

# Six Sūtras on the Dialogue among Religions

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PROOF OF THE IMPORTANCE of dialogue among religions does not have to be given here. To those engaged in it, the proof is in the experience. To those who need convincing by rational argument, there is a whole literature on the subject available in an array of languages. To those whose experience or convictions have led them to think otherwise, nothing I have to say here is likely to persuade them to change their minds on the matter. My concern here is of another sort.

That said, it is not always obvious to me that the advocates and critics of dialogue are talking about the same thing. This is not a lament; it is very much in the nature of dialogue that this be so. There is no corral into which one can herd a certain class of ideas and activities to brand them as belonging to the concept of dialogue. Nor is there any privileged height from which one can look down on the interactions among religion and generalize definitions or norms. Everything we say about dialogue—even in its most rational forms—has to be done from in the whole confusing thicket of it. It is not a certifiable professional skill exercised in committee and answerable to some higher authority. It is an adventure of ideas.

Experience quickly teaches one that what happens when different religious ways encounter one another through the colloquia of their living believers rarely caters to the expectations and predictions of the participants. The results are more often haphazard and fragmentary than they are systematic. The greatest impact is more often felt in an arresting twist of a familiar idea, a neglected fact, an unanticipated sentiment, than in a deliberated consensus or clarification of differences. This does not mean that the forum into which those of different religious traditions step to discuss matters of common concern is little more than a friendly chat

over a neighbor's fence. It means only that in the meeting of religions, the greatest fruits of even the most rigorous and disciplined colloquium tend to bud in the spaces between the clash and clamor of ideas and intellectual tools, only to blossom and mature at another time and place, often with no visible sign of their origin.

This is all well and good for particular dialogues, but when it comes to talking about the whole dialogue enterprise as such and assessing its proprieties and improprieties, one longs for some kind of definition of terms. If indeed there *is* some transformation of perspective going on, and if it is indeed part of a wider shift in religious consciousness, then we want to be able to pause from time to time to see that it is not illusory or self-deceptive. To fail to do so is to leave oneself open to the sway of hidden agenda or naïve conformity to fashionable ideas, or to the simple conquest of one set of certitudes by another.

So we have two interlacing questions here. First, we need some parameters to delimit what we mean by interreligious dialogue; and second, we need to give some account of what makes a dialogue true to itself and what falsifies it.

Regarding the first, I trust the reader will not think it immodest of me if I take the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture to characterize the interreligious dialogue for the sake of this essay as *at least what the Nanzan Institute has been up to*. One could as well say, perhaps with more humility and less risk of begging the question, that the role we have played in the dialogue is no more than one facet of the multifaceted and still growing phenomenon. My focus here, however, requires a bolder statement of the assumption that our experience counts for something in the wider story of the dialogue. I am obviously too much part of the phenomenon to claim any but the loosest form of objectivity in this regard, but insofar as the Nanzan Institute was established as a center for interreligious dialogue and has conducted itself for a quarter of a century with that aim in mind, and insofar as this conduct coincides with what is perhaps the longest continuous effort in human history to bring religions into dialogue with one another, then it seems fair to claim our own history as in some measure representative of an indispensable part of the dialogue.

The details of what we have been up to are outlined elsewhere. Even the quickest glance will confirm that our share in the adventure has been an intellectual one. I find no reason to parry criticisms that religions are much more than their doctrine or rational self-understanding, and that a dialogue centered on texts and ideas and bound to the principles of rational discourse is one-sided. Indeed, the wider network of interreligious activities that we have shared in within Japan and Asia and around the world has made it plain that ours is only one pattern woven into a much vaster tapestry. But the intellectual dialogue has been our part in the

story, and I prefer to speak from what I have seen and heard, even though it bias some of the generalizations that follow.

