

Interreligiosity and Conversion

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On 13-14 September 1996, the research staffs of the Nanzan Institute and the Institute for Oriental Philosophy gathered for a symposium on "Catholicism and the Sōka Gakkai." The event concluded a year of colloquia and discussions held at the two centers, and is due to be published in Spring of 1996 under the title 『カトリックと創価学会』 [Catholicism and the Sōka Gakkai] by Daisanbunmei-sha of Tokyo.

What follows is a translation of the text of the opening lecture to that symposium.

The symposium that brings together today the Institute for Oriental Philosophy and the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture is the last in a series of meetings that began as something of an ambiguous adventure for all concerned. The shape and general focus of the discussions, which we decided on together in a joint consultation, was clear enough: members of the two research institutes would come together to discuss the meaning of belief, institutional structure, and social praxis in our respective traditions. In general the series of ten colloquia kept to this framework and produced an exchange of information, cleared up some misunderstandings, highlighted many points of contrast and was, by and large, fruitful as such things go.

Normally it would be my duty in this orientation to our closing symposium to lay out the guiding insights. But there is another agenda that must be addressed first, and one which was more present in this dialogue than at any other time in our past experience of dialogue with other religions in Japan.

From the start, all of us involved realized that there was a double-entendre to even the most overtly academic of our discussions. From Nanzan's side, this was the first time that we had attempted such discussions with a religious group originating in the twentieth century. In restricting ourselves in the past to the so-called "world religions," we were already at something novel enough. But to go the step further and take as our partner one of the "new"

religions brought additional problems. From the side of the Institute for Oriental Religions, the move was bolder still in that it represented a first concerted effort by scholars within the Sōka Gakkai to carry on a dialogue with their Christian counterparts. I think that this is the time to air openly what some of those problems were, and to look at them in the hindsight of the discussions and exchanges that actually took place.



To begin with, we were faced at Nanzan with the problem of which group to choose. On the one hand, any number of the new religions have actively solicited our participation, as individuals and as an Institute, in local and international conferences. In many, if not most cases, these invitations did not stem from a scholarly tradition or academic caucus within these groups, but from public relations projects thinly disguised as academic interest. This is not to say that all such meetings are without all academic value, only that their primary focus was not the quest for understanding but a display of some other symbolic importance. All of this is not lost on the participating scholars who quickly see through it all (though the offer of free travel and accommodations may oblige them to a certain public silence), which leads me to suspect that the symbolic importance is more for those who do not attend the events—on their members and perhaps on the wider world of those who watch the activities of religions. In any case, this did not seem the right place to begin.

On the other hand, working as scholars, we have amicable relations with scholars of any number of new religions, including some that are not disposed to enter into religious dialogue with Christianity in Japan or elsewhere. In other words, whereas scholarly dialogue and cooperation have proceeded with individuals in these traditions, blind to differences of faith these many years, actual interfaith dialogue between their traditions and our own has not yet taken place or been out of the question. It was from this end of the spectrum that we felt our choice had to be made.

The problem was this: Given our own absence of formal dialogue in the past with the new religions, and given further the lack of dialogue among the new religions themselves at the academic level, would the selection of one partner be perceived as an endorsement of one group or an implicit critique of others? Would the “public relations” dimension enter in despite our good intentions and that of our actual partners? Would we run the risk of being used in the way that has become almost synonymous with certain new religious movements vis-à-vis Christianity, for purposes quite outside of the dialogue itself? For the fact is the presence of Catholic scholars engaged in dialogue can be, and often has been used as propaganda against the will of

people just like ourselves. Not to be overlooked in this regard was the obvious preoccupation with many new religions in Japan to be on friendly terms with the Vatican, and in particular to be singled out above other religions for special treatment. Even though we do not as such represent, by delegation, the Vatican, the world Catholic church nor even the Catholic church in Japan, the danger of our efforts being perceived as a political choice was there.

