

The Dialogue Among Religions Looking Back, Looking Ahead

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Since its inception, the Nanzan Institute has sponsored biannual symposia, bringing together leading scholars from Japan's major religions for dialogue with Christian scholars of religion. The eighth such symposium was held in the first days of September, 1992, on the topic "The Dialogue Among Religions: Looking Back, Looking Ahead." The papers and discussions are scheduled to be published in spring of 1993. The following is a translation of the opening address.

AS WE APPROACH THE CLOSE of the twentieth century, traditional world religions in their most dynamic expressions seem to be moving in one of two directions. On one hand, the swell of religiously inspired political movements continues to rise on all sides. Islamic fundamentalism has come of age in the Middle East as a political force eager to hold its own against the rest of the world. In many countries of the so-called Third World, revolutionary nationalism has earned the support of Christian or Buddhist religious thought. In some post-communist states of the Eastern bloc, the Orthodox structures that have survived the persecution and are now free to work have resurrected as spokesmen for renewed ethnic identities. In the United States, enterprising preachers of Christian evangelism compete with another through the mass media to call for a spiritual rebirth, that their country may once again rise to the full stature of its divine vocation to world leadership.

On the other hand, in the shadow of these more visible religious revivalisms, a quieter, more reflective mood has been stirring the conscience of our times. In the past decade an interreligious dialogue grounded on mutual respect and peaceful cooperation has shaken the great religions of the world as never before in history. At its core, this dialogue looks beyond the sectarian or nationalist captivity of tradition to express its primary concern as the deepest wellbeing of the human species and the planet. Its origins in and continued commitment to textual and historical research has helped it resist absorption into the dominant institutional agenda of orga-

nized religion. And its insistence on the primacy of experience has helped to generate the ideal of a religious commons to which no country, no doctrine, no culture, no economy has more right than any other.

Although these two contradictory dynamics rarely bump into one another (the audience each attracts almost by definition precludes the other), their collision cannot be far away. Indeed, the clash between religious fundamentalism and interreligious dialogue may well mark the most important spiritual event of the century. To engage in dialogue today is to be a participant in that historical confrontation. Every step that religions take closer to one another precipitates its advent.

The Escape from History

To come together to talk in the abstract about dialogue seems to be a step away from history, and therefore also a deliberate submission to the concrete forces of revolutionary religious fundamentalism. It looks like entering what George Steiner calls a kind of “secondary city” where, instead of talking to each other, we talk about talking to each other. If it is indeed the destiny of interreligious dialogue to change the way religions think about themselves, the way people of faith embrace their faith by also struggling in some way to embrace the faith of others, it must at least be wary of building such a secondary city where it can forget its own significance as a world event.

In this regard, certain Buddhist and Christian thinkers have begun to insist that the dialogue among religions focus its agenda on concern with human rights, poverty, oppression of minorities, environmental protection, and the like. In this way, it is thought, dialogue will maintain its place in the “real world” of history. But simply to exchange subject matters in a discussion is no guarantee that one has left the world of talk. Nor is to renounce dialogue for political action any guarantee that one has carried the dialogue through to its full historical consequences. The criteria must lie elsewhere.

The critique of historicity begins, I believe, in asking to what extent interreligious dialogue helps bring clarity of thought to the *lived* difference between sectarian, fundamentalist religious beliefs and cooperative, symbiotic, cohabitational faith. Its immediate focus is those who participate in the dialogue. If they are transformed, their discourse with others will also be transformed; if they are not, they will not know how to speak outside of formal dialogue. In other words, dialogue is basically a therapy of discourse. Whatever the encounter among religions might gain in moral satisfaction by aligning itself with one cause or the other, it gains nothing as dialogue. Its only aim—and aim enough it is—should be to see clearly and to talk in the

midst of the things of life about what one has seen. Nothing more is needed for interreligious dialogue to precipitate the destiny that awaits it: the confrontation with religious fundamentalism.