Interreligious dialogue on the intellectual forum is dialogue in the most literal sense of the term: persons of one religious belief conversing with those of another. Although the setting is defined by the demands of rational argument, it is motivated by a desire that is anything but purely rational, namely the desire to understand better the religious dimension of the human in all its diversity. The focus of the conversation is variable, as is the format, but the pure and simple intention of helping each other to think more clearly and better informed about something that belongs to all of us as part of our common nature remains the permanent, if somewhat elusive, ideal. What distinguishes the interreligious dialogue from the academic study of religion or the mere broadening of one's horizon of understanding is the belief that something more is at work in religious understanding itself than the exercise of reason over a certain class of phenomena—that has us more caught up in its unspeakableness than we can catch it with our speech. The mind of dialogue is wrapped in what we may call, *ignotium per ignotius*, mystery. This, at least, is the standpoint from which I have framed the remarks that follow.

At the same time, I freely admit that the kind of interreligious dialogue we have enjoyed at Nanzan qualifies as a luxury item when set against the backdrop of the way the world goes. For all the progress civilization has made in the tools it uses to work, to communicate, and to entertain itself, there is every indication that the quality of those basic cultural activities has deteriorated, that there seems to be an inverse correlation between the sophistication of our tools and the distribution of the wealth that gives access to them, and that organized religion seems by and large to have made peace with the contradiction to its principles. To step on to the forum of free dialogue uninhibited by direct responsibility to the world order is a privilege, the only possible justification for whose exercise is what happens in the history around the dialogue. This, too, I have in mind in what follows.



Regarding the second question of assessing the truthfulness of the intellectual interreligious dialogue, I would like to offer a number of prepositions in the form of strands for weaving into the larger tapestry of the encounter among religions. By themselves these strands—or to use the Sanskrit term, *sūtras*—are slender and easily snap under the pull of the shuttle. They need to be braided together to be worked on the loom. By this I do not mean to offer a systematic methodology, let alone a set of norms for all intellectual dialogue among religions. I only wish to lay out one set of reflections regarding the question of what makes a dialogue true to itself, reflections phrased moreover from the standpoint of a Christian participant.

Others of the community of scholars who have made up the Nanzan Institute would no doubt phrase things differently and place the accent elsewhere. They may even take cause with some of these statements. We have been far too motley a crew to pretend anything more than a common orientation. The mistakes and oversights that have accompanied us along the way also belong to the story, but I shall leave them aside here. My idea is to wander between the lines of the history of the Institute in search of the spirit of dialogue that it has been our aim to serve.

**Sūtra 1. *The spirit of interreligious dialogue need not be born of tradition in order to be reborn there.***

When Christianity encounters other religions today, it does so with a clear edge on the literature about dialogue. There is nothing in any other religion of the world to compare with the amount of theological reflection on the subject we find scattered across the Christian world. Nevertheless, it is necessary to disavow the claim that the primary inspiration to dialogue with the religions of Japan—Shinto, Buddhist, folk religion, and new religious movements—or indeed elsewhere, was born of the scripture or magisteria of my own tradition. (Nor do I find any evidence that any of the partners we have had could make such a claim on behalf of their own tradition.) If anything, the pioneers of dialogue had to contend at every turn with a barrage of scriptural passages and traditional beliefs that censured them for what they were doing. In the case of the Nanzan Institute, the air had already cleared by the time the spade dug into the earth to break ground for the buildings. This reversal of fortunes that has brought the dialogue into the forefront of theological reflection and lent the weight of tradition to the effort frequently gives the impression that the dialogue is a distinctively Christian adventure. The facts of the matter are more humbling.

Christianity did not set out on its own initiative to dialogue with the great religions of the world. A few farsighted people saw a change taking place in secular consciousness regarding the promise of religious diversity, recognized it as something of spiritual importance, entered into it against opposition, and persevered until the time would come when the religious establishment itself would take credit for the spirit of dialogue in the name of its own perennial heritage. When the Second Vatican Council made its pronouncements on openness to non-Christian religions and religious freedom—all rather tame by today's standards—it was not *initiating* a change of heart but *acknowledging* its presence. This recognition no doubt marked a watershed in the history of dialogue, siding with those who had cleared a way for Christians to recognize truth in other religious ways.

