Let me first express my feelings of gratitude to the organizers of this conference for taking the initiative and preparing this encounter between Buddhism and Christianity. As far as I know, Europe has been lagging behind on this point, when compared to Japan, the United States and India. I am also grateful that they have invited me to it - because that gives me the occasion to meet all of you - and for giving me an intriguing and, I think, very apt title to speak about.

I suppose, however, that what they really want us to do tonight is:
- to reflect together on the meaning of what we are going to do this weekend;
- to focus clearly the questions we will bring to the current discussion;
- to present or recall some background information which is necessary to situate the talks, to put them in the right perspective, and thereby to help our understanding of them.

I shall not, therefore, immediately proceed to the challenges to Christian theology, but - in the best classical tradition - divide my talk into three parts:
1. Why encounter the East?
2. The Kyoto School and Buddhist philosophy
3. The challenge to Christian theology from Kyoto School Buddhist philosophy.

Why Encounter the East?

I submit that all of us, by our very presence here tonight, have affirmed that we are somehow engaged in an encounter with the East, with “Eastern Wisdom.” That personal encounter with the East may be of greater or lesser depth and intensity - and I want to say immediately that I am ready to believe that there are among you persons who, thanks to a greater gift of empathy, have encountered the East at a deeper level and

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1 This is a slightly reworked version of an introductory talk given to the Conference on Buddhism and Christianity, De Tiltenberg, The Netherlands, in June, 1988.
obtained a more penetrating insight into it than I have myself, despite my 26 years’ stay in the East.

And, of course, this encounter with the East is of a rich variety, depending on the branch of Eastern Wisdom one is involved with: Tibetan tantra, Chinese taoism, Indian yoga, Japanese zen, or whatever. Logicians may even say that the so-called “East” or “Eastern Wisdom” does not exist, is nonsense or even pure abstraction, nothing but a mental amalgamation of very disparate things. We must, of course, applaud this warning of the logicians, and also of anthropologists, sociologists of religion and others. Still, for us, people of the Western Judaeo-Christian tradition, the East or “Eastern Wisdom” is at the least a psychological reality as a kind of mirror-image of ourselves or an alternative culture. For a certain cultural elite it has been that for a long time - in fact, since the 17th century, when Leibnitz and others saw the reports on Chinese Confucianism sent back to Europe by Jesuit missionaries - and in the last 25 years it has begun to play such a role for a broader stratum of people.

When we ask ourselves why we want to encounter the East, to know more about it, and perhaps adopt some of its ways, what our motivations are for this quest and what exactly we expect to gain from it, some of us may come up with a clear-cut answer, or refer to a specific vacuum in their lives which the East fills up. However, I suspect that most of us will not be able to offer such a definite answer and are living their contact with the East as a non-descript voyage of discovery, an intellectual and spiritual “adventure” - not, of course, an arbitrary and capricious one, but one prompted by some vaguely felt need or the spirit of the times ... “Why do you want to climb that mountain?” “Because it is there.” And recently the East has become “there,” a challenging presence for many of us.

By the way, the expression “voyage of discovery” may remind us of the fact that our endeavour is not without its risks and dangers. The voyages of discovery of the 16th century Spanish and Portuguese explorers did not bring only good results to the world. Still, their discoveries and subsequent contacts between people had to come sooner or later and the spirit of their quest may have been basically different from ours. To be sure, they also looked for things lacking in Europe (gold, spices, etc.), but in the expansionist mood of Renaissance Europe, they were intent on conquering these things, while we, rather, may be willing to be conquered, in other words, to receive from others, to learn from others.

When I say “we” in this context I mean “we here,” without judging to what extent our Western culture as a whole has already moved beyond that centuries-old mentality of superiority which asserted that “we” are the only ones who have true civilization, philosophy and religion - or, à la Hegel, that our civilization is the outcome of the development of all the others,
and contains all the others aufgegeben in itself.

It is good to remind ourselves of the “newness” of Westerners of this desire to learn from others. When did the West last learn from others? Probably at the time of the crusaders, when all kinds of things were adopted from the Arabs. Contrast this with the experience of most Eastern peoples who, since colonial times, have been obliged to recognize their inferiority in technical matters and have adopted many things Western, including religious elements from Christianity. Thus the “era of dialogue,” which seems so new to us, does not appear so to them. They may rather have the impression that they have already taken from the West and Christianity everything they wanted from it.

