THOUGHTS ON THE CHRISTIAN MISSION IN JAPAN
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RELIGION AND CULTURE IN JAPAN

For the better part of this century it has been the fashion to speak of Christianity in Japan as a "minority" religion. Advances in the study of social structures in general and of Japanese society in particular, as well as changes in the religious scene since the end of the World War II, have come to suggest that the classification may be inappropriate to the present state of Japanese Christianity. We are now in a better position to see that the underlying system of values found among non-Japanese Christians residing in Japan that allows us to characterize theirs as a "minority mentality" is at best of secondary significance to Japanese Christians themselves. Among them the dominant attitude is much closer to that of an international civic organization or esoteric society — such as the Lions' Club, the Rotary Club, the Freemasons, the Rosicrucians, and the like — than to the image it projects to the rest of the Christian world of a marginalized local Church struggling to establish a position in society from which to voice its faith and ultimate concerns. Honesty to the facts impels us to the realistic conclusion that Christianity in Japan is content to have earned itself a place as, in the words of a sociologist of religion at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, "only one of the many meaning-systems put on display in the religious consumers' market."

That a radically different set of values undergirds relations between religion and culture in Japanese society is evident already from statistics on religious affiliation and belief. (I do not intend here to dizzy you with any more numbers than necessary to make

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1 Jan Swyngedouw, "How the Japanese Look at Christianity," The Image of Christianity in Japan: A Survey (Tokyo, Sophia University, 1980), p.119. The survey to which this paper serves as a commentary, was conducted in 1977 and claims to be the first full-scale survey research devoted exclusively to Christianity in Japan.

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the point; those who feel data-deprived can still, at their leisure, follow the footnotes to their sources.) As highly cultivated a genre as the survey on religious matters is in Japan, and as often as the questions are phrased and rephrased with an eye to more accurate figures on the membership of religious groups, the result is invariably the same: the total number of those claiming adherence to Shinto, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, or any of the welter of sub-sects or “new religions” in Japan seldom exceeds 30% of the population (Buddhism about 25%, Shinto about 3.5%, and Christianity about 1.5%), while the statistics submitted to the Ministry of Education by these same groups add up to roughly 170% or more of the total population. At the same time, when asked which religions they feel “close to,” only 20% of those surveyed deny an affinity for any religion, while 17.6 point to Shinto, 63% to Buddhism, 12.4% to Christianity, and about 2% to other religions — the 95% total showing a significant number of double entries.2

One should not be too hasty here and conclude that Japanese religious organizations are more given to bending the facts than their counterparts in other countries, or that Japanese “reserve” impedes significant numbers of individuals either from acknowledging their religious affiliations or refusing any connection with religion. In fact, all of these of statistics are true in their own way — or perhaps better, all show the inadequacy of attempts to quantify the Japanese way of valuing religion according to categories familiar to the Christian West.

Nor should one be led astray by the word “Christianity,” whose meaning in Japan is far from contiguous with that of the West. The fact that as a whole the Christian Churches in Japan are structurally stable, relatively financially secure, and self-subsistent organizations, drawing their members from all strata of society and all types of occupations, easily leads one to suppose that these Churches are the major source of Christianity’s influence in Japan and the reason that for every self-confessed Christian there are 10 others who feel an affinity to Christianity. In reality, the strongest impact of Christianity on non-Christian Japan does not come from the Churches, but flows into the country from abroad

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as part of the ever-widening stream of Western ideas and customs. Christian modes of thought that Western cultures breathe in and out with equal ease when it is professing them, ignoring them, or openly rebelling against them, are still sufficiently foreign to the Japanese mind to require a response. The reverence paid individual freedom, the impatience with logical inconsistency among abstract principles, the submission of concrete ethical choices to transcendent values, and indeed the very notion of "belonging" to a religion are ideas the average Japanese is more likely to come into contact with through mass media and travel than through the Christian Churches of Japan. I do not mean to argue that these ideas represent the heart of Christianity— as surely they do not—but only to insist that these and other traditional carriers of Western Christian cultures are having a greater impact on contemporary Japanese culture than any message preached by the Christian Churches in Japan. To see this state of affairs as a sort of healthy, "pre-evangelizing" development clearing the path for the Gospel is only further to forslow the already long overdue process of bringing Christianity to Japan by first letting Christianity be Japanese.3