If Christianity had to catch up with the saeculum with regard to religious diversity, it has now cast itself into the van in significant numbers. It is not the absence of persecution that is the greatest proof that the spirit of dialogue has been reborn

in Christianity. It is rather the reinterpretation of religious tradition to explain the openness to other faiths as a natural consequence of our own faith. Neglected figures of the past whose ideas on dialogue had been marginalized are now brought forth to center stage with pride. There is no reason to accuse theologians of historical revisionism; this is the way religious traditions have always tended to work. Far more important for Christianity, and indeed for any other religion, than the fact that the dialogue was not born directly of its own tradition is the fact that it is being reborn there, that the weight of an ancient tradition is now put *behind* the efforts of an idea of such far-reaching importance for the human community as a whole, instead of being made to stand *in front* of them like a barrier. And insofar as this can lead other religious ways to emulate the search for that spirit in their own traditions, the value of the rebirth is only enhanced.

*Sūtra 2. Dialogue is primarily a minority enterprise that stands free of the obligations of institutional religion.*

To applaud the encouragement that the religious establishment gives to the dialogue in general is not to say that the presence of religious institutions is essential to the dialogue at all levels. This is clearly the case with the intellectual dialogue, our focus here. To stand on the forum of dialogue is to stand as one professing a particular faith, and in that sense to stand as a representative of that faith, however wide or narrow the range of knowledge one brings. But it is not to stand as a representative of the institutional demands of that faith. The work of dialogue flourishes best when it stands free of the demands of official institutions. Put the other way around, the representation of institutional concerns and policies tends more to inhibit the freedom of thought that is the soul of intellectual dialogue. One does not leave one's faith at the door, but one does leave the bulk of religion there—including the dimension of institutional obligations.

At the same time as concrete obligations vis-à-vis institutional religion is left out of the dialogue, the idea of institutional religion can never be far away from the talk of religion. Even at its most ethereal doctrinal heights, religious discourse is embedded in history as much through its visible political and economic structures as through the consciousness of its individual believers. Discourse and history are always correlative. But in the same way that private religious experience, for all its value, cannot be a subject of rational discussion unless it be abstracted from the experiencing subject, so, too, the concerns of maintaining religious structures need to be abstracted to their ideal if they are to be discussed at all. From the standpoint of institutional religion, then, the dialogue is always and ever a minority enterprise, unsuited to the full demands of a religious tradition.

*Sūtra 3. The dialogue's purpose relies on its being purposeless.*

In the Christian world, dialogue commissions and courses have helped to find the enterprise a place in the academic and ecclesial establishment around the world. The phenomenon is especially noticeable in Christianity, but happily not only there. As significant as this development is, it does not entail the conclusion that the dialogue itself, especially the intellectual dialogue, should be shouldered with agenda outside the dialogue, whether directly related to the religious establishment or not. The temptation to do so is enormous.

One thinks, for example, of initiatives to link the dialogue among religions to some form of “global ethic.” The aim of prompting among those of the world’s religions engaged in warfare as an important step to world peace is laudable enough in its own right, as is the collaboration among religions to counter systematic infringements on human rights and structural injustice. Such agenda understand dialogue as a form of lobby or task force, differing from the dialogue among nations and corporations in terms of motivation but not in terms of structure. But this does not imply that *all* dialogue must be fitted out with an agenda in order to be true to itself. On the contrary, I agree with my predecessor Jan Van Bragt that one of the defining aims of the intellectual dialogue is to be “without aim.”<sup>1</sup>

The insistence on a form of dialogue forum free from secondary aims in no sense contradicts those aims. It only asserts that clarity of thought is *also* served by an environment that steps away from the pressing concerns of the present. There is no argument that such a retreat is powerless in the concrete, lacking an orientation towards history. To say that such things are not its immediate concern is not to say that these are not concerns that the dialogue may, on some other forum, serve. In other words, the claim to be purposeless can only be upheld if one sees the dialogue forum as a deliberate but provisional asceticism. The intellectual dialogue is not a permanent state of religious identity or even of religious reflection. Dialogue does not aim at being the fullness of religious belief, let alone of religious practice. Nor is it even a permanent “ingredient” in ordinary religious self-understanding. The forum of dialogue itself is ancillary to wider questions of historical identity and morality only because the activity of the forum is ancillary to nothing. Like play that loses its quality of play once made subservient to some purpose outside of the playing itself, the dialogue flourishes in its purposelessness.

