

# NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto:

35 Years of Interreligious Encounter  
in an Ecumenical Context

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In 1994, the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto celebrated its 35th. anniversary. This is reason enough to inform the member institutes of *Inter-Religio* about the history and development of this Study Center. But it is also worthwhile to introduce it to a wider audience, for example in Europe and America, because the religious situation there has changed in the last decades, and the call for interreligious dialogue has become louder. The necessity to reflect anew on the relationship between Christianity and other religions has become unavoidable. During the time of its existence and activity, the Study Center in Kyoto has accumulated a considerable amount of experience and knowledge in its encounter with a multi-religious society and culture. Therefore, it has become a place where the traditional relationship between the so-called ‘young and the ‘old churches’ has fundamentally changed. It is a place which offers American and European churches, for example, the chance to learn to improve their relationship with the other religions surrounding them.

In the following, I try to give a brief outline of the beginnings and development of the NCC Study Center. In the second part, its present work and significance for the churches in Japan and of the ecumene shall be presented.

## I. HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

### *Effective Witness*

At the end of the fifties, the NCC Study Center was established in Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan and the center for many religious groups. Its

roots, however, reach further back; namely to the Scandinavian mission society “Christian Mission to Buddhists” which had been founded by the Norwegian Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877-1952). In the first half of this century, Reichelt had been a missionary to China and, due to his direct encounter with Buddhists, he recognized how inadequate traditional mission work was. Therefore, he studied Chinese Buddhism, and in 1931, on a mountain in the Hong Kong New Territories, he built houses, accommodation for mendicant monks, and a Christian chapel, all in Chinese style. This institution, called *Tao Fong Shan* (Mountain of the Way [Logos]-Wind), became an important place of encounter between Buddhists and Christians, between East and West.

In the fifties, the “Mission to Buddhists” sent the Rev. Harry Thomsen to Kyoto. In 1959, he established the *Christian Centre for the Study of Japanese Religions* and became its director. He also started to publish the journal *Japanese Religions* (JR) where he explained the task of the study center in its first issue:

Hoping for your co-operation, that the ‘Christian Centre for the Study of Japanese Religions’ may fulfill its purpose: to give to the Christians in Japan a deeper knowledge of the Japanese non-Christian religions, in order that we may be better servants of God in this country, and that Japan in more than one meaning may be the Land Of The Rising Sun. (JR 1.1:4)

Accordingly, the cover page of the first issue was decorated by a (somewhat tacky) picture of a cross shining on the top of Mt. Fuji. The first contributions indicated already the themes which in the future would become important: Ariga Tetsutaro reviewed Ernst Benz’ article on the “Difficulty of Understanding Foreign Religions”, and Tucker N. Callaway treated the “Intolerance of Christianity”. In the second issue (JR 1 [2]), Kan Enkichi dealt with the “Problem of Christian Communication in a Non-Christian Culture”, while the poet Rinzo Shiina wrote an article on “The Japanese People and Indigenous Christianity”, discussing the foreign character of Christianity to the Japanese and its lack of success in this country. In 1963, Ariga Tetsutaro already treated the problem of the indigenization of Christianity in Japan (JR 3 [11]1)

One of the first publications of the Study Center was also a religious map of Japan as well as the presumably first bibliography on Japanese new religions. Harry Thomsen also wrote one of the first books in a western language on new religions in Japan; *The New Religions of Japan* (Tokyo: Tuttle 1963) which he dedicated to Karl Ludwig Reichelt.

Very soon, in 1960, the Study Center was put under the umbrella of the *National Christian Council in Japan* (NTCCJ) and received its present name, the *NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions*. Hereby, the important step was performed of transferring the responsibility of an institution from a foreign mission board to the indigenous churches. The task of the Study Center under the umbrella of the NCCJ was defined in the following way:

The purpose of this Center is to promote a study of Japanese religions for the sake of an effective witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In order to accomplish this general purpose the Center shall:

- a. supply information concerning Japanese non-Christian religions and their impact on Japanese culture and society;
- b. provide a place where Christians and adherents of non-Christian religions can meet;
- c. produce Christian apologetic literature directed toward adherents of non-Christian religions. (J7R 2.1:11)

In what followed, the method of its work was outlined: activities should be performed within the larger framework of the churches worldwide; contributions to the theology of mission should be made; lectures and conferences for Christians (lay, missionaries, ministers) as well as for adherents of other religions should be organized (also with the participation of non-Christian speakers); and a library for research as well as rooms for seminars should be provided.

