

NANZAN BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN SYMPOSIUM II:

"Mass and Elite in Religion"

Time : January 4-6, 1978.

Place : The Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture.

Participants:

- Ishii Yoneo, Prof. at the Center for South-East Asian Studies at
Kyoto University (Buddhist)
- Inagaki Ryôtsuke, Prof. at Kyûshû University (Catholic)
- Kasai Minoru, Prof. at Tokyo International Christian University
(Protestant)
- Kajiyama Yûichi, Prof. at Kyoto University (Buddhist)
- Kadowaki Kakichi, Prof. at Sophia University (Tokyo)(Catholic)
- Kumazawa Yoshinobu, Prof. at Tokyo Theological Seminary
(Protestant)
- Takahara Kakushô, Resident Priest of Seikakuji (Hikone), Publisher
of the Buddhist Journal "Gankai".
- Hirata Soei, Prof. at Hanazono University (Kyoto), Zen master at
Tenryûji.
- Jan Van Bragt, Director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and
Culture (Nagoya) (Catholic)

(Note: One more Buddhist representative had been invited,
Kanaoka Shûyû, Prof. at Tôyô University (Tokyo). The sudden
decease of one of his parishioners at Takao Temple made it
impossible for him to participate.)

On seeing the title, "Mass and Elite in Religion", the reader may have known a moment of consternation: What can this mean exactly? Is it not a wager to take this as the theme of a symposium? And he may be excused, for the discussions have shown that the participants in the symposium shared these feelings to some extent. Indeed, mass and elite are not only not too well-defined concepts but are "loaded words": a preoccupation with elites often betrays arrogance, and a preoccupation with the masses can be a sign of sentimentality. And the question immediately arises: is it überhaupt allowable to apply these "sociological" categories to religion and, if so, do they permit us to plumb the religious reality to any depth?

The aim of the Nanzan Symposia has been described as: to discuss, in an interreligious and interdisciplinary context, such basic themes as permit the clarification of the fundamental structure of our respective religions and the delineation of the points of similarity and difference among them. At first sight, our present theme

does not seem to qualify. Still, everybody is more or less aware of a strange anomaly in the science of religion: While the positive (sociological, anthropological, etc.) approach takes the everyday religious practice of the ordinary faithful as its object of study, the speculative (philosophical, theological) approach rather tends to concentrate on doctrine and high-level experience of - yes - an "elite". Would it not be good to air that dichotomy and thematize it? In his paper, Prof. Ishii referred to Edmund Leach's distinction between high-level "philosophical religion" and folk-level "practical religion" and to Leach's conclusion that a different methodology is needed for both; but then went on to say that he himself is primarily interested in the relationship between the two: how is philosophical religion realized in practice?

That, of course, is not simply a methodological question. It bears, in the first place, on the existential - more directly religious? - problem of the relevance of high-level religious talk to people's lives or of the degree of participation of the masses in a religious ideal. Concretely speaking, what prompted the organizers to choose the present theme was the fact that, during our first symposium on Religious Experience and Language, the reflection kept popping up: "We are discussing things which we feel to be central to religion: mysticism, God's Word, conversion, enlightenment, etc., in a very serious and for us meaningful way, but is not most of it stratospheric speculation without any relation with the lives of the majority of the people?" Or again: "We, Buddhists and Christians, recognize one another's religion as a "high religion," the purity of which should be safeguarded and eventually further enhanced by confrontation with the other -- but, in how far does that high ideal really penetrate to the people?"

If we now add to these reflections the simple question: If we tie up salvation with these high-level things, how are the "social christians," the not especially religious people, the people busy with the struggle for life, going to be saved? -- then it might begin to appear possible that our theme has something to do with the deeper structures of religion.

For the general set-up of the symposium, may I refer the reader to the report on our first symposium, which appeared in our first Bulletin? Let me only repeat that the symposium (the second exactly like the first) consisted of six sessions of two hours and twenty minutes each; that the first five sessions all had the same structure: presentation of a paper (about 40 minutes), a commentary on the paper by a participant of a different religious affiliation (about 15 minutes), and a general discussion (about 80 minutes); and that the sixth and last session was devoted to a comprehensive discussion.