For this same reason, it is a mistake to see engagement in dialogue as the work of trained specialists. Dialogue succeeds more as a result of experience than of

<sup>1</sup> Jan Van Bragt, 「諸宗教対話の諸問題」 [Issues in Interreligious Dialogue], Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, ed., 『宗教と文化: 諸宗教の対話』 [Religion and culture: The dialogue among religions] (Kyoto: Jinbun Shoin, 1994), 45.

expertise. Attempts to lay down specific “ground rules” for intelligent discourse among believers of different faiths inevitably generates a priesthood of experts to monitor the results of such encounters and assess their success or failure. To avoid this, one needs to understand the dialogue as a good in its own right whose purpose is to serve no other purpose.

**Sūtra 4. *Dialogue is selective of tradition and may even require a dispensing with tradition altogether.***

When one doctrinal tradition meets another, there is no obligation to represent the entirety of the tradition into the picture. What would compromise one’s integrity in discussions of theology or the comparative history of ideas—where the whole picture, or at least one perspective on it, is always potentially relevant—does not pose the same danger to interreligious dialogue. The question of God, for example, does not demand that the Christian implicate the doctrine of the trinity; when speaking of salvation, there may be no need to represent theories of the soul or final judgment. In framing a question for discussion in common, the number of details left in the penumbral shadows will be much wider when a Christian speaks to a Shinto, a Buddhist, or a Taoist than when he speaks to other Christians, and vice-versa. Indeed, little is more stifling in dialogue than the attempt to overwhelm the discussion with details out of a sense of loyalty to tradition. As long as the concern with clarity of thought about the religious dimension of the human is primary, the clarification of tradition will remain secondary. I have no doubt that this latter is important, and can even gain from interreligious discussion. I mean only to suggest that the dialogue is better served where participants are relieved of the obligation to the fullness of tradition. This ascesis is well known to those who join with other religious for social causes. I believe it also can have a place in intellectual dialogue.

As corollary to this, some mention should be made of the problem of fundamentalism. I do not happen to believe that doctrinal fundamentalism is an acceptable rational position, but neither do I believe that the only choice is to counter it with the same level of intolerance. Where theological and philosophical discussion are concerned, fundamentalism has no place at all. But in the dialogue among religious believers, the absence of appeal to differing doctrines, which are in principle rejected by the fundamentalist position, does not mark the end of dialogue. It is rather the ultimate test of its inner heart. On the bare agreement that there is in us all a natural drive to know more of the mystery that envelops life, and that religious belief and practice is in some sense an attempt to respond to this drive, it should be possible to tolerate dispensing with doctrinal assertions specific to one’s own faith in order to broaden the common ground of understanding, provided the conditions discussed in the other sūtras expressed here are met with.

Although we tend to associate fundamentalism with an established and comprehensive standpoint, we are more likely to encounter it as a dimension of all articulated tradition. Here, too, the emphasis in dialogue must be on recovering a basic human religiosity from within fundamentalism, as the only possible healer of the wound of intolerance, not on asserting one's doctrinal loyalties at all cost.

*Sūtra 5. The dialogue is a religious activity, but one that leads neither to religious conversion nor religious convergence.*

On the one hand, critics of the intellectual dialogue with its preference for the rule of logical discourse over the full representation of tradition and its distance from established institutions often complain that the dialogue is a covert attempt to fusing existing religious traditions into one another at their points of contact. On the other hand, critics of the predominance of the Christian presence in the dialogue complain that it is a covert attempt to convert other religions to Christian doctrine, or at least the Christian way of understanding doctrine.

The intellectual dialogue, as I have insisted above, is always more than a forum for intellectual debate or the exchange of information among knowledgeable experts. It is not merely *about* religion after the manner of the philosophy, psychology, sociology, or history of religion, but in an important sense is *itself* a religious act—an exercise of faith in its own right. This does not necessarily entail, however, a change of affiliation or any other attempt to adjust the previous institutional commitments of the individuals. The experience of dialogue can, of course, prompt a conversion from one established religion to another, or even simply a conversion away from an established religion. But such consequences are not the concern of the dialogue itself. They occur off the forum of dialogue, in the fuller world of religious practice and tradition where the austere conditions of the dialogue do not hold sway.