#### ENCOUNTER

In 1962, the directorship was passed to Ariga Tetsutaro who had already played a vital role in transferring the Study Center under the umbrella of the NCCJ in 1960. As one of the important Japanese theologians, Prof. Ariga (1899~1977)<sup>2</sup> held the (for a state university unique) chair for “Christian Studies” at Kyoto University. Having Japanese leadership proved to be a blessing in the future. Adequate cooperation and communication with representatives of other religions definitely require a Japanese national as director.

Indicating a shift in direction towards “encounter”, Ariga wrote in 1963:

Our NCC Center is here to provide a meeting ground for Christians and non-Christians in Japan through literature, conference, and joint study. For Christians, a place to meet with non-Christians in a direct and personal way will provide deeper insights into the mentality, thought, and problems of people outside the church; while non-Christians will, through such a

contact, be better able to know Christians and what they stand for. (JR 3.1:ii)

As for publication policy, Ariga wrote that not only should knowledge about religions in Japan be conveyed in an objective way, but non-Christian authors should also be encouraged to contribute to the journal. Furthermore, theological articles dealing with the situation of Christianity in Japan should be included. In any case, “freedom of thought and speech” were to be honored. In accordance with the goal to create a place of encounter between Christians and representatives of other religions, Ariga, from 1961, led a study group on “Mysticism in Buddhism and Christianity” to which the well known Zen-Buddhist Hisamatsu Shin’ichi and his disciple Abe Masao belonged. At the same time, contacts with the church worldwide were cultivated. Visitors such as Visser’t Hooft (1959), Paul Tillich (1960), and Hendrik Kraemer (1960) had been invited to give talks, and seminars and were provided with the chance to meet and encounter non-Christians.

#### DIALOGUE

The next phase in the development of the Study Center began in 1965 when Doi Masatoshi took over the directorship and held it for the next twenty years. Doi (1907- 1988)~ was Professor of Systematic Theology at the Christian *Doshisha University*, where the Study Center now had been housed for a while. In 1969, it was moved to a building of the Episcopal Church, located at the Western side of the Imperial Palace and park (*Gosho*). In this central location it is still housed today.

In 1974, Notto Thelle joined the staff, and became Associate Director in charge of the foreign-related activities of the Study Center. As the son of a long-term co-worker of Reichelt, Thelle had grown up at *Tao Fong Shan*, and therefore was very well acquainted with this work as with the “Mission to Buddhists”. Also in 1974, the NCC Study Center started to organize annual seminars in English for missionaries and foreign church personnel. The annual seminars for Japanese pastors had started already in 1964. These seminars are held at various religious centers in Japan in order to give the participants the chance to experience for two or three days another religious community, attend the ceremonies, and learn about its faith, religious thinking, history, and organization. By doing this, direct encounter and first hand information not available by reading only books were made possible. At these seminars, a process was started among the participants which transformed somehow the original conception of the

Study Center. This becomes very clear in the annual report of 1977/78:

When Christians engage in the study of other faiths, they enter a process which challenges and sometimes shakes their faith. A study is not only a mechanical learning process in which one accumulates knowledge about other faiths and seeks to utilize the knowledge in different ways. It also becomes a deeply personal quest for truth: to grasp the depth of the Truth who was born as a Jew 2000 years ago, and then to integrate into one's belief truth as it has been grasped by other faiths. The question was put radically in one of our forum meetings by Professor John Cobb, "Can a Christian be a Buddhist, too?" That is, is it possible for a Christian to integrate into his faith even central Buddhist insights and experiences, and by this realize his Christian faith in a deeper and more universal way?