Why Encounter Kyoto School Philosophy?
Against this backdrop, what could our encounter with the philosophy of the zen-inspired Kyoto school mean for us? Allow me to suggest a few possible answers:

First, our encounter could bring us an awareness of the presuppositions of our own philosophy and religion. As John Hick has said, “Zen philosophy presents a radical alternative to various presupposed doctrines of Western thought which seem [to us] not doctrines but inevitable categories of the human mind .... People do not see them, but [see] other things through them” (1985, IX). Indeed, it is a basic truth that one sees one’s own presuppositions only in the mirror of the other, who has a different set of presuppositions - and the Buddhist worldview certainly has a different set.

Second, we may experience a correction of imbalances and disfigurements which may have crept into our own tradition in the course of history. We might think here first of all of the Renaissance which set our civilization on a course so different from the other cultures of the world, which has made it in many respects an anomaly in the history of humankind. Here will come to mind immediately the very pronounced anthropocentrism and stress on the ego which have, in a sense, set our civilization on the course for external success, but success at the cost of narrowing the full human perspective and of forgetting many of the values of the earlier tradition. Indeed, the task of dialogue may bestow on us values never cultivated in our own tradition and will certainly also help us to recover values long neglected.

Concretely speaking, the encounter with zen may further help us to relativize the thought-pattern of the natural sciences which more and more invades and dominates all aspects of our lives. It has become clear by now that the spread of this thought-pattern - no matter how true and efficient it may be in its own domain - is responsible for many of the dangers of our age, such as ecological destruction, the lowering of the quality of human life by reducing human relations to functional relationships, the
narrowing of the dimensions of what is perceived as human. One of the main “reductions” wrought by this approach has been indicated by the process philosopher Hartshorne, who said, “[In the West we have developed] a technique of reasoning which will not allow the religious idea even to be expressed” (1967, X). On these points, too, the philosophy of the Kyoto School can be of much help to us.

The Kyoto School and Buddhist Philosophy

Now I come to the most difficult part of my task: to give you briefly a thumbnail sketch of what has come to be called the "Kyoto School of philosophy". I shall limit myself to the points most relevant for our current discussions. Let me begin by quoting a “definition” I wrote (for the Introduction to the translation of Keiji Nishitani's Religion and Nothingness): “Briefly put, the Kyoto School is a way of philosophizing - more of a philosophic ethics than a unified system of thought - which developed in the departments of philosophy and religion at the State University of Kyoto under the initial inspiration of Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945)” (Nishitani, 1982, translator’s introduction, XXVIII).

As basic characteristics of the Kyoto School we can immediately mention the following:
1. a committed openness to the Western traditions;
2. a deliberate attempt to bring about a synthesis of East and West;
3. a thoroughgoing loyalty to its own tradition: Eastern, Buddhist, Japanese;
4. an all-pervasive religiosity

Permit me to enlarge a bit on these basic characteristics.

East and West

While other departments of philosophy in Japan simply take the line of Western philosophy and mirror faithfully every movement taking place in the Western philosophical scene - without showing much dynamism of their own or taking root in their native Japanese situation - the Kyoto School stands out as the great exception. While very well versed in Western philosophy and mainly using Western categories, they resolutely choose to philosophize from out of their Eastern heritage. They continue the line of Eastern thought, update it with the help of Western philosophy, and in this way very consciously work at a synthesis of Eastern and Western thought.

Needless to say, this is the first and fundamental reason why we who want to incorporate, at least to some degree, the Wisdom of the East, are interested in the Kyoto School. They have been building many bridges from East to West which may facilitate our passage from West to East; and long before the present “vogue” of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, they
have been engaged in it on a high theoretical level. As citizens of Japan, the most thoroughly Westernized Eastern country, they have felt the meeting of East and West as an existential necessity. As Nishitani once wrote, “We Japanese have fallen heir to two completely different cultures, a great privilege that Westerners do not share in ...” (1967, 2).

The Role of Buddhism
For the philosophers of the Kyoto School, their Eastern heritage means first of all Buddhist thought and religiosity. It may be good to point out, however, that “Buddhism” here means Japanese Buddhism.

