

Mutual Transformation of Pure Land Buddhism and Christianity

Methodology and Possibilities in the light of Shinran's Doctrine

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The following essay is a translation of one of the contributions to the 1997 Nanzan Symposium on the theme, "What Does Christianity Have to Learn from Buddhism?" The author is a Pure Land priest and professor of Religious Studies at Ryūkoku University in Kyoto, who looks back over his many years of interreligious dialogue to reflect on major issues.

"What can, or must, Buddhism learn from Christianity?" From my experience of encounters with Christian theologians, seminarians, and ordinary faithful, I have come to the conviction that, rather than learning from some element of Christianity (doctrine, or view of life, or worldview, or others), we Buddhists must lend an ear to all that Christianity is teaching and arguing. Buddhism must first of all learn from the attitude Christianity is showing nowadays, of trying to learn from Buddhism, and from the earnestness and humility this implies. What is, after all, the theological or doctrinal basis that lies at the bottom of that effort to learn from other religions? I have the impression of discerning in that attitude the very religious core of Christianity.

In this essay I want to take up the writings of, successively, Nishitani Keiji, John Cobb, Takizawa Katsumi, and Gordon Kaufman, and to reflect on the relationship of Christianity and Pure Land Buddhism from the perspective of some of the problematics that these authors have introduced. In my last section I shall broach the subject of "religious pluralism." This is a position that wants to uproot the traditional concepts by means of which the religious phenomenon has been conceived, for example, the very ideas of "Christianity," "Buddhism," and so on. Its problem is, then, no longer simply the mutual

relationship of the two religions, Christianity and Buddhism. It tries to rethink from the bottom up the very phenomenon of two religions endeavoring to learn from each other.

But, before I enter into my investigations, permit me to stress my strong conviction that, in the praxis of the interreligious dialogue, the existential relationship with the dialogue partner is of central importance. In my own case, the encounter with the four people mentioned above was such an existential thing, something beyond all doctrines and academic theories. It was rather the case that the meaning of the doctrines and theories emerged for me from the existential encounter. For me, these four persons are truly “bodhisattvas of returning transference,” and especially the Christians among them I cannot but call “Christian bodhisattvas.” It is in my *nembutsu* world that these people appear to me in this way.

Nishitani Keiji's Ideas on the Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

Nishitani discovers the path to mutual understanding in a doctrine that affords liberation at the same time that it implies exclusivity.¹ He insists that we must descend deep into the realm of faith and doctrine, and quotes as the reason that this is precisely “the deepest and innermost realm that humankind has reached in its long history.” He therefore stresses that also the encounter of East and West cannot be called a true and radical encounter “as long as the two do not come to a real understanding by descending into that innermost level or realm.” However, this realm is “at the same time precisely the place where the most vexing aporias originate that obstruct all mutual understanding.”²

Nishitani then concludes that there is no other way but to break through the very level of faith and doctrine, after having reached it—into a “totally new level wherein even the innermost core of the human heart is transcended.”³ The place that makes possible a “true encounter,” in other words, “a mutual understanding that goes beyond even the innermost core of the human heart,” is “a level wherein humans are simply human, purely ‘sons of man’.” It is to this place that we must return. What is required is that “we resolutely and radically divest ourselves of all the fixed forms and categories that shut up all our thoughts, feelings and acts of will within an established and

¹ For Nishitani's theory on the dialogue I base myself mainly on his essay “On the encounter of Buddhism and Christianity: With Reference to Two Discourses by Martin Heidegger,” in 『西谷啓治著作集』 [Collected writings of Nishitani Keiji, hereafter NKCW], Volume 14 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1990), 53–69.

² NKCW 14:55.

³ NKCW 14:56.

immutable-looking framework.” This is a level wherein “the human being becomes a totally ‘unveiled body’, barefoot and barehanded, without a thread either on the head or on the back, and is able, at the same time, to open and unveil also his/her innermost heart for everybody to see.”⁴

Nishitani looks for the elements that could make possible the realization of such a “true encounter” in the following four “basic historical conditions of the present:” (1) “the fact that at present the whole world is rapidly becoming ‘one world’;” (2) the fact that, in art, morals, and philosophy, it is this one world that has become the stage; (3) the fact that science-technology has become “the main actor of the drama of the emergence of this ‘one world’, first of all by making communication all over the globe easy and rapid; but more basically (4) by the fact that this science-technology, on account of having “objectivity” as its basic character, is in the process of bringing the hearts of all humans and peoples to the same common level of thoughts and intentions.

The universal pattern of our times, that which characterizes our contemporary lives, is brought about precisely by “secularization.” Secularization designates “the piecemeal liberation of human endeavors from the shackles of religious doctrine and theology that have long dominated them.”⁵ However, the root-cause that led to our present “one world,” accompanied as it is by a radical and universal secularization, is as yet a “hidden ground.” I would like to suggest that, given the fact that the root-cause of the emergence of the “one world” remains unrevealed, we must conclude that this “one world” is not truly realized as yet.

What kind of reality is that “one world”? This “one” is a problem. The fact that its root-cause is not visible to us is another. The root-cause of the contemporary “one world” must be understood as that which in our times made one world out of the dispersed localized or “parochial” worlds that existed in modern times. As long as this root-cause is hidden, the “one world” we are presently thinking of is, in fact, still a chimera. Only when this root-cause is unveiled will it appear whether the world brought about by it is “one world” or not.

What is the concrete methodology of the encounter of religions? Nishitani maintains that the only possible path to mutual understanding “can only be found by exposing oneself directly and with all one’s might to the factual, profound, and complicated situation of the present world, and to grasp in its midst some new point of departure.” How would this complexity be related to the “oneness” of the “one world?” It has to be a relationship of the

⁴ NKCW 14:56.

⁵ NKCW 14:56.

“many” to the “one.” Basing itself on the theory of emptiness, Buddhism has traditionally presented this relationship by the formula “many-*sive*-one” (多即一). This *soku* philosophy, however, is no longer adapted to reality. Buddhists may seriously argue about *soku* and emptiness, but would this mean that they are earnestly tackling the problems of reality in the direction indicated by Nishitani, of “exposing oneself to the real situation of the present world”? Does not their real attitude show the exact opposite? While with their bodies they are firmly immersed in the luxuries and pleasures of the secular world, their hearts keep aloof from the secular world by judging it to be illusory. In the world they are called “monks” but they are living in comfortable houses on great lots of land.⁶

Could this possibly be called a way of life of total exposure to the factual situation of the present world? These priests are nothing but entrepreneurs who make their living from the management of funerals, cemeteries, and parking places; people who have turned the dead into commercial objects. On seeing them, I cannot but think of the “clerics” against whom Nietzsche directed his fiery invectives in *The Antichrist*.⁷

Nishitani also says that the “level where the self is a naked body” has the same meaning as the “Pure Land” of which Pure Land Buddhism speaks. He points out that the Pure Land is the “fatherland whereto living beings must return, and that in Shinran’s *Notes on ‘Essentials of Faith Alone’* it is called the “City of Dharma-nature,” the hometown to which one is meant to return.”⁸ According to Nishitani, the Pure Land is “the Fatherland, essentially the Bud-

⁶ In his Letters (*Gobunshō*), Rennyo often criticizes the *bōzu* (monks or priests) in the following vein:

Recently, however, even priests of high position, ignorant of what our school teaches about the settled mind, severely rebuke those among their disciples who happen to go to places where faith is discussed and listen to the dharma; thus, at times, discord arises. Consequently, since the priests themselves do not clearly hear the reality of faith, and since they deal with their disciples in such a manner, faith is not decisively settled either for them or for the disciples, and their lives then pass in vain. It is truly difficult for them to escape blame for harming themselves and others. This is deplorable, deplorable. (I, 1)

These days, however, the priests in this region who are practitioners of *nembutsu* are seriously at variance with the Buddha-dharma. That is, they call followers from whom they receive donations “good disciples” and speak of them as “people of faith.” This is a serious error. Also, the disciples think that if they just bring an abundance of things to the priests, they will be saved by the priests’ power, even if their own power is insufficient. This, too, is an error. And so between the priests and their followers, there is not a modicum of understanding of our tradition’s faith.” (I, 11)

Quoted from Minor and Ann Rogers, *Rennyo: The Second Founder of Shin Buddhism* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), 143, 162.

⁷ See my 『親鸞浄土教と西田哲学』 [Shinran’s Pure Land doctrine and Nishida’s philosophy] (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1991), part II, ch. 6, “God, Humans, and Monks,” 502–508.

⁸ See *Notes on “Essentials of Faith Alone”* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1979), 33.

⁹ *Notes on “Essentials of Faith Alone,”* 62.

dha's Enlightenment, the Awakening we have to reach.”⁹ Indeed, if one thinks only of the Pure Land as such, Nishitani's understanding is correct. However, would it be possible to say that the place of the Pure Land in Pure Land thought and its salvific significance reveals the identical meaning as what Nishitani intends when he says that “the level on which the self is a bare body” is the place of “living in the world as an enlightened one”? Did it or did it not have such a meaning in Shinran's own self-understanding? Shinran uses the expressions “City of Dharma-nature” and “returning to one's hometown” in connection with his idiosyncratic interpretation of the traditional idea of *raikō* (来迎 the coming of Amida with a suite of bodhisattvas to one's deathbed), while commenting on a text by Fa-chao wherein the latter speaks of “Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta come of themselves to welcome them.” There, Shinran clearly tries to read elements of his idiosyncratic soteriology, such as “rejecting this defiled world” and “coming to the saha world,” into the expression “returning to the city of Dharma-nature.” Without reference to these soteriological elements, the “life” of the religious existence by which the individual *nembutsu* practitioner is moved would be lost in these expressions. “To reject this defiled world” is certainly not something that has to do only with awakening of self-awareness.