The process is one that is resisted not only by Western Christianity (which has admittedly begun to show signs of taking itself to task) but also by elements within Japanese culture itself which

3 While the literature pleading this cause if both sizeable and respectable, it has failed to effect any concrete change in the mind of the responsible hierarchy or those entrusted with designing seminary curricula. I cite only the words of one of Japan's leading Catholic intellectuals, Professor Anzai Shin of Sophia University:

For the Japanese who have for centuries been wrapping their religious mentality, feelings, etc. in different packages, this new religion is too much. For example, Westerners tend to speak in absolutes, in universals, in dualistic terms .... Japanese tend to think in synthetic terms; therefore such concepts as absolute vs. relative, sacred vs. profane, have no meaning .... For anyone to speak in Japanese, to Japanese, with Western concepts is like beating the air or spinning tires on ice.

It must be said that the Church has forgotten to distinguish, even in its own Western terms, the essential from the non-essential. It took many centuries for Western Christianity to fashion a beautiful square peg, and she has been trying to drive it into a round hole in Japan. The peg will not fit."Japan, Laity, and Christianity," The Japan Christian Yearbook (Tokyo, Kyobunkan, 1968), p. 160.
Japan's Christianity has taken over without question. Without entering into a lengthy excursus on Japanese "religiosity" and indigenous spirituality, on which matters at all events I continue to hold my own views highly suspect, I would only note here that the apparent inconsistency in statistics is not a modern phenomenon, but rests on a bedrock of habits of thought and behavior accumulated through centuries of assimilating foreign cultural influences. Put in the crudest terms, where Western cultures have tended to protect their values against the onslaught of foreign values by head-on confrontation, Japanese culture has insulated itself with a swampy marsh where foreign elements can neither get a foothold nor escape until they have been absorbed without remainder. As the Catholic novelist Endo Shusaku has said, what is absorbed into Japan is buried in Japan. As with any society, the genius of Japanese culture is never far from becoming its slavemaster. The same spirit that enabled Japanese Christians to adapt to the most rigorously dogmatic and culture-blind understandings of the Christian legacy without forfeiting their national identity has also protected them systematically from the radical critique of culture that is implicit in the Gospel.

The achievement is all the more remarkable when we think of how the floodgates of pluralism have been thrown open in contemporary Christianity. One would expect that the monolithic ideals Japanese Christians share with the surrounding culture would start to splinter under the pressure. In fact, precisely the opposite has occurred. The rushing torrent of theological opinion and pastoral experimentation streaming out of Christianity from all sides is let to flow freely into the Churches of Japan where it is transformed into a peaceful mountain lake in quiet harmony with its surroundings. Such is the mysterious alchemy that Japan has devised to negotiate its identity with the outside world.

This is not to say that Japanese culture is static or that its values have survived modernization unscathed, only that an adequate awareness of the extent of these changes seems to be lacking among its intelligentsia in government, academia, and religion. At a recent symposium bringing Shinto and Christian academics together, it was one of the foreign participants who had to point out to both sides engaged in debate about Shinto's claim to be the truest mirror of the soul of Japan that the "Japan" they were talking about is a memory that has passed irretrievably into his-
tory, leaving in its place the seeds of a new cultural diversity whose sprouts are breaking ground everywhere. The alarming rate with which books arguing the cause for a national “identity” or drawing contrasts between the Japanese people and the rest of the world are being published and read is no match for the changes that have taken place. “Being Japanese” and protecting the “harmony” of Japanese society, which are the fundamental religious values of Japan — and that includes Christian Japan — are slowly losing their grip. Even were a world crisis to provoke Japan into a new totalitarianism, a prospect not at all unrealistic, it would in my view be Japan’s last. No nation or people so tied to the rest of the world through commerce, media, and transportation as the Japanese can long sustain an insular culture, no matter how deep its roots or how firm the convictions of its leaders.