Before offering a short, and necessarily incomplete, summary of each session, it might be good to try a succinct formulation of our problematic as it gradually emerged from the discussions themselves:

It soon appeared that our question shows some relationship with a traditional theme both in Japan and in the West. In the West, we

can refer to the idea of election by God and to the quaestio disputata on the number of the saved, and in Japan we find the generally accepted idea that Buddhism developed here from a religion of the elite to the religion of the common man (true Mahāyāna).

It can further be noted that modern times have brought, in both parts of the world, a more explicit concern with our theme. In some European countries, the Church deploras the "loss of the masses." In Japanese Buddhist circles, that feeling may not be equally strong, but still the challenge of the New Religions, with their sway over the masses, is there to make traditional Buddhism reflect whether the religiosity of the people is not fed elsewhere, outside of organized Buddhism.

His dictis, our problem could be formulated as follows:

Sociology points out in society a certain structure of elite and mass, whereby the elite fulfils a role but is, at the same time, a principle of inequality, opposition, strife. Our first question could then be: How do we appreciate or judge this social phenomenon from a religious standpoint? And does religion have a role to play in this connection? However, this same phenomenon also appears to exist within religion itself. Does it exist there legitimately? Does it have the same meaning and role as in society in general, or does it obtain here a specifically religious significance? And, lastly, if we can see religion as a dynamic historical process, does then the mass-elite dialectics play an essential role in these dynamics?

In the First Session, professor Kajiyama, a specialist in Indian philosophy, read a paper on Mass and Elite in the Development of the Bodhisattva Idea. Herein he presented us with a clear picture of the growth and significance of the Bodhisattva ideal against the background of primitive Buddhism and Indian mentality in general. I am inclined to say that, more than by its scientific precision, this presentation was crucial to our discussions by the fact that it made explicit and, at the same time, brought into sharper focus the understanding which Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism has of itself on this point, and thus put up a few recognizable landmarks.

Schematically speaking, Kajiyama presented the evolution of Buddhism as a "dialectical process," whereby the tension between shukke ("household-renouncers", i.e. monks and nuns) and zaike (house-holders, i.e. lay people) -- in a sense, between elite and mass -- passes through three stages:

1. The stage of primitive Buddhism, where the original idealism leaves no room for opposition or conscious exclusiveness, where wisdom is seen together with compassion, where the opening of enlightenment is immediately for the good of all sentient beings. It must be recognized, however, that the original Buddhist doctrine contains the seeds of an opposition between mass and elite: the tenet that there can be no full satori without the monastic way of life, and the fact that the Buddha's doctrine differed according to his listeners: monks or householders.
2. The Hinayāna stage, where the originally latent opposition takes

form, where the opening of the way, from a burden borne for the benefit of everybody, becomes a feat benefiting the sole diligent individual -- in a word, where the elite becomes exclusivistic.

3. The Mahâyâna stage, where the mass-elite opposition is resolved by the idea that the highest perfection (becoming a Buddha) is open to everybody without distinction, and the consideration that the desire to become a Buddha can only be motivated by compassion, by the desire to save all sentient beings. - This conception was born out of the desire of the masses to fully participate in the benefits of Buddhism, and is as such a universalization ("popularization") of the original idea; but it is, at the same time, a return to the original purity by doing away with a non-intended duality.

In his commentary, Inagaki Ryôten first summarized Kajiyama's paper in an exceptionally lucid way, and then remarked that there may exist a tendency to consider true religion as a matter for an elite but that, in our days (since the Aufklärung), it is more common -- not only in Western rationalistic circles, but also among the Japanese intelligentsia -- to consider that the elite has no need of religion, which is something for the uneducated masses. Scattered dissatisfaction with the "brave new world" notwithstanding, the scientific utopia is still very much alive.

