

Christian Theology Learning from Buddhism

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From 24 to 26 March 1997 the Nanzan Institute held its tenth interreligious symposium on the theme, "What Does Christianity Have to Learn from Buddhism?" The papers and discussions are being edited for publication in both Japanese and English. What follows is an English version of the opening lecture to that symposium.

At the beginning of this symposium it may be good to reflect a moment on what exactly we are trying to do during these three days.

This symposium is announced as the tenth in the series of symposia organized by the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, a series that began in 1976 and the reports of which have been published in Japanese. These Nanzan Symposia were envisaged as dialogue meetings of Christians with representatives of other Japanese religions, most of all Buddhism, and have been exactly that up until now. Thus, we may first of all notice the fact that this tenth symposium—a kind of jubilee edition—is of a somewhat different nature. Indeed, our title this time clearly denotes an *intrareligious* topic, a matter to be reflected on by the Christian community, rather than a theme conducive to fruitful discussion by two (or more) religions.

Still, we may honestly say that, with this year's theme, we do not distance ourselves very far from the *interreligious* dialogue. First of all, there is no denying that "learning from other religions" is an integral and basic part of all interreligious dialogue. We may say, I believe, that the understanding of another religion at a deep existential level comes about only—paradoxical as this may sound—when one is able to relate the religiosity of the other to one's own, and is eager, for the benefit of one's own religion and spirituality, to incorporate and bring to life the strong points of the other in one's own religion. Besides, it is clear enough that the inner-Christian problem we want to come to grips with this time finds its origin in the interreligious dialogue; con-

cretely speaking, in the encounter of a small number of Japanese Christian thinkers with Buddhism.

Furthermore, one of the characteristics of this “age of dialogue” appears to be that purely intrareligious problems—themes that are relevant for one religion only—have ceased to exist. What becomes an issue in Christianity always seems to find an echo in a number of, if not all, other religions. The problem of demythologizing may come to mind here as a good example, but, nearer to home, this “commonality” finds a very concrete embodiment in this very symposium. You may have noticed already that our program offers as the title of the third session, “What can/must Buddhism learn from Christianity?” And, contrary to the traditional wisdom of not exposing one’s dirty linen to the view of others, the willingness to tackle the problems in the presence of the others may be the earmark of a true ecumenical spirit. John V. Taylor formulated this once as follows:

We have got to expose to one another the ways in which, within our separate households of faith, we wrestle with the questions that other religions pose to us. To be overheard as we face up to these disconcerting questions will make us very vulnerable to one another.¹

If I may add a “rider” to this quotation, I would say: we must not only expose our problems to the other, but humbly accept, even look forward to, the help of the other in the solution of these problems. It is in this spirit that four Buddhist “theologians” have been invited, and have graciously accepted, to serve as panelists at this symposium.

The Aim and Meaning of this Symposium

To prevent misunderstanding, let us first ask ourselves what the Nanzan Institute had in mind when it decided to organize this symposium. The organizers gave it the title “What Does Christianity Have to Learn from Buddhism?”, but it is clear that, among the many aspects of a religion, they were not especially thinking of Buddhist praxis—let us say, Christian meditation learning from Zen, or the Jesus Prayer revived by impulses from the *nen-butsu* practice of Pure Land Buddhism—but rather of the realm of doctrine. It would then not be remiss to interpret the title as “What can Christian theology learn from Buddhist doctrine and logic?”

Indeed, in their readings, but probably more still while attending Buddhist-

¹ John V. Taylor, “The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue,” G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky, eds., *Mission Trends No. 5* (New York: Paulist Press, 1951), 107–8.

Christian dialogue meetings, the members of the Institute—like most of you, I guess—have come into contact with diverse expressions of a trend of Christian theology in Japan that clearly shows the influence of Buddhism and even incorporates basic Buddhist concepts in its theologizing. This contact not only aroused their interest, but also made them suspect that this theological movement might be an extremely important one, especially with regard to the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. They also realized, however, that this theological trend—represented in different degrees by Christian thinkers such as Hatano Seiichi, Takizawa Katsumi, Ariga Tetsutarō, Doi Masatoshi, Mutō Kazuo, and several of the panelists here present—has not yet found the interest it probably deserves in the Japanese theological world, and has had very little impact up to now on the mainstream of that theology, which for the main part faithfully treads in the footsteps of Western theological trends. Moreover, at first sight it also looked as if the efforts of the various Buddhist-inspired theologians do not show too much unity or convergence.