In this same connection, there was some fear that we would somehow approve, by entering into dialogue, many of the practices of forced proselytizing and violation of human rights for which certain of the new religions have been criticized by the Catholic church. No matter that such criticism has not always been fair—the symbolic value of the dialogue could be misinterpreted easily by Catholics and Christians engaged in serious dialogue in Japan. Finally, there was some anxiety over taking a step naively in the direction of dialogue with a religion that may have left scars in the Christian community, or among those in the Buddhist traditions with which we have had a long-standing dialogue, of which we at the Nanzan Institute were unaware.

Clearly the reasons for sticking to classical and world religions were compelling. While I myself was determined not to let these fears cripple us, I have to admit that they were part of what went into our decision to seek a middle road, by entering into formal academic dialogue with what we considered a serious academic research center, and as far as possible to make this an interfaith dialogue among believers but among believers who come together as scholars.

Happily the Institute for Oriental Philosophy was of the same mind when we presented our proposal. Given the past relationships between the Catholic Church and the Sōka Gakkai, the plans proceeded smoothly in a way that none of us imagined would happen. In this way the inter-institute dialogue began.

From the side of the Institute for Oriental Philosophy there were no doubt anxieties, too. Most obvious is that the parent organization of the Institute, the Sōka Gakkai, had traditionally kept aloof from interfaith dialogue. The reasons for this have tended to be tacit or at least not widely publicly pronounced. Although I have a hard time finding any reasons I can sympathize with, it is not hard for me as a Catholic to find like reasons within our own tradition. For despite all the efforts that have been made at a fair and open dialogue with other religions, there are many who have opposed it, and continue to oppose it as apostasy, or who have tried to strategize it for the purposes of expansionism.

There is another factor that enters into the dialogue. The split of the lay members from the monastic Nichiren Shōshū has meant that structurally the Sōkagakki was going through a major upheaval for which it was hoped the Catholic experience might be of some help. In fact, the dwindling ranks of the clergy, the dramatic loss in esteem, and thinning out of the flocks of the tradi-

tional “pastorate” and the like, even in traditional Catholic countries, have in effect meant that many in the Catholic tradition have made that split on their own. In any case, the decision on the part of the Institute for Oriental Philosophy to enter into dialogue was a bold one that came from within their own members, not from the top down, and as such represents an act of courage and risk of censorship much like that of the predecessors of dialogue in our own Catholic tradition, on whose shoulders we stand for the freedoms we enjoy today.

And perhaps, too, under the surface of it all, was something of the widespread fear mentioned earlier that, when all is said and done, the Catholics engage in dialogue as a mission strategy. The fear is not entirely paranoid. After all, the open-ended dialogue that we enjoy today was an outgrowth of a for the time rather liberal missiological stratagem circulating around the middle of the century known as “pre-evangelization.” The idea was that one should look for preparatory signs of openness to Christianity in religions that do not know the church or the gospel. At the time, this was a rather bold step, resisted by those who divided the world neatly into the faithful and the pagans. But the final goal was the same: conversion to the one true church.

This attitude is still prevalent, and has not escaped the attention of those who have been its object. (Indeed, the same methods are also apparent in new and lay Buddhist movements in predominantly Catholic cultures such as found in South America and the Philippines.) The critique has been more forceful from quarters in the world of Islam, both because of the cultural agenda of the nineteenth century missionary movement, only now coming to its end, and because of the current fundamentalist mood. As these critics view the interreligious dialogue, the absence of outright attempts to convert others to Christianity cloaks a more basic conversion to a certain idea of human relations and a certain way of being human—a humanism that has historically been the support of Christianity. This extends not only to the political and the economic realm, but also to the rational and religious dimension.

To put it briefly, the idea is that only a religion that is self-reflective and self-critical after the manner of Western theology is worthy of the human being at the end of the twentieth century. Thus, entering into dialogue means taking on this attitude, and in a sense is still a kind of “pre-evangelization.” The closer non-Christian religions approach to the methods of Christian theology, the more prepared they are to enter into the cutting edge of dialogue—but at the same time, the more likely they are to be absorbed into a language game at which Christianity has the edge of a long tradition and history. This is clearest in religions without a scripture or at least predominantly ritual, but it is also the case in religions based on non-European philosophical principles.