The answer is not easily given. But this is one of the questions that forces itself on Christians who try to live and practice their faith in close communication with indigenous beliefs. Some people may feel that something is wrong when Christians who are sent to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ start to wonder whether insights of other faiths can be integrated into their own faith. The NCC Study Center was started in order to "promote a study of Japanese religions for the sake of an effective witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ" as it was formulated in the beginning. Has this basic idea disappeared? No. When the concern for communicating the truth of Christianity disappears, study and dialogue becomes irrelevant in our context. The Study Center regards itself as a genuine expression of Christian mission. That is the background of our concern to motivate and prepare Christians in Japan for the encounter with other faiths. The basis of the work is research and study programs. But this naturally leads to active contact, dialogue, and cooperation with different religious groups. In this context reflection becomes an inevitable part of the work; reflection about the basis of one's own faith and its relation to other faiths. This is not just an academic problem, but a vital question for Christians who live in non-Christian surroundings. (Annual Report April 1977— March 1978)

The basic questions of how 'mission' and 'interreligious dialogue' have to be understood, and of how the relationship between both should be defined properly, becomes the red thread through the history of the *NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions*. The task of the institute, as it had been set at its beginnings, to be an 'effective witness', remained as a constant challenge to be dealt with. However, over against the basic declaration of 1960, an important change of perspective took place: Besides the

objectifying study of other religions, a self-reflection on the part of the Christians appeared—a reflection upon their own faith and its contents in the new light of the encounter with other religions. Encountering believers of other religions directly became a religio-existential challenge for the Christians themselves. It questioned them in their traditional position. Concerning what he calls ‘missionary dialogue’, Notto Thelle, in 1978, wrote the following in respect to the declaration of 1960:

Very few of us would be able to talk about the study of religion as a ‘strategy’ for an ‘effective witness’. We feel that such hidden motives would destroy the radical openness, and neglect the fact that God is working also outside the church.... The missionary concern is certainly still a part of its [the NCC Study Center’s] work. One aims at motivating and educating Japanese Christians for the encounter with other religions. We have annual seminars for pastors at religious centers and head temples, and similar arrangements for missionaries; we have lectures on Buddhist sutras and publish periodicals such as *Japanese Religions* and *Deai* (Encounter), all of which intend to make the Christian witness more relevant, more ‘effective’ to use a crude expression. But an interesting thing happens. Those who engage in the study of other religions enter a process; they become engaged in a dialogue that forces them to change attitudes. The contact becomes a mutual search, and Christians become also receivers. What started as an effort of effective witness has deepened to include a spiritual search; not only preaching the truth but also a search for the truth. Mission and dialogue have become one in a new openness to God’s working in people seeking the Way. If a missionary dialogue means a dialogue that is carried out with conviction and faith, it should not prevent a radical openness. A real search for understanding is open to the truth, wherever it may be found. A true dialogue will not yield to the temptation of propaganda and apologetics. But it will inevitably involve the risk of conversion.(JR 10.3:701)

Concerning this change of perspective the following observation can be made: By really opening themselves up to non-Christians, and by giving up treating them as objects of mission, Christians themselves suddenly become opened up to themselves and their own faith in a completely new way that they haven’t experienced before. Therefore, being secure in one’s faith and learning from the other in an open way do not exclude each other, as is normally maintained in traditional concepts of mission, or in the discussion of the so-called Christian claim for absoluteness. This fear of

encountering other religions seems to be without sufficient base. In this kind of encounter, not only a change of perspective within the believer takes place, but also, at the same time, a change occurs in respect to the Christian faith and its contents as a whole. Historical and cultural conditions of the perception of faith not only help to understand the contents of the gospel, but also, at the same time, conceal them to a certain degree. These barriers must be revealed and removed again and again. Therefore, encounter with other religions helps Christians to find their *proprium*. Doi Masatoshi wrote:

Here lies the possibility that interfaith dialogue may contribute to our understanding of Christianity itself. The more our eyesight is broadened and our insight is deepened through interfaith dialogue, the greater becomes the possibility of finding new dimensions of our faith which so far have been concealed to our eyes. In other words, through interfaith dialogue God may speak to us anew the eternal truth which is implied in the traditional Christian symbols.(JR 15.3)

This question of interreligious dialogue was pursued to the extent that, in 1977, a symposium was organized with the theme “Is common worship [sic. with other religions] possible?”