The great tragedy for Christianity would be, and in a sense already is, that the grace of so singular an opportunity to participate in the inculturation of Japan into global society is missed for want of a broader vision of its mission. In hopes of giving her a native face, the sponsa Christi has been painted like a Japanese bride, too cosmetically perfect to risk the crack of a smile or the moisture of a tear.

JAPANESE CATHOLICISM: THE MISSIONARY DIMENSION

There is no doubt that the Japanese Catholic Church gives the impression of keeping itself busy enough. The problem is that it also gives the impression of not taking itself critically enough. In spite of the fact that it has a greater ratio of priests and religious

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4The complete proceedings of this meeting will appear, in Japanese, at the end of this year. Brief reports were published in the pages of INTERRELIGIO No. 3, Spring 1982, pp. 2-10; and Bulletin No. 7 of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 1983, pp. 15-27.

5As an instance of this myopia I would cite here what one of the strongest proponents of the fundamental religion of “being Japanese,” Yamamoto Shichihei, has to say in a popular book published pseudonymously some years ago: “Surely it is futile to attempt to transform a faith as deeply rooted as Nihonism into another religion, yet Christian missionaries have long pursued this tragicomic course” (Isaiah BenDasan, The Japanese and the Jews, trans. by R. Gage, Tokyo, Weatherhill, 1972, p. 107).
to serve the general faithful than probably any other country in the world, making it the envy of other Asian countries. Church personnel are far from a leisure class. The demand for pastoral care and activities generated by local parish communities is phenomenal and leaves little time or motivation to dwell on comparative statistics. Workshops, study groups, and religious publications are everywhere in evidence. It comes as no surprise that this whole buzzing interplay of increasing demand and new activities should also serve as a defense against serious self-evaluation except that given Japan's cultural bias against pluralism, this lack has itself become a tradition, we might even say one of the ingredients of Catholic identity. That this state of affairs is also present among those who represent the missionary dimension of the Church is perhaps the gravest indictment of all.

I speak of a missionary dimension of the Church rather than simply of missionary activities by the Church because mission is not something a Church is at liberty to engage in or not depending on its available time and resources, as it is free, for instance, to start a parish kindergarten or boy scouts' troupe or not. Through its mission, a local Church reaches out beyond itself, transcending boundaries of nation, race, culture, and social status in order to partake in the universality of the Church and to protect its own particularity from egoism and isolationism. This two-way traffic of crossing over and homecoming in turn functions within the Catholic tradition as a sort of prophetic mechanism calling the Church to continued self-evaluation. Without a missionary dimension a Church is not yet Church — it is as simple as that.

It is this missionary dimension that has badly atrophied in Japanese Catholicism, despite the strong presence of foreign mission-oriented religious orders who represent to Japan the missionary dimension of local Churches in other lands. The Society of the Divine Word offers an altogether typical example of the current situation throughout the Catholic Church.

Since the arrival of the first Divine Word Missionaries to Japan in 1906, the Society has grown to a position of considerable institutional strength. Its 100 members, half of which are Japanese, work as pastors in 21 parishes, manage sizeable educational complexes in Nagasaki and Nagoya, and operate the second largest

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6 Working among Japan's 411,451 Catholics are 8,935 priests and religious, which accounts for fully 2.17% of the total (sisters alone make up 1.6%). See the Japan Catholic Directory 1983, p. 562
major seminary in the country. For all that, the total number of Japanese it has sent abroad as missionaries or released for mission work among minority groups within Japan can be counted on one hand. The image the Society projects to the Catholic Church differs from that of the diocesan clergy only in terms of the institutional impressiveness its schools, in particular Nanzan University and Nanzan Junior College, provide. The word “missionary” is not likely to be applied to the Japanese members but to be reserved to the foreigners in the Society. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the Japanese working in the Society, among whom any ideal other than that of working in the established Church of Japan is all but completely absent, identify themselves as missionary in virtue of their foreign confreres rather than in virtue of any distinctively missionary idealism. And this, I repeat, in a Church that enjoys a luxurious percentage of Church personnel.

