

A BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN SYMPOSIUM :

"Religious Experience and Language"

From February 6 (Friday), 1976, 4 PM, till February 8 (Sunday), 5 PM, the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture organized and hosted its first Interreligious Dialogue Session. The reader may know that this is not a novelty in Japan where the mutually tolerant coexistence of many religions is a long-established reality. Especially during the last 15 years several meaningful encounters have taken place. We cannot go into this history now, but it must be admitted that, even in Japan, the interreligious dialogue is still in its pioneering stage : a groping for ends and means, a still massive indifference on the part of most authoritative people, etc.

On the whole, the Nanzan Symposium can be considered to be an effort at a dialogue in depth . Therefore, sufficient time was allotted; the number of participants was strictly limited (10 persons only), as well as the number of represented religions (only Buddhism - specifically Pure Land Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, and Christianity - mainstream protestantism and catholicism); the texts of the papers to be read were distributed to all participants a few weeks before the meeting; a fundamental religious problem was chosen as the theme.

Of course, the choice of the individual participants is a determining factor in every dialogue. Not only do their degree of religious commitment and their degree of openness to the other define the level of encounter, but also their respective interests and competences determine the angle from which the theme is tackled. I believe, however, that the theme itself, "Religious experience and Language" (word, logos) was well chosen. There are, indeed not so many topics which permit to plumb as deeply the structure of a religion and the similarities and differences between different religious systems. It remains to be seen, however, in how far our symposium exploited the possibilities offered by its theme.

The symposium consisted of 6 sessions of two hours and twenty minutes each. The first five sessions all had the same structure: presentation of a paper (about 40 minutes); commentary on the paper by a participant of a different religious affiliation (about 15 minutes); general discussion (about 80 minutes). The sixth session was devoted to a comprehensive discussion.

I shall now try a short presentation of each session. It is understood that, in this short space, I cannot do justice to the

contents especially of the papers, but it might interest the reader to know about the general trends of the dialogue. I am happy to be able to announce the imminent publication of the full text of the symposium (in Japanese).

In the First Session, professor Kajiyama Yūichi, member of the Buddhist True Pure Land sect and professor of Indian philosophy at Kyoto University, presented the paper, Word and Silence in Buddhism.

Prof. Kajiyama sketched the birth and development of early Buddhist "theology" (rational systematization of the Buddha's doctrine) in India, from its roots in the early sutras (Agama) to its eclosion, especially in the Sarvastivadin and the Madhyamika. The Sarvastivadin ontology shows a great confidence in our intellectual concepts and their expression in human words. This rationalistic conceptualistic theory brings Nirvana and the phenomena of Samsara together under the same philosophical categories: objects of intellectual cognition, substances. It is within this rationalistic framework that then a place and a sense is sought for the Buddha's religious doctrine, especially its tenet of the "transiency of all things". He further sketched the strong reaction against this theory in the Greater Vehicle: over the Prajnaparamita and the Madhyamika up to the Apoha-school. This tendency discredits all the categories and words of the human intellect, to follow a higher reason and logic into a realm of indifferentiation: sunyata, kū, emptiness — all this under the impulse of what could be called mystical experience. Here, again, Nirvana and Samsara are brought together into the same unity. However, this doctrine seems to provide a more radical and direct explanation of the Buddha's doctrine on the transiency and selflessness of all things.

The present author (catholic) then commented, mainly by asking the following questions: (1) Why are the later disciples not satisfied with the founder's (Buddha's, Christ's) original words, his own expression of his religious experience? In how far is the tendency toward a comprehensive "theology" religiously motivated? (2) Do the differences between Buddha's and Christ's words (universal truth v. message centered around an historical person and event — truth to be personally experienced v. divine message to be believed) bring about an essential difference in the transmission of these words and in the relationship between these privileged words and the human word in general (especially in philosophy)? (3) Did not the "theological" doctrines, in their (philosophical) search for unity, weaken Buddha's religious message by doing away with the tension (or dualism) between Nirvana and Samsara?

In the ensuing discussion, the existence of two, mutually opposed, tendencies in all religions was pointed out: the tenden-

cy to grasp the Ultimate through words, and the realization that the Ultimate is essentially beyond words. And the question was broached whether there is an essential difference here between Buddhism, where the distrust towards human words in general can be seen as an integral part of the religious doctrine of the irrationality and vanity of human life, and Christianity wherein, independent of any trust or distrust towards the human word in general, the trust goes to a very special Word, an appeal (Anrede) from the beyond that breaks through human history.