In spite of its modest facilities<sup>4</sup>, the NCC Study Center became a place of attraction and impulses. Among the visitors in the seventies were John Cobb, Joseph Kitagawa (Chicago University), Geoffrey Parrinder (London University), and Bishop John A.T. Robinson, all of whom presented lectures. Huston Smith (Syracuse University), Gerald Cooke (Bucknell University) and others stayed for longer periods of study. Also, regular meetings were held (twice a year) with the Catholic study centers in Japan: the *Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* (Nagoya), the *Oriens Institute* (Tokyo), and the *Institute of Oriental Religions* (Sophia University, Tokyo). This goes by the name of EGSID (Ecumenical Group for the Study of Interreligious Dialogue).<sup>5</sup> Such an ecumenical cooperation proves to be very encouraging and helpful for each center’s own work. The NCC Study Center was instrumental in establishing the interreligious study group CORMOS (Conference on Religion and Modern Society) which meets annually. Since 1982, when the first meeting of similar Christian study centers in East and South-East Asia dealing with Asian religions and cultures took place, the NCC Study Center has been involved also in *Inter-Religio*. Since the beginning of the eighties, the Study Center has also been involved in the “East-West Religions Project” of the University of Hawaii, with a Japanese section being founded under Doi’s leadership. In 1984, the third conference of this project was held in Kyoto with the theme “Jesus

and Zen”.<sup>6</sup> Notto Thelle’s book *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan—From Conflict to Dialogue, 1854-1899* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1987) was written in that period too.

#### THE “THIRD WAY”

The struggle for theological clarification of the NCC Center’s place between the church and other religions, and between dialogue and mission continued, as can be seen clearly from the Annual Report April 1983—March 1984:

A Christian center for the study of Japanese religions finds itself on the borderline between Christianity and other faiths. As John B. Cobb Jr. suggests in his recent book, *Beyond Dialogue*, commitment to Christ has to be combined with an unreserved willingness to be transformed by the insight and experience of the religions one encounters. We have to find a third way beyond imperialism which imposes Christianity on others as the absolute truth and relativism which abandons the ultimacy of Christ. The daily work of research and dialogue often seems undramatic and peaceful. Nevertheless, the encounter with other faiths is an exciting process where the effort to understand other faiths goes together with a continual search for the essentials of one’s own faith. Our center wants to contribute to the life of the church in Japan through studies and by engaging in dialogue with the religious environment. We want, furthermore, to stimulate Christians in this country to take seriously the fact that Christianity is an outsider in a culture which is strongly nurtured by other faiths, and to inspire and prepare them for the inevitable encounter.(cf. JR 13.3: 87)

When, in the spring of 1985, Doi Masatoshi retired after twenty years as director, and at the same time, Notto Thelle (after having been Associate Director for ten years) took over a professorship in Oslo, a certain era came to an end for the Study Center. At a time when the World Council of Churches in Geneva, as well as the Vatican in Rome, had sent positive signals for a new relationship with other religions, the NCC Centre for the Study of Japanese Religions had played an important role as pioneer. Its involvement in interreligious dialogue had effects reaching as far as America and Europe. When Doi Masatoshi died in 1988, one could read in his obituary:

The Buddhist-Christian dialogue gained ground year by year and resulted in an urgent need on behalf of the Christian churches to re-think their positions vis-à-vis older religious traditions. Doi was instrumental in setting the stage for a productive and meaningful



encounter between Christianity and Buddhism. His insights into and awareness of Buddhism made him the ideal pioneer of a friendly relationship with followers of non-Christian paths and gained him respect and esteem in wide circles. Non-wavering he stated: “Christianity is primarily a religion of dialogue.”<sup>7</sup>

After sixteen years of life and work in Japan, Notto Theile described what can happen to a person who becomes engaged in dialogue with other religions:

It often begins as a concern for true witness—in order to transmit the gospel in a meaningful way one has to be in dialogue—and becomes a pilgrimage which has two significant directions: journeying into another faith and at the same time searching into one's own faith. The one-way search becomes a two-way process; it still involves witness, but this is significantly modified by a transformation within. (JR 13.4:20)

