

EAST-WEST SPIRITUAL EXCHANGE. A PROJECT

The Nanzan Institute, together with the Institute for the Study of Oriental Religions of Sophia University in Tokyo, has for the last two years invested considerable time and energy in the preparation of a project of East-West Spiritual Exchange. Reports on the actual results of this project will appear in various publications later on. Let us here report only on the dream.

The project in outline

Time : September 1979

Place : Western Europe, with West-Germany and Rome as the 2 main focal points.

Organizing bodies :

- In Japan : Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture; Sophia Institute for Oriental Religions (Tokyo); with the collaboration of the Hanazono Institute for Zen Culture (Kyoto) and the Urasenke Tea Center (Kyoto); and with the support of the Japan Foundation for Cultural Exchange (Tokyo) and the Eisei Art Collection (Tokyo).
- In Europe : The Ostasien Institut e.V., Bonn (Germany); with the collaboration of the Vatican Secretariat for non-Christians, the Japanese Cultural Institutes of Cologne and Rome, and the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst (Köln).

The project covers four phases :

I. The Residence in European contemplative monasteries.

A group of 46 Japanese religionists will be residing for about twenty days in one or two Catholic monasteries to share, as fully as possible, in the daily life of the monks. During that time a few dialogue sessions may be organized in the monastery.

a. The receiving monasteries can be roughly divided as follows:

1. Benedictine monasteries in the German-speaking world (represented by the Salzburger Äbtekonferenz), e.g. Maria-Laach, St. Ottilien.
2. Benedictine and Trappist monasteries in the Dutch-speaking world (represented by the Westmalle Abtenconferentie), e.g. Westmalle (Belgium) and St. Adelbert (Holland).
3. Benedictine and Trappist monasteries in the French-speaking world (represented by the Commission pour le Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique)

b. The visiting Japanese belong to three groups :

Group A : 12 Buddhist monks, selected and invited by the organizers. They belong to the following Buddhist denominations : Rinzai Zen (5), Sōtō Zen (1), Jōdo (Pure Land, 2), Nishi-honganji (1), Higashi-honganji (1), Shingon (1), Nichiren (1). The group leader is Yamada Mumon rōshi, Chief Abbot of the Myōshinjiha and probably the most influential Zen personality in Japan.

Group B : 25 Japanese religionists participating on their own initiative and expense. This group comprises 10 Buddhist monks, two of whom are Zen Masters (rōshi) (Ōbaku Zen, 1; Sōtō Zen, 4; Rinzai Zen, 4; Tendai, 1) and two Shinto priests. The others are lay people of long-standing religious practice.

Group C (Ladies Group) : This group comprises 2 Sōtō Zen nuns and 7 lay practitioners of Zen (Buddhist, Catholic and Protestant).

II. Exposition of Zen Sumie Painting (Bokuseki)

Place : Museum for East-Asian Art, Cologne.

Time : August 17 to the end of September.

Through art works by Zen practitioners (e.g. Ikkyū, Hakuin, Jiun, Musashi, Tesshū), the connection between spiritual practice and artistic refinement is demonstrated.

III. Conferences, Demonstrations, Dialogue Sessions

These activities are organized in large European centers (München, Bonn, Köln, Brussel, Paris, London, Amsterdam) and in some Catholic centers.

Speakers : Ōmori Sōgen Rōshi, Enomiya-Lassalle, H. Dumoulin, Kadowaki Kakichi, H. Waldenfels.

Demonstrators :

- Shodō (calligraphy) : Ōmori Sōgen, Terayama Katsujō
- Kyūdō (archery) : Suhara Kōun
- Kendō (swordmanship) : Ōmori Sōgen, Terayama Katsujō
- Sadō (tea ceremony) : Urasenke specialists

IV. A Visit to Rome

From September 25-29, all participants in groups I, II and III will gather in Rome. Besides the general pilgrimage and sightseeing focus, the following activities are planned there :

- A special audience with Pope John-Paul II.
- A dialogue Session with Cardinal Pignedoli and Mgr. Rossano of the Secretariat for non-Christians.
- An exchange of views and impressions among the Japanese participants in part I, followed by a question and answer session with representative European monks.