The ensuing discussion centered -- de facto, if not thematically -- on the conditions a "salvation religion" must fulfil in order to be a "mass religion." The first to be mentioned was a generalized feeling of the need for salvation: the awareness in the people that the human condition is not as it should be (concretely speaking, in ancient India the terror of the reincarnation idea). Secondly, a (rather optimistic) belief in "absolute grace" was discussed. Since the average man cannot dream of obtaining salvation by his own efforts the complicity is required of an agent which gracefully provides perfect (i.e. not a second-rate) salvation to everybody. It was pointed out that such a situation obtains in Mahâyâna Buddhism, and it was further remarked that the idea of the universal possibility of full salvation involves the conception of the possibility for everybody of a personal encounter with the saving agent. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are, therefore, many in Mahâyâna.

Many problems could not be talked through: In how far is the belief in absolute grace present in the Bhakti idea? How does the Bhagavadgita's view of moksa (deliverance) in and through the householder's life combine with the ever-present sannyasa ideal? What is the significance of the monastic life in Mahâyâna, etc.? At the occasion of the discussion of the Bodhisattva idea, the paradoxical character of the "elite" was first pointed out: Indeed, while the Bodhisattva is unquestionably 'he who obtains satori for the sake of everybody', and therefore can be seen as an "elite of service," the idea is also alive that everybody is a Bodhisattva for the others -- which tends to negate the very idea of an elite.

From the viewpoint of a Buddhist-Christian dialogue, professor Kasai Minoru's lecture on Elite and People in the Hindu Tradition,

in the Second Session, may look somewhat extraneous. Strongly convinced of the impossibility of grasping another tradition or religion from the outside by so-called objective methods, Kasai attempted to communicate the fruits of his long and ardent search for the soul of the Hindu tradition, India's self-understanding. In the framework of the caste system (varna) and the stages of human life (asrama), the sannyâsi, in his negation of all worldly values, embodies a tradition of transcendence and lives radically "as a witness to meaning." Gandhi, while negating the caste system and turning to social commitment, still is "the man who in modern times lived most faithful to tradition." The people recognized him as such.

Omitting the many inner-Indian problems which were evoked in the paper and the subsequent discussion (the unity or plurality of Indian tradition; the relationship of Brahman and Hindu cultures; the meaning of the caste system, etc.), I concentrate here on the questions more directly relevant to our theme: What did this second session contribute to our understanding of the elite-mass relationship in our religions? In general, we could say, of course, that an important side-light was thrown on this relationship in Buddhism from its Indian background, and that, with Hinduism, a nativistic religion with its original link with society was introduced -- which, again, illumines by contrast the social involvement of the historical religions. Indeed, over against the surprising identification of Hindu religion with the Indian social system, the question became acute: In what way and how deeply did Buddhism and Christianity penetrate into the people, how were they "popularized?" And the presentation of Gandhi's heroic struggle brought us face to face with the following problems:

- In how far can a traditional religious ideal survive, when its traditionalistic societal forms crumble? What could the forms of "popularization" of religion be in the future, when society follows its own laws and dynamism?

- Can a religious ideal really adapt to the needs of the times and the people?

- Is "popularization" of a religious ideal necessarily secularization? And, if so, is that to be deplored? While Gandhi's activity was clearly religiously motivated, did not the people who followed him necessarily become totally engrossed in the sole socio-political elements of the movement set in motion by him? Was Gandhi's conversion of the straight trans-worldliness of the sannyâsi into an inner-worldly transcendence recognizable by the people as a religious ideal?

It is also worth mentioning that the originality of the Buddhist (and Jainist) shukke ideal, in its radical break with society, was stressed over against the sannyâsi ideal with its paradoxical alignment with social forms.

In the Third Session, professor Ishii Yoneo, a specialist in the sociology of Theravada Buddhism, drew us a lighter but none the less thought-provoking picture of Mass and Elite in Theravada Buddhism. He confronted us with the reality of a "Buddhism in two

layers." Surprisingly enough, when seen from the viewpoint of Japanese Buddhism, in Theravada, the elite-mass dialectics appear to have stopped on the second stage (of the evolution sketched in the first session). The original "elite religion" with its transcendent ideal (nibbâna) and mandatory life style (monasticism) persists for a small minority, but has given rise among the people to a derived or secondary religion which, consciously, contents itself with a relative ideal: the betterment of one's lot within the reincarnational cycle by merit-making. Needless to say that here we are presented with an extremely interesting "test case" for our central question: Can the people really live a high religious ideal or, inversely, does "popularization" of a religion necessarily entail a "betrayal" of the original impulse?