For us at the Nanzan Institute, this is the first symposium we have conducted on the subject of dialogue itself. The previous seven symposia, as is evident from the published results, have simply *done* dialogue. All things being equal, that still seems the better course. I admit I do not find it attractive to read or write or talk about “dialog-ology.” I have seen enough of it to be suspicious of its common failure: dialogology prides itself on being, or at least aiming to be, methodologically aware of everything there is to dialogue. Everything, that is, but the reasons for its own emergence. It does not bother to ask why, or even *if*, it is necessary in the first place. For the most part, as far as I can see, dialogology is not very necessary, and the reasons for thinking that it is lie mainly in the attractions of the secondary city.

Without entering into that question here, I cannot ask it without assuming some responsibility for choosing dialogue as the subject matter for this symposium. Although the reasons for the choice are largely connected with our own history as a research institute, it is the larger perspective that makes them more interesting.

The Spirit of Vatican II

When Pope John xxiii convened the first session of the Second Vatican Council thirty years ago this fall, he was not only opening the windows to let some fresh air into the Vatican’s corridors of power. He was also opening the doors of Catholic tradition to outsiders who had been knocking for some time to get in. It soon became apparent that the gesture was more than symbolic. A great number of ideas and practices that had been outlawed in the fight against “modernism” in the early years of our century, and indeed in the centuries of deliberately cultivated opposition to non-Catholic religion in all its forms, were given a fresh hearing.

The overall impact was unsettling in the extreme. An entire tradition was thrown off balance, and not even the most carefully worded documents of the Council could put a halt to what had been started. Church liberals welcomed the temporary suspension of balance as a chance to take a step forward. For those of us who were in the seminary at the time, training in the traditional rituals and doctrines of the Church, it was a chance to celebrate—and celebrate we did, regularly and with studied abandon.

The dust from the Council has not yet settled. Or perhaps we should say, the places where it has settled are a fair share less populated than they used

to be. Masses of believers grew disenchanted with the clericalism, dogmatism, and exclusivism in which they had been reared, and many with the Church altogether. The children of these disenchanted have become the concern of the institutional Church today, which has inaugurated a new missionary movement to re-evangelize them back into the fold. But for those who moved away from official religion, it must also be said that a great deal of traditional Christian spirituality moved with them. The flourishing of new religious movements and cults in traditional Christian countries, the turn to Oriental meditation and religious ways, even the shift from pastoral care to psychological therapies are not unconnected with the *aggiornamento* of Pope John.

At the same time, within a decade after the Council it had become obvious that there was more at stake than simply the house-cleaning of the Catholics. Across the industrialized world unrest fomented in nearly all varieties of traditional religion. Even if Pope John had not opened the windows and the doors when he did, they would have opened very soon anyway. Now that we see this, what difference does the “spirit of Vatican II” make any more? At least it makes this difference: *that those who call that spirit “holy” and yet choose to remain within the Church no longer face their future alone. They believe, and I with them, that the life of religion in the modern world hinges on the collaboration of religious ways that have traditionally been separate and at enmity.* Though it was not entirely clear at the time, the “ecumenical” Council was inherently “interreligious” as well.

Direct references to “interreligious dialogue” in the Council documents are few and direct allusions to other faiths are for the most part bookish and removed from their lived reality. The fact is, of course, that the idea of engaging in open dialogue with other religions was not encouraged in the Catholic tradition, and that this lack of experience is reflected in the documents. But the option for dialogue *was* taken, and taken rather more adventurously than anyone seems to have anticipated. This, too, is cause for seeing the spirit of the Council as something holy.

The organizational response in Catholicism to the Vatican Council was structured according to a division of labor that more or less followed the line of the documents. Secretariats and other structures were set up to implement the various reforms. The training of specialists in each area was encouraged. As these specialists returned to the seminaries, they brought with them courses on liturgy, missiology, science and the modern world, ecumenism, and so forth. Lagging far behind, and in most cases (the Catholic seminaries of Asia are a good example) still not implemented, were courses in world religions.