Moreover, in Shinran's particular way of thinking, the opposite idea of “rejecting the Pure Land to return to the world of life-death,” the so-called “returning transference,”¹⁰ is involved. This corresponds to the idea of the bodhisattva path in Mahāyāna: wandering endlessly in *samsāra* with an ultimate aim of profiting all living beings by teaching them and setting them on the path to buddhahood. In Nishitani's understanding, “returning to the city of Dharma-nature” is an event within self-awareness or awakening; would this also be the case with Shinran's “returning from the city of Dharma-nature to the *saha* world”? It is clear that the expressions “rejecting” and “coming” contain in their meaning what Nishitani understands by them, but besides this, there is strongly present in Pure Land thought a dynamic pragmatism, that points over and beyond that meaning to an infinite openness to positive involvement in all the phenomena of “this world.” It is precisely by way of that limitless openness to the practice of the bodhisattva path that we can con-

¹⁰ The idea of “returning transference” (還相廻向 *gensō ekō*), proper to Shinran's Pure Land doctrine, may not be understood apart from the “going transference” (往相廻向 *ōsō ekō*). Both are only two aspects of the same soteriological reality, namely, Amida's Transference of Merit. One does not catch their essential meaning as long as one represents them as two points on a straight line. An interesting question is whether there is any idea in Christianity that corresponds to this “returning transference.” Yagi Seiichi thinks it is not to be found in Christianity. Cf. Yagi Seiichi, 『パウロ・観鷲、イエス・禅』 [Paul and Shinran, Jesus and Zen] (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1983), 57. On the other hand, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi criticizes this idea of Shinran as non-Buddhist.

form to the demand which Nishitani directs at all present-day religionists: that they expose themselves directly and with all their might to the profound and complicated conditions of present reality.

Nishitani writes that, in the present interreligious situation, it is more important and urgent to pay attention to the vast commonalities among the religions than to focus on the particularity of the religion one believes in. Still, in his famous essay “God and Absolute Nothingness,” he writes:

Absolute Nothingness is a term that has its genealogy in Buddhism. It is true that Meister Eckhart speaks of a “Godhead” beyond the personal God and calls this also an Absolute Nothing. Still, there is a basic difference between that Nothing and the Nothingness in Buddhism, a difference on the level of the general difference between Christianity and Buddhism, or between Oriental spirit and Western spirit.¹¹

Thus, Nishitani clearly points to a basic difference between the Absolute Nothingness of Buddhism and the Nothing of Eckhart. This even becomes a central theme in the essay. The two notions belong to worlds that are already different. Nishitani recognizes that, from the viewpoint of difference, the two are totally different and no single point of sameness can be detected between them. Nevertheless, Nishitani endeavors to compare them.

The question then becomes: what kind of relationship or world does there lie between those wholly different realities and, on the other hand, the philosophy (or comparative thought) of Nishitani himself, who compares the two? What is the point of contact between these heterogeneous concepts and comparative thought? What kind of situation does comparative thought reveal Buddhism’s nothingness and Eckhart’s Nothing to be in? Does it reveal that each is sufficient unto itself? If so, comparative thought becomes unnecessary. Or does it reveal that the two are complementary? Or does comparative thought endeavor to create something new, something that could not be detected in the compared realities before the comparison, something that is neither Eckhart’s Nothing nor Buddhism’s Nothingness? Would comparative thought lay claim to the revelation of a new reality that had not been paid attention to nor had been realized in any of the two?

Nishitani maintains that Eckhart’s Christian experience in itself contains a correspondence with Buddhist experience. This is a matter of rather great importance for Nishitani, “because I believe that, not only for different sects but also for different religions, the awareness of a greater sameness is more important at present than the awareness of difference.”¹² He also says: “A

¹¹ NKCW 7:3.

¹² NKCW 7:5.

mental attitude of burying oneself exclusively in the particularity of one's religion naturally makes one's eyes turn towards the past and necessarily lands one in conservatism," while it is necessary in our present situation to evoke "the spirit of trying to open new possibilities of religion in view of the future." What Nishitani looks for is that "the religious life in each of the religions would, from within that very life, become aware of a position of universality greater than that which it had traditionally been conscious of."¹³

What, after all, is the meaning of "a universality greater than one had hitherto been conscious of"? "The awareness one had hitherto" (awareness N) is different from that "greater awareness" (awareness X). Still, insofar as the claim is that they arise from "inside that life itself," they must both be contained in the religious life itself. Indeed, religious life implies awareness of some kind (awareness N + X); religious life does not obtain apart from the self-awareness of the religionist. Religious life exists essentially as religious self-awareness. However, seen from Nishitani's standpoint, in this religious self-awareness the self-awareness of a "greater universality" (awareness X) has not yet been reached. It must then be a self-awareness that comes to itself only by an encounter with other thought, philosophy, religion, and science. The self-awareness of a more universal position is also presented as "a path that opens new possibilities into the future for the present religions." To which concrete circumstances would these "new possibilities" point with regard to each religion? In the same vein as Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani also strongly states that these new possibilities do not intimate the creation of a new religion, different from both Buddhism and Christianity.

Nishitani circumscribes this "greater universality" also by writing: "the various religions should not stop at their established forms, but [reach] a standpoint of greater universality." The first requirement is thus that the religions break down the "existing forms" that they have built up in history. Those are the historically contingent religious forms that the various religions have created over a long time, by building a unique tradition with definite doctrines, "theologies," rituals, and various cultural elements, and by a course of repeated developments, struggles, backslidings, and reformations. These are the determinations that Nishitani himself calls "historically restricted on all sides." Nishitani considers that, by a "comparative thinking" about the relationships of the various religions, it becomes possible to bring to light "a religious life that takes the ground of man's eternal essence as its foundation, or at the least as the foundation of the vanguard of that religious life." This

¹³ NKCW 7:6.

would precisely be “awareness X,” which is then no longer “comparative thought” but goes beyond comparison and reveals itself as creative thinking.

Nishitani then clearly declares that “seen from the viewpoint of the history of world spirituality, religious life has come at present to a point where it must return to a standpoint of greater universality, based on the essence of the human, with regard to spiritual content and with regard to the factual historical relationships as well.”¹⁴ This “great universality” is no longer the universality that has been claimed and sought for by each of the religions, and that could be discovered within the various religious truths. From the standpoint of that “great universality,” all universality to be detected within each religion and sect is relativized. Nishitani, however, discovers that “great universality” in mysticism. “From the viewpoint of universality in the religious life, there is nothing as universal as mysticism.” Mysticism contains something very universal that pervades all the main religions. In a word, mysticism can be defined as precisely “the religious life that takes the essence of the human as its foundation.”

The reason why I am deeply interested especially in Nishitani’s “Eckhart theory” and want to attach great importance to the theory of interreligious dialogue propounded therein is that Nishitani offers an Eckhart interpretation according to which, in Eckhart, the two moments that in Japanese Buddhism came to be separated from each other, namely, Zen Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism, cross and interpenetrate one another. In other words, the reason is that I have been made painfully aware, by my dialogue with Christians, of an urgent task to be performed, namely, the realization of a truly religious encounter of *nembutsu* and Zen within the same Buddhism. An important element herein is the question of what Pure Land Buddhism can/must learn from Zen. No matter how much the Buddhist-Christian dialogue flourishes and deepens, how could we be speaking of a dialogue of world religions, if a religious dialogue among the various schools belonging to the same Buddhism would prove to be impossible? Within Buddhism, Pure Land and Zen are two major schools that are summoned in an especially urgent way to enter into dialogue. It goes without saying that the Pure Land school (which includes Shin, Jishū, and so on) must also engage in religious dialogue with the other schools, such as Tendai, Shingon, and Nichiren, but the dialogue with Zen is one of our most important tasks, especially in view of the future of the propagation of Shin Buddhism in North America.¹⁵

¹⁴ NKCW 7:7.

¹⁵ See my 『親鸞とアメリカ：北米回教伝道の課題と将来』 [Shinran and America: The task of the propagation of Shinshū in North America and its future] (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1996).

Nishitani himself, rather euphemistically, gives us a first hint when he writes: “It is impossible to deny that there is something akin to Zen in Shinran’s religious experience of dwelling, as a foolish being, in the state of non-retrogression and naturalness (*jinen hōni*).”¹⁶ Also, people like Nishida Kitarō and Suzuki Daisetz, while having their basis in Zen religious experience, have shown interest in the thought of the Pure Land school and written about Shinran and the Myōkōnin. They thus appeared to recognize a “little universality” (over against Nishitani’s “great universality”) or, we might say, a common religious truth between Zen and *nembutsu*. Of course, at the same time, within the *nembutsu* school, the three major sects that derived from Hōnen, namely, Chinzei, Seizan, and Shinshū, will have to overcome their sectarian closedness and engage in mutual religious dialogue.

Unfortunately, in all this we run into a steep wall: how far will each religion and sect be capable of “the effort to divest itself from all the established doctrines and theological tenets,” in order for this “great universality” to come into its own? In fact, to divest oneself in this way is of extreme difficulty for the concrete individual believer, and is it not also rather unrealistic when one actually engages in interreligious dialogue? What does this “divesting oneself” really mean, after all? It might be possible to do this on a somewhat theoretical-conceptual level. Would there really be no way for that “great universality” to come to the fore without this divesting? Would it not be that actual religious dialogue comes to be, not by divesting but rather by each religion positively putting forth and laying bare “all its established doctrines and theological theories” and confronting them squarely with the particular doctrines and theories that the other religion has built up in its history? Thereby the religious diversity would come to the fore as the factual problem it is. I wish to state that, especially in this “postmodern” present, creative interreligious dialogue must be undertaken from a standpoint of religious pluralism. It must go in the direction of what I like to call a “pluralistic religious dialogue.”