In Japan, this issue is close to the surface, and I should like to think it is so because the dialogue belongs to a broader trend in Christian theology of self-reflections on the Hellenic and Western biases of Christianity vis-à-vis Buddhism in particular. Indeed, the leading role that Japanese Christianity has played in interreligious dialogue is partly a function of its concern with facing up to its own failures to inculturate.

As our discussions progressed, these ambiguities wove in and out of one another until in the end everything came together in a day of closed-door discussions held at the Institute for Oriental Philosophy in Tokyo last July. It is because of those discussions that the matter can be aired here without animosity or fear of offense. It is a matter, ultimately, of common concern. In hindsight, I have no question but that Sōka Gakkai believers of the Institute for Oriental Religion were as fitting dialogue partners as we have ever had. I am also persuaded that the actual discussions and relationships that grew up outweighed and obscured the fears of either side using the other to its own advantage. Such obscuring is the best answer to the question, which cannot really be dealt with on its own. The proof of the dialogue was in the dialoguing.



Each of the major themes of the symposium—faith, structure, social praxis—will be given its own session. What I would like to devote the rest of my comments to here is the question of the relationship between academic dialogue such as that we have been engaged in together as research institutes and the fact that we do so as members belonging to a particular religious tradition.

To begin with, I wish to state my own conviction concerning the religiosity of the interreligious dialogue itself. For it seems to me that this business of getting together is not mere talk about religion, nor mere religious theory, but *is itself a religious act*. Contrary to the view that dialogue, like scientific study of religion, requires stepping away from one's convictions in order to create an atmosphere of objectivity or at least etiquette, there are a range of convictions that are strengthened in the dialogue as no where else. In this connection, I would offer three comments here.

- 1. In laying out the motivations for entering into interfaith dialogue, however much one may cite scripture, documents, and the sayings of founders, saints, and sages in one's religious tradition, the core attitude of dialogue really belongs to the sound common sense that makes any reflection on the reality of religion today possible.*

The simple historical fact is that the advance of the scientific spirit in our own century has accomplished far more than centuries of religious teachings, theology, and philosophy were able to accomplish with regard to instilling tolerance for religious traditions other than one's own. It is no accident that those religious institutions and thinkers who have most resisted the progress of science are also those most averse to the consequences of religious pluralism. The scientific spirit rests on a conviction that whatever authority human reason has, rests on a continual interplay among the facts of experience, the irritation of doubt, and the release from this irritation by settling opinion in open forum. Secular civilization has become dependent on this spirit, not only for the progress of its knowledge and technology, but also for a critique of that progress. Given the pluriformity of the human religious experience and expression, to enter into dialogue with one of another faith requires no more than a modicum of good will and a moment's consultation with that common sense. To refuse to do so on principle, even religiously motivated principle, is an offense to reasonableness.

I would go further and claim that ultimately the refusal to place one's own faith in an interreligious context of dialogue cannot reasonably be grounded on religious belief or special revelation but only on a decision to cling to one's own opinions and absolve them from their wider context. This means not just clinging tenaciously to particular tenets, but clinging tenaciously to the opinion that this is the proper way to believe. This tenacity is no more a religious act than liberation from it is a religious act. It is at direct odds with the social impulse of our human nature, as the openness to truth is a confirmation of our nature. The same holds true in the case of an institution that sees moral authority as a way to settle matters of truth a priori, oblivious of the pluriformity of experience and the community of thinkers. Any reason that rejects self-criticism, again however religiously expressed its motivations and grounds, is at odds with common sense and humanity. Realizing this is the beginning of dialogue.

In our discussions, there were any number of points at which allegiance to one's respective religious bodies came into question. At times these counterpositions were justified as belonging to a "minority view" within the wider tradition. Such justification, it seems to me, only makes sense if one accepts the claim of moral authority to fix the majority view and to proscribe rational doubt in favor of tenacity to fixed beliefs. In the context of dialogue, the negative sense of a "minority view" departing from the mainstream of tradition is out of place. On the contrary, insofar as the forum of dialogue is truly open, such wrestling with received tradition and free exchange of opinion is not sus-

pect but rather the proof of the humanity of our religious reflection. That having been said, there is a second factor to consider at once:

2. Interreligious dialogue cannot ignore the moral dimension of the fact that religion has always fostered an admiration for the person who can dismiss reason in favor of submission to the authority of tradition and of the strength, simplicity, and directness of tenacity to one's beliefs.