The idea then arose that it would be good, even necessary, to try once to view those different individual theologies all together; not, of course, with the idea of coming to a synthesis of them all—the time is probably not ripe for this—but rather of “taking stock,” in order to ascertain what exactly there exists, all in all, in the direction of Buddhist-inspired theology in Japan, and possibly to put some order into that disparate harvest in the hope of detecting some common trends in it. The further expectation or hope is then to come to a balanced judgment mainly on the following questions: Can we speak already, with regard to this theological trend, of “acquisitions,” points that are so convincing that any honest theologian would have to agree with them? Is this theology, while being strongly Buddhist-inspired, still truly Christian theology? How much future does this theology have?

On the answers to these questions will then depend our future attitude towards this theology. If they turn out to be positive, as we already suspect, we—and, more importantly, the theological world of Japan—will have to give up a possibly negative or indifferent stance, to honor the legacy of the pioneers in this field, and to try to follow in their footsteps.

Let me tell you, by the way, that the Nanzan Institute is planning on publishing the records of the symposium also in English translation this time. The idea is to give theologians from abroad a chance to form their own judgment on this Buddhist-inspired theology and, eventually, to participate in this theological endeavor. This may be very important, since experience shows that intellectual movements totally restricted to the Japanese language world tend to suffer from inbreeding.²

The Motives behind this Theology

Now that we have clarified the intentions of the organizers of this symposium, we may turn to the protagonists of this theological trend, and inquire about the meaning they have found, and continue to find, in a theology that bases itself very much on Buddhist theory and logic, and about the motives that impelled them to engage in that way of theologizing.

We cannot a priori exclude from their motives the challenging and exciting intellectual adventure that this endeavor undoubtedly represents, but a reading of even a lesser part of the texts produced by these theologians makes it sufficiently clear that they are spurred on by an existential need in themselves and in their fellow Christians in Japan, and are thus basically moved by motives based on their Christian faith. Of the many testimonies that could be adduced here, let me cite only one: “The theological effort to reformulate the Christian truth with the help of Buddhist logic is today... an inescapable providential task for us, Japanese Christian scholars.”³

In a more analytical vein, we can distinguish three different, although not unrelated, motives. To begin with, the motive that is vividly felt in the literature of Christian authors such as Endō Shūsaku and Inoue Yōji, and may be considered to be the most existentially urgent one for Japanese Christians since they experience the Western intellectual mantle Christianity has clothed itself with as not fitting their Eastern-Japanese body, is the desperate desire, precisely as Christian intellectuals, to find a more Japanese intellectual underpinning for their faith. In that predicament it is not at all surprising that Buddhist theory appears to them as the first candidate to fulfill that role. Let us call this the inculturation motive.

Secondly, we can also discern in them the desire to build a bridge to the Buddhism among which Japanese Christianity is living as a tiny minority. We could call this the dialogical motive. The third motive we can detect in the writings of these theologians is one that is found all over the Christian world, and is thus not proper to Japanese or even Easterners, but to which Easterners might nevertheless be especially sensitive. In the West it has been dubbed, a bit in slogan fashion, the desire to liberate Christianity from its Greek captivity. Especially from the standpoint of our theologians, the idea behind it could be formulated as follows: the logic of Greek philosophy, geared as it is to the

² This Japanese theological trend has already found some amount of hearing and “airing” in some German publications, in the pages of the Japanese Religions journal, and in connection with the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies.

³ Honda Masaaki, 本多正昭, 仏教的「即」の論理とキリスト教 [The Buddhist logic of *soku* and Christianity]. Privately printed, 1974, 2.

founding of this world's secular reality, is not suited to understand or explain religious reality, especially not the Semitic religious thinking in which Christianity has its roots. No wonder, then, that building a theology on the categories of Greek philosophy produces a distance from the Gospel message and leads to many aporias, especially that between faith and reason.