On the other hand, their difference of aims notwithstanding, samgha (the monastic order) and lay people live in very close symbiosis: the people look to the samgha for their merit-making and magical effects (paritta), but also for the sense and identity itself of their religion. The people want to see the elite separated from themselves and, as it were, realizing in their stead the full ideal and bliss of Buddhism. To put things strongly, the people in Theravada rely very strongly on the samgha-elite without expecting to be able to imitate them or to be lifted by them to their level. Could one say that the antipode of this attitude is to be found in Protestantism: personal (not vicarious) realization by all of the highest level (cf. session 4), and that Catholicism with its priestly and monastic elites takes a middle position?

In his commentary, Fr. Kadowaki stressed the point that Christian monasticism does not imply a discontinuity in religious ideal and is not exclusivistic, since its idea is: to participate in the salvation of all by Christ. Still, it would be hard to deny that the catholic people expect from "the religious" some kind of full -- but, at the same time, exemplary -- and in some sense vicarious realization of the evangelical ideal, which they themselves feel it hard to live up to in the midst of the struggle for life.

The discussion came back to the problem of the impact of religion on a people in the throes of modernization. In several of the Theravada countries, traditional culture and mentality of the people are strongly pervaded by Buddhism. Nevertheless, a sense of crisis is felt among monks and intellectuals: Are not the people, in fact, kept away from the real Buddhist ideal? Can this "popularized" Buddhism really be the backbone of the people in the future? Can we expect from this Buddhism any working on the contradictions of society which now become apparent? As Ishii put it: "I still expect, somehow, a revival but, if the lower strata do not find in the top a new principle of liberation, Theravada could be finished as a religion."

It is worth mentioning that, at this point, the suggestion was made by one of the participants to make a comparison between the role of the samgha in Theravada and that of monastic life in Catholicism. We did not really take up this challenge, but the flexible nature

of catholic monasticism -- its evolution with the needs of the times -- was commented on and contrasted with the unchanging forms of the samgha.

The Fourth Session brought us the only paper on Christianity: A remarkable exposition on Elite and Mass in Christianity by Kumazawa Yoshinobu. The fact that it presented a consistent protestant view of Christianity was an asset for the discussion, but made it doubly regrettable that we could not have a parallel presentation from a catholic point of view. In a first part, Kumazawa tries to pinpoint the problem. He rejects the simple application of the ordinary meaning of the categories "elite" and "mass" to religion, but recognizes in religion a tension between two intentionalities: an elitist intentionality whereby religion incessantly tries to purify itself, and a mass intentionality whereby salvation is originally and essentially directed to all. This tension is legitimate, but every tendency to build from there an elite of privilege must be rejected as inimical to true religion. In his second part, he investigates the Old Testament in order to find the roots of the elite in biblical religion. Here, "elite" is associated with the mediating function of priest and prophet. The elitism of the prophets corresponds to the religious intentionality: it is a purifying action, totally in function of the building of Israel into the chosen people. The priesthood, on the contrary, by its hereditary system, is in danger of centering on a priestly class and degenerating into an elite in the ordinary sense of the word. A second deviating trend is to be found in pharisaism, which turns the outward practice of the law into an exclusivistic wall of separation around a privileged people.

Thirdly, the history of Christianity is considered as a movement towards universalization. Over against the outward exclusivism of the pharisees, Jesus restores to "elite" (the chosen people) the meaning of religious purification. By turning Christianity into a world religion, Paul does not reject the idea of the chosen people, but enlarges and deepens its meaning from a tribal entity to a "spiritual Israel." With the development of the priesthood, and especially of the priestly hierarchy, an elite within this elite is formed. In a radical reaffirmation of the sole elitism of the chosen people as such, the Reformation destroys the elitist priestly system and proclaims the universal priesthood of the faithful. In a fourth part, the nature of the election idea is further investigated. Some predestination theories tend toward a "sociological" opposition of a doomed mass and a saved elite. However, the stress on the freedom of God's election is essential: christian elitism is of grace and can never be made a right or privilege. Moreover, election is never for the sake of the individual but for the sake of the salvation of all: it forms an elite of mission, not an elite of privilege.