John Cobb’s Theory of the Dialogue between Pure Land Buddhism and Christianity

In chapter six of his well-known book *Beyond Dialogue*,¹⁷ Cobb tackles the question, “What Buddhists Can Learn from Christians?”¹⁸ The basis of the

¹⁶ *Shinran and America*, 7.

¹⁷ I rely here mainly on this work of John Cobb, Jr.: *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

¹⁸ *Beyond Dialogue*, 128–36.

thesis he defends in that chapter is the idea that Pure Land Buddhists can learn from Christianity by recognizing that Amida is Christ. He then argues that the potential fruitfulness of this recognition appears most clearly if one gives attention to the following two points: (1) the meaning of Amida Buddha being personal; (2) the meaning of Amida being ethical.

The first refers to the problem of how universality and personality can be conceived of together. In Pure Land Buddhism and Christianity both are considered in much the same way. Still, Cobb argues that in Christianity there can be found in the relationship of God and us humans a personal character that has no equivalent in the mainstream of Pure Land thought. As a process theologian, who bases his thought on Whitehead's philosophy, Cobb's understanding of the personal character of the God-man relationship is very different from that of the traditional theology, which considered God to be immovable (divine immutability) and one-sidedly active in the relationship. On his part, he understands the personality of the God-man relationship as a "personal interaction between God and human beings."¹⁹ In the relationship God is active but at the same time passive.

Here, Cobb points out an element that is lacking in the Pure Land Doctrine: Amida does not "listen to" the "prayers" of sentient beings. Or, to put it in terms of Whiteheadian theology, in Pure Land Buddhism there is, indeed, something that corresponds to God's "Primordial Nature," namely, Amida Buddha's Primal Vow, but the "Consequent Nature" of God is not represented. I do not want to enter here into Whitehead's philosophy, but I find this remark by John Cobb to be very important. We must carefully analyze the structure and content of the term "listening to," when it is said that Amida does not listen to our prayers.

In this connection, we might refer to the "Meditative Good" chapter of Shan-tao's Commentary on the *Meditation Sūtra*.²⁰ There, Shan-tao characterizes the relationship between Amida and sentient beings as a threefold relationship: "intimate karmic relation," "close karmic relation," and "superior karmic relation." In that analysis, however, the relationship is not seen from the viewpoint of activity and passivity, put into question by Cobb. Shan-tao elsewhere clearly says that, when sentient beings recite the *nembutsu*, the Buddha reacts favorably to that *nembutsu* recitation, precisely because it is the *nembutsu* that is the content of the Primal Vow of the Buddha. The religious act of the sentient being is thus perfectly predetermined by the Buddha, and

¹⁹ *Beyond Dialogue*, 130.

²⁰ See 『真宗聖教全書』 (Kyoto: Kōbundō, 1992), vol. 1, 521–2. This text is extensively quoted in Hōnen's *Senchakushū* (956). The English translation of this text can be found in *The Pure Land*, N.S. 1 (1984), 20–21.

in that sense sentient beings are passive. Shan-tao wrote the above text as an answer to the question: “Why is it said that the Buddha’s Light, that is all-pervading, embraces only the people who recite the *nembutsu*?” From that point it could be said that the Buddha’s Light is limited by the reciters of the *nembutsu*. It can also be said, however, that the implication is that the Buddha’s Light turns non-reciters into reciters of the *nembutsu*. Thus, one can interpret this doctrine in the sense that the universality of the Buddha is here located in his active power to convert all sentient beings into *nembutsu* reciters. Anyway, even if it is said that Amida “listens” to sentient beings, the sense of this listening is fundamentally different from God’s listening to people’s prayers.

This may suffice to indicate that we should, indeed, pay heed to what Cobb proposes to us Pure Land people—a proposal that he finally formulates as follows:

At least in Christian experience and teaching it has seemed appropriate to believe that the One that gives gracious character to ultimate reality also responds perfectly to all that happens in the world. It is hard to see that anything of worth would be lost to Buddhists if they assimilated from the Christian knowledge of Christ the conviction that our lives are in this way of importance to Amida.²¹

We come now to the second point, the ethical character of the figure of Amida, especially in relation to the stress put on social ethics in Christianity. Also on this point Cobb’s considerations are extremely well-taken. He is most certainly not suggesting that Buddhism or Pure Land Buddhism would be an unethical religion. He fully recognizes the moral character of Buddhism, stressing that Buddhist cultures are beautifully structured also ethically, meet the needs of society, and uphold socially desirable behavioral patterns by means of Buddhist ideas. He goes so far as to say that “on the whole, Buddhist societies probably function better than Christian ones, and could well be said to be more moral.”²² Cobb further points out the pacific and humanistic character of Buddhism. He refers to the negation of the caste system in Śākya-muni’s sangha and to the fact that, contrary to the Christians who have taken up arms in the name of Christ, Buddhists have not waged wars for the sake of the Buddha. In a word, Buddhists have a more tolerant spirit in questions of religion than Christians. Finally, he remarks on the presence in Buddhist societies of moral ideals, a sense of responsibility, loyalty, and diligence, a spirit of

²¹ *Beyond Dialogue*, 131–2.

²² *Beyond Dialogue*, 132.

not pushing oneself, of fortitude and discipline. In all these senses the morality of Buddhist societies must be said to be of a high quality.

What is lacking in Buddhism, at least when seen from a Christian viewpoint, is, according to Cobb, not moral virtue or goodness, but “a trans-social norm by virtue of which society is judged.” Also with regard to this point, Cobb argues with much circumspection. He does not want to suggest that Buddhist humanism does not function as a normative check, but he indicates that, in the case of Buddhism, this check works only with regard to social roles or moral relationships that militate against the individual other. Consequently, Buddhism shows a tendency to attach supreme importance to human relationships as such, and the welfare of the individual is considered to be the norm to check the system and structure of actual society. He describes this characteristic of Buddhist societies as follows:

But this potential principle of leverage is rarely thematically developed. On the whole, Buddhism does not encourage attention by its adherents to critical evaluation of social and political programs or exhort them to be in the forefront of movements of social protest. This seems to be because the mode of the relation of individuals to trans-social reality, namely, to Emptiness or to Amida, does not direct them to a judgment of social structures and their historical roles.²³

This remark faithfully describes at the least the actual situation of Japan's traditional Buddhist world, and cannot be said to show any intention of criticizing Buddhism in a negative way. Cobb himself says that his remarks are merely “descriptive comments.” And he recognizes that even in Christianity itself the clarification of the relationship between religion and social justice is still very much a task of the future. On this point, too, Cobb is self-critical. In Cobb's theology, God is certainly not seen as an absolute Lord who likes to give heteronomous and despotic commands. In Christianity the image of God is not first of all that of one who commands; there is a more numinous idea of God's existence: the God who offers and calls. This image is in greater continuity with that of Amida. From there Cobb proposes that, by learning from Christianity, Pure Land doctrine can further extend the original image of Amida.

The core of what Cobb tries to say with regard to Buddhism, and especially Pure Land Buddhism, can be found in the difference he indicates between Buddhism and Christianity as to their attitudes to the actual world of *pratītya-samutpāda*, especially when confronting the problems of socio-ethical reality. The world of *pratītya-samutpāda* includes both what is actual

²³ *Beyond Dialogue*, 133.

and what is possible. According to Cobb, Buddhism has concentrated on the attainment of a nondiscriminating wisdom beyond the dualism of subject and object, by way of awakening to the fact that the world of reality has the *pratītya-samutpāda* nature. The focus, namely, is on the aspect of actuality. Christianity, on the other hand, focuses on the aspect of possibility. This indication has great doctrinal meaning for Buddhism and especially for Pure Land Buddhism, which has developed in close unity with the historical world.

If, then, in the perspective of “Amida Buddha is Christ, and Christ is Amida Buddha,” the calling voice of Amida could be experienced not merely in the absolutely present individual (“for me, Shinran, only”), but beyond that as a summons with a social and world-historical meaning, Pure Land Buddhists would have to cease being concerned only with the liberation from the illusory and perverted ignorance found in the individual, and would naturally hear in Amida’s summons also the demand for a right attitude with regard to social and historical reality.

The liberation from individual ignorance must also be the liberation from social and historical ignorance. But Cobb maintains that we must use the idea of liberation or freedom to evoke better concepts and theories. If we want to live according to the call of Amida that summons us to individual liberation and at the same time to the liberation of society, we have to consider carefully how our social activity and decisions can truly contribute to social liberation. Cobb concludes: “Pure spontaneity works well in immediate human relations, but is a poor basis for public policy.”²⁴ This theological criticism is worthy of our attention.

Takizawa Katsumi’s Ideas on the Dialogue of Pure Land Buddhism and Christianity

The centerpiece of Takizawa’s theology is certainly his theory of a “primary contact between God and man,” antedating that of the “secondary contact” in Christ. But, since I have earlier discussed this theory from the standpoint of Pure Land doctrine,²⁵ I shall not develop it here. Only, when Takizawa equates the “primary contact” with “Amida’s Primal Vow” and understands the “secondary contact” as the moment of the “attainment of faith,” I cannot but find this problematic. The problem lies in the relationship between the “practice” spoken of in “the realization and fulfillment of the bodhisattva

²⁴ *Beyond Dialogue*, 136.

