

## Review Article

John B. Cobb, Jr., and Christopher Ives, eds.,  
*The Emptying God*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990

Joseph O'Leary

The current popularity, among those engaged in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, of theories about God as empty, or as Absolute Nothingness, has licensed revisionist accounts of Christianity that are likely to seem bizarre and unreal to most Christians, and that threaten to bring this interreligious enterprise into discredit. To sift what is good from what is bad in this discourse of "the empty God" one should carefully differentiate between the *speculative* and the *phenomenological* levels. The notion of emptiness has immense value at the phenomenological level; it is essentially a therapy against metaphysical delusions. But in the hands of the Kyoto School, as represented in this book by Masao Abe's contribution, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata" (1—65), it becomes itself a metaphysical absolute. This leads to a speculative engagement between this absolutized emptiness and metaphysical versions of Christian theology, which themselves need to be overcome by being recalled to their biblical roots.

Theologians addicted to speculation have chosen Abe as their favored Buddhist partner in dialogue, because he cushions the shock of a direct encounter with Madhyamika or Zen, offering instead a merely speculative, and therefore manageable and reassuring, challenge. Moreover, Abe shares with his partners in dialogue a lack of historical awareness. He presents a timeless, ahistorical essence of Buddhism, and on the whole his interlocutors present an equally ahistorical essence of Christianity, defined speculatively rather than by close attention to the phenomena.

Abe's revision of Christian theism is based on Philippians 2.5-8, which he interprets as follows:

In Paul's understanding the Son of God abandoned his divine substance and took on human substance to the extreme point of becoming a servant crucified on the cross.... Christ as the Son of God is *essentially and fundamentally* self-emptying or self-negating.

. . . It is not that the Son of God *became* a person through the process of his self-emptying but that fundamentally he *is* true person and true God at one and the same time in this dynamic work and activity of self-emptying. [For “person” read “human being”; here inclusive language becomes theologically inaccurate.]

Consequently, we may reformulate the doctrine of Christ’s kenosis as follows:

The Son of God is not the Son of God (for he is essentially and fundamentally self-emptying): precisely because he *is not* the Son of God he *is* truly the Son of God (for he originally and always works as Christ, the Messiah, in his salvational function of self-emptying). (10—11)

One reading of these remarks could take Abe to be distancing himself from metaphysical kenotic speculation and seeing Christ, both divine and human, in a phenomenological way, as intrinsically “empty.” Phenomenologically, there is merit in the proposal that the union of divine and human in Christ can be grasped in terms of “a ‘nondual function’ of self-emptying or self-negation.” Johannine non-duality —“I and the Father are one” (John 10.30)—which lies at the root of the Nicene and Chalcedonian doctrines, can be given phenomenological perspicuity in terms of emptiness. The mutual indwelling of the Father, the Son and the believers is a relation arising on the ground of emptiness, and actualized in self-emptying *agápe*.

The insistence of Abe and his Christian sympathizers that Jesus’s self-emptying is more than a temporary abnegation, but represents the essence of divine love, and of divinity itself, seems to grasp a basic phenomenological reality. Kung’s objection that in Philippians 2 “this kenosis was not understood as a permanent status, position, relationship, but as a humiliation occurring in a unique, historical life and death on the cross” limits the suggestiveness of this text. Yet Kung rightly insists that in Philippians it is not God who empties himself, but the human Jesus, who by emptying himself makes his existence transparent to the divine. This limits the phenomenological viability of a transference of the language of kenosis to the divine nature, and especially of attempts to say that God actually suffers or dies.

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1. In: Roger Corless and Paul Knitter, eds, *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 33. This volume is centered on an earlier version of Abe’s essay.