Some remarks and clarifications

The above presents only the bare bones of the project. And while space does not permit me to offer anything like a full explanation, some clarifying remarks and a few further details may help to make it more intelligible.

To begin with, it should be noted that, in general the project gives clear priority to Zen Buddhism. We do not mean to suggest thereby that Eastern (or Buddhist) spirituality begins and ends with Zen. The preferential treatment shown to Zen in the present project is motivated by the following considerations.

1. Zen is, indeed, one of the finest flowerings of Sino-Japanese spirituality and has much to offer, especially in the areas of objectless meditation and the unity of body and mind in spirituality. The fact that Zen is, in many respects, further removed from Christianity than some other schools of Buddhism makes the encounter all the more challenging.
2. The misunderstanding of Zen and its "faddism" is rampant in Europe. We would like the present project to contribute to counteracting these ideas and fads.
3. Zen finds its expression in many artistic forms and "ways" (dō), which makes it relatively easy to show Zen spirituality.

These demonstrations will be carried out in two ways : through an exhibition of representative Zen-inspired sumie (shodō) paintings in the Museum for East-Asian Art in Cologne, and through live demonstrations in several European cities. The exhibition in Cologne, of course, makes no claims to novelty in exhibiting the typical Far Eastern art of Chinese ink painting to a European public. Even the fact that the present exhibits were never before shown outside of Japan and that a number of them are of high quality, does not make this exhibition so very remarkable.

The point of this exhibition is rather that instead of merely showing works of art for the aesthetic appreciation of the connoisseurs and the casual visitor, it aims beyond the aesthetic level, to something which, in the minds of the artists, can only be called "spirituality," or "religious experience." Indeed, in the Zen view, no worthwhile work of sumie art can be produced without a high degree of "unification of the mind," and this unification process is itself spiritual and religious. In addition, it is felt that any worthwhile degree of spiritual unification inevitably tends to express itself in art, or at the least in an aesthetic way of doing everyday things. It goes without saying that this view points directly to spirituality as the well-spring of culture and challenges Western ideas not only of art but also of religion. This is not the place to argue the point in detail. The idea is that it would be taken up in Europe and provoke a meaningful dialogue.

To put this in more concrete terms, the Cologne exhibition aims:

1. to show how Zen spirituality embodies itself in writing and painting;
2. to enable an evaluation (by comparison) of the differences in spiritual development of the various painters (recurrent themes - the Daruma figure, the circle, mount Fuji, etc. - will be displayed alongside one another to this end).
3. to show how the quality of the paintings rises with the depth of Zen insight as a fruit of spiritual training. For this purpose, dated paintings by Tesshū, are to be exhibited in a chronological order.

This same idea underlies the Conferences and Demonstrations which form the third part of the project. The cultural forms shown here link together in a "spiritual life style," without any sense of discontinuity, two things which in the West have traditionally been considered to be of a different order : the realm of art and a gamma of everyday human activities.

For the most part, the demonstrations should speak for themselves. When a Zen attitude is shown, the audience should be able to grasp intuitively the underlying spirituality. Nevertheless, short explanations will be offered to help bridge the cultural gap. At the same time, the conferences by well-known specialists in the field -- with themes such as "Spirituality as the well-spring of culture," "Zen and the arts," "Christianity and Buddhism," -- will try to evoke a more explicit understanding of the problematics involved, and to provoke an East-West intercultural dialogue on this basic level.

It should be clear from the above that, although the Japanese press may be tempted to see in these parts of the project "a tour for promoting Zen in the West," this is not the precise intention of the organizers. It is true that since its introduction to the West by D.T.Suzuki, Zen has come to the conviction that it has something irreplaceable to convey to the West, and has become one of the few traditional forms of Mahayana Buddhism self-confident enough to feel no qualms about showing itself to the West. It may look as if the present project is calculated to further enhance that self-confidence. The organizers are evidently aware of this, and yet feel prepared to run that risk. Indeed, they are of the opinion firstly, that Eastern spirituality, to the extent that it is authentic, is also a work of the Spirit and should therefore, far from being felt and treated as an adversary, find at least the sympathetic understanding of the Christian; and secondly, that the time for a "confrontation" of East and West has come, and that the West -- and especially Christianity-- must take up the challenge of Eastern spirituality; and thirdly, that Eastern spirituality has, indeed, something to offer to the West, and that the misunderstandings and abuses surrounding its introduction should not constitute a prejudice against it.