Reasons given to support this state of affairs tend to center about the small numbers of Japanese Christians, the need for evangelizing at home, and the desire to reduce dependence on foreign missionaries. We need not dismiss these ideas as groundless in order to insist that they do not add up to an excuse for a missionary society’s failure to fulfill its basic purpose of bringing a missionary dimension to the local Church in the course of serving as its auxiliary.

It is perhaps only natural that we turn our attention to the system of seminary education in the attempt to find out just why this has come about. This is not the place to repeat my personal views on theological training in general or the curricula taught in Japan in particular, which are not in any case held in high regard by seminary administrators themselves. Suffice it to say that the theological training given aspirants to the Society of the Divine Word has yet to pose a serious challenge to the absence of a missionary dimension in Japanese Catholicism.

PATHS INTO THE FUTURE

As is well known, classical Western medicine spins on the axis of etiology. The symptoms of an illness are diagnosed after the model of effects stemming from a cause, and a cure is brought about by removing the cause. This was the tradition that gave the world the science of anatomy and the arts of surgical excision and replacement. Medicinal traditions in the East, and also among indigenous people of the Americas before they were redefined as
the New World, revolved on another axis: adaptation. The particular disturbances in an organism that made it ill were seen as so many maladjustments to the environment — physical, social, and spiritual — which needed to be set aright, one after the other, until such time as health was restored. It was out of these traditions that synthetic or what we now call "wholistic" views of the human body developed.

Much the same difference applies to the models used in the process of decision-making and social reform East and West, and it remains a constant cause of aggravation to the peoples of Asia that new ideas are regularly forced on them in the name of "common sense" or "self-evidence," what is really at stake is one set of presuppositions lording it over another.

Ultimately it is not Western theology or Western legislation that will bring about a deeper contact between the ideals of Christianity and the cultural legacy of Japan, but a metanoia among Japanese Christians themselves. It is a metanoia that foreigners can neither achieve for the Japanese by proxy nor even participate in. The conversion they are called to is a far humbler one: to learn enough respect for varieties of modes of thought and experience other than their own to stop obstructing the way.7 With that caveat in mind, I should like to point to three paths along which the Japanese Church, and in particular a mission congregation like the Society of the Divine Word, might dispatch its future in order to restore to Catholicism its missing missionary dimension.

First, it will be important for theologians and scholars of religion to make a more determined and collective effort to latch on to the demand for an indigenous theology at some concrete point and see it through to its full theoretical and practical consequences. On the one hand, without a tradition of indigenous theology the missionary dimension of the Japanese Church can never amount to more than Japan’s participation in missionary ideals imported from abroad. On the other, an indigenous theology does not come to birth all at once, but accumulates through responding to particular questions in particular circumstances. A look at the storm brewing around the most recent issue to arise in Christian circles, the decision to review the Church’s stance

7 Karl Rahner's forceful injunctions in this regard I find very much to the point. See his essay "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," Theological Studies, December 1979.
towards "ancestor worship," may help to clarify the present circumstances of theology in Japan.

A special commission to study the question of ancestor worship was set up by the Catholic Church and a preliminary draft of its conclusions drawn up and published in the pages of Japan's Catholic Newspaper. Tame as it was, and indeed something of a theological embarrassment to more liberal elements in the Church, the proposal met with an outcry of protest that has driven it back to the commission for rewriting. The Asahi Journal, one of Japan's more popular left-of-center weeklies, carried an article on the problem by one of Japan's well-known religious critics which characterized the effort as a "secularizing" trend in Catholicism lending support to Shinto nationalism. Seminars and workshops on the subject conducted by the Protestants have met with similar resistance from their Japanese pastors.