Insofar as Abe presents divine self-emptying not as a metaphysical process, an alteration in the divine nature, but rather as the quality or texture of divine being and of the human existence of Jesus, his view promises an integrated understanding of the New Testament revelation. Even at this level, it rather stylizes the figure of Jesus, and it is not surprising that a Jewish theologian, Eugene B. Borowitz, should remark: "Abe's reinterpretation of Christ's kenosis seems to me quite utterly to transform it from what I have understood contemporary Christian theologians to be saying" (80). Insofar as he replaces the functional, dialectical use of the notion of emptiness in *Madhyamika* with a metaphysics of emptiness as the very nature of the absolute, and insofar as he correspondingly inflates the biblical narrative of Christ's kenosis into a metaphysics of kenosis as the very nature of God, Abe can scarcely avoid overleaping the phenomenality of both Buddhist experience and the biblical data, landing in a realm of shaky speculation, one, moreover, where he is destined to a head-on collision with classical Christian ontology and dogma. That collision at the metaphysical level is likely to remain a sterile one, an inconclusive rehash of Hegel. For a proper dialogue, the metaphysical constructions on both the Christian and the Buddhist side need to be recalled to their phenomenological roots.

There is a significant confusion in Abe's account of traditional Christology, which does not teach "'consubstantiality' of two substances, divine and human" (11), but the consubstantiality of the Son and the Father in their divine nature (Nicea); in the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in Jesus Christ (Chalcedon) the two natures are "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union."<sup>2</sup> Kung says that Abe's Christology "completely identifies Jesus with God [better: Jesus's humanity with his divinity] and brazenly declares Jesus' death to be the death of God."<sup>3</sup> This may not do justice to a possible phenomenological interpretation of Abe, but Abe's own failure to differentiate phenomenology from speculation, his assumption of an easy identity of the two, leaves him open to such dismissal.

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2. Quoted in Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* (London and Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975), 544.

3. Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity, 34.

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Like Schubert Ogden, I find the equation of the whole of reality with absolute nothingness to be “wholly unintelligible” (131). In *Madhyamika*, the emptiness of emptiness does not mean that emptiness turns itself into the whole of what exists by a dialectical transformation. Rather, it means that having realized that all things are empty of self-nature, we refrain from clinging to the notion of emptiness itself as if it somehow had a self-nature. It is but a provisional designation, a skilful means, to be cast aside as soon as it has fulfilled its purpose.

Abe quotes Karl Rahner on “the self-emptying of God, his becoming, the kenosis and genesis of God himself” (14)—a piece of Hegelianism which Rahner cautiously qualifies with a tortuous quasi-scholastic distinction: “He who is not subject to change in himself, can *himself* be subject to change *in something else*” (15). The horizon of metaphysical speculation in which Rahner is moving here seems to me to be one that is closed to modern religious thought; his effort at dialectic founders on an irremediable contradiction, in any case. But Abe does not share this scepticism. Remaining on the same speculative plane as Rahner, he rejects what he sees as Rahner’s residual “dualism”: “It must not be that God *becomes something else* by his partial self-giving, but that in and through his total self-emptying God *is* something—or more precisely, God *is* each and every thing” (16). This is not pantheism, he insists, but the very condition of God’s being truly God. It seems to me that if Abe is speaking on the same metaphysical register as Rahner, then of course his position is pantheism. It is a correlate of his monophysite account of the Incarnation: “If this total identity of God with the crucified Christ on the cross is a necessary premise for Christian faith, why is this total identity of God with Christ through Christ’s kenosis not applicable to everything in the universe?” (18). Ogden rejects the association of the Christian God with dualism: “God is indeed distinct from self and the world, but only because God is really, internally related to them and therefore inclusive of them” (130). This revisioning of the ontology of God, in terms of process thinking, is a riposte to Abe’s critique on the same speculative plane.

But underlying Abe’s speculative overcoming of dualism lies a phenomenological sense that the Christian God is incompatible with the Buddhist experience of non-discrimination and non-duality. The riposte required here is a phenomenological demonstration that faith in God in no

way undermines what is valid in the Buddhist grasp of the texture of experience.