While the consciousness of this situation is alive in many parts of the Christian world, the characteristic trait of our Japanese Christian thinkers is that they try to replace the Greek categories with the more intrinsically religious categories of Buddhism, and with their help endeavor to elaborate a theology that is truer to the Gospel message. Among them we encounter the consciousness that precisely therein resides the providential task or mission of Christian intellectuals who, by the grace of their Japanese environment, have been brought into contact with Buddhist religious thinking—a task for the benefit of the whole of Christianity. That benefit is then seen under two aspects: one, an intellectual expression of the Christian doctrine that sticks more closely to the structure and contours of the message; two, a concretization of the universality of Christianity. The first aspect is particularly stressed by, for instance, Ariga Tetsutarō, while Mutō Kazuo may have given the second aspect its classical expression:

Although it has the nature of a World Religion, Christianity up to now has appeared all too much as a Western World Religion. In order to make it into a truly ecumenical religion, we must find a way for it to become also an Eastern (or Japanese) World Religion.⁴

If we now consider for a moment the places where voices of dissatisfaction with and criticism of the traditional theology appear most strongly in the West, we might especially think of the following four areas: (1) biblical theology, wherein the distance of systematic theology from the biblical way of thinking is often deplored; (2) the Theology of Liberation, which wants to rethink the Christian message more directly from the concrete situations in the world, especially the world of the poor; (3) a theology developing under influence of a philosophy that, in the wake of Heidegger, Derrida, etc., wants to deconstruct the traditional metaphysics on which traditional theology was built (“Postmodern Theology”); (4) the recently developing Theology of Religions, which is becoming painfully aware of the impossibility of considering the relationship of Christianity to other religions using the categories of traditional theology.

⁴ Mutō Kazuo 武藤一雄, 信仰の神と哲学者の神 [The God of faith and the God of the philosophers], in 神学的・宗教哲学的論集 I [*Essays in theology and the philosophy of religion I*]. (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1980), 45.

For a better grasp of the particularity of our Japanese theological trend and of the role that it might be called to play on the international scene, it would be best if we could now review the points in traditional theology that have become particular targets of criticism. Lack of time (and competence), however, obliges me to skip this.

Some Perspectives and Probings

Next, as a stimulus for the ensuing discussions, I would like to present a few more perspectives on the Japanese trend of philosophizing with the help of Buddhist theory and logic, as it has shaped up until now.

1. First of all, I want to come back to the “context” of this Japanese theological movement, its position on the international scene. What would the relationship be of this movement to, for example, the “deconstructive theology” mentioned a moment ago? I have the impression that these two movements share many criticisms and that their thoughts move in a similar direction. But, can we speak already of any cross-fertilization between the two? And is there any reason to think that, as far as “liberating criticism” goes, the Buddhist one can be more radical than the postmodern one?

It would also be interesting to know whether similar theological trends can be found in other Buddhist countries. And would not there be merit in a confrontation of this Japanese theological trend with the Christian Advaita movement in India, led by people such as Henri Le Saux, Jules Monchanin, and Bede Griffiths?

2. There is also the question of the kind of role Buddhist theory (and especially the logic of emptiness) is playing in this theological trend, or, more generally, what kind of contribution Buddhist theory can make to Christian theology. Would it be possible to circumscribe or define that role more exactly? Would this role, for example, be a purely negative, critical, deconstructive one (the killing of idols), or could it also be a positive, constructive one? We might remember here that the working of Nāgārjuna’s emptiness on the earlier Abhidharma is often said to have been a purely negating one.

3. When we say that these Japanese Christian thinkers practice theology under the influence of Buddhism or while learning from Buddhism, it may be salutary to be aware of what the term “Buddhism” means in this case. If asked to circumscribe it, I would tentatively say that it means “a variety of Mahāyāna Buddhism that puts the stress on the omnipresent Buddha Nature and posits emptiness as the basic principle of all reality.” This may certainly be regarded

as an especially valuable strand in the variegated texture of Buddhism, but scarcely can be said to represent all of Buddhism.