In his commentary, Zen master Hirata discovered many points of similarity in Zen Buddhism, especially the rejection of an "elite" in the ordinary sense of the word. From a Zen standpoint, he also

approved of the designation, "functional elite" or "role elite," but felt that in any sense elite supposes authority -- authority arising not from technical superiority but from the dharma, the totality of human existence. He further stressed the point that, in a time when "social elite" is determined by considerations of money and privilege, religion has the responsibility of showing what a real human elite should be. He was seconded here by Inagaki who intimated that the questions of authority and prophetic function in a democracy are religious questions.

Kadowaki objected to Kumazawa's "too theologically deductive" treatment of the problem, and advocated an analysis of concrete experiences of election, the mystery of which shows itself on different levels, individual as well as communitary. He also deplored the fact that monasticism does not find a place in Kumazawa's scheme, which makes a comparison with Buddhism difficult. And finally, he would prefer the notion of munus, serving profession, to that of function.

The fifth and sixth sessions will be harder to summarize, because the transcriptions are not at our disposition yet. May the honorable speakers have mercy on me if I do not do full justice to their words. Takahara Kakushô's paper, in the Fifth Session, was entitled Elite and Mass in Pure Land Buddhism, but a better name might have been: "The Spirituality of Mass and Elite." Although he offered us his profoundly original view on Shinran's theology, I dare submit that his main contribution to the symposium lay in his presentation of the religious tenor of Shinran's "radical awareness of belonging to the mass." During the preceding discussions, Takahara had already made the remark that "Amidism is essentially a mass religion." This remark is far from original, but to have enabled us to better understand what it means may be one of the fruits of the symposium.

Takahara first explained that, under influence of the Kanmuryô-jukyô, Amida's Great Vow had been mostly interpreted, in the existential, intuitional direction, as the "background" of the sinful human subject. In this view, religious experience becomes paramount. Shinran also is heir to that tradition, as clearly appears in the "Tract deploring Heresies of Faith" (Tannishô). However, his great work, the Kyôgyôshinshô, shows that Shinran fully valorized the tradition of the Daimuryô-jukyô, which betrays a much more cosmological and historical vision: not only awakened man but the entire universe and human history live in the cosmic aspiration which is Amida's Vow. In this universe, ample opportunity is provided for the common man to meet with saving grace even in the midst of his everyday occupations, and extraordinary experiences or a monastic life style are not called for.

Can the term, elite, still have any meaning in this vision? We could say that Mahâyâna, and the Pure Land School in particular, tend to "universalize the elite" by attributing to everybody the power of gensô: to return from the Pure Land to serve the others. And Shinran himself expects everything and everybody to be "elite for him," his

"master": that they show him the way to the Pure Land. But, on the other hand, Shinran -- unlike many mahâyânists -- refrains from presenting any earthly reality as "in possession of the Buddha-nature." The salvific causality (the "elite role") is Amida's alone. In his own religious consciousness, Shinran himself completely belongs to the sinful mass without any power of gensô, without any elite capacity. "Shinran does not have a single disciple, only companions on the road." Shinran's most characteristic trait may lie in the radicality of his "mass consciousness."

The discussion afterwards centered around the question of worldly benefits (genze riyaku) in religion. Needless to say that one of the strongest ties that bind people to whatever religion is the expectation of benefits for this life. Is not this incompatible with the purity of religion? We were reminded of the strong "world-negating" character of original Buddhism, and it is a fact that Shinran tried to pry Buddhism loose from the many compromises with magical elements, social structures, and primitive Japanese religiosity, in order to reach a pure reliance on Amida's Vow alone. But Ishii remarked -- rightly, I think -- that a "religion that spurns worldly benefits, forgets man." Unfortunately, we did not really talk this important problem through. It was stated that Shinran did not see salvation as merely a matter of a future life, but that, on the other hand, he did not identify earthly blessings with (religion's) Perfect Bliss, so that his religion, unlike Zen for instance, has an eschatological dimension.