What the Catholic administrative response seemed to miss was the awareness that the choice to live and grow in a religiously plural world, in collaboration with people of many faiths could not be effected by structural appendages, by training “experts” in other religions, or by inserting courses in the seminary curriculum. In hindsight for those who took up the dialogue directly, it is clear that what is being called for is nothing less than a fundamental conversion that touches the very core of the Church’s identity. It means renouncing one’s image of the non-Christian world as an open market place for conversion; it means renouncing ideas and practices that denigrate the faith of others; it means actively trying to claim as our rightful heritage the whole wealth of the religious truth of humanity. But it was before that hindsight, in the early years when only the most courageous would dare think such thoughts, that the Nanzan Institute came to be conceived.

The Birth of the Nanzan Institute

Ten years after the Council, the former president of Nanzan University, Johannes Hirschmeier, had an inkling that something needed to be done for a Catholic University to engage itself in its religious surroundings. There was almost no model to go on. His close friend and president of Sophia University, Josef Pitau, had already encouraged Heinrich Dumoulin, who was approaching retirement, to begin an Institute for Oriental Religions. Within a couple of years, and with a direct request from the Vatican, he did so. That Institute continues in Sophia University to this day. President Hirschmeier, who followed these developments closely, set his sights on something grander if also more naive—a free “think tank” whose purpose would be to forge a “common language” that the religions of Japan could use to talk to one another.

I was one of several consultants invited to Japan in 1975 to discuss this plan. At the time I was dividing my time between Mexico City and Chicago, but gladly made the trip to help as I might. I remember President Hirschmeier taking me to a corner of the campus and showing me a large hole in ground where excavations had begun for the buildings. He asked me to think out loud about my idea of an “ideal” working environment for research. Being totally ignorant of Japan, so ignorant that I knew not even just how little I knew, I unashamedly painted a picture of what my I imagined the perfect research institute to look like: a free center for excellence, unencumbered by the bureaucratic apparatus, where people of different faiths could work together. I recalled a passage where Lao-tzu remarks that the

importance of the tea cup is where the tea cup ends—in the nothingness that it creates. I suggested that the Institute should be like that—space and time galore, without a purpose of its own. He thanked me and sent me on my way. That was to be the extent of the consultation for which I had traveled about as far away as I could travel without leaving the planet. I returned to Mexico, resigned to the embarrassment of having wasted the resources of those who invited me, but grateful all the same for having been given a first glimpse of the country of Japan.

Some months later, I moved for a short stay in Nicaragua on the island of Mancarrón in the archipelago of Solentiname with the poet Ernesto Cardenal (later to become the Minister of Culture of the government that formed after the revolution) and his small commune of poets and artists. On the other side of the island, a group of young men who called themselves “Sandinistas” had formed their own commune, which I would visit from time to time. One day a letter arrived from Nanzan. “The Institute is finished,” it said. “How would you like to join us in a cup of tea?”

Japan was on the other side of all my plans for the future, but somehow I could not put the invitation out of my mind. One day, walking in the jungle after the rains, I made up my mind. I would go to Nanzan to have a look. That was nearly 15 years ago.

Heinrich Dumoulin, who had since retired from the directorship of the institute at Sophia, was asked to take over as the first director of what would be called the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. He assumed the title role until a proper substitute could be found, but declined an active role for reasons of health. One morning while shaving, as he told me, the image of Jan Van Bragt came to his his eyes in the mirror. In no time Van Bragt was contacted and agreed to take over as director.

When I joined the team two years later, it was apparent to me that the director shared the same dream as I. Though I did not entirely appreciate it at the time, it was not without some effort that Van Bragt succeeded in protecting the time and space of the Institute in order to let nature have its way. Sometime in the early years of his directorship, he placed a little sign in the director’s office (which he had turned into a common room for the staff to meet in daily), that read *Jinen hōni*—more or less the equivalent of an important but often neglected ideal of our Christian tradition: *fiat*, “let it be.” The gesture was an important one. The posture of *jinen hōni* sees the spread of truth as residing not in consensus about answers that obliterate the original question, but in a consensus about the importance of questions with an inexhaustible storehouse of answers. This was what he imagined a research institute to be, and what we all learned to work together to let it become.

