

NEW YORK CONFERENCE ON WORLD SPIRITUALITY

—A Brief Report—

I have just returned from New York where I attended a Conference on "World Spirituality" convened at Fordham University from June 24 to 26. What follows is intended to explain how it was I came to be invited to participate in the event and to introduce a related project in which our Institute has become involved.

Two years ago the Crossroad Publishing Company of New York began preparations of a grand-scale venture: the publication of a 25-volume Encyclopedia of the religious quest under the title *The Encyclopedia of World Spirituality*. The aim of the series would be to present a comprehensive account of the variety of spiritualities throughout human history. The idea originated with the editor-in-chief of Crossroad, Richard Payne, who had earlier undertaken the initiative at Paulist Press to publish a multi-volumed collection of *Classics of Western Spirituality*. For the concrete elaboration of the plan, Payne invited the collaboration of Professor Ewert Cousins of Fordham University, who was appointed General Editor of the series. Partly due to the Nanzan Institute's existing connections with Crossroad—namely, the publication of two volumes of our Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture, *The Buddha Eye* (1982) and *The Heart of Buddhism* (1983)—one of our closest collaborators, Professor Takeuchi Yoshinori, was invited to take on the editorship of the two volumes on Buddhist Spirituality. Takeuchi accepted the task, on condition that the Institute staff would assist him as co-editors and handle the bulk of the secretarial work.

Meantime, editorial work on other volumes of the *Encyclopedia* has been going on in many other corners of the globe, and for the sake of the overall coordination of the work it seemed advisable to gather together the some twenty editors at least once for mutual consultation. This led to the idea of holding a conference on world spirituality. Professor Takeuchi was, of course, invited in his capacity as one of the editors, but when conditions made it impossible for him to take the trip, he asked to me go in his place.

Space does not permit me to write the lengthy report needed to do justice to the entire Conference and my impressions of the papers I listened to and the personalities I met. Instead, I shall limit myself to a few considerations on the project itself.

Whatever else is to be said of it, the undertaking is ambitious in scope: a presentation of the entire spectrum of spiritualities that have flourished in human history. This includes not only traditions that are alive today but ancient traditions as well (Volume 12, *Ancient Near-Eastern Spirituality*; Volume 15, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*). It covers living traditions both in their present reality and in their pilgrimage through time (for example, Volume 6, *Spirituality of India I: Early Hindu and Jain*; Volume 13, *Jewish Spirituality I: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*), and includes both the spiritualities of the great World Religions and those of archaic

or tribal religions.

This last point might be the most revolutionary of all. After all, what could be the relevance of the spirituality of these archaic religions for modern men and women? Or as one of the editors formulated it: What lives on in us of the old German cults? Perhaps one of the major benefits of the conference was that the editors of the "archaic volumes" succeeded in making that relevance credible by drawing attention to a spirituality of the "things of the earth" necessary to counter-act the one-sided effects of modernity (and, it may often be said, of the world religions as such).

An "encyclopedia of spiritualities"—what exactly does that mean? How is such a work supposed to differ from an encyclopedia of religion? It appeared during the conference that the different editors were not operating on the basis of a common, clearly defined concept but that each had a particular intuitive notion. If there was any common denominator, it can only be expressed *negatively* in terms something like: not simply an account of the objective facts of religions as organizations or systems of objectified doctrine. The problem was expressed from a different angle by Professor Arthur Green, editor of the Jewish volumes: "Our project wants to be academic and religious at the same time." At all events, opinion among the editors appeared to be unanimous on the point that difficult as such a venture is, it is also most assuredly a worthwhile one. Significant in this respect may be the inclusion in the series of a volume on *Modern Secular Spirituality*, which will portray a picture of those forms of a "quest for the absolute" that do not take on the form of a religion.

A last characteristic of the project I should like to mention here is the fact that two of the three concluding volumes are dedicated to the "encounter among spiritualities." The idea is clearly that throughout history the different spiritual traditions of the earth have never been completely self-sustained and static entities, but rather dynamic realities evolving through mutual cross-fertilization. At the same time, however, one can hardly fail to detect here a contemporary concern: in our present-day global village no tradition can remain an island complete in itself and hope to survive. It may be that the time has come for the birth of a new spirituality, an "inter-faith spirituality".

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