Taking Abe's critique of Rahner as moving on this phenomenological level, its weakness is that he has not fully clarified the phenomenological upshot either of Rahner's or of his own position. Reliance on such words as "God" and "emptiness" is treacherous here, for such words carry meaning only in a constant process of reinterpretation and experiential substantiation. They are intrinsically contextual expressions, gaining their meaning from the entire tradition and way of life that produces them. The mechanical habits of speculation revealed on both sides of this dialogue require the therapy of an "overcoming of metaphysics" that could well begin with a more realistic appraisal of the historical finitude of both traditions. On the Christian side, this would involve a conversion back to Jewish sobriety. As Borowitz observes: 'Christian theologians like Jurgen Moltmann find it congruent with their trinitarian faith to speak of what transpires in God's interior. Masao Abe suggests that from his Buddhist perspective they ought to move on to 'the still greater interior of the interior.' On this score, the central tradition of the Jewish people has been resolutely agnostic. It does not know much about God's essence because, as a religion of revelation, God did not say much about it" (86). Abe's talk of the "interior of the interior" may have some recuperable phenomenological upshot, as similar language in Eckhart surely has. Here I feel that Nishida Kitaro has been on the whole a bad influence, through his development of an inflated speculative jargon purporting to convey mystical vision; Nishitani, less speculative and more existential, seems closer to the sober economy of classical Buddhist wisdom, and thus also closer to non-speculative Judaism and Christianity.

The impression left by Abe's essay is that the theory of emptiness saves much as Hegel's philosophy saves: in providing a luminous speculative interpretation of reality. True, Abe and most of his respondents use lofty mystical terms which implicitly claim for their discussion the richest phenomenological content. In reality, however, this high-flown language seems to have little real experiential basis, and at times it becomes a helpless floundering among abstractions. Catherine Keller comments: "Abe contends that his kenotic God is fully personal, because so fully loving as to be 'identical with everything.' But what does 'love' mean when it dissolves into sheer identification?" (108) She grasps the psychological upshot here as a "narcissistic merger." Indeed, the word "love" is not used by Abe in any

careful phenomenological sense, but only as a pawn in his speculative construction.

His concern with non-dualism might have experiential roots in a Zen sense of the unity of things. But his account of Christ's self-emptying as an overcoming of dualisms is too sweeping to carry much conviction. Abe claims that his own moral experience is what forced him to relativize the duality of good and evil (188). But nothing he says shows why the biblical account of good and evil is inadequate. In reply to Borowitz, who insists that "insofar as the 'absolute' God is holy/good, the Holocaust is enduringly evil" (84), Abe brings Buddhist dialectic to bear on the notion that "the Holocaust has a fixed, enduring, absolutely evil nature" (187), concluding that ultimately the Holocaust is a "relative evil." This is to attack a straw man. The point is to assert, not an ontological subsistence of Evil, but the undeniable wickedness of certain human actions, which must not be dissolved into some higher ontological texture beyond good and evil. To replace "God as the absolute good" with "God as the absolute nothingness that is neither good nor evil and yet both good and evil dynamically" (188) is simply to rob both the biblical God and moral evil of any reality. It is also irrelevant to say: "the Jewish experience of the Holocaust is beyond the comprehension of any non-Jew" (184). The point is that the *human* experience of the Holocaust, as a horrific revelation of the scope of human wickedness, is not adequately addressed by the statement that "I am sharing in the blame of the Holocaust because at the depth of my existence I am participating in the fundamental ignorance together with the overt assailants in the Holocaust." For in this view moral wickedness becomes merely part of a general metaphysical condition: "the boundless openness or emptiness ... in which all things, including the divine, the human, and the natural, are all interrelated with and interpenetrated by each other," and wherein the Holocaust "must be grasped as a matter of my own responsibility in terms of sympathetic and collective karma that reverberates endlessly and is unfathomably deep" (51). The vigilant ethical realism to which the memory of the Holocaust obliges us is here blurred by a de-emphasizing of specific individual and collective responsibilities, as John B. Cobb notes (93).

Abe makes emptiness the sole absolute, at the cost of de-absolutizing the good. Jewish insistence on the absolute status of holiness and goodness "means that in Judaism the realization of spiritual death ('the wages of sin is death') and great death (the complete death of the human ego) are absent" (185). This use of emptiness to put other religions in their place is a

rather doctrinaire proceeding. May there not be a plurality of languages of the absolute, all enjoying *droit de cité*? Moreover, the absoluteness of goodness does not entail an investment in substantial selfhood that would deny the negativity of sin and death; quite the contrary, as Abe's own biblical quote shows.