²⁵ I had occasion to discuss this theory directly with the author himself at a meeting of the Japan Society for Buddhist Christian Studies. For the theory itself see 滝川克巳 Takizawa Katsumi, 『現代に於ける人間の問題』 [The problem of the human today] (Tokyo: San’ichi Shobō, 1984), 164–70.

practice by Dharmākara Bodhisattva” and the “*nembutsu* practice of ordinary sentient beings.” It is the problem of the “karma” that embraces both the pure karmic activity of the Buddha (Donran calls Amida’s Vow-practice “the karmic power of the Great Vow”) and the sinful karma of sentient beings—both are described as “the threefold karma of body, speech, and mind.” I fear that this problem is not taken into consideration in Takizawa’s theology.

But, as I said already, I cannot enter into this discussion here. Now I want to give a moment’s thought, from a Pure Land perspective, to what Takizawa calls “absolute negation.”²⁶ For Takizawa, the “negation” in absolute negation is not a judgment or decision by us humans, nor is it an arbitrary human activity. He qualifies it as follows: “A negation that simply arises without any negating agent; a negation that is unconditionally there right from the beginning of human existence and will always be there and be valid ever anew till the very end.”²⁷ In human existence, therefore, this negation is there, previous to any human initiative, from the very moment that humans exist, without the need of any preconditions, and will be there till the very end, whether this end is seen as the point that humans become inexistent or as the time that the whole universe passes into nonexistence (the eschatological end).

Commenting on the Buddhist expressions “Buddha and sentient beings are one,” “the pure and the impure are not two,” Takizawa interprets these as referring to the unique point that is the point of contact while being the dividing line between the everyday finite self and the true infinite self that is absolutely creative; an uncrossable borderline but, at the same time, a point of contact that does not allow any separation. Precisely in the fact that the absolutely formless subject is unconditionally present, Takizawa saw the eternally unchanging but forever new “basic situation (*Grundsituation*)” of human existence.²⁸

According to Takizawa, all human beings, without exception, whether consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, are placed in a unique and nonpareil universal situation, “the basic situation of the unity of true Buddha and ordinary human.” Each human being, although being nothing

²⁶ I rely here on Takizawa Katsumi, 『宗教を問う』 [Questioning religion] (Tokyo: San’ichi Shobō, 1977), ch. 3: “Buddhism and Christianity: The atheism of Hisamatsu Shin’ichi.” I take as my main source the section “On the basic nature of what I call here ‘absolute negation’.” Takizawa’s theology on “Buddhism and Christianity” is also discussed in a 120-page essay, taken up in Volume 7 of his collected writings (『滝川克巳著作集種』) under the title 「仏教とキリスト教: 久松真一の『無神論』にちなんで」. In this latter text, in the passage that summarizes Hisamatsu’s theory, the term “absolute negation” is mentioned, but the idea is not especially discussed or criticized, whereas in the former it is. The reader should remember that Takizawa elaborates his ideas here in a running discussion with the “atheistic” Zen philosopher, Hisamatsu Shin’ichi.

²⁷ Takizawa Katsumi, *Questioning Religion*, 57.

²⁸ *Questioning Religion*, 58.

more than a contingent objective manifestation of the true formless subject, is placed in that basic situation as one free subject.

A foundation that simply exists, totally independent from all human reason and will; without it or outside of it, no particular situation of any kind can actually exist. It is the real and universal ground of human life and history. Consequently, there can be nothing whatsoever in any place or time on earth that could do away with the irreversible relationship between one's unique basic situation and one's particular situation, or that could keep away from the human being the knowledge of that original state of affairs.²⁹

The structure of Christianity, which Takizawa calls "the schema that is universal to all Christianity up to now," can also be considered to be the general schema of Jōdo Shinshū. God and man are seen in a dualistic relationship of total mutual separation; Jesus of Nazareth is the only mediator between the two, and this mediatorship is symbolized in the visible cross of Golgotha; there exists a community of people who believe in that particular form as in their only and absolute refuge; this church is the only sacred haven in the real human world; the world outside it is an abyss of endless darkness; all people of other faiths are beings drowning in that abyss: it is their ineluctable destiny.

Takizawa, while maintaining that this is the schema or way of thinking of all Christianity, declares it to be in reality a chimera or false image. The logic behind this declaration is as follows. Takizawa puts the reason for this mistake of Christianity in the fact that Christians, in the bind of that schema, have not known about the inseparable, nonidentical, and irreversible relationship that exists between God and human beings.

Judging from the way he speaks about that "one particular form within the world," we can discern in Takizawa a pluralistic standpoint. He defines the schema that he sees as universal in Christianity as "one particular form" and criticizes traditional Christianity for the error of absolutizing that particular form. He then adds that, for that reason, Christianity cannot free itself from the medieval heteronomy. On the other hand, he also writes that, to the extent that it presupposes that image of human existence as something evident, Christianity stays within the general framework of the modern autonomy. In other words, Takizawa states that both the lapse into medieval heteronomy and the fall into modern autonomy derive from the same "one single mistake": the blindness to the inseparable, nonidentical, and irreversible unity of God and human being. Therefore, the mistake can only be corrected from "the one point, the insight that true Buddha and sentient beings, while being one, remain forever two."

²⁹ *Questioning Religion*, 60.

A grave problem may be lurking here, however: the danger that precisely “the one point” of which Takizawa speaks implies, in turn, the tendency of falling into the “absolutization of one particular form.” In other words, even when it is said to always contain a moment of negativity (as absolute negation), as long as it is thought of as having the nature of “a unity,” “one point,” or “a single point,” this “one” is, in the final analysis, a unity of the same nature as the “one absolute” found in making Jesus the “sole mediator,” “the only refuge,” or “the only sacred haven”—which Takizawa makes the object of his critique of the general Christian schema. What difference would there be between the two, when it comes to religious experience? The Buddhist *soku* certainly does not designate a unity in whatever sense; if one describes it by means of the expression “one,” one commits a great mistake. Is it not because one grasps it as “one” that one is obliged to bring in a distinction such as Takizawa’s distinction of “primary contact” and “secondary contact”?

In intention, Takizawa’s Christology wants to be inclusivistic, but I cannot help feeling that, in its inner nature, it is an expression of Christian absolutism. How would his view of Jesus differ from that of the idea of Jesus as mediator in the traditional Christian schema, criticized by him? When he presents Jesus as the point of contact between God and humans, we can ask why such a contact point is needed. For a contact point to be decisively needed, one must presuppose a decisive opposition between God and the human. Without a decisive breach, the need for a contact point that links the two becomes thin. The nature of a contact point is determined by the poles to be linked (God and the human), and by the respective nature of the poles. It can be said that Hisamatsu’s criticism was directed at these basic elements that are more constitutive of Christianity as such, and not, as Takizawa’s interpretation of this critique understands it, at a generally held schema of Christianity that can be called a false image. Hisamatsu levels a radical critique at the idea of God, in whatever meaning it may be believed in by Christians. And the same goes for his critique of Shinran.

Further, which role would the historical reality of Jesus in Christianity play in Hisamatsu’s critique of Christianity? Which meaning is to be given to the historical existence and life of Jesus as the one who realizes the love of God in the figure of the Son of God? The meaning that the cross of Jesus has for the Christians, that of the historical reality of salvation by God, will not crumble, whatever critique Hisamatsu may level against it. But Hisamatsu’s critique is not directed against such historical realities. Does he not rather want to put into question the very God who was the object of Jesus’ self-awareness? It is precisely because his critique of Christianity is directed at that point that

it is so basic (*gründlich*). For this is the very foundation on which Christianity exists as Christianity.

Let me finally touch on Takizawa's theory of the "Original Immanuel" and "derivative Immanuel." I shall present it only schematically and then add a few observations on it.

Immanuel in the primary, original sense = actual reality; to awaken to the primary Immanuel = discovery of actual reality = faith in Jesus Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit (as Karl Barth sees it).

Immanuel in the secondary, derivative sense = the fact of somebody believing in the primary Immanuel = the fact of God being with us to the extent that we believe in Him.

Seen from a Buddhist perspective, this is a theory of Buddha-nature or *tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha-womb). The problematic point is the relationship between original and derivative Immanuel. My difficulties with this theory can be summarized in the following four points:

1. If the original Immanuel can be directly discovered provided one awakens to it, is not the derivative Immanuel then unnecessary? Or again, if the original Immanuel is seen as the object of awakening, discovery, or faith, does it then not cease to be in the strict sense (or according to the definition) original Immanuel?
2. If the original Immanuel can become object of awakening, the derivative Immanuel becomes indeed unnecessary. If one then would hold that the awakening itself is the derivative Immanuel, is not the derivative Immanuel then by itself sufficient, since one can discover the way of being of the original Immanuel within the derivative one?
3. Whereby is someone's awakening to the original Immanuel brought about? If one holds that the original Immanuel is present in the ground of the self, the awakening becomes an awakening to the way of being of the original self. In that case, Jesus Christ becomes unnecessary. If one would equate this with "faith in Jesus Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit," it would cease to be the discovery of the original Immanuel. This is precisely what Hisamatsu criticizes. It is precisely in the idea that one cannot actually exist without reliance on Christ that Hisamatsu discovers a remnant of medieval heteronomy. One might come somewhat nearer to Hisamatsu's standpoint if one talked of a self-realization of the original Immanuel. However, the basic problem lies in the idea itself of an original Immanuel. In the way Takizawa here speaks of "with the inclusion even of non-Christians" or of "a gracious visitation of God,"

we can detect again traces of a feeling of Christian superiority. If one sets one false step in that direction, one falls into absolutism or religious pride. Does not Takizawa, totally against his intentions, fall into a dangerous all-one theory or a hidden inclusivism?