Rev. Takahara concluded this session with the striking remark that the Pure Land School could not hope any longer to develop and purify its own religion without (contact and confrontation with) the other religions.

The comprehensive discussion of the Sixth, and final, Session went back to several topics of the earlier sessions for further clarification, but we cannot say that it brought basically new insights.

One of the ideas that popped up regularly in the earlier discussions was that authentic transmission of religion happens only on the basis of a one-to-one contact; and the objection had already been made that precisely such a conception is elitist and that the majority of the people are only exposed to a more "social" influence of religion. The remark was now made that the "stepping down" of religion into the realm of the social (and the socially measurable) does not necessarily mean a mere loss of religious quality. The examples of Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and the priest-workers were then evoked to ponder the relationship between spiritual liberation and social liberation, and the lot of the religious spark that kindles a social fire and "loses itself" in the process. In this connection, an interesting analysis was offered of the different ideologies of various Buddhist Socialisms in South-East Asia.

Another point that was taken up anew in this discussion was what I would like to call "the religious charisma" of the people.

It is true that religion (or at least the historical religions with their strong element of world-negation) intends a high ideal and has to do with the highest values in human life; but it seems equally true that a religion that does not come to grips with the "bottom" of human life (evil, suffering,...) and with the everyday life of the man in the street, is not worthy of the name. It is not surprising, then, that in Buddhism as well as in Christianity the idea lives that the simple people, "who carry the burdens of the world," are also the true carriers of religion. The figures of Gandhi, Shinran, and pope John were called to witness that true elite is uncommonly close to the people. It was also stressed that not only an individual religionist but equally a religious organization can only teach the people to the extent that they learn from the people.

During this final discussion, a few stabs were made at a definition of "elite," but these attempts faltered before the elusiveness and paradoxical nature of the subject. One of the participants called elite a totally relative thing, which nevertheless contains something primordial. While it is bound to pursue an ideal open to all, it is nevertheless called to realize something that is essentially attainable by only a few.

Other subjects were broached, but soon dropped, because their vastness did not leave us a chance to say anything sensible in so short a time. Most important among these were the matter of the New Religions in Japan and the present trend toward individualization in religion, with the concomitant question about the possible principles of "popularization" of religion in the future.

In his summing up, professor Kumazawa underlined the dynamic circular nature of the mass-elite relationship. The elitist intentionality emerges from and above the mass in the direction of an original purity, but this purity itself only proves itself by pervading the mass. These two intentionalities form together a dynamic Gestalt, the movement of which builds the historical religions. Elite and mass are totally interdependent and the tension between the two will only disappear in the eschaton, when God's mission is completed.

Much could be said, in retrospect, about the symposium. From the beginning it was, indeed, a wager; at the end, it cannot boast of spectacular results. However, I feel reasonably confident that, for the participants, it opened some new vistas and provided ample food for further reflection. And above all, the open and mutually sympathetic discussion among people of different religious affiliations, also this time, felt like a spiritual shower.

If, finally, we ask ourselves what this symposium revealed about the differences and similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, we might perhaps say the following:

Owing to the original link of full salvation with an "elitist" life style, the mass-elite tension is stronger in Buddhism than in Christianity, where priesthood or monastic life have never been con-

sidered a condition of salvation. Historically speaking, Buddhism was driven by this dilemma to two rather extreme and mutually exclusive solutions: a static juxtaposition of mass and elite, and a complete but rather idealistic universalization of the elite. Christianity never had to go to these extremes, but even so one can detect in Christianity a similar dialectic movement from the original impetus over undue exclusivistic elitism to renewed forms of popularization.

Both Buddhism and Christianity show a special affinity with simple people, and stress the "elite for the mass" idea. Both find it difficult to reconcile, and show the continuity between, the "more exalted" and the "more popular" elements of their set-up. Both seem to be momentarily powerless before the "loss of the masses" and without a blueprint for the future.