This rear-guard battle being waged here under the aegis of theology in fact has little if anything to do with theological differences. It is political. Japanese Christians, especially Protestants, are keen not to erase the scars left at home and abroad by "Japanization." After all, that was the ideal that inspired the occupying forces of Japan's Imperial Army to initiate in 1938 the suppression of Christianity in Korea and demand that all Christians worship at Shinto shrines, and during the War to abolish all Christian sects and replace them with what was called the "Japanese Christian Korean Council of Churches." In the name of "Japanized" Christianity the Bible and hymns were expurgated of anything inconsistent with the mind of the militaristic government. Meanwhile, in Japan itself, the United Church of Christ in Japan was formed in 1941 in response to government requests that the Churches do their part to unify the nation, a move which the same

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body later publicly confessed as its own sinful complicity in the War. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Christianity was an openly persecuted religion in Japan from 1641 to 1873, during most of which period (1633 to 1854) a policy of national isolation cut the country off from the rest of the world. All of these factors give the words “indigenization” or “inculturation” connotations largely unknown among Western theologians.

The theological problem is, in a sense, deeper. Lacking sufficient roots in Japanese culture and spirituality to speak to problems like ancestor worship, Christian theologians can only appeal to their own discipline by deferring to the “international” character of the Church, which is of course of little help in tackling the issue. In this way, the attention given to the political aspects of the problem serves as a further proof of the impoverishment of Japanese theology. Meantime, the force of complaints against the foreignness of Western theology is beginning to wear thin. At some point, theologians will have to set issues like ancestor worship squarely in the grip of their theological sensitivities until the two begin to reform one another. This is the first path down which those concerned with the missionary dimension of the Japanese Church might look for hope.

Secondly, and most obviously, religious orders like the Society of the Divine Word whose Rule is constructed explicitly on missionary ideals might begin to sacrifice their local parochial commitments in order to send significant numbers of young Japanese religious into the developing countries where they might gain immediate experience of Christianity involved in the struggle for life and dignity. Then, as their experience filters back to the

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10Further historical data on the relations between Christianity and Japanese nationalism can be found in Richard H. Drummond, *A History of Christianity in Japan* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1971) pp. 196-202; The history of the aftermath is dealt with more extensively in James M. Phillips, *From the Rising of the Sun: Christians and society in contemporary Japan* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1981).

11Theological arguments mustered in opposition to indigenous theologies in Asia frequently stress the primacy of the “global community” and the great loss to Japan were it to abandon its study of Western theology. If one does not do them the courtesy of reading them in the light of political history, they end up sounding like nothing more than an apology for having scholarly expertise acquired abroad and exercised at home. In this regard, see Furuya Yasuo, “A Critical View on the So-Called Asian Theology,” *Theological Studies in Japan* 21, 1982, pp. 26-38.
homeland, there would be concrete grounds for restructuring the training process and for expanding the horizon of concerns of the Japanese Church itself.

For many, the proposal is dismissed as too early for this generation of Christians. It would be nearer the facts to admit that it is in danger of being too late for them. The longer the conscience and youthful idealism of the Japanese Church continues systematically to be diverted away from the global concerns that cry out daily through the press and the media, the more we may expect a life of devotion to the Church to become identified as a form of nationalism baptized with Christian belief. And when this nationalism is rejected, as I believe it will have to be before this century is behind us, the Church will only find itself further marginalized from Japanese life.

It may be noted here that the Protestant Churches of Japan have been sending Christian workers overseas since the 1950s and have now reached all six continents. This effort has done much to heal the resentment left in East Asian countries by the cooperation of Christian chaplains with the Japanese government and military, and is also responsible for producing one of the first Japanese theologians to gain recognition for an original, "Asian" contribution to the worldwide theological community. It is still too early to demonstrate, as I suppose to be the case, that the relative vitality and variety of Protestant theology compared with Catholic theology, can be traced to the greater importance given by the Protestant community to the mission effort. Moreover, recent upheavals in models of mission theory and practice, as well as new directions in interreligious work, have yet to have the impact on the Christian Churches of Japan they enjoy elsewhere in the world. Still, we have every reason to suppose that the impact of a generation of returning foreign missionaries on the international awareness of Japanese Christianity will only deepen as these developments take stronger hold.