Because authority and tenacity are tied more directly to moral action than is scientific method or the radical search for truth, religion has tended to define itself at the limits of reason. There is something in our nature that admires the moral goodness of the believer as somehow outweighing the renunciations of the rational processes. In this context of the interreligious dialogue, which is a rational process, however, the interreligious dialogue's insistence of speaking from a standpoint of faith is less an argument for authority or tenacity than the conviction that the moral impulse is an essential ingredient to a religious outlook and life. In our discussions, there was a sense emerging that moral concerns were not merely the concretization or social consequences of the founding ideals, teachings, traditional institutions, even personal faith of a religion, but belonging to the primary core of religion.

3. Interreligious dialogue is not about pitting the particular symbols of faith against one another in order to compare their relative merits and demerits, but about a mutual conversion.

By conversion I mean articulating in mutually understandable language a view of life based on those symbols, a sense of how the evolution of one's own symbolic system is enriched and challenged by that of other faiths, and a joint attempt to decide what is morally acceptable in the social sphere and what is not. It is here that the dialogue becomes properly a religious act.

In this sense, dialogue requires a change in the way individual religions have classically thought of truth. As long as the unshakable, nonevolutionary, solid foundation of faith is a special revelation chiseled in stone, giving access to facts about the universe not otherwise accessible, then dialogue about religious truth can only be political etiquette or pre-evangelical strategy. What is needed is a conversion to a kind of dual-affiliation. In the same way that one may feel oneself a primary citizen of the world and a secondary citizen of one's own particular culture, so too one's primarily religious allegiance can be the point at which religious faiths together open out to responsibility for the world, and the secondary allegiance to that concrete set of symbols or revelations within which one lives and thinks. This standpoint of dialogue, on which

only in joining the two loyalties can one think of truth and act the truth, though not limited to formal dialogue, must be present.

In saying that my particular religious affiliation is secondary, I do not mean that it is dispensable. In fact, its indispensability is the deepest mystery of religion: that our specific symbolic system is not exhausted or reducible to any general religious principles or insights, but remains a *sine qua non* of religious discourse. Like the senses without which we cannot take in the world, still it is not the senses but the world that is primary. Similarly, one cannot be a citizen of the world, picking and choosing what one finds of benefit in many cultures and languages, without a grounding in one language and culture. My Christianity is my vernacular language without which I am silent in the dialogue.

In this same regard, I would note that the “suitability” of a partner for dialogue is ultimately not directly a matter of relative institutional strengths. This is because finally dialogue does not take place between institutions—theological or ritual traditions, financial conglomerates, political regimes—but between the only weakly representative individuals who in some measure accept responsibility for the continuation of those institutions. There is no question of a lack of parity in dialogue simply because of a disparity in the length of one’s history, the indigenoussness of one’s presence, the presence or absence of a scriptural tradition or priesthood, even the size of one’s membership. In the case of the Sōka Gakkai and Christianity, it is clear that the Catholic church is worldwide the institutionally stronger, but inside Japan those roles are reversed.

Such dialogue does not take place between mere individuals, but representative ones, that is individuals who do not rely merely on their own insight and reflection but recognize as critical the limits imposed on self-understanding and self-determination by past and present circumstances. The constant reference to our respective history and ongoing change was not a distraction, but a necessary ingredient of what we were trying to do. Successful dialogue is a religious attitude of mind that builds up a community of faith that cuts across traditional lines, a community which is through and through religious and whose cooperation is all the more important because it is non institutionalized. Mutual conversion takes place in a community of faith united against the bad habit of what Rudolf Harnack called “comparing one religion’s good theory with another’s bad practice.” Although this kind of reasoning is not to be discounted in a fair number of conversions of individuals from one faith to another, the sensible thing in the dialogue context is to try to find a harmony between one’s own theories and one’s own practice. This is a common quest that only proceeds better if one can secure the help of others.