In the Second Session, Miyoshi Michi, catholic priest and specialist in New Testament studies, read the paper, The Jesus who addresses God as 'Abba'. Fr. Miyoshi explained that addressing God with the very familiar (childishly trusting) term, Abba, is strictly peculiar to Jesus; and that the gospels (especially Mt.11,25-26) clearly indicate that this consciousness of sonship is connected with a belief in God's special fatherly care for the "little ones" of this world (nēpioi). Consequently, for the Christian also, a real experience of God as Abba can only be had in an attitude of empathy with the actual underdog in society.

In his commentary, Bandō Shōjun, True Pure Land Buddhist and professor at Kyoto's Ōtani University, made four interesting points:

- (1) In Pure Land doctrine, "calling to" (Amida) equals "being called by" (Amida). Can the same be said in Christianity?
- (2) I, prof. Bandō said, am disillusioned : up to now I have been led to understand the "poor" of the gospels as the "poor of heart" (irrespective of economic or social circumstances), and I find this understanding profounder, religiously speaking, and more in accordance with the Buddhist tenets of no-mind and no-self.
- (3) I still feel a distance between Jesus and the "poor", while Shinran identified completely with the "lowly people of base professions".
- (4) Meister Eckhart, for one, certainly understood the nēpioi as the "poor of heart". In Buddhism, the tendency is strong to consider later interpretations as superior. Is there no possibility, in Christianity, to see certain later interpretations as positive developments?

The discussion afterwards brought further Buddhist questions:

- (1) What kind of religious experience makes Jesus call out, "Abba"?
- (2) Is the religious experience of the Christian the same as that of Jesus?
- (3) Is it essential for Christianity that God is called "father" and not "mother"? I do not have the space to analyse the Christian answers to these very pertinent questions, and shall limit myself to a few remarks. During this session it was felt very strongly (by all participants, I believe) how difficult it is (but, at the same time, how potentially enriching for its self-understanding) for one religion to be questioned with the categories of another tradition, and to try to find a meaningful answer. It was pointed out that the Buddha could not call anybody father, and that the terminology of "calling" and "being called" in Buddhism fits only the Amida school with its "theistic and

personalistic tendencies". However, it became apparent, at the same time, that Amidists (or, at least, Amidist theologians) tend to finally reduce these alleged traits to a higher impersonal unity. In this session also, the socio-economic category popped up in our discussions for the first time; and the way in which this category was promptly discarded in favor of the "spiritual" by our Buddhist partners was probably very significant.

The Third Session brought a lecture by Iwamoto Taiha, True Pure Land Buddhist and professor at Saitama University, on The Fundamental Word (Grundwort) in Shinran. As the reader knows, Shinran is the founder of the Shinshū or True Pure Land sect, the strongest Amidist group in Japan. Amidism with its absolute reliance on the sacred incantation, "Namu Amida Butsu", certainly looks like a privileged locus to investigate the role of language in religion. Professor Iwamoto explained the significance of this sacred formula and the experience underlying it from the works of Shinran: how, for Shinran, this "word" is the foundation of everything; how Amida and man (and the world) do not pre-exist to this word, but exist by the grace of their encounter in this word. He further explained the significance of this "Grundwort" over against (1) the Zen conception, according to which any exclamation whatsoever — as first utterance of a decisive religious experience — can play the role of fundamental word; and (2) over against Buber's conception of the fundamental I-Thou relationship as the speaking of a "Grundwort" by the human subjects. If, in Buber's case, it is the human subject that speaks the "Grundwort", in Shinran's view the constitutive relationship of Amida and man comes about by man listening to the call of Amida.

In his commentary, Ōki Hideo, protestant and professor at the Tokyo Union Theological Seminary, first pointed out that the significance of Buber's philosophy lies in its vindication of the priority of personal relationships over thing relationships. He then referred to Buber's critique of Buddhism as a "sublime monologue", a religion without "possibility of saying, Thou". His question then was: does in Shinran's "Namu Amida Butsu" the personal I-Thou relationship between Amida and man disappear? And, if so, how can one still speak of "calling and being called", of "listening" to the word of Amida?

The ensuing discussion centered around a further elucidation of the real meaning of the Amida-believer relationship. Our Buddhist partners, each in his own way, impressed upon us that this relationship must be finally interpreted (and therefore demythologized) in accordance with the fundamental Buddhist tenets of Engi ("conditioned origination") and non-self. In Buddhism, there can be no question of an "absolute other" or "personal other". The "personalistic terminology" of Amidism is only provisional. Ultimately, it points to the undifferentiated unity of Nirvana and Samsara, of Amida and the believer. Only one Buddhist participant expressed his doubts whether the standpoint of living

Amidist faith can really be identified with the standpoint of emptiness. Here, we reached, of course, the fundamental question of the ontological and religious status (validity) of the person. The Buddhist position, as intimated here, seems to be that direct personal relationships are sufficiently valued in Buddhism on their own level, but that they can never be the ultimate reality. Persons can only meet in a locus of more fundamental unity.