4. Takizawa defines the existence of “the actual human being” as “the actual human being wherein Christ is present totally independently from the person’s consciousness, in other words, wherein God and man are mutually inseparable.”³⁰

Here again we can detect the same tendency. Takizawa himself considers that the structure of this “actual human being” is the same structure as the one the Zen man Hisamatsu discovered in the ground of his being. But, what would be, for Hisamatsu, the meaning of that God of which it is said that “God and man are mutually inseparable?” Could Hisamatsu, after all, admit a God in that sense? No, he must absolutely negate even such a God.

Four Questions directed at Pure Land Buddhism by Gordon Kaufman

In this section I want to comment on the keynote speech, entitled “Religious Diversity and Religious Truth,” delivered by Gordon Kaufman at the “Shinran and the Contemporary World” Symposium, which was organized to commemorate the 350th anniversary of Ryūkoku University in Kyoto. On that occasion, after having argued the necessity of a pluralistic conception of religious truth, Kaufman applied this view to Shinran’s Pure Land doctrine and formulated four critical questions concerning it.³¹

These questions were not meant as a mere criticism of another religion’s doctrine, but grew out of the belief that “the various Buddhist ways of understanding human life and the world have significant contributions to make in the pluralistic conversation about religious truth in which we all are becoming increasingly engaged.” Kaufman added, however, that “if this conversation is to go forward, we must speak clearly and forthrightly with each other about what we understand and what we do not understand.” With the intention of reflecting on the idea of a “pluralistic truth” as proposed by Kaufman, and as a like-minded partner, I want to present here these four questions and, afterwards, offer a short response.

³⁰ *Questioning Religion*, 66.

³¹ In the following I shall use, as much as possible, Kaufman’s own words without, however, indicating pages, since the official publication is still outstanding.

1. THE QUESTION OF THE PURE LAND

How are we to understand this “Pure Land” at present? Does there really exist in the afterlife a very different place from this present world, a Pure Land of peace and joy? Many religious mythologies speak of a similar place, but, “in the light of modern scientific cosmology and our modern knowledge of the grounding of human existence in the evolution of life and the earth’s ecology, it is difficult to make much sense of this kind of thinking.” Kaufman says that he did not find much discussion about this problem in the doctrinal writings of the Jōdo Shinshū he had access to, and asks himself how ordinary Shin faithful are thinking about the Pure Land. Could it be that this question is not so terribly important for them? Do Buddhist teachers not discuss these issues when instructing their students? “Do common folk, for the most part, believe that their faithful repetition of the *nembutsu* will assure their entry into some sort of Pure Land—wherever that might be—after they die?”

2. QUESTIONS CONCERNING AMIDA BUDDHA

Who—or what—is Amida Buddha? Is Amida some sort of “cosmic person,” a kind of god? If so, how are we to conceive this sort of being today? If Amida is not a person of some sort, how should we think of the “vows” he is supposed to have made? Vows are made by personal beings, beings who can carry out purposes they have set for themselves: were Amida’s vows made at some particular time and place (like ordinary vows), and then carried out later through his personal activity? How are we to understand the claim that Amida’s vows bring about effects in this world, such as transferring women and men into the Pure Land?

We are told that the making and carrying out of Amida’s vows took many “kalpas” of time—apparently billions of years—but how should this be understood? It is difficult to see just what this highly mythical sort of thinking could mean if taken in anything like its literal sense; but if we do not take it in this way, what does it really signify?

Amida is said to be “the primordial Buddha who embodies the essence of all Buddhas”; and this ultimate reality is taken to be utterly “formless,” characterizable by such various terms as “emptiness, suchness, dharma-body, thusness, oneness.” If such characterizations are really appropriate, is it not quite misleading to put such emphasis on the importance of a particular personal name (“Amida”) and to suggest that this reality makes “vows” and then acts in certain specific ways to carry them out?

Kaufman then goes on to insist:

These questions are not mere quibbles: they go to the heart of the claims of Shin Buddhism. For all salvation from the evils of this world, all movement

into the Pure Land of fulfillment and bliss, is said to depend on the activity of Amida Buddha, the great Other-Power apart from which we wicked human beings could have no hope at all. I am most interested in learning more about how modern Shin Buddhists understand these central symbols about Amida Buddha.

3. A RADICAL DUALISM

Kaufman's third and most basic question concerns "the radical dualism suggested by the symbols of the Pure Land and Amida's Vow, a dualism that runs through all Shin Buddhist thinking":

The entire understanding of human existence and its problems appears to rest on sharp contrasts like that between the Pure Land and this world, Other-Power and self-power: everything right and good and true is concentrated in the one side of this contrast; everything evil and false and wrong is to be found on the other.

This clear dualism is inherent in the symbolic basis of all things Jōdo Shinshū is speaking of. However, further exploration reveals that Shin Buddhists are not in fact speaking (as I just have) about a simplistic or straightforward dualism between this world and some other reality: on the contrary, this very dualism, it is claimed, is itself a delusion and confusion; entry into the Pure Land is nothing else than the discovery that this powerful dualism—experienced to deep levels by the self which lives in this world of *samsāra*—is really false, an illusion. *Samsāra* is really *nirvāna*, and *nirvāna* pervades all of *samsāra*. Shinran has expressed this as follows: "the person of true *shinjin* can be called equal to Tathagatas... even though he himself is always impure and creating karmic evil... the heart of the person of *shinjin* already and always resides in the Buddha Land."³²

We must take note of what this seems to imply about our humanness and the meaning of our human activities. For Shinran every thread of the human sense of a capability or power to do something on our own, to act in some meaningful or significant way, appears to be part of the illusion of *samsāra*: "even the believing in Amida's Primal Vow and the reciting of his Name are said to be given through and as the activity of the Buddha. "The person of *shinjin* realizes that Amida's Primal Vow to liberate him has been fulfilled in the infinite past, and has always been working to grasp him. Thus, everything of any importance that we might do or not do appears to have been caused by Amida Buddha long before our appearance on earth.

Kaufman maintains that this scheme does not carry conviction for us. Since we are told that "human judgments of good and evil hold no meaning from

³² *Letters of Shinran* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1978), 26ff.

the deeper standpoint of the Primal Vow, even our apparent power to do evil is undercut here.” Kaufman then considers:

This position seems to undermine all human sense of responsibility, on the one hand, and, on the other, to declare all apparent evil in this life—torture or murder, injustice of all sorts, poverty, disease, the suffering in war, polluting the environment, even the perpetration of a nuclear holocaust—to be our deluded interpretation of what is actually the beneficent outworking of Amida’s Primal Vow.

As Other-Power becomes almighty, self-power disappears into nothingness, and the Buddha’s mind and the mind of the practitioner become one, the distinctions necessary to maintain some sort of humanness and decency in life all seem to dissolve away completely. The sharp dualism running through the mythology and symbolism of Amida’s Vow and the Pure Land has now become so decisively dissolved that all distinctions essential to on-going human life—good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsehood, reality and illusion—evaporate into nothingness; and with them goes all human meaning, all discrimination of evils and problems in human existence, all human address of these problems and evils.

Or would it be so that the undercutting of the radical initial dualism does not have these implications?

4. THREE CRITERIA OF TRUTH

Next, Kaufman broaches the question of “in what respect, and why, we should regard any or all of these Shin Buddhist claims as true.” He says:

As nearly as I can see, for Shin Buddhists themselves this judgment is made on the basis of three criteria of truth: First and foremost, virtually unquestioned authority is given to certain scriptural texts (particularly those dealing with Amida’s Vow), and to a specific line of interpreters of those texts—the Pure Land line culminating in Shinran. Second, cogency of argumentation on specific points or positions in these texts is valued highly. Third, there appears to be a claim that the positions taken and points made make sense of our everyday experience of life and its problems, in a way that is ultimately totally convincing.

He then goes on to comment:

It is not difficult to understand why these three criteria might well appear adequate to persons living and thinking within the circle of Shin Buddhism, [where the authority—that is, the ultimate truth—of these scriptural texts and this line of Pure Land interpretation is taken for granted; and where, therefore, human life and the problems of life are experienced, defined, and interpreted largely in Shin Buddhist terms.] At the same time, however, it is clear that “arguments which invoke only these three criteria are completely

internalist in character: they give us a self-confirming circle of interpretation and proof, in which nothing external to the perspective of Shin Buddhism—no ideas, evidence or arguments—is drawn upon. It should not be surprising, then, if outsiders find it difficult to understand many of the specific pieces of this picture or the picture as a whole; and if they regard it as but one more religious point of view, the expression of but one voice among the many engaged in the ongoing conversation of humankind about ultimate questions—with no more claim to genuine truth than any of the others.

Kaufman concludes as follows:

Such truth will emerge, I have been arguing today, only in the full conversation of all those many voices; and the real truth of the claims of Shin Buddhism, thus, will be discovered only through that wider conversation, not in the largely internalist dialogue that Shin writers—like the representatives of most other religious communities and traditions (including Christian theologians)—ordinarily conduct.

Which attitude should we Shin people take towards questions such as these posed here by a Christian theologian? We should first of all receive them with humility, and absolutely refrain from considering them a priori as the superficial and puerile questions one can expect from an outsider. The frank questions directed at Shin doctrine by Gordon Kaufman touch the very core of Shinran's thought, and we must respond to them in a "theological" fashion. Since all four questions are intimately interrelated, I shall try, in the remainder of my paper, to react to them as a whole, while leaving a detailed treatment for a later occasion.

The basic view underlying Kaufman's four questions has to do with the problem of religion and science, and thus points to the question of how Pure Land Buddhism is responding to the decisive change of worldview that science has brought about and is confronting religion with. This problem is not simply restricted to the sole realm of doctrine; we must take it up as a most personal challenge on the level of our religious existence, which is prior to doctrinal systematization. The question is here asked of Pure Land Buddhism's response to the change in worldview and the mechanization of the human being worked by science.