#### RECONNECTING

Doi's successor was Yuki Hideo, professor of the History of Religions at *Doshisha University* and who had already been (together with Thelle) Associate Director for some time. Thelle was succeeded by Hakan Eilers who had written his dissertation on Karl Ludvig Reichelt (*Boundlessness. Studies in Karl Ludvig Reichelt's Missionary Thinking with Special Regard to the Buddhist-Christian Encounter*. Studia Missionalia Upsaliensa, 1974), and who had been sent to the Study Center by the Church of Sweden in 1983/84. The Japanese Associate Director appointed was the theologian Take Kuniyasu, professor at *Doshisha Women's College*.

The work of the Study Center continued. Research fellows in the mid-eighties were Dr. Salvador Martinez from the Philippines, Michael Shackleton from England, Roald Kristiansen from Norway, and Michael Newton from the USA. Frederik Spier, who had served on the staff for several years, left in 1986 for America. In the same year, a series of important lectures were held: Prof. Donald Mitchell (Purdue University) talked on “Buddhism in America”, Prof. Frederick Streng on “What is Religion?”, Prof. John Hick on “Problems of Religious Pluralism”, and Paul Knitter on the theme “No Other Name?”. Other research fellows came: Martin Schulz, assistant pastor of a German church, spent 1987/88 at the Study Center. Dr. Jong Sung Rhee, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, did research for half a year, and Siegfried Finkbeiner, pastor of a German church stayed for two years (1988- 1990) with the support of the WCC scholarship program. On the occasion of the arrival of

the young theologians from Germany, Hakan Eilert wrote in the Prospects for 1988:

We are very pleased with developing stronger ties with West German Churches and regard it is a token of the quest for a theology which draws strength from God's universal presence before the world was split up in different nationalities, cultures and religions. We hope that other churches abroad will avail themselves of the opportunity to send young theologians to our center. Such a presence is particularly meaningful since a dialogical relationship will become of utmost importance in the future, not only between the churches but also between cultures and religions.

In 1991/92, Prof. Peter Igarashi, New Testament scholar of the University of the South (Sewanee, USA), and Dr. Rainer Wassner, sociologist of religion at Hamburg University (Germany), did their research at the Study Center. In 1992, a Japanologist and a theologian, both from Denmark, each came for several months. In 1993 Bernhard Neuenschwander, Th.D. candidate of Bern University (Switzerland), studied Japanese Zen-Buddhism in connection with his thesis on mysticism in the Gospel of John. Again there were changes in the staff when Hakan Eilert returned to Sweden in 1991 and was succeeded by the author of this article. In the same year, the Church of Sweden sent Hayashi Midori and Bo Hallengren, a couple who had previously worked with Amity Foundation in China.

## II. TASKS AND SIGNIFICANCE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF CHURCHES IN JAPAN AND OF THE ECUMENE

In the following section, we turn to the question of the present work of the *NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions*, and its tasks in connection with the churches of Japan and of the *ecumene* at large.

Under the directorship of Yuki Hideo, a certain reorientation of the work as whole was undertaken. His predecessor had, as a pioneer, gone far ahead in interreligious dialogue whereas the concrete connection with the Japanese churches suffered considerably. It was not clear any more why this Study Center had been a Study Center of the *Protestant churches* in Japan, and why this institute and the churches needed each other in close cooperation. In response to this situation, Yuki is trying to tie the work of the Study Center back to the churches. This attempt shall be described in this final section.

The experience of militarism before 1945 (which had been also supported by a wide range of religious groups, including some churches), remains a very important challenge for Japanese churches even today.

Therefore, they watch critically the relationship between state and religion in contemporary Japan, speak up for human rights, and warn against dangerous political tendencies. The NCC Center has repeatedly dealt with these issues in its publications, seminars and lectures. The political and, at the same time, religious character of *Tennoism* (the emperor system) in Japan belongs to the field of research Prof. Yuki is pursuing. As a historian of religion, he maintains the important difference which has to be made between State Shinto, an ideological construct of the Meiji Period, and Shinto, the traditional religion of Japan. In the critical proclamations of the Japanese churches one normally does not find this decisive distinction. In addition, a deeper understanding of Shinto as religion is missing. Hopefully, in the future, Japanese churches will make more use of the rich knowledge and insights the NCC Study Center is able to provide in this respect.