Abe undercuts the phenomenality of the biblical God when he writes: "God as a subject who meets one and whom one can address as Thou is incompatible with the autonomous reason peculiar to modern humanity" (26). Instead we must move in the absolute interior of God as *Nichts* which is "dynamically identical with the absolute exterior (25). Taken literally, such a view renders the entire religious practice of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam invalid. As Thomas Altizer puts it:

"the Christian faith in God ... can only appear as bad faith in the light of the Buddhist perspective" (69). But can the address to God as "Thou" not be retained at least as a "skilful means" (*upāya*)? Surely the Psalms, rather than being a barrier to the realization of emptiness, can open our minds to the suchness of things, the boundless openness of reality, in the contemplation of a world charged with the grandeur of God. To call God "Thou" has never been an obstacle to the awareness that "in him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17.28). Is this really "nothing but a reification and substantialization of something ultimate as the only entity that has its own being. . . a special form of attachment" (49)? Phenomenologically, it seems that the freedom of such a contemplative apprehension of God as Spirit has much in common with the boundless openness *sunyata*.

Does the realization of emptiness bring the Christian discourse of salvation tumbling like a house of cards? Altizer says that "Abe has un

veiled the contradiction between established Christian doctrines of God and Christian faith in Christ, between the glory and transcendence of God and the humiliation and servanthood of Christ, between the eternal life of God and the eternal death of Christ" (69). Are matters really so clear-cut? A complex historical formation such as Christian dogma certainly offers many openings for deconstruction; but by reason of its very complexity it is unlikely that the deconstruction can proceed by such massive oppositions.

## EVENTS

In April this year, representatives of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism (MGGBCHS), met with the Malaysian Prime Minister in response to his invitation for dialogue. The Prime Minister was handed a list of grievances which have caused apprehension and fear among non-Muslims.

Later that month, a unity dinner was held to celebrate the eight anniversary of the foundation of the MCCBCHS which serves as a forum to represent the non-Islamic faiths in issues affecting non-Muslims and a platform to resolve conflicts. The Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, YAB Encik Abdul Ghafar Baba, addressed the 1,000 participants who attended the dinner.

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The opening celebrations for the East Asia Pastoral Institute's 25th anniversary took place on 20 September 1991. Francis Clark and Teresita Nitorreda gave presentations on EAPI's past, and Geoff King, current director, spoke of EAPI's future.

Upcoming events at EAPI include a Theological and Pastoral congress on the theme of Inculturation in the Asia-Pacific region, schedule to take place from 27 April to 2 May 1992. This, too, is planned as part of the 25th

anniversary celebrations.

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The annual meeting of the Japan chapter of the Society for Buddhist Studies was held in Kyoto in late July of this year. The keynote speakers, Jan Van Bragt and Bando Shojun, focused the dialogue on Pure Land Buddhism and Christianity.

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The Oriens Institute for Religious Research began a series of seminars to reflect on different aspects of evangelization and culture. The first meeting was held in May 1991.

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A Forum on the Identity of Women in Chinese Religions has been organized by Cynthia Chapman of the Study Centre, together with representatives from various religious groups in Hong Kong. It will be held in March of next year.

Peter Lee, director of the Study Centre, had a hand in organizing the Second Confucian-Christian Conference, which was held in Berkeley, California, 7—11 July 1991. The Graduate Theological Union served as host to the conference, which brought together some 25 Confucian scholars and Christian theologians from Hong Kong, Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, South Korea, and their



counterparts in North America.

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The NCC Center's 28th seminar for pastors was held from 4—6 September at Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei and focused on the study of Japanese Tendai Buddhism. Lectures dealt with such topics as the Tendai meditation practice, the teaching of Tendai, and the organization of Tendai. The seminar included attending services as well as guided tours at the precincts and temples.

§§

Also in May, Ernest Piryins of the Institute gave a talk to Japanese priests on "Christian Resurrection Faith and the Japanese view of the Dead in the Context of the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue."

Ernest Piryins, along with Joseph O'Leary of Sophia University, was invited to teach a course on Japanese Buddhism at Temple University, Tokyo, from September through December, 1991.

§§

The Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture in Hong Kong has been conducting an ongoing series of Open Lectures organized by the program coordinator, Lennart Hamark, in the areas of religion and Christianity in China and on theological issues related to the East Asia. Subjects covered in the

lecture series include: Christian Art in China; Religious Policy in China; Sociological Study of Church Life in China; and Christology in the Hong Kong—China Context.