A Look Back and a Look Ahead

Now, in our seventeenth year of operation, dialogue looks much different than it did at the start. What was once an esoteric activity is now a commonplace in religious academia across the world. What was once a kind of “pioneer” trek across unknown territory is now familiar ground. The holding of interreligious symposia and international conferences, the publication of journals and bulletins, the editing and translation of books, the sponsoring of scholars from abroad have earned a respectability where they were once eyed with suspicion.

At this point, now that our business is a respectable one, we have to ask ourselves seriously whether all our “busy-ness” is motivated by something of greater historical significance than our own Institute’s continuance. The aim of this symposium, and of the eight colloquia that preceded it, is simply to ask this questions of foresight based on hindsight. It is a question we did not want to put in the abstract, but in the concrete, right here where we work and live. And it was a question we wanted to put to those who know us and what were our aims. Like any institution, we are hardly immune to the danger of spinning our wheels or riding in ruts that drive us around in circles. If you will pardon me an image from my own heritage, we decided it was time to turn our wagons in a circle, build a fire, and sit down with our friends to make sure we know where we were headed and why we were headed there.

There is a second purpose to these proceedings—to arrange a modest *festdialog* for Jan Van Bragt, whose name for many of you is virtually synonymous with the Nanzan Institute. We offer him these discussions by having him here with us as an active participant.

The colloquia have thrown up such a rich fare that almost any one of them would give more than enough to discuss in symposium. In the discussions that follow we will try to focus on the points of overlap. But first I would like to register some general impressions that struck me during the course of the year’s colloquia.

People who are drawn to interreligious dialogue seem to be people who feel an attraction for plurality and pluriformity. In many cases, the attraction is impractical in daily life: the pressures of tradition often prohibit us from implementing true plurality in the fields in which we actually work. But dialogue is a kind of sandbox where one can make-believe a world different from the one we inhabit. These rearrangements in imagination are a way of experimenting with the future, of living posthumously, which is one of the greatest gifts consciousness gives us. That these energies should be spent in the name of religion, it struck me, is indeed something noble.

Despite all the “manuals” and “guidelines” for dialogue that religious traditions have tripped over one another to publish, my experience is that the real *work* is done by fumbling around, by trial and error. One can hardly object to one’s work becoming recognized, but there is a sense in which the suspension of recognition encourages just this kind of trial and error. William James once said that great ideas go through four stages. First, they are seen as foolish and idiotic; next, they are seen as true but insignificant; then they are seen as significant but nothing really new; and finally they are recognized as revolutionary. I can hardly think we have come to the fourth stage yet. At least in the Catholic tradition, we seem to have become stuck in the third. For the time being, we seem to enjoy plenty of romping ground.

If dialogue needs freedom to imagine and discipline to grow, it has also to begin from an awareness of its own conventions. In other words, it is not only the *plurality of religions* that gather to discuss together, but the *plurality of forms* in which they gather that is important. In all of this, and in the sessions that follow, there is one supposition I think we all share: that dialogue is not yet everything it should be nor is it going on everywhere it should be. There is much to be done and many different ways of doing it. It is important that our years of work do not become a kind of ritual carried out for the sake of what we have invested in it, resistant to radical criticism. In that sense, some of the wildest ideas that came up in the discussions were the most instructive.

Finally, I have found that I have had to pause on more than one occasion to ask myself what kind of person I have become by engaging in *this* kind of work, rather than in the work I had planned for myself as a young man. I have had to ask what difference it makes to those I come into contact with outside of the work. These may not be matters for public debate, but I am sure that the success or failure of one’s work is not only measured by the number of publications and academic events hosted, but also by the quality of people that are produced in the process. If the latter fails, the success of the former is diminished as well.



The fact that the word *religion* has meant something in the twentieth century that it never meant before and that it has become part of ordinary parlance is not without relevance for the traditions that fall under the name of religion. The very currency of the word has predisposed us to expect of our belief questions about equality among faiths, relativity of truth, and trans-traditional experience of the transcendent. However one respond to them,

once asked these questions cannot be unasked. On their answer hinges the future of the faith that we inherited from our ancestors, and therefore it is important that we protect the dialogue from become unhinged from the world of history—the history that is made and the history that is in the making.