The Study Center's emphasis on social issues is pursued by the long-term staff-member Yamashita Akiko. She deals with the role of women in Japanese churches and society. She critically analyses the reliance of the church upon women who are not given their deserved share of responsibility and recognition. At the same time, she views women's issues in the broader perspective of Asian cultures and religions. Presently, she is involved in a research project on shamanism in Korea and Japan. She is one of the well known feminists in Japan and has co-authored a book on Buddhist discrimination against women (among other books and articles).

Another issue Japanese churches have to deal with is the question of *ancestor veneration*. In Japan, ancestor veneration is the fundamental form of religious life, be it in Buddhism, Shinto, or any new religion. Moreover, this form of religiosity is closely intertwined with the Japanese social life, because a family is bound together by the continuously cultivated connection with its ancestors. The missionaries viewed ancestor veneration as nothing but idolatry, and advised newly converted Christians to remove the ancestor altars from their homes. This meant that Christians were asked to place themselves outside their family, which created tremendous tensions. With such a shallow understanding of ancestor veneration, the missionaries caused incredible suffering within Christian individuals as well as within families. Such an approach has been maintained in the Japanese churches until today. One can say that the churches in Japan define their relationship to traditional Japanese culture, religion and society (more or less) in a negative way. Thereby, the Japanese Christians are forced into a tragic split between religious identity (of occidental origin) and national or

cultural identity. This foreign character of Christianity in Japan seems to be one of the major reasons for the stagnation of the churches here. Over a period of several years, the issue of ancestor veneration was treated in a seminar sponsored by the NCC Study Center under the guidance of Prof. Take. He himself is also a minister of a local congregation and therefore knows about these problems of pastoral care. One can only hope that the Japanese churches will take these practical-theological problems more seriously, and that they make use of the NCC Center's work in this respect. For the churches, the question of ancestor veneration can be treated adequately only in close cooperation with theologians of different disciplines, ministers with their concrete experience, and specialists in the study of religion.

In this connection, another important issue has to be mentioned. The religious life of many Christians is focused mainly on the Sunday service, of which the most important part is a (usually, very long) sermon. Like in a lecture, the listeners write down what they hear. With this rather rational or school-like way of approaching faith, less and less Christians are satisfied. Instead, they are searching for authentic forms of *meditation, spirituality, liturgy*, etc. Not a few Christians (quite often second or third generation Christians) choose a way leading through Buddhism: by the practice of *Zazen* (sitting meditation) or *Nembutsu* (repetitive calling on the name of Buddha) they try to find access to Christian meditation, Jesus prayer etc. One of the staff members of the NCC Center, Matsuoka Yukako, focuses her studies on Zen Buddhism and also practices *Zazen*. The NCC Center could become a place where the many existing attempts at Christian spirituality are taken up, reflected on theologically, deepened through practice and exchange, and applied to the churches. Such an endeavour could give important impulses to the spiritual life of the congregations as well as to Japanese theology. It could become an important step in the process of the inculturation of the gospel in this country. Such a development, eventually, could be of considerable significance for the churches of the *ecumene* which are presently also searching for authentic forms of Christian spirituality.<sup>8</sup>

From the historical outline given above, it has become clear that the NCC Study Center not only serves the churches in Japan, but the churches of the *ecumene* at large. It is characteristic of the work of the Study Center that the activities are performed either in Japanese or English. The annual seminars for Japanese ministers and the ones for foreign church personnel (missionaries, teachers, etc.) are still held today. In 1993, the thirtieth