§§

The NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions reports that the monthly Buddhist study group on the "Ten Oxherding Pictures" has been taking place since May, under the direction of Ueda Shizuteru, professor emeritus of Kyoto University.

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In October, the NCC Center hosted a meeting of the "Conference on Religion and Modern Society" (CORMOS). Muto Kazuo, professor emeritus of Kyoto University, gave a talk on "Eschatology."

Also in October, Prof. Ikeda Akira of Chukyo University in Nagoya lectured on "The Deification of the Japanese Emperor and Deification in Japanese Folk Religion."

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The Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture is conducting a series of 7 monthly seminars, beginning in October 1991, on "Religion and Culture: The Future of Dialogue." The seminars will culminate in a general symposium among the speakers in September, 1992.

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The Institute has also held weekly seminars with Jamie Hubbard, visiting scholar from Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, on the Chinese Buddhist "Sect of the Three Stages." Research associates Fuchigami Kyoko ("Shamanistic practices in Korean Christianity") and Horo Atsuhiko ("The Nishida-Tanabe Debate") are also scheduled for presentations this fall.

### §§

Jan Swyngedouw of the Nanzan Institute taught a 30-hour intensive course on "Interreligious Dialogue" at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila from 14—22 October 1991.

Before that, he gave a paper on "Shinto Influence in Japanese Cultural Expressions" at a meeting of the ACUCA (Association of Christian Universities and Colleges in Asia) held in Taipei, Taiwan, 23—24 September 1991.

Jan Swyngedouw also spoke at the 21st Conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion, held in Maynooth, Ireland, 19—23 August 1991. His theme was "Roman Catholic Interreligious Dialogue and Japan's

New Religious Movements."

### §§

The Gowing Memorial Research Center, in cooperation with the Mindanao State University, hosted the 12th National Conference on Local History from 22—24 October 1991. The theme of the three-day conference was "Shaping Philippine History: Focus on Mindanao." Moctar Matuan, Director of the Center, presented a paper on the "State of Research and Scholarship on the Muslims in Mindanao and Sulu."

The GMRC will host the 17th Annual Summer Session on Mindanao and Sulu Cultures from 6 April to 1 May 1992. The course will focus on Islam in the Philippines and is intended for Christian teachers, church workers and social scientists working in Muslim areas.

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The Institute for Culture and Communication of the East-West Center, Hawaii, is holding an international conference on Japanese Spirituality in January of 1991. Paul Swanson will represent the Nanzan Institute at the event.

## PUBLICATIONS

The June issue of *Deai* (published by the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto) fo

cuses on "Enthronement Ceremonies of the Japanese Emperor." It includes contributions by Okada Seiji,

Takagi Hiroshi, and Yuki Hideo. The July issue of the Center's English-language journal, *Japanese Religions*, contains articles by Håkan Eilert ("Keiji Nishitani [1900—1990]"); Roald Kristiansen ("Ethics and Emptiness"); Gilbert Johnston ("Kiyozawa Manshi"); and Thomas Hastings ("Parameters of Faith among Japanese Junior College Women").

§§

After five years under the editorship of Sean Dwan, the Columban publication *Inculturation* now appears in newsletter form with a new name and new editor. It is now called *Inculturation, Korea* and its new editor is Hugh McMahan. It will continue to be sent to those who are on the old mailing list. If there have been any changes of address, or if you would like to be added to the list, please contact the staff at:

Columban Inculturation Center  
G.P.O.Box 1167  
Seoul, Korea.

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Two more volumes of Nanzan Studies in Asian Religions (general editor, Paul Swanson) will appear in the early months of 1992: Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*, and Minor and Ann Rogers, *Rennyō: The Second Founder of Shin Buddhism*. Both volumes are published by Asian Humanities Press of Berkeley, California.

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This year, Yamashita Akiko of the NCC Center edited the book *Japanese Sexuality — a Feminist Critique*, and co-edited *Femilogue Vol.2, Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination* (both in Japanese).

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The May—August edition of *Ishvani Documentation and Mission Digest* from Ishvani Kendra, Pune, India, contains a very useful bibliography of recent publications covering a wide range of topics related to religion, dialogue, and culture.