Now Japanese Buddhism is indeed Buddhism, and thus the notions of pratiya-samutpada (interdependent co-production, the negation of any permanent substance one could cling to) and anatman (non-ego, which undercuts the basic self-affirmation through which man makes himself a permanent centre of his world) are central to it. But it is also a Mahayana Buddhism, wherein the original world-negating dynamic (from samsara to nirvana) has been bent back to samsara - sive - nirvana - or “negation of the negation of this world.” Here Nagarjuna’s Emptiness (shunyata) idea, with its stress on the overcoming of all dichotomies, is very important. Moreover, mercy is supposed to be as central as wisdom in the ideal figure of the Bodhisattva, who instead of entering nirvana (which he could do through wisdom) returns to this world to guide all others to nirvana first.

Japanese Buddhism is likewise East Asian Buddhism; it has gone through a transformation in its contact with Chinese culture. Two traits of this transformation may be especially important for our discussions:

1. the influence of Taoism, whereby the Buddhist idea of emptiness tends to coagulate with the Taoist idea of nothingness and comes to take on the traits of an absolute monism, and whereby in East Asia “unity with nature” becomes part of the ideal of Buddhhism, which was originally rather a-cosmic;
2. the influence of Confucianism in that Buddhism leaves the domain of ethics and social life to the dominant Confucianism and clearly takes the stand that religion transcends ethics, is beyond good and evil.

Finally, Japanese Buddhism is a Buddhism that, through a symbiosis with Japanese Shinto religiosity, came to minimize the importance of the Buddhist precepts, and came to “identify” very much the religious with the aesthetic. As Prof. Winston King says, “Aesthetic form and feeling in many situations are taken to be more important in Japan than practice or substance” (Nishitani, 1982, Foreword, X).

The “All-Pervasive Religiosity”
The philosophy of the Kyoto School can be said to be “intrinsically religious,” “intrinsically Buddhist” and for the greater part “intrinsically
zen.” Indeed, there can be no doubt that the philosophy of the Kyoto School in religious through and through. For these philosophers “the cognitive pursuit of reality is inseparably bound up with those ultimate concerns that have come to be known as religion” (Nishitani, 1982, translator’s introduction, XXIII), and true reality is to be found in the domain of religion and only there. To quote only two of Nishitani’s most significant sayings:

When we speak of things “as they really are,” we are in the field of religion (1982, 5). The fact that this staff is a staff is a fact in such a way as to involve at the same time the deliverance of the self (1982, 158).

On this point Kyoto philosophy stands in the Eastern tradition where, in contrast to the Western tradition with its dichotomy of reason and faith, “philosophy” is something that developed in unison with religious purposes and practices, without ever setting itself up as a system of “objective” knowledge, complete in itself and detached from the realm of the religions. This is, of course, the case for Buddhist philosophy in general, where the unity of the religious and the speculative has never been severed.

From this we could conclude that the word “philosophy” in the expressions “Eastern philosophy,” “Buddhist philosophy” has a somewhat different meaning from what it means in “Western philosophy.” This is, as far as I can see, the main reason why Eastern speculative thinking and Western speculative thinking find it so hard to dovetail, as they could be supposed to do in the present global era, and why there is very little interest in the Kyoto School among purely philosophical schools in the West.

But it may be salutary to remark here also that the word “religion” is not so univocal as it may seem at first sight. Some of you may be acquainted with the tendency among 19th-century Western scholars of Buddhism to say that Buddhism is not a religion but a system of moral and spiritual philosophy, without any of the usual trappings of religion such as priests, rituals, symbols, and gods.

And, although we now know better - that Buddhism as it actually exists (even including zen) is a religion all right, with all the usual trappings - there remains, I believe, some truth in what these people said. Buddhism originally appeared not so much as a religion but as a kind of spiritual counter-movement to the existing ritualistic religion. (Of course, the same could probably be said of Christ’s message, and equally of Socrates in his time.) This may account for the fact that the “religion” of the Kyoto School is almost completely divorced from the phenomenology of religion and practically disregards religious community, ritual, prayer, symbolism. This also accounts for the fact that Professor Abe’s “religion” has been called de facto a “thinly disguised atheism.”
Questions
On the other hand, if there is one thing that distinguishes the philosophers of the Kyoto School from their Buddhist predecessors, it is their confrontation with Western philosophy and their determination to see their speculation as expressly “philosophical” in the Western sense. However, this immediately evokes a two-pronged question:
1. Can this intrinsically religious speculation really stand by itself, apart from religious practice, in logical autonomy?
2. And if it wants to do that, can it still be a real representative of Buddhism, in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue?

