing, he did not pursue his reading of James with the same seriousness he devoted to continental philosophers. For another, he was not deterred, as James was, by the western distinction between the subject matters of philosophy and theology. Nishida made none of the usual apologies when using Christian imagery or citing from scriptural and theological texts. He did not take them on faith as providing information about a transcendent world or as logical arguments to be tested for consistency. Doctrines of religion were for him expressions of the way we experience the human condition: the more they have survived shifts in intellectual and cultural climate, the more universally interesting they were; the more parochial and culture-

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11 This contrasts sharply with the way Christian theology views the use of philosophical hermeneutics. For example, the sharp line that George Lindbeck draws between his cultural-linguistic reflections and the doctrines to which they are applied is erased in these philosophers as it is in the general application of upāya in the Buddhist intellectual tradition. This is why he insists that his theological method, as radical as it is, "must always allow for possible propositional truth" (The Nature of Doctrine, 63), without considering the possibility of a further step that would entail the renunciation of all methods, his own included, without ceasing to be intellectually and philosophically respectable.


13 I have presented an overview of the principal figures in my Philosophers of Nothingness. Honolulu 2001: University of Hawai’i Press.
bound they were, the less. Thus, for example, arriving at the point at which the self experiences a power transcendent to itself that acts through the self but is not under the control of one's own will, he had no hesitation in drawing on Christian notions of God for guidance, absorbing what was useful (for example, the phenomenal world as a manifestation of a noumenal creator) and discarding what was not helpful (for example, the notion of God as a person).

The same could be said of any number of western philosophers as well. The difference is that Nishida did not feel under any obligation to draw a line between his personal "belief" and his philosophical conclusions. The distinction between faith and knowledge, insofar as it functioned in his thought, had nothing to do with deciding matters of fact. Buoyed up by a somewhat simplistic distinction between experience and the expression of experience, he felt that like all language, the language of doctrine was an index of experience and could never claim primacy over it. Despite the strong influence of Zen thought in his formative years, Nishida's strategy cannot be called either religious or philosophical in the western sense of the terms. It cut through, or rather under, the distinction. If there was any distinction, it was between religious-philosophical thought (which is universal in nature) and practice (which belongs to a particular religious tradition).

Nishida's approach to religious doctrine carried over in the thought of Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962) and Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), both of whom wrestled with a wider range of doctrines, both Christian and Buddhist, than Nishida himself had. It is with Ueda Shizuteru (*1926) that the implicit model Nishida was working with has received its clearest explanation. Analyzing an early statement of Nishida's — "I would like to try to explain everything in terms of pure experience as the sole reality" — Ueda sees three distinct acts: (A) Pure experience itself, where there is no distinction between subject and object; this is called "awakening" or is the event recorded in Zen images of enlightenment. (B) Pure experience as the sole reality, in which the subject-object dichotomy returns, in the form of a primordial utterance, as the self-expression of A; this is called "self-awakening" and can be considered an expression of the Zen practice of trying to see the whole of reality just as it is. And (C) Explaining everything in terms of pure experience as the sole reality, which is no longer Zen but a philosophical structuring of the world; this is a self-awareness of the subject as being-in-the-world, or "the self understanding of the world". Ueda sees these three as a dynamic unity that works in both directions: A → B → C moves away from experience and towards philosophy, while C → B → A moves towards experience and away from philosophical thinking. The transition A → B is common in Zen, but B → C is not traditionally present in Zen nor B → A in philosophy. Nishida's genius, for Ueda, was to bridge those gaps — as Ueda reckons, "for the first time in the history of philosophy".