At the same time, these convictions go hand in hand with a parallel belief that Western spirituality has equally something invaluable to offer to the East. It is not unimaginable that, despite a long history of mission, this is only now being offered in a way that it

can be seen in its true light and accepted without loss of self-respect. It is in this spirit especially that the initiative for the first part of the project was taken. To this and to the basic idea of the total project we can now turn.

Dialogue on the level of spirituality

There can be no doubt that mutual understanding and exchange among the various peoples and cultures of the world is a matter of urgent necessity, and one on which the future of the world depends. It is equally clear that one of the main barriers to be overcome is the dichotomy between East and West and the consequent inability to seriously tap one another's riches.

Up until now, exchange between East and West has taken place largely in the economic, social and political spheres, and on the levels of science, technology and art. Furthermore, except for the case of the art, "exchange" on these levels has tended to be a one-way street from West to East. All this may have been good and necessary, but it is our conviction that real mutual understanding can never originate from such a one-sided exchange. Such an understanding supposes, first of all that the partners meet as equals on a level of human experience where the word "difference" may come into its own, but where the terms "inferiority" and "superiority" lose their meaning. It supposes, secondly, that one go to the roots of the differences, that one come to an exchange on the level of the view of heaven and earth, of man and his destiny. This points to the necessity of the East-West dialogue on the levels of religion and philosophy -- a dialogue which, unfortunately, has hardly begun.

This terminology may be misleading. "Religion and philosophy" might suggest nicely formulated and systematized doctrines. What is really meant here is a fundamental and "spiritual" experience of reality that becomes the inspiration of a culture and that may express itself more truthfully in art or in a style of living than in particular philosophical tenets.

The present project could be said to be the fruit of two related convictions: (1) the belief that at the basis of all cultural endeavor there lies what could be called a "spirituality;" and (2) the view -- which has been growing in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Japan -- that interreligious dialogue will never be basic and fruitful as long as it limits itself to the discussion of doctrine and dogma. To put the same thing in positive terms, dialogue first becomes a genuine possibility on the level of religious experience. This was already the idea of the controversial Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, whose words we would do well to cite at length. In his Asian Journal, we find the notes for a paper which he had to deliver at Calcutta in October of 1968. Among other things, he remarks there: "Without asserting that there is complete unity of all religions at the 'top',

the transcendent or mystical level -- that they all start from different dogmatic positions to 'meet' at this summit -- it is certainly true to say that even where there are irreconcilable differences in doctrine and in formulated belief, there may still be great similarities and analogies in the realm of religious experience...Cultural and doctrinal differences must remain, but they do not invalidate a very real quality of existential likeness."¹

It is especially here that the "monk" enters the picture of the interreligious dialogue. In the belief that monastic life is the privileged locus of the "experience of God," the necessity of involving the "monks" of both sexes and of the different religious traditions in the interreligious dialogue is self-evident. The first part of our present project is, hopefully, a step in that direction. The original idea we owe to Father Joseph Spae, presently of the Chicago Institute of Theology and Culture. In the past, individual monks have been living for certain periods in monasteries of a different religion, but as an organized effort our project may have a certain degree of originality. We can only pray that it may be realized truly in the spirit indicated by Thomas Merton:

True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, of conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth. The kind of communication that is necessary on this deep level must also be communion beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a 'preverbal' level but on a 'post-verbal' level.

There is a real possibility of contact on a deep level between this contemplative and monastic tradition in the West and the various contemplative traditions in the East. We can easily see the special value of dialogue and exchange among those in the various religions who seek to penetrate the ultimate ground of their beliefs by a transformation of the religious consciousness. We can see the point of sharing in those disciplines which claim to prepare a way for mystical self-transcendence...

I think we have now reached a stage of (long-overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience. I believe that some of us need to do this in order to improve the quality of our own monastic life and even to help in the task of monastic renewal which has been undertaken within the Western Church.²

¹. The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton, New York: A New Directions Book, 1975, p.312

². Ibid., pp. 315, 312-313, 313.