seminar in Japanese, and the eighteenth in English were held. Being the guest of a religious group for two or three days, the participants are taught directly by representatives of the religion about their faith, life, and thought. Attendance at the religious services, guided tours of the precincts, lectures and discussions help deepen one's understanding. Such a direct encounter goes far beyond the study by books alone; it triggers the process within Christians mentioned in the first section. In this way, a religion is taken seriously as a living reality, something which cannot be perceived sufficiently through objectified knowledge alone. The long tradition of these seminars comprises religious groups (and places) such as Shinto (Ise and Izumo-shrine), folk religion, Buddhist Schools such as Tendai (Hiei), Shingon (Koya), Zen (Eihei-ji, Mampuku-ji, etc.), Jodo-shu (Chion-in), Jodoshinshu (Nishi and Higashi Hongan-ji), the New Religions (Tenrikyo, Soka Gakkai, Rissho Koseikai, Oomoto, Shinnyo-en) and many others. Apart from that, regular study groups or seminars on Buddhist and other texts with competent teachers in those fields are organized throughout the year. Ueda Shizuteru, for example, last year explained the Zen-Buddhist story of the "Ten Ox-herding Pictures".

The NCC Study Center also continues to publish its two journals, *Deai* ('Encounter' in Japanese), and *Japanese Religions* (in English) twice a year. *Japanese Religions* treats themes such as Christianity in Japan, especially the problem of its inculturation, and informs about Buddhist schools such as Zen, Pure Land, and Shingon; on Shinto, Taoism, Confucianism, Shugendo, new religions, ancestor worship, etc. Also themes like interreligious dialogue, theology of religion, philosophy of religion (among them contributions by and about the "Kyoto School of Philosophy").<sup>9</sup> Documents such as the message of the Pope Paul VI to the Buddhists in Japan are published in JR as well.

In spite of the attempts to cooperate more closely with the member-churches of the National Christian Council in Japan (NCCJ), this goal unfortunately has not been reached yet. In September 1993, at the last *Inter-Religio* conference in Hong Kong, it became clear that it is not the NCC Center in Kyoto alone which is insufficiently integrated in the work of the church. Many other Christian study centers in East and South-East Asia suffer the same structural problem.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, they don't receive sufficient financial support from their churches. On the other hand, those churches don't make real use of their institutes which deal with such important issues as "gospel and culture" (indigenization), and "Christianity and other religions" (interreligious dialogue and mission, theology of

religion). Here, the question gets raised whether in this situation of “supply without demand” the supply is superfluous, or whether the demand should be awakened, or what else should be done. In addition, it is desirable that in the future, the *WCC Office on Inter-Religious Relations* in Geneva may cooperate more efficiently with the local Christian study centers dealing with the inculturation of Christianity and interreligious dialogue.

This structural problem of a lack of financial support from, and an insufficient integration in, the churches is connected with the fact that these institutions were usually founded and financed from outside the country or outside their respective church. In the case of Japan, many foreign churches are now withdrawing more and more of their financial and personnel support due to the present economic situation. This new situation could be perceived by the Japanese churches as a great chance to liberate themselves from a paternalistic relationship to the American and European churches in which, consciously or unconsciously, they are still kept, and to take up more responsibility for projects in the own country. Probably, this new challenge is not yet sufficiently recognized by the persons responsible in the churches. In the future, the NCC Study Center may expect less support from foreign churches and will have to look for more support from the member churches of the NCCJ.”

At the same time, however, and this has to be stressed, foreign churches should not completely withdraw their support and cooperation. From its very beginning, the NCC Study Center was an international, ecumenical endeavour, and this character should be maintained in the future under any circumstances.<sup>12</sup> From what has been said, it should be clear that the work of the NCC Study Center is not only relevant for the churches of Japan, but also, at the least, for those in Europe and America which are facing such important issues as the encounter with other religions, the quest for spirituality, etc. The *NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions* wants to further cultivate ecumenical exchange and to invite theologians and others interested from overseas to share in this learning. In doing this, the Study Center—as the churches in Japan—should not be focused on the churches of the West. It is conspicuous how few persons from East and South-East Asia have joined the staff of the Study Center up to now. However, exchange and cooperation, especially with the Asian churches, has to be developed and strengthened. In this area also, the Study Center serves the churches of Japan which have started to improve their relationships with their Asian neighbours.