Nishitani approached the problem of the relationship between philosophy and religion by throwing himself into the perennial debate over how far doctrine can be demythified, "a problem that has laid hidden deep under the surface of Christianity."

from the beginning but has not been an issue for Buddhism". Nishitani rejected all sides in the debate (Bultmann, Jaspers, and F. K. Schumann are the representative figures for him), both the fundamental demythifying of all doctrine and the existential reinterpretation of myth. He admired the vitality in Christianity for engaging in such debates with modern thought, but in the end he reckoned it "fruitless" because it assumes a dichotomy between historical, scientific, rational truth on the one side and transcendent, religious truth on the other. In its place, he proposed a standpoint that sees a kind of non-nature at the core of the natural world itself, in effect relativizing both sides in the argument to a higher standpoint of "emptiness". Only thus can the realm of awakening (he uses the alternative term "witness") that is the life of religion become accessible to rational thinking, just as the critical reason of philosophy can become accessible to religion.

As applied to religious truth, neither Nishida’s "pure experience" nor Nishitani’s "standpoint of emptiness" makes sense without an understanding of doctrine as an upāya whose purpose lies outside of the content itself, and therefore as incapable of sustaining the central position in the life of faith. This would seem to be the most immediate challenge the Buddhist east poses for the Christian west, but it was not so for the Kyoto School thinkers. The reason they did not see it as an obstacle is that they already had found a comparable approach to doctrine in the Christian mystics. Nishitani was stimulated by Nishida to read Eckhart; Tanabe was inspired by the younger Nishitani to delve in the mystic’s writings for his late philosophy. Ueda went further still, becoming an internationally recognized authority on Eckhart’s thought and its relation to Zen and Nishido philosophy. All of them found an immediate connection between Eckhart’s idea of the absolute as a God beyond being and their various understandings of the absolute as nothingness. Nishitani, and especially Ueda, also found themselves in sympathy with Eckhart’s insistence on breaking through the images of God to the ground from which those images spring, a ground at which God and self are one.

Given that there is no question of these thinkers professing a Christian creed, and that they cut across the borderlines that the Christian west has drawn between philosophy and theology, it is not immediately clear how to respond to what they have to say. If it were only a question of accuracy in their description of doctrines, there would be no problem. But they offer an interpretation of Christian ideas that cannot simply be dismissed because it comes from "non-believers". Their right to inherit the wealth of Christian teachings cannot be denied them because of philosophical differ-

15 Eine buddhistische Stimme zum Thema Entmythologisierung, in: Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte 13/3-4 (1961): 244-62, 345-56. In reading this essay it bears keeping in mind that Nishitani confused "immaculate conception" with "virgin birth".

16 Tanabe’s concern is with Eckhart’s idea of transcendence, which he sees as lying beyond being. See his Philosophy as Metanoetics. Berkeley 1986: University of California Press, 183. Similarly, the opening essay of Nishitani’s Collected Writings, written while a student in Germany in 1938, deals with Eckhart. In it he is attracted by the way in which Eckhart overcomes the association of God with being, and how “God and man become a pure one in nothingness”. (Nietzsche no Zarathustra to Meister Eckhart, in: Nishitani Keiji edōsokushū Tokyo 1986: Sobunsha, 23.) In German, see his Was ist Religion? Frankfurt 1986: Insel Verlag. For a quick overview of Ueda’s work on Eckhart, see note 13 and Steffen DOLL: Wozu also suchen? Zur Einführung in das Denken von Ueda Shizuteru. München 2005: Judicium, 63-8.
ences, but neither can their approach be absorbed tout court into the way Christianity has come to understand itself. There are two interrelated problems here.

First, as we have seen, the Kyoto philosophers work on the assumption that religious doctrine is subsidiary to religious experience. Clearly they are not simply lifting doctrinal language out of its historical context without regard for the wider tradition of Christian thought and its definitive texts. Neither do they allow the content of any doctrine the privilege of standing beyond criticism or free of the quality of upāya. This is hardly a ground on which traditional theology can feel at home. Even a radically demythified theology that seeks the meaning of doctrines in their existential interpretation still sees the doctrine itself as normative for the description and evaluation of experience. Moreover, since these Japanese thinkers are not simply interested in what is “rationally” meaningful in doctrines, they cannot be thrown into the same category as western philosophers who read Christian teachings within the bounds of reason alone. Because of their unique non-creedal yet religious approach to Christianity, the Kyoto School thinkers see mystical thought as representative of the best that Christianity has to offer to those who look at it from outside the institutional fold. This, too, is a topsy-turvy world for theology, which prefers to relegate the mystical tradition to an ancillary status.