From this related questions arise: is Kyoto School philosophy not guilty of an unwarranted crossing of the boundaries between different levels of discourse? Do not originally religio-practical tenets of Buddhism change their meaning when projected on the level of ontology (Anatman-Emptiness)?

We might also align these questions here:
- Does the religious philosophy of the Kyoto School fit the facts of religious consciousness in history?
- Does the Kyoto School philosophy faithfully express Buddhism, at least its deeper layers?
- Does the Kyoto School philosophy really express zen in its totality or only the movement of quiet, silent zazen?

The Challenge to Christian Theology from Kyoto-School Buddhist Philosophy

We finally come now to the subject matter indicated in my title. I have called this title apt or felicitous for two reasons. First, I believe that the real partner in the West of the Kyoto School philosophy, at least for the time being, is Western Judeo-Christian theology, rather than Western philosophy. Second, I believe that the Kyoto School represents quite a serious challenge, whereby our Western theology may be obliged to reflect more deeply than ever on its presuppositions and to revise quite a number of its favourite traditional concepts.

It was the very perspicacious German professor of the Christian worldview, Romano Guardini who, in the 1920s, characterized Buddhism as the most serious challenge Christianity has ever faced in its entire history. “Challenge” ears, of course, not only attack and danger but also opportunities for purification and growth, a kind of grace. But these positive elements are not possible without the attack and danger. It is regrettable that the one who is supposed to present this challenge to Christian theology is not himself a theologian, but this, perhaps, is not so important in the long run since the brief catalogue of points on which the Buddhist challenge appears to bear, which I am going to present here, is only meant to be suggestive and in no way normative. It is only from the actual dialogue that we
will get a true idea of the nature of the challenge.

I first want to confess that the thing I hope for most from this challenge is a certain liberation of Christian theology from the captivity of Western (Greek) philosophy, whose original inspiration and fundamental notions are so very different from those of the Bible. It certainly looks as if the ancilla or maidservant, philosophia, has had a bit too much (distorting) influence on her mistress, theologia. This emancipation is, of course, important for Christianity in the East, but also for theology as such.

A Questionable Dichotomy
Let me now present my brief list of challenges, which is not intended to be exhaustive.

We might begin with the challenge to our traditional dichotomy of faith and reason: the fact that we tend to assume one worldview in moments of spiritual reading and another in moments of rational analysis. Buddhism seems to prod us by its example, asking “Why don’t you start elaborating a truly Christian philosophy, a ‘Christian logic’?” For Buddhism does have a truly Buddhist philosophy; it has a mode of speculation which
- takes as its radical point of departure the Buddhist religious experience of reality as expressed in the Four Holy Truths;
- provides a systematic explanation of that religious doctrine and attitude of life;
- constructs for it an appropriate logic.

The Christian West does not possess anything comparable in the way of a “Christian philosophy.” Even after the advent of Christianity, Western philosophy held fast to its Greek origins, which were geared for the explanation of the “natural phenomena” of the world, and did not make a fundamental shift in orientation to serve as an explanation and logic of the Christian religious experience of reality.

Re-evaluating the Negative
One of the fundamental differences between Greek philosophy and Christianity may be that Greek philosophy is basically immediate affirmation, while Christianity is world-affirmation through the mediation of negation. The Buddhist logic then seems to challenge us to a deeper understanding and fuller “speculative valorization” of the negative moment of Christianity. The Kyoto philosophers are inclined to say that Western philosophy does not pay enough attention to the negative elements of reality and therefore never gives a positive role to the notion of “nothingness.” They say that in the West there is always an absolute priority of being over nothingness; nothingness is seen only as the secondary negation of the primary affirmation, being. I think the Buddhists would say that nothingness is indeed a negation of being, but being
is equally a negation of nothingness.

It cannot be denied, of course, that the central theme of Christianity is “resurrection through death,” the death of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ is resurrection through death. Christ himself appears to “naturalize” this in a sense when he says, “If the seed does not die it does not bear fruit.”