In its rather short history of thirty-five years, the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions has gained such a respectable position that it has become a place where the traditional relationship between Western churches and Japanese churches has changed fundamentally: Here dialogue, exchange, and mutual learning within the church, with adherents of other religions, and with churches worldwide occurs. It has changed from a place where missionaries had been sent to, to a place where the foreign staff can now become ‘missionaries’ to their churches back home.

#### ENDNOTES

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- 1 That this theme was taken up in Japan in the beginning of the 1960’s is connected with Hendrik Kraemer’s visit in 1960. Similar tendencies can be observed in contemporary Korean theology (see Keel Hee-Sung, *Korean Theology: Past and Present*, *Inter-Religio* 12: 87).
- 2 Ariga had studied (among other places) at Union Theological Seminary (New York) and written his dissertation on Origen. He developed the so called ‘Hayatology’ (from Hebrew *haya*), drawing from the works of Carl Heinz Ratschow and Torleif Boman. Thereby, he tried to give Asian Christian thinking an alternative to ontology. In 1965, he had been invited as observer to the Second Vatican Council. His articles in English can be found in *Japanese Religions* and in one volume of his collected writings.
- 3 Doi had studied theology at Doshisha and written his dissertation on Tillich’s eschatology after the war at Chicago Theological Seminary and Hartford Theological Seminary. In 1963 and 1964, he had been invited as observer at the Second Vatican Council; he also took part in the “Candy Consultation” (Ceylon) of the WCC. His articles in English can be found in JR and in the volume *Search for Meaning Through Interfaith Dialogue* (Tokyo: Kyobunkwan 1976).
- 4 In the Annual Report April 1980 - March 1981 one can read:  
Visitors to the NCC Study Center in Kyoto are sometimes surprised to see how small it is: just two rooms. One room is used for the business office, and the other serves as library, reading room, and conference room. Compared to similar centers in Japan and other places in Asia, our Study Center is certainly among the modest ones. The staff is also rather small ... On the other hand, it might be said that the Center has played a central role for the development of religious studies and religious dialogue in Japan. Come and see us some time and see what we are doing!  
Today, visitors may be received in a third room which could be rented due to the generous support of EMS and which serves also as a room for seminars and for the journals.
- 5 The establishing of the Catholic study centers had been inspired by the NCC Center. James Heisig, presently Director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (Nagoya) writes in a letter of December 12th 1992: The NCC Center is the oldest interreligious center in Japan, and has been instrumental through the years in helping younger centers like our own to get a foothold in the world of interreligious research. (Letter of December 18, 1992)

- 6 The second conference (1982) dealt with the thoughts of Takizawa Katsumi.
- 7 Hakan Eilert in JR 15.3 (without pages). See also the portrait of Doi, the “dean of dialogue”, which FrederikSpier draws in JR 13.4: 3-15.
- 8 The many foreign monks in Japanese monasteries, mainly from Europe and America, indicate most clearly that the churches at home have not been able to give sufficient response to the religious needs of these young people. Otherwise they would not have been compelled to go on spiritual pilgrimages as far away as India, China, Korea and Japan.
- 9 The following are among the many who have contributed to JR: Abe Masao, Thomas Altizer, Bando Shojun, Ernst Benz, Alfred Bloom, Jan van Bragt, Fritz Bun, Horst Biirkle, Carlo Caldarola, John Cobb, Heinrich Dumoulin, Gorai Shigeru, Charles Hartshorne, Winston King, Joseph Kitagawa, Kubo Noritada, Muto Kazuo, Nakamura Hajime, Nishitani Keiji, Heinrich Ott, Huston Smith, Takeuchi Yoshinori, Ueda Shizuteru, Hans Waldenfels, Yagi Seiichi, and many others.
- 10 Therefore, the next *Inter-Religio* conference shall be concerned with this issue.
- 11 Support comes mainly from the Church of Sweden, from EMS and EMW of Germany, and from HEKS and SOAM of Switzerland. This most generous support is gratefully acknowledged.
- 12 The NCC Study Center is in urgent need of a native English speaking coworker for copy-editing Japanese Religions, correspondence, etc.! Churches in the English speaking world are kindly requested to respond to this appeal. The task of the co-worker would also include giving information about the life and events in the churches and religions of Japan, and of the NCC Study Center, back to their churches at home.