Second, the words doctrine and experience are really being used in a somewhat different sense. In Christianity it is a specific body of doctrine that is taken to be central, but it is the idea of religious experience, whatever its content, that is made subservient to doctrine. In this way, whatever “doctrinal” content derives from a particular religious experience can be judged in the light of a more or less stable tradition of teachings. In other words, religious experience is viewed primarily as an alternative source of doctrine or of evaluating doctrine, and it is this idea that has to be given its proper place. But for the Buddhist-inspired philosophers of the Kyoto School, it is the idea of doctrine that is made secondary and actual experience that is definitive. Doctrine is viewed as one means to guide the believer along the path of awakened experience. Hence to ask a Buddhist to describe what objective “beliefs” are central to his faith is as likely to introduce foreign assumptions as asking ask a Christian to describe what religious experiences are central to Christian faith.

Now if it were merely a matter of two different traditions that, at some point, are incompatible, the matter could end there, or at least the ground would be clear for further discussion. But there is another, critical ingredient that changes everything: the rise of interreligious spiritualities within Christianity.

4 The dialogue within spirituality

I have the impression that a shift is taking place within the world of interreligious dialogue, but one that has not yet made itself felt to the full at the scholarly level. The last quarter of the twentieth century saw an explosion of interest in dialogue among world religions. Specialized courses, doctoral dissertations, books, dedicated jour-

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17 The Korean scholar of religions, Hee-Sung Keel, goes further to say that Eckhart’s Christianity is better suited to Asian Christianity than the dualistic ontological of the western dogmatic tradition. See his Meister Eckhart’s Asian Christianity, in: Studies in Interreligious Dialogue 14/1 (2004): 75–94.
nals, and even academic associations have sprung up across the Christian world, and to a lesser extent in the Buddhist world. The flurry of activity has had two effects. On the one hand, it has paved the way for a greater attention to the religious dimension in the political, problem-solving dialogue that has gone on, particularly with the Islamic world. On the other, as pure dialogue, it more raised serious concerns within Christianity over the form of its survival in a religiously plural world. In this latter regard, there is every sign that the balance is tilting more and more in the direction of accepting the challenge rather than warding it off as a “scandal and danger”.

One sign of this tilt is a move away from dialogue among established traditions to a dialogue among living spiritualities. In the former case, comparison of key religious doctrines tended to set the agenda for the dialogue. This meant that one tradition of texts and hermeneutical theory would face another tradition for mutual enrichment and criticism. Leaving aside questions of the Christian bias in the dialogue agenda, what was often lost in the exchange was the awareness that the spirit moving the dialogue did not spring out of the materials that were forming the basis for the dialogue or even from professed representatives of the established religions. If anything, dialogue entered the established religions only through a breakdown in resistance to a Zeitgeist that had taken shape at their borderlands. The formal dialogue among religions was a refraction of a dialogue that had already begun in the hearts of a generation of people in search of a spirituality that was eager to cross over received frontiers in the search of religious meaning. More closely bound to practice and experience than to doctrine, this “dialogue” has been largely informal, relatively free of institutional authority, and more often than not insufficiently self-critical. I have the feeling that this is changing as the demand to locate the fund of Christian symbols, practices, and teachings in a wider and multi-religious framework becomes more articulate.

It is no surprise that in such a situation the mystical tradition should be given a place of renewed importance in Christian self-understanding, even to the point of dislodging the objective creed from its dominant position and absorbing more and more of the underground, counter-traditional currents into the Christian mainstream. It is precisely here, I would suggest, that the Christian west has much to learn from the Buddhist east on recovering a sense of humility towards doctrine that has long suffocated under the weight of traditional theology. Just how to do this is a question for the future. Perhaps the Kyoto School thinkers in the academic interreligious dialogue years have yet to play their most important role.