In the Fourth Session, Father Kadowaki Kakichi S.J., Professor of Theology at the (catholic) Sophia University in Tokyo, offered a testimony and a reflection on the development of his personal spiritual life through his practice of zazen and Kōan, in a paper entitled, Zen Kōan and Understanding of H. Scripture. He testified that, since he started practicing Zen, Holy Scripture discloses itself to him on a deeper level, and he defended the necessity of a spiritual, experiential, exegesis, different from the habitual scientific one. In the perspective of our theme, the important question seems to be : how can a religious attitude, based on obedience to a revealed word, profit from the religious practices of a tradition which reduces religion to personal experience, independent of alien words? Of Kadowaki's explanations I want to retain here the following points: (1) In contrast with most Christian meditation, which is a prayer of the mind, Zazen is a meditation of the "body", i.e., of the entire person, unity of body and mind. Just as in the ordinary dialogue body language is prior to and deeper-reaching than word language, so too with our conversation with God. (2) Christ is the Word become flesh : Christ's "body" speaks to those who have eyes to see, in a revelation through action. (3) True understanding of Scripture (as well as of Kōan) can only be obtained through religious practice, in an understanding by the "whole man" ("beyond reason"). (4) We should awake to the reality that our body is "the temple of the Holy Spirit" and that God's Kingdom is already among us. Thus it makes sense, even in our belief in the revealed word, to "seek the truth in ourselves".

Abe Masao, Zen Buddhist and professor at Nara University of Education, then probed into the possible meaning of this "spiritual exegesis". Does the fact that it is supposed to go beyond "word exegesis" mean that here "all words are taken away" from us, like in the Kōan? Does not it mean that the Christ event in its concreteness is transcended, just like in Amidism one should transcend the encounter with the personal Amida to reach the ground of that encounter? Does it mean that the believer relates to Christ like the practitioner of Kōan relates to his master (rōshi)?

In the ensuing discussion, this "Zen experience" by a catholic priest was further submitted to a critical examination. Is there any necessity to adopt the Zen practices into Christianity? Can the adoption of a part of a tradition into a fundamentally different one be authentic? What is intended : to have the same experience as Christ (and so to be able to say : I am Christ)?

Why would such a universal experience have to limit itself to Christ? Is not there in Christianity, differently from Zen, a traditional frame which fixes the limits of possible interpretation? In this discussion, the problem of "experience and word" became, indeed, very poignant. And, at the same time, one of the fundamental questions of the dialogue, i.e., how can two different religions hope to learn from one another, took very concrete shape.

In the Fifth Session, Ueda Shizuteru, Zen Buddhist and professor of the Science of Religion at Kyoto University, offered us a paper on Experience and Word - In view of "Zen Words" : a very original and deeply philosophical interpretation of Zen reality which, at the same time, appeared to throw light on some universal presupposita of "Eastern thinking". Every new experience breaks up our old world of understanding, and pushes us to a self-transcendence. As such it can already be called religious. However, besides his everyday experiences, which bring a gradual widening and deepening of his world, man is capable of a fundamental experience, a sudden and basic turn-about wherein the world shows its infinite width and depth (in Zen, the moment of enlightenment). This experience is characterized by its absolute immediacy which guarantees its purity and situates it beyond the separation of subject and object, and beyond the emergence of the 'I'. In this moment of pure experience, all words are "cut off". To reach real reality (i.e., in the religious endeavor) we must reject words, the origin of illusion. Nevertheless, the moment of pure experience is, at the same time, "the event of the Urwort(fundamental word)". This return to the original silence under the noise of words is, at the same time, the rebirth of words : a fundamental word is uttered. Religious language (e.g., "Zen words") is, then, a new speaking from and the articulation of that fundamental word, wherein the creative power of the word comes into its own. In Zen, this fundamental word has no fixed form.

In his commentary, Kumazawa Yoshinori, protestant and professor at Tokyo Union Theological Seminary, did not follow the usual pattern of questioning the speaker's thesis. Instead, in a daring conception of his own, he painted a picture of Christianity wherein Ueda's presentation of religion is valorized as much as possible and wherein an answer is intended to the following questions : (1) Does it make sense, in Christianity, to speak of such an Urwort? And, if so, what could it be? (2) Is it possible, in the Christian perspective, to see religion as a transcendence of the subject-object dichotomy? Does not our conception of God forbid that? Taking his clue from the Zen story wherein the monk obtains enlightenment when he is called by his name and answers, "here", Kumazawa proposes that the fundamental Christian experience=word lies in man's answer to the God who creates him by calling him by his name. This is the creation of a relationship wherein I am born and God becomes my God. It is an origina-

ting encounter of subject and subject without any objectification but, from the beginning, in an irreversible relationship of "original calling Subject" and "derived answering subject". In that original faith experience, I do not find God as an object or substance over against me, but I find myself in God, my "carrying ground". Speaking from this experience (or again : in confrontation with Zen), we are brought to a de-objectification of God (to "go out of" all objective language of God) and a de-subjectification of the I (I am only an answering relationship - from the beginning, I am as "going out into" the word, "here"). In this perspective the relational and personalistic God language comes into its own (e.g., God as "relational existence" in the H.Trinity).