According to Nishitani Keiji, the continuity between the temporal-sensual world (the standpoint of *scientia*) and the eternal-suprasensual world (the standpoint of *sapientia*) has been severed by science in its modern guise. As one kind of knowledge, science stays within the field of *scientia* in the traditional sense; as to its basic spirit, however, it has become something of a totally different quality. The reason is that the two-level world view that lay in the background of traditional *scientia* has been lost. Moreover, from the

standpoint of modern science, the traditional view of seeing all sensual things, within that two-level world, as transient-unreal-illusory has disappeared. Instead, modern science came to see, within the impermanent and ever changing phenomena, a mathematically measurable movement, and it interpreted this as a change in the combination of unchanging elements. It was the discovery that the sensual world is ruled by unchanging laws.

What does this mean for religion? Instead of seeing unchanging reality beyond and outside of changing things, one now came to grasp unchanging reality within the changing things themselves, and to see the changing phenomena as expressions of unchanging realities (laws). While formerly the changing things were experienced, in the perspective of a negative impermanence and in the consciousness of their contingency, as bringers of dissatisfaction or *Angst*, modern science has brought a sense of stability and order that precisely overcomes such feelings of *Angst*. That sense of stability had traditionally been supplied by metaphysics, but since modern times science has taken the place of metaphysics. It has inserted the infinite, as it were, right into the middle of the finite. This standpoint of the infinite is precisely the standpoint of pure intellect, of scientific cognition.

When we try to adapt to this scientific worldview, the traditional worldview of Pure Land Buddhism, as expressed in the motto “Reject this world and aspire for the next world,” appears to lose all meaning. The traditional Pure Land view of salvation, based as it was on the two-level world of defiled land and Pure Land, according to which salvation consists precisely in rejecting the defiled land to be born into the Pure Land, has gradually lost its religious efficacy and power. Moreover, the dichotomy of defiled land and Pure Land became an especially clear-cut one, at least when seen from our actual situation, by the fact that death was seen as lying between the two. Therein lies the reason why our present Pure Land establishment has degenerated into mere “funeral Buddhism.” Or, if this be an overstatement, we can at least say that the financial base of the Shin establishment relies for the greater part on funerals and services for the dead.

As Tanabe Hajime has argued, Pure Land Buddhism, as a religion living in our present times, must base itself on the historico-critical awareness of the philosophy of science. It must not wait any longer to reject the two-level worldview, wherein one passes from the defiled land to the Pure Land through death. The old metaphysical tenets hitherto contained in Pure Land doctrine have now lost the religious power to save the suffering masses, which it possessed in the past. We must subject the basic doctrines of our Pure Land Buddhism—on the Pure Land, Birth, *nembutsu*, and Buddha bodies—to a radical reinterpretation.

At several historical turning points, Pure Land Buddhism has, in fact, experienced and overcome critical situations that shook the very bases of its existence. Basing himself on the value judgment that the path must fit the times and the capabilities of people, Tao-ch'ō chose the Pure Land Gate as the only Buddhist path, with rejection of the Gate of the Sages; and, continuing in the same line, Shinran came to a clear awareness that, in these Latter Days or Extinction of the Dharma, all the doctrines left by Śākyamuni Buddha had lost their relevance. From there his Copernican turn from Śākyamunism to Amidism.

Would not now (after the birth of science) be the time to reject a Pure Land Gate that sees the Pure Land only in the afterlife; or at least a Pure Land Gate that, now as before, bases itself on a two-level worldview? Supposing, then, that Pure Land Buddhism is still viable as a path of salvation, which direction would still be open to it? I personally see no other direction than that of the practice of the bodhisattva path of Māhāyana Buddhism, which can be discovered within Pure Land Buddhism. The "Other-Power," which Tanabe Hajime conceived of as a philosophy of metanoetics, also had its origin in such a bodhisattva path. The bodhisattva path found in Pure Land Buddhism is none other than the path of Dharmākara Bodhisattva. And this is not simply a myth, but has its historical basis in Śākyamuni Buddha. Precisely in a life that lives consciously the vow-mind of Dharmākara Bodhisattva (the compassionate mind born from the Dharma-nature of suchness) as the subjective basis of the existence of the self as ordinary human, we can bring forth the religious particularity of Pure Land Buddhism in the present situation, wherein we must make our own the historico-critical self-awareness of the philosophy of science. In his *Philosophy of Elemental Subjectivity*, Nishitani wrote the following sentences, wherein I find hints of a standpoint very similar to the one I just outlined:

We must see both [divinity and humanity] in a relationship such as that found to exist between the transferences of going and returning. Therein we find the fundamental spirit that differentiates all high religions from mere superstition.... In the Pure Land Gate of Buddhism there is the saying "directly attaining Birth, leading a life of gratitude." It expresses the idea of speedily attaining *nirvāṇa* by entrusting oneself to the vow-power of Amida's Great Vow, and thus obtaining the fruit of benefiting others in one's returning transference. Therein the "mind of true other-benefiting" is stressed. We can recognize the same basic spirit in Shinran's words: "The desire to attain buddhahood is the will to bring all living beings to the other shore, and this in turn is the true *shinjin* to benefit others." Here "*shinjin*" means being saved by going to one's Birth borne by Amida's vow-power and, carried by that

same vow-power, returning to save all others; continuing Amida's vow of Great Compassion in one's own practice; living the life of Amida Buddha.³³

Nishitani points out that this experience and practice of living the life of Amida Buddha evokes similar experiences and emulations (*Nachvollziehung*), and that a religious organization is precisely the crystallization as historical reality of this process. With regard to the relationship between the religious organization and experience-practice, Nishitani then rings a warning bell, which we, as a traditional religious organization, would do well to listen to: All religious organizations have as their basis and vital axis some powerful experience and praxis (for example, that of the founder), which unifies the network of experiences and practices of the organization. That network is given life precisely by the original "aspiration" that continues to work within it. Experience is a truly living Erlebnis only as long as it continues to originate and live as a response to the aspiration; as soon as the aspiration vanishes, it ossifies into dogma. When the aspiration weakens and dogmatism sets in, praxis becomes formalistic and the organization becomes rigid; and an ossified organization further plugs up the well from which living aspiration springs, so that it withers by the loss of a source of inner life. It then maintains itself only by extrareligious forces. It has then turned into a "religion"-less shell of religion. Indeed, it must be said that what brings forth and bestows life on religious formations as historical products—their source of life—is religious aspiration.³⁴

Religion, thus, must find a place within itself for modern science as the element that at present offers the chance to return once more to the place of that most basic aspiration and to discover anew the "inner source of life" that is gradually disappearing from the traditional religious organizations. That basic aspiration is, further, the existential element that makes us consciously engage in the religious pluralism and concomitant interreligious dialogue, which constitute one more important task for present-day religions.

When we next pay attention to the "opening up of nihility," which came about together with the mechanization of the human, the above may apply again. From a Pure Land perspective it can be said that an awareness of radical nihility cannot arise from within "ordinary people" (*bonbu*). Rather, we must locate the essence of "ordinary people" in the fact that nihility cannot consciously present itself in them. On the other hand, it is also true that nihility reveals itself in a deeper way precisely where nihility cannot be self-consciously grasped. This is, in fact, the place where Tanabe's "metanoia"

³³ 『根源的主体性の哲学』 [*The philosophy of elemental subjectivity*], NKCW, vol. 1, 177–8.

³⁴ *Philosophy of Elemental Subjectivity*, 204–205.

comes to awareness. However, also in this case, it remains true that “metanoia” in Tanabe’s sense cannot be realized from within ordinary man and that this impossibility precisely defines “ordinary man.”

The absolute Other-Power propounded by Pure Land Buddhism is absolutely affirmed as Other-Power precisely at the ground of ordinary man’s existence, wherein neither nihility nor metanoia can be self-consciously realized. About the manner wherein the “opening up of nihility” is realized, Nishitani says that “it naturally comes to self-awareness when the human being faces its own existence without self-deceit.” But does there not lie a still deeper nihility in the incapability of facing oneself without self-deceit? Is it not precisely there that the abyss of the human’s basic ignorance (*avidyā*) is to be found? The extreme form of nihility occurs when nihility cannot be opened to self-awareness. Nishitani says that “nihility cannot free itself from itself.” How, then, could a human being suspended over such an abyss of nihility ever face itself without self-deceit? The possibility of facing itself in this way would already mean the liberation from nihility.

Nishitani, moreover, time and again cites Eckhart’s thought as a perspective that does not resort to the opposition of theism and atheism. He characterizes Eckhart’s idea of God as a tendency to elevate the personal relationship of God and the human to a “suprapersonal” level, and sees in it an overcoming of nihility. According to him, Eckhart grasps the personal relationship of God and a human being as a living relationship within the soul between the “image of God” and its *Urbild*. As a result, God’s “essence” is a completely “image-less” (*bildlos*) godhead, which he then calls a “nothing” beyond all forms. When the soul becomes perfectly one with the godhead that is the essence of the God that is nothing, it returns to the true self and obtains perfect freedom. This “nothing” in Eckhart’s thought, while being the ground of the personal God and the other-side aspect of God, is at the same time “my ground” and is realized as my most this-side front. Nishitani considers that in this Eckhartian view is contained the turn to the “absolute this-side” that he discovered in “emptiness.” Indeed, Nishitani interprets the idea of emptiness in Buddhism in this way: while it is spoken of as a transcendence toward the other-side, it is realized as something beyond the opposition of other-side and this-side and, in that sense, as the “emergence of the horizon of the absolute this-side.”