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The Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture in Hong Kong announces the publication of *Taoist Tradition and Change: The Story of the Complete Perfection Sect in Hong Kong*, by Bartholomew P. M. Tsui; and *The Centennial Collection of Poems and Papers of Professor Hsieh Fu-ya* (in Chinese).

§§

This year's special double-issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (June—September 1991) focused on "Japanese New Religions Abroad." It was guest-edited by Mark Mullins and Richard Young.

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For those interested in Muslim dialogue, *The Quranic Jesus in the Light of the Gospel* by Salvatore Carzedda, PIME, is available from Silsilah Publications, Edificio Ciudad, San

Jose Road, Zamboanga City, Philippines.

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The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism have produced a paper for private circulation entitled *Why the MCCBCHS Rejects the Application of the SyariaK on Non-*

*Muslims*. It can be ordered from the following address:

The Catholic Research Centre  
528 Jalan Bukit Nanas  
50250 Kuala Lumpur  
Malaysia.

§§

Also available from the Catholic Research Centre is a paper entitled *Human Rights* by Dr. Paul Tan. It deals with the erosion of religious freedom in Islamic states.

#### COMMUNICATIONS

The annual meeting of the Jesuit Refugee Service took place in Hua Hin, Thailand, from 10 to 16 November 1991. The participants stressed the need for Buddhist-Christian cooperation in refugee situations of Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

§§

Cynthia Chapman, a recent graduate of Vanderbilt University School of Divinity, has joined the staff of the Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture for a two-year stint as a "Theological Fellow," sup-

ported by the Board for World Ministries of the United Church of Christ in the United States. Brian Lawless, a Divine Word Missionary from Ireland, has taken over the responsibilities of book-review editor for the Center's journal, *Ching Feng*.

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Rev. Hilario Gomez, Pastor of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, is now serving the Gowing Memorial Research Center as a Consultant on Muslim-Christian Relations.

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From September of this year, Hayashi Midori (Mrs. Hallengren) and Bo Hallengren joined the staff of the NCC Center for Japanese Religions in Kyoto. Both are sponsored by the Church of Sweden's Department of Mission. Prior to coming to Japan, they taught for two years in China under the auspices of the Amity Foundation.

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Harrie Vanderstappen, professor emeritus of the University of Chicago and a specialist in Oriental art, is at the Nanzan Institute for one semester to complete a book of reflections on Chinese art.

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The Nanzan Institute also wishes to announce the newest addition to its staff, Thomas Kirchner, who will replace Ed Skrzypczak as editorial assistant.

Peter Igarashi, professor emeritus of University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, has come to Japan under the joint sponsorship of the NCC Center for Japanese Re-

ligions and the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya. His research will focus on Shinran and Christianity.

# Inter-Religio Nr. 1–20

## Cumulative Index

- AKIZUKI, Ryomin  
“Christian-Buddhist Dialogue.” II 1988 14:38–54]
- ANGSUMETHANGKUR, Dusadee  
“Catholicism and Thailand.” [1987 11:8–19]
- ARIARAJAH, Wesley  
“Religion in China: Some Impressions.” [1986, 10:50–65]
- BATUMALAI, Canon S.  
“The Task of Malaysian Theology.” [1988 13:2–17]
- BUNCHUA, Kirti  
“Buddhist-Christian Interchange: An Attempt at a Definition.”  
[1989 15:58–67]
- CLASPER, Paul  
“Christian Faith, Asian Wisdom Traditions, and the Newly  
Emerging Paradigm Shift.” [1984 6:48–59]
- DIAMOND, Michael  
“In Memoriam: Peter Gordon Gowing, 1930–1983.” [1983  
4:95–96]  
“Islam in the Philippines.” [1984 5:22–28]
- EE, Theresa  
“The Multi-Ethnic Complexity of Malaysia.” [1984 6:66–71]
- EILERT, Hakan  
“Journey Through the Gateless Gate.” [1988 14:63–68]
- ENGLAND, John C.  
“Towards the Charting of Asian Theologies.” [1988 14:5–62]  
“Reclaiming our Christian History.” [1991 19:21–36]  
“Program for Theology and Cultures in Asia.” [1987 11:20–22]
- FREDERICKS, James  
“The Metanoetics of Interreligious Encounter.” [1989 16:40–54]
- GILKEY, Langdon  
“Reflections on a Fascinating Journey.” [1987 11:2–7]
- GOWING, Peter  
“An Encounter with Mindanao and Sulu Cultures.” [1983 3:11-13]
- HARDAWIRYANA, Robert  
“Towards a “Theology in Asia”: The Struggle for Identity.” [1987  
12:42–66]