Would Hajime Tanabe express a “Christian logic” when he writes, for example, “Our existence can be founded [not in direct affirmation, but] only on a principle of transformation or conversion that presents itself through self-negation” (1986, 4)? To make this a bit clearer, I will also quote a few lines by Langdon Gilkey, a theologian of the University of Chicago - remarks which were, by the way, made in response to some things said by Prof. Abe: “The issue ... raised in contemporary theology ... involves the related God, in some sense a conditionedness on the part of God, and implies a vulnerability on the part of God. I think here the dialectic of being and non-being is closer to the authentic Christian message than the conception of pure being” (1985, 74). And also: “I think there is a bit of a contradiction for a faith that asserts unequivocally the being of God and then has its centre in the death of the Son of God” (1985, 77).

Thus in Christianity the negative moment is not taken as seriously as the positive moment. This is, of course, not to say directly that the notion of nothingness or non-being or emptiness could ever play the same dominant role in Christianity that it does in Buddhism - Christianity, after all, finds a strong positivity of being in the doctrine of creation - nor that this sole notion could solve all the problems either of Christianity or of Buddhism.

The Primacy of Experience

The third point I wish to make concerns the distrust of conceptual language in Buddhism. Briefly, it is a deep distrust, a conviction that we can never in our human language express the absolute. Again, I am not sure whether Christianity can ever go so far in this distrust of language - there is, after all, the doctrine of the logos - but still Buddhism may challenge us to a greater consciousness of the inadequacy of our human concepts and language before the Absolute.

My fourth point, very much related to the last one, is the Buddhist challenge to place more stress on religious experience, over against dogmatic formulas or the kind of faith whereby the object of faith remains a mere object, completely outside of the believer. Of course, that stress on experience is no stranger to the Christian mystics.

As you know, Buddhism - especially the Mayahana tradition - stresses the point that the Buddha and all his teachings can be found in one’s own heart, one’s true Self, one’s Buddha-nature, and that the important thing is to experience, to realize this. Indeed, it is often said that precisely this
stress on experience attracts many Western people to Buddhism. This characteristic of Buddhism is perhaps most forcefully expressed in zen, with its so-called rejection of the scriptures; its reduction of everything to kenshō: seeing one's own nature; and its "if you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha", that is, a Buddha outside of oneself is an idol.

Christian mystics, too, go quite far in this direction. Did not St. Paul say, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20, New International Version)? And Brother Steindl-Rast recently wrote, “Each Christology answers the question, who is Jesus? in a different way. But the upshot is: It’s you. Until you can recognize Jesus Christ in yourself and yourself in Jesus Christ, you haven't caught on to the Christian message” (113). But I want to add a word here: Christian mystics and most Zen sayings and also most of the Kyoto School doctrines move on the high peaks of religiosity, not easily reachable by the average believer. It is important, at least for Christianity, to know what all this can mean for the ordinary person. In this connection, another line from Gilkey can perhaps help us in our reflections: “We don’t have a particularly higher consciousness in which the validity of our symbols comes clear, but I think that there is a kind of experiencing, liturgical and devotional, as well as in one's ordinary life, that is the basis of our hope” (1985, 76).

And again, a strong stress on personal experience may need a counterbalance in Christianity, still more than it needs it in Buddhism. In Buddhism this stress can be said to go in the direction of Wisdom, the ascent to the Absolute, and must be counterbalanced by - and finally identify with - Compassion, the descent to one’s fellow creatures. This stress may be said to have some affinities with existentialism, which sometimes became “an elegant forgetfulness of the social dimension.” It could be characterized as “con-centric”: seeking God in oneself, while the thrust of the Gospel appears to be “ex-centric”: seeking God in the other, one's neighbour, not only in feeling or idea, but in act.

On the other hand, however, the Buddhist insistence that true Compassion is only possible together with wisdom is needed to counterbalance our Western tendency towards empty activism and unreflective "do-gooder-ness".

The Role of Pratitya-Samutpada
A further and all-pervasive challenge to our traditional Western way of thinking, which also informs our theology, comes to us from the previously mentioned doctrine of pratitya-samutpada (that is, interdependent co-production). This was undoubtedly one of the centrepieces of the worldview of original Buddhism, geared to breaking down the self-centred human ego. It was further developed, for instance, in Nagajuna's idea of emptiness and in the Chinese Kegon philosophy and, arguably, is responsible for the “taming” of the Asian peoples into relatively tolerant, peace-loving, kindly people.
We cannot go into this doctrine here, of course, but in short, instead of seeing all things, including one's own self, as substances with their own boundaries, here a “relativism” is proposed which demolishes all these frontiers. Everything is only its relations to everything else. The usual simile or image is that of the “Indra net” where, on every crossing of the threads (the individual things), a crystal is attached that mirrors and thus contains all the others. The Kegon school also speaks of an unhindered interpenetration of all things.