At the same time, it must be admitted that within the parameters of the dialogue, differences of belief that separate one religious way from another are often ignored. In terms of the interaction among different Christian churches engaged with a religion like Buddhism, it is true that there is a mood of spontaneous ecumenism that takes over and sets aside secondary concerns that would derail the whole function of a colloquium between religions. Although Buddhist sectarianism is of a very different sort from that found in the Christian world, and although the progress of an intra-Buddhist ecumenical movement is still in its infant stages, this sectarianism is not always relevant and often needs to be overlooked in the name of clarifying some matter or other under discussion. There is no reason in principle that this habit, common enough in the intellectual dialogue, should carry over into the wider realm of religious theory and practice, though neither is it impossible that what has been seen in the dialogue should not do so either. To



repeat, the conditions of the dialogue neither generate nor inhibit later decisions about erasing outdated sectarian disjunctions or even the fusing of different religions in some new form of religion. Such decisions require far more than the tools of intellectual dialogued to be assessed, and the deliberate distancing from them in the dialogue only underlines this fact.

In this regard, we do well to dispose here of the criticism that Christianity, as a function of its monotheism, tends to promote an exclusivism and a conflict among religions that is foreign to the inveterate inclusivism and harmonious approach of non-monotheistic eastern religions. In Japan, the argument is used to support the claim that the spread of Christianity, with its assumption that religion requires that each individual affirm affiliation to one religion and disavow affiliation with any other, is responsible for the policy of separating Shinto and Buddhism inaugurated in the first year of Meiji era. Further, it bolsters the claim that entering into inter-religious dialogue with Christianity involves a certain imparity, given Christianity's inveterate tendency to erect divisions in a form of religiosity that is naturally pluralistic.<sup>2</sup>

There are several problems with this argument, all of them surfacing in the dialogue. To begin with, contemporary Christianity is mightily divided on the question of pluralism, with those most active in the interreligious dialogue arguing the strongest case in favor of it. Far from promoting a cryptic form of exclusivism, Christianity in dialogue shows signs of healing itself of the exclusivism it has long clung to (or perhaps we might say as well, recovering a tolerance it had too long left on the periphery). Moreover, the clean separation of Christianity and eastern religions into the open and the closed risks committing the basic error that Harnack was fond of warning against: comparing one religion's theory with another's practice.<sup>3</sup> The pluralism that Christianity is claimed to disrupt exists religiously in the popular consciousness far more than it does among the doctrine of the institutional religions, for whom inclusivism is often little more than a political or economic expediency. At the same time, the pure monotheism that is said to foster exclusivism rarely exists in the popular Christian imagination, whose religiosity in practice is much closer phenomenologically to some form of polytheism than it is to high theology. The comparison is badly skewed from the start, and Christianity's efforts to open the tradition to dialogue is little served by this kind of misunderstanding. At the same time, insofar as the forum of discussion with other religions serves Christian theology—or any other religion's method of doc-

<sup>2</sup> For example, Yamaori Tetsuo 山折哲雄, 「『宗教的対話』の虚妄性: 『宗教的共存』との対比において」 [The deceptiveness of “interreligious dialogue”: A contrast with “religious coexistence”], *Religion and culture*, 83–96; 『宗教の話』 (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 1997), 232–3.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in R. Otto, *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted* (London: SCM Press, 1930), 59.

trinal reflection for that matter—as an opportunity to propagate its own patterns of self-understanding as universal, it betrays the spirit of dialogue. Only in a heightened awareness of this tendency to partiality can different methods of self-understanding freely interact, clashing at one moment, borrowing at the next, persuading but always open to persuasion. This is the only form of transitive conversation in which the dialogue can be true to itself.