- HEISIG, James  
 “Inter-Religio: The Birth of an Idea.” [1982 1:2–22]  
 “Facing Religious Pluralism in Asia.” [1983 4:34–65]
- HYUN Younghak  
 “Three Talks on Minjung Theology.” [1985 7:2–40]
- IMMOOS, Thomas  
 “The First World Hindu Conference.” [1982 2:30–32]
- KADOWAKI, Kakichi  
 “From Chuang-tzu’s Way to Jesus Christ as the Way.” [1989  
 15:2–20]
- KEEL, Hee-Sung  
 “Korean Theology: Past and Present.” [1987 12:84–91]  
 “Zen and Minjung Liberation.” [1990 17:24–37]  
 “Three Approaches to Justice and Peace in Korea.” [1989  
 15:55–57]
- KHONG, Edward  
 “The Catholic Church in Nanjing.” [1986, 10:79–82]
- KIM, Sung-Hae  
 “Liberation and Inculturation: Two Streams of Doing Theology  
 with Asian Resources.” [1987 12:67–83]
- KITAGAWA, Joseph M.  
 “Some Reflections on Chinese Religion.” [1986 9:17–23]
- LAI, Whalen  
 “The Three Jewels in Contemporary China.” [1986 9:24–28]
- LEE, Peter K. H.  
 “The Coming and Going of Protestant Christianity in China  
 Today.” [1983 4: 66–72]  
 “Opening Address to the Hong Kong Conference of Inter-Religio.”  
 [1986 9: 2–16]  
 “The Four Little Dragons, the Great Dragon, and the Phoenixes.”  
 [1989 15:21–32]  
 “Breaking New Ground in Confucian-Christian Dialogue?” [1991  
 20:66–70]
- LOVETT, Brendan  
 “Religion and Popular Religiosity in the Philippines.” [1987  
 11:23–31]
- MCDONAGH, Sean  
 “The Future of Tribal People in South Cotabato.” [1983 4:73–86]

- MERCURIO, Edwin  
 “Bishop Bienvenido Tuedud: ‘The Lamplighter’.” [1987 12:92–94]
- MESA, Jose M. de  
 “Re-Thinking the Faith with Indigenous Categories.” [1988  
 12:18–29]
- O’LEARY, Joseph S.  
 “Partners for Dialogue.” [1985 8:62–99]  
 Review of Eric Sharpe, *Karl Ludvig Reichelt*. [1986 9: 35-38]  
 Review of Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* [1985 7:44–47]  
 Review Article on John B. Cobb, Christopher Ives, eds. *The Emptying  
 God*. [1991 20:71–77]
- PANIKKAR, Raimund  
 “The New Role of Christian Universities in Asia.” [1991 20:44-65]
- PHONGPHIT, Seri  
 “The Impact of Interreligious Encounter in Thailand.” [1984  
 5:16–21]  
 “A New Dawn for Religion in China.” [1986 10:66–78]  
 “Liberative Elements in Theravada Buddhism in Thailand Today.”  
 [1990 18:70–78]
- RAYMAKER, John  
 “In Memoriam: Joseph Spae (1913–1989).” [1989 15:68–69]
- RUAN Renze / XIAO Zhitian  
 “Two Addresses to an Inter-Religio Delegation of Scholars of  
 Religion.” [1986 9:29–34]
- RYU, Tongshik  
 “Shamanism: The Dominant Folk Religion of Korea.” [1984  
 5:8–15]
- SASTRAPRATEDJA, Michael  
 “An Asian Perspective on Interreligious Encounter.” [1984 5:2–8]
- SHIM, Sang-tae  
 “Liberative Elements in Christian Salvation.” [1990 17:2–23]
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