Moreover, the Buddhist influence has reached the protagonists of this theology in part directly, yes, but maybe more still through the mediation of the philosophy of the Kyoto school. It can be said, I believe, that in its basic direction Kyoto school philosophy is remarkably true to the Buddhism in question—even to the point of sharing the same problem: difficulty in coming down to the concreteness of daily life, especially to the level of social engagement. There remains a difference between the two, however, owing to the simple fact that the one is religion and the other philosophy. By its very nature, philosophy cannot really take the religious “path” into account (Tanabe’s valiant efforts notwithstanding), nor can it truly honor the part of mystery contained in religious truth. It cannot but “secularize”—universalize, logicize—the religious truth it encounters. In saying this, Hegel’s philosophy is foremost in my mind; in connection with our present investigation, I only wish to say that although I joyously applaud the deconstruction of the God of Greek philosophy, I feel less sanguine about its replacement by a God of Eastern philosophy. In this connection, we might do well to listen to the warning bell that Mutō Kazuo once sounded:

In Nishida’s philosophy and view of Christianity, there are things apt to open our eyes anew, beyond the horizon of traditional theology, but there also lurks the danger of losing sight of Christian dimensions we should not let go of.⁵

4. As a final perspective I would like to introduce the question: Which would be the areas (or “treatises”) of Christian theology to which Buddhist thinking can make the greatest contribution? Judging from the writings of our Buddhist-inspired theologians, it seems safe to say that the possibility of valuable Buddhist contribution looks especially great in the areas of God’s existence and nature (including the Trinity), and of the relationship of God and human being (the world)—areas which, while being central to Christian theology, are also the most metaphysical ones. At the other end of the spectrum, it could be argued that no great hopes can be pinned on Buddhism when it comes, for example, to ecclesiology or the sacraments. But, even supposing that I am correct up to this point, there remain many open questions. What, for instance, of moral theology? Could, for example, the Buddhist tenet of the nonduality of good and evil become a fruitful ingredient of Christian ethical thinking? I have the impression that our theologians may not have paid

⁵ Mutō Kazuo, キェルケゴール [Kierkegaard] (Nishinomiya: Kokusai Nippon Kenkyūsho, 1967), 346.

sufficient attention as yet, to the Buddhist possibilities in moral theology—not, to be sure, for resolving concrete moral problems, but rather for reconsidering the basic spirit of Christian ethics and its relationship to salvation.

Acquisitions?

Finally, I want to give some thought to a question merely mentioned at the beginning of this talk: Would it be possible to speak already of “acquisitions” to our theological thinking? (By that I mean propositions common to all protagonists, or evidently presupposed by them, and with which we would all have to agree.) If there are, we may assume, of course, that they will emerge from the discussions in this symposium, but, with the intention of offering a partial sounding board, I am going to present a short list of what I consider to be possible candidates for that category, making my formulations bold enough to be easily assailable.

1. When it comes to understanding, expressing, and ordering spiritual (religious) reality (Nishida’s famous *shinreijo no jijitsu*), Buddhist categories and logic are much more suitable and useful than those of Greek philosophy.
2. With regard to religious thought and praxis, the Buddhist tenet of *pratītya-samutpāda* is extremely important and salutary. However, a “*pratītya-samutpāda*” that is seen as synonymous with emptiness—a correlationality that does away completely with the self-being of the related entities—cannot as such be adopted into Christianity, since in Christianity otherness, alterity, has a central role. In that connection, the formula “emptiness-sive-love” looks misleading to me.
3. The Buddhist way of thinking is most salutary for Christian theology where it makes clear the mutual interdependence of things that, in traditional theology, have been thought of very dualistically. Examples would be: faith and wisdom (understanding), knowledge of God and knowledge of (the true) self, the “objective” and “subjective” in religion. Here again a word by Mutō Kazuo comes to mind: “I want to confess that, when faced with hard-to-solve aporias in my theological thinking, I not seldom receive precious hints from Nishida’s philosophy.”⁶
4. In its content and structure, Christian doctrine is more deeply pervaded by negativity—or again, negation plays a more positive role in Christianity—than can be brought out and systematized by the Greek philosophy of

⁶ Mutō Kazuo, *Kierkegaard*, 347.

being. The Chicago theologian Langdon Gilkey formulated this once as follows: "I think that there is a bit of a contradiction for a faith that asserts unequivocally the being of God and then has its center in the death of the Son of God."⁷

5. To conceive of God's essence (insofar as this is humanly possible), it is not enough to invoke the category of being; we must at the same time ascribe a positive role to nothingness. Also, however, God's reality cannot be thought through only with the category of emptiness. In this connection, the formula "being-sive-nothingness" (有即無) may be felicitous in that it reminds us that both are at work together, but does not mean that we can think both together.

⁷ Langdon Gilkey, cited in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 5 (1985): 77.