This question of mutual conversion through dialogue to a kind of inter-religiosity and its broader idea of religious truth did not come up directly in the year's discussions. In another sense, the question of a broadening of religious loyalties beyond one's particular affiliation and awakening to the need of mutual support for moral praxis was there beneath the surface all along. In conclusion, I would like to address this matter in more specific terms.



The very idea of "conversion" implies both an awakening to reality and a readjustment of habits of behavior. To say that conversion is "mutual" does not mean that it is a kind of joint statement or joint action after the manner of a treaty or contract, but that each side is intimately involved in the process of change of the other. This is not only a personal matter, but one that affects the structure of religious institutions. In concluding my remarks today, I would like to single out six points of orientation towards conversion that directly engage the religious establishment interreligiously, including of course Catholicism and the Sōka Gakkai.

Each of these orientations is motivated not only by the time-worn nobility of ideals to be found in religious traditions everywhere, but also by the persistent ignobility of the failure of organized religion to measure up to them. Together they suggest that part of the purpose of cultivating the disciplines of interreligious dialogue is to protect religious activity from yielding to its dark side. The longer religious institutions join in dialogue not only as an exchange of information but as a religious activity that affects the way a religious body conducts itself in history, the more apparent the perils of isolating one religious tradition from another become. The case of the Aum Shinrikyō is a grotesque example of what can happen when one religious body deliberately distances itself from the community of other religious bodies. As its leadership lost touch with religious ideals and become hopelessly entangled in the shadows of economic and political agenda, the piety of its rank-and-file membership was enlisted in the service of the worst kind of social destructiveness. As extreme as the consequences were, the bare *pattern* of the process is not unfamiliar to the history of religion. Missionary tactics of persuasion by financial or institutional impressiveness, moral pressures to comply without question to institutional decisions, cultural imperialism, political extortion, and the like are all familiar weapons to the traditions of Catholicism and the Sōka Gakkai as well. My point here is that interreligious dialogue cannot get very far without obliging participants to face these perennial problems in the concrete in the light of our respective ideals and scriptures. In this connection, I would note that if there is one distinctive element that the Christian tradition has brought

to dialogue with other religions, it is the willingness to face up to the inherent sinfulness of our institutions, and the willingness to see the correction or failure to correct as something that affects the role of religion within society as a whole. If it is not out of place for me to say so, this is an attitude that our Buddhist counterparts in general, including Buddhist groups like the Sōka Gakkai, have yet to accept as fully in the dialogue. That having been said, I take up the points of orientation to interreligious conversion.

First, the dialogue is oriented to improving our understanding and appreciation of the broader religious history of humanity. If there is, as I believe, a sense in which religious believers today can claim as their rightful inheritance the full wealth of religious insight, this requires a deliberate effort to make that inheritance better known. In taking this as a task of dialogue, the implication is that the truth and self-understanding of a religious way is best learned from one who believes and practices it, not from one who does not, which means recognizing the need to expose the faithful of one tradition to the teachers of another. In other words, if the dialogue is a religious act, and not merely an area of expertise for specialists, its religiosity must not become the special privilege of a priesthood of experts. It needs to become a permanent feature of the way we pass our respective traditions on from one generation to the next.

Second, the dialogical state of mind is oriented towards calming hostilities among religions of a size and power that makes them capable of generating, inspiring, or otherwise supporting warfare. This was one of the guiding ideas behind the call for a “global ethic” that featured prominently in the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago last year. While the number of religious traditions to whom this applies is rather restricted, their institutional strength is such as to immunize them from the critique of smaller, less “developed” religious traditions. It may well be that when institutions—even religious institutions based on ideas of simplicity, peace, and equality—cross a certain threshold in size and wealth that they cannot avoid engagement in the area of political and economic warfare. If that is so, the promotion of peace by individual believers within these institutions, and the advance of interreligious contact with smaller religious ways not so compromised becomes crucial. In warfare as in so many other areas, it is naïve to entrust the execution of a global ethic to the most powerful global institutions. The dialogue among religions must work to awaken religious establishments to this insight.