What, then, should be our central concern when we pursue this kind of reasoning? When it is said that the self becomes perfectly one with the “nothing” that is the essence of God, the basic question is, of course, how this perfect unity can be reached, whereby this turnabout can occur. From the perspective of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the answer is that, for that purpose, the

“practice” of the bodhisattva path is required. When we understand Eckhart from a Pure Land perspective, the “nothing” of the godhead corresponds to the formless “suchness” or “Dharma-nature”: in the light of the doctrine of the Buddha bodies one would speak of the “Dharma-nature Dharma Body,” and in light of the “adornments of the Pure Land,” the “uncreated Dharma body of true wisdom” comes to mind. As an “ordinary being,” fully aware that I cannot perfectly fulfill the practice of the bodhisattva path, I cannot reach the place in which the “Dharma-nature Dharma body” is realized directly “in my own ground” as the this-side aspect of the self, without relying on some mediation. We have Shinran’s confession: “I am one for whom any practice is difficult to accomplish, so hell is to be my home whatever I do.”³⁵ This is an expression of Shinran’s self-awareness of absolute limitation as to the path of practice, arrived at through the very “practice” of this bodhisattva path. This is a state of mind that opens up for the first time within the confrontation of the own “practice” with the “practice” of Dharmākara Bodhisattva. When this practice of the bodhisattva path is lost sight of, all the doctrines of the Pure Land Gate will lose their validity and vitality, just as the various paths of Śākyamunism have lost theirs.

Religious Pluralism and Shinran’s Pure Land Doctrine

Let me refer here for a moment to John Hick’s thought. He bases himself on a new understanding of the religions, one that has mainly been promoted by Wilfred Cantwell Smith. One speaks here of a “dynamics of traditions”: the different traditions, which have hitherto been called by the names of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Confucianism, and so on, are certainly not homogeneous and static substances but rather “living movements” that have undergone great inner changes over time. What is here called a “tradition” is no longer seen as an unchanging fixed substance but as a “complex reality with a rich content,” in which, by a cumulative process, all kinds of diverse elements have met, come to grips, and been amalgamated.

In the present meeting of these different traditions, Hick pleads for “a transformation of human experience from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.” In the midst of that problematic, he discerns three possible intellectual options: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. I shall not speak here of the different standpoints taken by Christian theologians, since these are well known; instead, I shall try to indicate how these options shape up in the perspective of Pure Land thought.

³⁵ *Tannishō*, sec. 2.

1. EXCLUSIVISM

As so many others, Shinran's Pure Land doctrine also easily falls into exclusivism. The reason is that its basic standpoint is one of "rejection and option": between all Buddhas and the sole Amida Buddha, between miscellaneous practices and the sole practice of the *nembutsu* of the Primal Vow, between all sutras and the Greater Sutra of Immeasurable Life.³⁶ Shinran, for instance, holds the tenet: "Only those who say the Name all attain birth;"³⁷ and again: "You should know that only those who obtained true *shinjin* will dwell in the true Land of Recompense";³⁸ "Only those who dwell among the truly settled will be born in that Buddha Land";³⁹ "Only the saying of the *nembutsu* is the heart of great compassion that is thoroughgoing";⁴⁰ "With a foolish being full of blind passions, in this world that is a flaming house of impermanence, all matters without exception are lies and vanities, totally without truth and sincerity; the *nembutsu* alone is true and real."⁴¹ The soteriological reason for this is then formulated as follows: "The Name of this Buddha surpasses the names of all the other Tathagatas, for it is based on the Vow to save all beings."⁴² It is the tenet that the Name of Amida is the "treasury of all merit," the supreme Name beyond all other merits.

However, when one considers the true meaning of the "choice" made by Dharmākara Bodhisattva, which serves as the basis for the "rejection and option" of Pure Land Buddhism, it appears that this "rejection and option" does not intend any exclusivism but, on the contrary, an extreme inclusivism. This appears clearly from the following text by Hōnen:

Since the *nembutsu* is easy, it is open to everyone while the various other practices are not open to all types of people because they are difficult. Was it not in order to bring all sentient beings without exception to Rebirth that [Dharmākara] in his Original Vow cast aside the difficult practices and chose the easy one?⁴³

³⁶ Cf. Hōnen's *Senchakushū*, ch. 4 [*The Pure Land*, N.S. 1, 3-11].

³⁷ Shinran, *Notes on "Essentials of Faith Alone,"* 30.

³⁸ Shinran, *Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1981), 54-5.

³⁹ Shinran, *Notes on Once-Calling and Many-Calling* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1980), 34.

⁴⁰ *Tannishō*, sec. 4.

⁴¹ *Tannishō*, sec. 15.

⁴² *Notes on "Essentials of Faith Alone,"* 30.

⁴³ Hōnen, *Senchakushū*, ch. 3. Cited in *The Pure Land*, 5/2 (1983), 23.

2. INCLUSIVISM

An inclusivist understanding can easily be drawn from Pure Land doctrine as well. The object at which the Original Vow is directed is said to be the “sentient beings throughout the ten quarters.” In other words, the ocean of all living beings in all possible worlds. The Light that “envelops and does not reject” is thought to embrace all sentient beings without discrimination of nationality, race, social class, gender, or culture. No single human being should be excluded from Amida Buddha’s salvation on account of any of these differences. Interpreting the restrictive clause of the 18th Vow, “Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma,” Shinran simply states that “all the sentient beings throughout the ten quarters, without a single exception, will be born in the Pure Land.”⁴⁴ The “form of the Buddha of Unhindered Light [Amida]” is said to be a “form that gathers up the wisdom of all Buddhas.” From the fact that Amida Buddha’s being is seen as embracing all other buddhas, it can be inferred that the basic standpoint of the doctrine of salvation by Amida Buddha is an inclusivist one.

On the other hand, however, it is believed that people who rely on miscellaneous practices “are not bathed in the light, are not taken up and protected, and do not share in the benefit of ‘being embraced without rejection’.”⁴⁵ Thus, people outside the pale of practicers in accordance with the Original Vow have been excluded from Amida’s salvation. While it is said that “This Tathāgata pervades the countless worlds; it fills the hearts and minds of the ocean of all beings. Thus plants, trees, and all attain buddhahood,”⁴⁶ when it comes to the soteriological point of contact between Amida and sentient beings, the religious efficacy of Amida’s “taking up and not rejecting” is made dependent on whether one practices the *nembutsu* as the practice of the Original Vow.

Therefore, if one considers the sole practice of the *nembutsu* of the Original Vow to be the only causal practice that saves all sentient beings, the religion of salvation by Amida is made to represent an exclusivistic standpoint. In that case, people that do not practice the *nembutsu*—Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hinduists, and so on—are not saved by Amida Buddha. And the expression, “sentient beings throughout the ten quarters,” of the Original Vow is then finally made to mean the sole practicers of the single practice of the *nem-*

⁴⁴ *Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls*, 35.

⁴⁵ *Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls*, 55.

⁴⁶ *Notes on “Essentials of Faith Alone,”* 42.

butsu. It follows that, if we do not succeed in converting all human beings of the world into *nembutsu* practitioners, Amida's Primal Vow will not be fulfilled.

Even when believing that Amida "fills all minds in the ocean of living beings," if we stick to the *nembutsu* prescribed by the Original Vow, we are open to the same criticism that Hick has leveled against the so-called inclusivism or universality of Christianity. No matter how universal the object of the Original Vow ("the sentient beings throughout the ten quarters") is deemed to be, the underlying logic will be an exclusivistic one: the reality of salvation will touch only the *nembutsu* practitioners, and all people that engage in other religious practices will be excluded.

If so, how could we arrive at a way of thinking whereby salvation by Amida's Original Vow becomes truly universal? The answer must lie in the direction of a pluralistic standpoint.

3. PLURALISM

Hick's pluralism is built on the presupposition that "ultimate divine reality" is "One." From the perspective of that presupposition, it can be considered to be a kind of inclusivism. It differs fundamentally, however, from the inclusivistic standpoint we have been considering above. That inclusivism is a standpoint whereby one considers the ultimate truth of a particular religious tradition to include the truth of all other religions.

In Hick's theory, the "ultimate divine reality" is not seen within one particular religious tradition, but is viewed, within the basic field wherein all great religions originate, as the ontologically "preexistent" "One." He speaks of a development from that basic "One" to the particular concrete "Many" of the different religions. Hick further tries to find the proof of that development from the One to the Many in the fact that the same kind of evolution occurs in each of the traditions of all great religions. Therein lies the characteristic trait of Hick's pluralism.

Personally, I cannot agree with Hick's pluralistic standpoint. My basic difference with Hick is that I do not posit such an ultimate "One" as a presupposition of all religions. One claims such a "One" within each particular religion, but this forever refers to an ultimacy within the particular tradition, and cannot become an ultimate One among the different religions. At the present juncture it is impossible to know whether or not one can presuppose such a "One" among the various religions. More still, if such an underlying One could be known, there would be no meaning to the interreligious dialogue.

4. THE POINT OF CONTACT BETWEEN PLURALISM AND SHINRAN'S PURE LAND DOCTRINE

In the doctrinal system of Shinran's Pure Land Buddhism one finds classifications of doctrine proper to Shinran. They are called respectively *nisōshijūhan* (二双四重判 four-pronged classification in two steps) and *shinkegihan* (真假偽判 classification in true, provisional, false). They have the doctrinal classifications of general Buddhism as their intellectual background, and take the Original Vow of Amida Buddha as their soteriological norm. The *nisōshijūhan* classifies and judges the various doctrines Śākyamuni preached during his lifetime; it is a classification of inner-Buddhist doctrines. The *shinkegihan*, which can be called Shinran's absolute doctrinal classification, has the discernment of true and provisional as its core and serves to judge between the doctrines of the Path of Sages and the Pure Land Gate. When we consider Shinran's Pure Land doctrine from the viewpoint of religious pluralism, both doctrinal classifications appear to be irrelevant, at least as doctrinal classifications. It is the various non-Buddhist doctrines, which in the doctrinal classification scheme belong to the category of the "false," that come into question here.