Thirdly, and closely related to what has just been said, concern with the missionary dimension of the Church cannot be divorced from a firm commitment by professional missionary organization to promote the engagement of lay members of the

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12 The reference here is to Koyama Kosuke, best known for his book *Waterbuffalo Theology* (London, SCM, 1974), who served from 1960 to 1968 as a missionary to the Church of Christ in Thailand. He is currently on the staff of Union Theological Seminary in New York.
Church in the Church's missionary effort. Japanese Catholicism, it must be said, is one of the strongest outposts of clerical Christianity anywhere in the world. Whatever explanation is given for this situation—though it is hardly enough of a burning issue in clerical circles to oblige the average pastor to give the matter a second thought—the commitment of the Second Vatican Council to a "Church of the faithful" remains on the paper it was printed on. Since, however, there is no reason to hope that Japan will continue simply to tail along after the Western Church in reforming its structures, it is best to let the rest of the world be scandalized for the time being, and to disassociate any positive steps to involve the laity in the Church's missionary dimension from any grander schemes.

To my knowledge, the first lay missionary sent abroad by the Catholic Church in Japan was a young man of twenty-five dispatched to the Philippines by the Bishop of Yokohama in the fall of this year. Events leading up to this important step began some years ago when a young Catholic woman took it upon herself to do extended volunteer work as a nurse in Zaire. Over a decade she spent a total of seven years in that capacity, despite the general indifference that met her upon returning home to Japan. On one such visit she met with a young Australian Divine Word missionary, who was impressed by her enthusiasm and set about to see if he might interest other young Japanese Christians in similar commitments.

There was a good cause to be optimistic at the time. The sting of conscience felt in Christian Japan over the plight of the "boat people" had proved an occasion for concern with conditions in Southeast Asia. Several parishes had recently formed organizations to help refugees in Japan find homes and employment. Groups of students from Japan's Catholic universities had begun to organize for inter-semester volunteer work in Thailand and the Philippines. And all of this activity, in turn, drew the attention of many in the Church to the small number of isolated individuals working to promote cooperation among Japanese youth and the youth of other Asian countries.

As it turned out, the response to the idea of lay missionary work was so encouraging that the rudiments of a lay missionary
organization have now been set up and plans for beginning the training and placement of more volunteers are well on their way to becoming a reality.\(^4\) It may be a good many years before propriety and good taste allow the full story to be told of the opposition the idea encountered on its way to recognition, let alone the obstacles still to lie ahead. But one can only hope that it is one of those movements whose harvest will reward the toil invested on its behalf.

A Note on Interreligious Dialogue in Japan

In conclusion, a word may be in order to explain why direct mention of interreligious dialogue has been omitted from the above account of the Church’s mission in Japan.\(^5\) Simply put, before the Japanese Church can extend its sense of tradition to include the inheritance of the wealth of other religious traditions, it needs first to establish its own tradition – as Japanese and as Church. While I see the missionary dimension as critical to this two-fold process, and also see interreligious work as the blossoming of that missionary dimension, I have learned to be realistic enough not to set out to harvest fields that have not been seeded.

Like other Christian Churches in Japan, the Catholic Church views interreligious dialogue as a peripheral concern. The level of tolerance, and in some cases even encouragement, that it has shown to those given to the work is due almost entirely to foreign influences within Japan and current moods in the world theological community. There is perhaps no other aspect of Christian life in Japan that flows so far astream of the main current of Church life than that of interreligious dialogue, and yet it is a face that the Churches seem proud to wear before the rest of the Christian world.

At the same time, the contributions that are being made in Japan by Christians engaged in dialogue with Buddhism, Shinto, and other religions are considerable and augur well for the future.


\(^{15}\) A condensed account of the state of interreligious dialogue in Japan and its relationship to Japanese Christianity has been prepared for a special issue of \textit{Concilium} by the director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Jan Van Bragt under the title “New Dialogue with Buddhism in Japan” (No. 181, pp. 68-73).
The research and activities conducted under the sponsorship of Japan’s several interreligious organizations have done much to further ecumenical cooperation among the Christian Churches, to create common ground for Japan and its Asian neighbors, and to draw the attention of many in the Western Churches to the full consequences of religious pluralism. Perhaps the most important challenge that lies ahead for these organizations is the formidable one of widening intra-religious encounter into an encounter with social problems of urgency to the world community. On that, it is my hope, you shall be hearing more in the years to come.