In Christianity we have this relational model, but have reserved it for the Holy Trinity in which the three Persons are one in circuminsessional interpenetration. In Buddhism, on the other hand, it is universally applied to everything, without a single exception. To begin, I must then apply it to myself and my fellow human beings. And there can be no doubt that a strong consciousness of one’s total dependence on one’s fellow humans (all of them) is an excellent remedy for self-conceit and anger against others. David Chappell, a professor in religion at Hawaii University, remarks that he never picked up a sense of resentment against the Chinese from Tibetan Buddhists who were living in exile. He writes, "You suddenly remove that dichotomy where I am being hurt by someone else. I think that's a fundamental challenge, a metaphysical challenge, to the West" (1985, 92). It is, actually, a challenge to our individualism.

There are no isolated individuals. Is it also a challenge to Christian personalism? How does such a personalism relate to the "no-self" implied here? And how does this conception, in which the other as other disappears, affect our definition of Love as the deepest I-Thou relationship? (Incidentally, this problematic is already present in Buddhism where it is said that for wisdom the other does not exist, but the other does exist for compassion.)

The relationist pattern is applied also to the relationship of humankind and nature. This brings us to the very real problem of ecology. What kind of thinking about nature can prevent us humans from destroying nature? Again, the idea of total mutual dependency and ultimate synthesis seems to be a good candidate. There can be no doubt that our Western civilization, at least since the Renaissance, has often put man against nature, as res cogitans against res extensa, history against nature, and so on. It is clear that the original Biblical image of man, the steward over nature in the service of the creator, is much more balanced and nuanced. Still, the same Langdon Gilkey (of the Protestant tradition) speaks of “what is certainly one of the major problems of all three of the religions that stem from the Hebrew religion, namely the separation of humans from nature ...” (1985, 72).

On the other hand, I have already mentioned my idea that Indian Buddhism was rather a-cosmic and did not really elaborate on the pratitya-
samutpada between humankind and nature. The unity of man and nature came to be stressed in Chinese Buddhism under the influence of Taoism with its “biological-organic idea of the universe” and its “amorphous unity of nondistinction.” Here one begins to speak of the Buddha-nature in all sentient beings and later also in inanimate things such as mountains and rivers. This tendency may have grown still stronger in Japan with its native animism.

Finally, the pratitya-samutpada idea is applied to the relationship of humankind/world to the Buddha, the Absolute, God. But we shall leave that for a later point. Let me close this part with just three short remarks:

- Of all Western philosophies, Whiteheadian process philosophy is often singled out as most contiguous to the Buddhist worldview of interdependent co-production.
- Nishitani Keiji thinks that, because of the substantialist elements it contains, Christianity cannot really overcome the human ego-centredness.
- The Japanese Protestant theologian, Katsumi Takizawa (a disciple of Nishida and Barth), has said, “Herein true Christianity and zen stand on common ground, that they both radically eliminate the vulgar way of thinking, especially of modern humanism, which first isolates the human individual and posits it as an independent person, to speak of its relationship to God, nature and other human beings only afterwards” (1973, 151).

The Challenge to all Dichotomies

My next point is intimately connected with the former one, in that it also points in the direction of the original unity of everything, of the mutual presence of everything in everything. It alone permits us to look at things from different angles. I refer here to the challenge, represented by the Buddhist idea of the necessity of overcoming all dichotomies: as long as one puts contradictories over against one another and then sides with one of them, one is not in the truth and will not be able to get rid of one's attachment to things.

The idea came to the fore in the early Mahayan Prajnaparamita Sutras and was elaborated philosophically in Nagarjuna’s emptiness philosophy, but in a sense it is only an application of the older Buddhist idea of the “Middle Path”: clinging neither to the sensual life nor to asceticism, neither to being nor to annihilation. Now one draws the ultimate conclusion: do not cling to nirvana as opposed to samsara: samsara is nirvana. This is a revolutionary idea because all religions, including early Buddhism, are built on some kind of dichotomy: salvation against sin or suffering, good against evil, truth against falsehood, and so on.