From the standpoint of religious pluralism, I want to pay attention to the following two points: (1) the fact that the Path of Sages is classified as provisional; (2) the fact that all religions and thought systems outside of Buddhism are branded as "perverted and wrongly adhered to." We could say that this is a doctrinal element in Shinran's Pure Land Buddhism that radically distances it from any positive attitude toward the dialogue among world religions and religious pluralism.

To overcome this serious handicap, the following two pluralistic methods need to be pursued. First, the ground on which the *shinkegihan* itself is based must be reconsidered. And second, the ground on which the very Original Vow of Amida Buddha, hitherto considered as absolute truth, is based as a soteriological method must be rethought. I shall discuss the second point, in the context of the truth claim of religious pluralism.

With regard to the refutation of the Path of Sages, we must give attention to the fact that the question of whether the Buddhist doctrines remain valid or not over the three ages of True Law, Semblance Law, and Latter Days Law has been taken as the actual standard for understanding the Path of Sages and the Pure Land Path as, respectively, provisional and true. This means that this classification has certainly not been put forth as a mere dogma. It was the actuality of the historical situation that led to the division of the whole of Buddhism into the two gates. It is precisely in this historical actual basis for

the discernment of true and provisional that we discover a point of contact between religious pluralism and Shinran's Pure Land doctrine.

To make a long story short, at the present historical situation, 734 years after Shinran's death, the classification of Path of Sages and Pure Land Gate as provisional and true has ceased to correspond to the historical situation. This, however, does not at all mean that the *shinkegihan* has lost its essential meaning. Rather, to rework a *shinkegihan* that has ceased to correspond to the historical situation so as to make it correspond to the present historical situation is in accord with the original spirit wherein it was first set up. Shinran originally constructed his unique *shinkegihan* in order to put forth the true meaning of Amida's universal and absolute salvation. The religious basis of the truth of Pure Land Buddhism has always been sought in its soteriological contact point with the historical situation.

The historical situation is not limited to the mere Buddhist view of a history in three stages. While staying basically rooted in that view, but taking in also the results of the contemporary historical sciences and of the philosophy of history, we must base ourselves on the present historical situation wherein a communication in real-time has become possible across the boundaries of regions, nations, peoples, and cultures. We must build anew a *shinkegihan* that is adapted to the context of the world situation, which moves in these synthetically organic connections.

In the present situation, and seen from the standpoint of religious pluralism, an inner-Buddhist interreligious dialogue must come into being between the people of the different sects of the Path of Sages (*Lotus*, Hua-yen, Esoteric Buddhism, Zen, and so on) and the faithful of Shinran's Pure Land Buddhism, by way of a new recognition of the historical situation as sketched above, and in such a way as to be able to respond to the global tasks discovered in that situation.

This brings us to the second point: that all religions and thought systems outside of Buddhism having been branded as "perverted and wrongly adhered to." (As is well known, it is especially in the second part of the sixth chapter of his *Kyōgyōshinshō* that Shinran confronts in detail the various alien doctrines and perverted views in order to distinguish the true from the false.)

It goes without saying that the various views that were rejected as "false" by Shinran (the "62 perverted views and 95 false paths") were only the thought systems outside of Buddhism that were known in his time. Seen from the present-day history of thought, they represent only a very limited selection. And, on the other hand, to claim universal truth for a doctrine on the pretext that it is "true" in contrast with a limited number of other doctrines is not permissible any longer in the field of contemporary study of thought.

If one nevertheless persists in clinging to this way of thinking, the truth claim either becomes a dogmatism or falls into a self-satisfied bigotry.

In fact, it may have been in order to avoid that dangerous trend that Shinran himself looked all over the sūtras and commentaries for relevant texts. It appears that Shinran did not stick to the sole subject-matter he took up; by contrast with extraneous doctrines, he endeavored to bring to light the universality of the Original Vow's truth. It could be maintained that Shinran's method was that of comparative philosophy. In the present historical situation, the question of whether the doctrine of salvation by Amida is true or not can be investigated only through a dialogue and comparison with all the thought systems that we know of at present. It is only in such a process that a new *shinkegihan*, that has the present historical situation as its basis, can originate.

From the pluralistic hypothesis the following questions arise. What, after all, is that "divine reality" that all great religions are supposed to intend? Can we, ultimately, consider as identical those elements of religion in East and West that are provisionally thought of as parallels: Yahweh and Brahman, the god Shiva and the Tao, the Trinity and the Trikāya (Three Buddha bodies), and so on? Did not East and West, each building up its own tradition in a particular and unique history, wrestle with different problems that cannot be brought under one common denominator?

With such questions in mind, John Hick strongly insists on the elaboration of the basic structure of a pluralistic theory that can positively recognize the plurality of religious "forms," and correctly value each of them while seeing them in an organic mutual relationship. Let me introduce here the basic structure of Hick's pluralistic theory by itemizing its essential characteristics:

Ultimate Reality

1. There exists an infinite, majestic, and lofty reality.
2. It resides in the natural and social reality of our daily experience, or again in our own inner depths, while transcending us.
3. It is in our turning to it that our highest good consists.
4. What ultimately exists and is of ultimate value is the One.
5. To offer oneself totally to it is ultimate salvation, liberation, enlightenment, perfection.
6. It infinitely transcends all our language and thought; it cannot be caught in our human concepts, since it is infinite, eternal, and superabundant.
7. In order to express it in a way that does not depend on any particular

tradition and is common to all, the term “ultimate reality” or “the real” is suitable.

It is precisely in the understanding of that ultimate reality that the fundamental problem of Hick’s pluralist standpoint lies. On which level would a standpoint from which one can posit the proposition in point 4 originate? Is not the time when such a standpoint can originate the same as the moment when all dialogue among the great religions of the world has come to perfect fulfillment? At present, however, we only just entered the path of dialogue among the world religions. Is not it all too unrealistic, then, to posit such a proposition as a presupposition? Hick calls it an “hypothesis,” but would not this hypothesis limit and distort the dialogue itself? Moreover, if this hypothesis proved to be true, it would follow that the dialogue itself is meaningless. It would therefore be irrational to make the determination of the truth or falsehood of this proposition into the goal of the dialogue. The “ultimate reality” contained in Hick’s hypothesis has, after all, the same content as the “reality” intended by the “transformation of existence” that occurs in each religious tradition, the reality that is sufficiently present in the own religious tradition. It is, then, totally unnecessary to learn new things from other religious traditions.

The Real Itself

We come here to the distinction between the Real itself and the real as experienced and conceptualized by us humans (experiential reality). On this point Hick offers us the second proposition in the fundamental structure of his pluralistic theory. In a different formulation this becomes: “The Real itself is the One, but this One can nevertheless be experienced in various ways by us humans.”

For Hick, precisely this proposition expresses the central reason why he had to come to his pluralistic hypothesis. Indeed, the logical basis of a pluralistic standpoint, propounds that all great religions reveal in themselves ultimate reality to the same degree, is located in the theory on the relationship between “Reality itself” and “experiential reality” that is taught in each of the great religions. This teaches us that, in Hick’s view, the theoretical structure of pluralism is based on the fact that all religions themselves base themselves on a pluralistic view of reality. In other words, to negate the pluralistic understanding of religion amounts to negating the view of reality that is the ultimate ground of the salvation or enlightenment that one’s own religion aims at.

The Reality of the Many “Forms”

With regard to the criterion whereby the grasp of “reality” of the various religious forms can be judged, pluralism proposes that: (1) within each of the

particular forms a salvific power is at work; (2) particular traditions are fields wherein a transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness can be realized; (3) particular traditions each reveal “reality” in a different light. On the pluralistic standpoint, the criterium of truth is not simply looked for within the traditions themselves. By the same norm whereby the truth of the own tradition is established the truth of the other traditions must also be recognized at the same time. Precisely therein can be found the answer to the question which structure the new paradigm of religious truth in pluralism must have. And so we are faced anew with the problem of religious truth.

Personally I accept the truth theory of pluralism, according to which recognising the criterion of one’s own truth must mean at the same time recognizing the criterion of truth of the other. The reason for this is that as long as we do not base ourselves on that theory of truth, there can be no dialogue among the world religions. I am critical, however, of Hick’s putting up the “One” of ultimate reality as a presupposition, and this for the following two reasons. One, because with this as a presupposition dialogue among the world religions becomes meaningless. Two, in the end because one arrives at an inclusivism, if one envisages the “One” of ultimate reality, be it only as a hypothesis.

It appears that an even more radical pluralistic standpoint is called for. Postponing a detailed argument to a later date, I would only like to suggest here by way of conclusion that, in order to come to a radical pluralism, at the least the following preconditions have to be considered:

1. We must not base our idea of an ultimate reality that latently pervades all great religions on a preconceived vision.
2. We must work with a postmodern worldview according to which, in true reality, all things in past, present, and future exist within the meshes of a net of organic nonsubstantial relationships.
3. All religions, no matter how limited they are by a particular tradition from the past, must be seen as forever open to infinite future possibilities. Each religion is a carrier of new creativity.
4. The religions must not resist the self-transformation demanded by the dialogue of world religions.
5. The religions must, therefore, see participation in interreligious dialogue and the transformation brought about by it, not as something imposed by other religions but rather as something that necessarily results from the ground on which their own religion is standing.

[translated by Jan Van Bragt]