The ensuing discussion, although hesitantly, tried to do some further spadework around these two conceptions. It was first pointed out that, in Kumazawa's presentation, there still is a certain divergence between God as "ground" and God as the very personal caller of I as a person. Can these two be brought together except in the biblical word, "father"? A parallel was then made between the O.T. notion of creation (bārā) as the happening of something astoundingly new, with the Zen experience as conversion of the total person. A Zen participant explained that the Zen experience, too, is essentially "dialogal", but that Zen shrinks from further determining or "naming" the partners of that relationship, for fear that the two poles be substantified and made logically prior to the relationship itself. A discussion then ensued between Zen Buddhists and Amidists about the final value and necessity of calling the name of Amida. While, from the Zen side, it was further intimated that calling the name is stopping at the "front of God or Amida" without pushing through to the underlying final reality, - the Amidists pointed out that transmission and communion of faith require definition of the experience, and that, anyway, sticking to non-determination is a determination in itself. And finally, a comparison between Ueda's and Kumazawa's schemas brought to light a fundamental difference : in Christianity there is a basic subject, a ground ; in Zen, the ground is emptiness or no-ground. In that sense, we Christians cannot call God emptiness.

The Sixth, and final, Session was entirely consecrated to a comprehensive discussion of our theme. At the beginning of the session, the question was asked : did we sufficiently take into account historical reality, everyday reality in our discussions? Were we not preoccupied too exclusively with an idealized, rarified, kind of religious experience, thereby forgetting the actual religious feelings of the masses? What is the meaning of these - far from pure - experiences?

One Buddhist participant clearly stated his opinion that Zen represents a form of elite-consciousness, seeking a high-level experience away from the masses, and tends to go away from the Mahayanistic Bodhisattva ideal back to the monastic Arhat ideal. Furthermore, since about 1920, also the originally popular True Pure Land sect shows the same tendency : to concentrate on a small

number of "real believers", of whom a very special religious experience is expected. Concomitantly, a Christian participant said that, over against Christianity with its tendency to meet God in the historical world, in society, Zen makes the impression of being a "U-turn religion", always stopping its "going out into" word and world to return to the pure experience.

A Zen representative answered that, indeed, the Bodhisattva idea does not come to the fore as strongly in Zen as in some other sects, but that the real question is that of Bodhisattva existence. Zen is aware that the consciousness, "I save the other", is not sound, and that it is extremely hard to determine what really benefits the other. Traditionally, Zen stresses the fact that one's own deliverance is only fulfilled in one's return to the world. So, Zen could be called the religion of the "double U-turn". However, the forms which this return to the world takes are not necessarily "Zen-like" or even religious. Zen words are mostly a-religious (e.g., "the sun rises in the morning"); and there is no such thing as Zen politics or Zen social doctrine. But is it not better not to mix so directly in politics and social questions as Christianity did? The social significance of "not being social" should be re-examined.

From the Christian side, it was then stressed that Christianity does not know any satori as a "religious demarcation line". The only criterium of the Christian life is love of neighbor, which is, after all, a social principle. Christ's revelation is not the doctrine preached by Christ, but Christ's historical existence as a whole, including its socio-political background. As such, it has a socio-historical component and direction.

In connection with the rather self-centered and materialistic elements in the religious feelings of the man in the street, the role a man's personal problems play in his religious experience was discussed. Also the problem of Japan's New Religions was brought up. With their adaptation to everyday life they seem to fill the gap between the traditional religions and the masses. How should we judge them or how do they judge us? Does this stress on the this-worldly benefits represent a distortion of true religion?

Thus our two-day Buddhist-Christian dialogue came to an end. What did it accomplish? It did not produce a Buddhist-Christian joint declaration, and it certainly brought more questions than answers. Reflection can point out some flaws in the organization: all the papers had much more to say about language than about experience; there was a certain imbalance between the Buddhist presentations (very general and theoretical) and the Christian ones (treating two concrete points without presenting a general Christian view); everyday life could have been given a greater place from the beginning...

But all this does not touch the nature of our endeavor. Was this endeavor an "exercice in futility" because it cannot

show "a produce"? The ten participants are agreed that it was a very enriching experience : to be able to seek together for the presence of the "hidden God". In itself, our symposium was, of course, very limited. It demands follow-up in all kinds of forms. This is up to us...and the Spirit.

Jan Van Bragt