Let me now briefly indicate how this approach would affect Christian ideas. First, regarding the idea of God: we are used to ascribing to God only the
good or superior pole of the dichotomies of being and non-being, good and evil, truth and falsehood, spirit and matter. We say, “God is good” and negative theology adds “but not with a goodness as found in creatures.” From the Buddhist tenet, however, we would have to say:

- God is, but not with a being that opposes nothingness; rather God’s being is one with nothingness.
- God is good, but not with a goodness that opposes evil.
- God is spirit, but not with a spirituality that opposes matter.
- God is person, but not with a personhood that is opposed to impersonality.

All of this may still sound like abstract lucubration, but it has its implications in our daily human life. “Christian life” is often represented as a battlefront of good against evil, truth against falsehood. Mahayana Buddhism would say that such an attitude is false. In fact, historically speaking, this mentality of good against evil has led to much fanaticism and ostracism of people; the mentality of truth against untruth has led to loveless exclusivism and the burning of heretics together with their books.

The attitude of overcoming dichotomies urges one not to situate oneself on one of the extreme sides of polarity and then to regard “the other” from that position, because in that structure the other is always going to be wrong. In Sino-Japanese Mahayana and in the Kyoto School this idea is often expressed by the conjunctive soku, often translated as qua or sive, for instance in the formula: “form - sive - emptiness; emptiness - sive - form.” It is a very delicate and hard-to handle structure, for the idea is that in the soku the opposites are neither one nor two, neither the same nor different - and it is not easy to keep that balance right in one’s thinking and reasoning. It is, for instance, different from Hegel’s synthesis of thesis and antithesis. The Kyoto School philosophers like to quote in this connection the words from the Gospel: “Be perfect like your heavenly father, who lets his rain fall on the good and the evil alike.”

**The Challenge to Theism**

Finally we come to the decisive challenge of Buddhism: the challenge to the theism of Christian theology. Notice that I do not say: the challenge to God. As a matter of fact, the Kyoto School philosophers are always talking about God - they cannot keep silent about him/it! And they speak of Godnot as of an alien idea but rather as one of their own. (I sometimes think that Shakyamuni Buddha may occasionally be scandalized by all that God-talk!) Moreover, I think we must welcome this challenge as a good occasion for the purification of our idea of God.

I cannot begin to treat this very delicate question here. I cannot go into the exact meaning of Shakyamuni's so-called “rejection of God,” or anyway his silence about God as something “not conducive to liberation.” Nor can I say anything about “what of God” (which of God's attributes) is negated by the Buddhists and what is accepted. I can only briefly indicate how what I have said up to now bears upon the idea of
God.

Pratitya-samutpada forces Buddhists to say: “Because Buddha is, the human is; because the human is, the Buddha is.” This is a completely reversible relationship. Christianity puts God outside the pratityasamutpada as an exception and is inclined to think of God as the Absolute in a way which cuts off all relationship. According to the Kyoto School, God is thus posited in Christianity as a substance-being, while they are ready to speak of God as non-substantial “Absolute Nothingness” - as it were, the relationality itself, the place of the relations among finite beings, something like the Holy Spirit in the Trinity.

Buddhists will say that Christianity is always left with an unresolvable dichotomy: God and the self/world. First we think of God and from there we think of his opposite: the world. In this connection Prof. Hans Waldenfals says that “Nishida's position is distinguished from that of Christianity in that Christianity deals with the relationship of God and man, and this is based on God and takes God as its starting point, whereas Nishida makes the relation of God and man his foundation” (1980, 45).

Finally, the personality of God is challenged by Buddhists. Again, it is the absolutization of one of the poles of an opposition: personal and impersonal. Further, personality implies “form” and form can never be the absolute - that can only be formless. In other words, not God but the Gottheit is the real absolute. (Thus the Kyoto School people feel a great affinity for Meister Eckhart.)

I would like to end with a text I found some time ago on the programme of the Naropa Conference of Buddhist and Christian Meditation:

The theological dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism has largely focussed on theism versus non-theism or, as it is usually expressed, God versus emptiness. But, as has been discovered, contemplative spirituality in both traditions has found this to be a false juxtaposition. God is not an objectifiable reality, and emptiness not merely empty but full of clarity and compassion.

LITERATURE

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