**Sūtra 6. *At heart, Christianity is naturally Buddhist, Buddhism is naturally Christian.***

Tertullian's famous dictum *anima naturaliter christiana* has traditionally been interpreted to mean that "the soul is naturally Christian," and hence that not to accept the Christian faith is to rebel against what is in our nature. The Latin as well as the original context of the phrase, however, suggests a radically different reading, one closer to the spirit of interreligious dialogue. In the search for a point of contact between believers and unbelievers, who lack a common scripture and teaching, he appeals to the *testimonium animae*: In the deepest recesses of the human heart the central ideas and symbols of Christianity are all to be found in a natural state. In other words, "Christianity is natural to the soul." Christianity is not simply a set of beliefs imposed from without by collective historical forces or embraced in defiance of the desires of our human nature. It is, at core, an expression of our nature.<sup>4</sup>

The consequence of this position is that Christianity is also something natural to the soul of those who profess other religions. To Christians experienced in the dialogue with Buddhism in Japan this is patently evident. The other side of the coin is that Christianity is not the only religion that can make this claim. As the dialogue also attests, the Buddhist path is natural not only to the Buddhist but to the Christian as well—and not just to the small numbers of Christians who step onto the forum of dialogue. The longer Buddhists and Christians discuss with each other, the stronger grows the sense in both of a fundamental, though often unexpected, familiarity. If this were not the case, the dialogue would have collapsed long ago or at least reshaped itself into a simple intellectual exchange.

To say that Buddhism and Christianity are natural to the soul is also to say that they are natural to one another. This affinity is confirmed at the doctrinal level in the dialogue. As Raymundo Panikkar is fond of saying, religions are much like languages. On the one hand, the languages of others sound like nonsense to those who do not speak them, and the peculiarities of one's own are unknown until one

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<sup>4</sup> In his *Apologia*, which was aimed at parrying criticisms of heretics and pagans, Tertullian uses the phrase only in passing in the first sense. It is treated more fully in his *De testimonio animae*, where the second, more positive meaning, is in force.

learns others. On the other hand, for all their difference there is no general idea in any language that cannot be understood in any other.<sup>5</sup> Only through the experience can one know what it means to say that a new language enriches the mind in general and the understanding of one's own language in particular. Similarly, when the doctrinal expressions or scriptures of Buddhism are viewed through a Christian lens, or vice-versa, without a commitment to their fundamental naturalness to each other and to the mind that tries to entertain them both, in dialogue, at the same time they can only look like distortions. This awareness—one may call it a conversion to another religion in the intransitive sense, a metanoia without a loss of faith—in turn heightens the sensitivity to the richness of one's own religion's past, turning up equivalents and similarities in the most unexpected corners of the tradition.

Obviously there is a great deal in all historical religion that represents a lamentable imposition on the human spirit (and in some cases so overwhelming as to infect the religion as a whole). Neither Christianity nor Buddhism are clear of this charge. For any two religions to dialogue with each other, such things cannot be dismissed out of hand. Without the commitment to a basic natural affinity, however, the temptation of discussions of these matters to degenerate at some point into a contest is all but insurmountable. There *are* forms of interreligious interaction that are measured in terms of winners and losers. War is one obvious example; conversion through proselytizing is another. The dialogue forum is not an arena; no one keeps score because there is no score to keep. It is rather, as I said at the outside, an adventure of ideas: seeing through the unique and distinctive qualities that sets one's own religious way off from others to the universal humanity beneath, and returning from that universal to have a second look at the unexplored potential of one own particularity.



The religious consciousness of the age that feeds the spirit of dialogue is not one attracted much to institutional religion as we have known it in the past. It picks and chooses from the sacred texts of the past, patches them together with modern texts, and stitches the whole together into a quilt of one's own design. This is a fabric of faith organized religion has always found dangerous, but it may also be the way the soul has always made sense of even the most dogmatic belief system in the midst of a world wider than the dogma. It also seems to point to radical changes in store for the world's great historical religions as we know them today.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *La nueva inocencia* (Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1993), 388.

<sup>6</sup> See my "What Time is it for Christianity?" *Metanoia* 8:3/4 (1998): 99–121.

In any case, the spirit of dialogue which we have experimented with is certainly bigger than us and still blowing at our backs. We are its servants truly only if we protect ourselves from becoming its masters. This was the atmosphere into which I stepped over two decades ago, and which I find as fresh and challenging today as I did back then when Jan Van Bragt stood at the door and welcomed me in.