Third, dialogue is oriented towards ecumenism with factions, denominations, and sects that make up one's primary religious affiliation. Christian ecumenism has made great advances in the past fifty years, and the signs of ecumenical cooperation among Buddhists of different countries and persua-

sions are encouraging. In contrast, contact among the new Christian groups, beginning with those that grew up in the latter half of the last century, is wanting. The same animosities and competitiveness that keep them apart are also apparent in the new Buddhist groups of the far East. In the case of Japan, for example, while many of these groups fall over one another to enter into dialogue with non-Buddhist religions, they cannot suffer dialogue with their fellow Buddhists. I am persuaded that without progress in intra-religious ecumenism, there is no hope of the gains that Buddhism and Christianity make in academic dialogue ever touching the soul of our age.

Fourth, dialogue is oriented towards the promotion of religious pluralism. Contrary to what dialogue might look like from the outside—and where established religion is concerned, let it be remembered, dialogue is still by and large an esoteric activity judged from the outside—it does not take the question of doctrinal foundations lightly. Quite the opposite, it thinks about these questions all the time. And precisely because it does so in an interreligious context, it cannot but raise questions of the cultural and historical bias built into doctrinal understanding. The more one is made to understand the specificity of one's own religious way in the broader context of the religious history of the world, the more one is also driven to esteem pluralism and variety within one's own chosen faith. This is an important, even essential, by-product of dialogue among religions. At the same time, the pursuit of doctrinal questions in a context of dialogal openness can always lead to a change of affiliation for some individuals. Though this occurs less frequently than might be imagined, it is a sign of the health and honesty of the dialogue that such conversions occur from time to time: Christians becoming Buddhists, Buddhists becoming Christians, Christians and Buddhists of one denomination shifting to another. Insofar as such persons carry their commitment to dialogue with them, they may render a service to the religion they have "left" that perhaps no one else can render.

Fifth, the dialogue is oriented not towards an elimination of all proselytizing and teaching of one's own faith, but to a conversion of the means of expansion. In the same way that the end of the colonial age did not mean an end to the spread of one's own language and culture throughout the world, so too the religions must consider, in dialogue, new ways to reach the whole world with their teachings. In the case of the Catholic tradition, missiological theory is still bogged down in the last century, but a recognition of the "pre-evangelical" truth of other religions for the teaching of Christianity coupled with a recognition of the pre-evangelical truth of Christianity for other religions is essential if we are to flourish in a pluralistic, interreligious world. In the same way that Christian teachings will never reach the soul of Japan with-

out building on the indigenous religiosity of its people, neither will Buddhist groups active in the West really reach the soul of the West without an understanding of very different religious roots. To see these processes as something to encourage rather than as a competition to fear is a task that awaits inter-religious dialogue in the years ahead.

Sixth and finally, the dialogue is oriented towards a conversion of self-understanding through a mutual engagement in one another's sacred texts. In addition to mutual reflection at the level of moral praxis, there is also a need to encourage more Buddhist readings of Christian scriptures, and vice-versa. This in turn requires a change of heart regarding the "authority" over the textual tradition. If we grant that the believing Christian, for example, can enter into the spirit of the New Testament in a way that the scholar who abstains from faith in order to be objective cannot, and that both together are necessary for "understanding" the scriptures; then might there not be a sense in which the believing Buddhist can further complement our understanding by reading the text with the eyes of another faith? Conversely, might not the Christian sensitivities enlighten Buddhist sūtras in a way instructive for the Buddhist believer? Emotionally, the possibility of being instructed in one's own faith by those in another is difficult to accept. Still, until such a conversion has been made, the religious dimension of the dialogue can never be complete.

It only remains for me to thank the participants, Catholic and Sōka Gakkai, who have come together here today to crown the efforts of the past year, and to wish us all well in the efforts that lay ahead.