

MASATOSHI DOI: DEAN OF DIALOGUE

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My immediate reaction after meeting Professor Masatoshi Doi the first time about fifteen years ago was that this frail man resembled a flickering candle which could be blown out by the first wind. His health has certainly not been the best during the years I have known him, and as he retires now, at the age of 77, as Director of the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, he looks feebler than ever. But Masatoshi Doi is a surprising man: his light is still burning clear.

There is a Japanese saying that appropriately describes the hidden strength of Professor Doi, *shin ga tsuyoi*. It means literally that the center or heart is strong, or more appropriately, the spiritual resources (heart, mind, marrow, etc.) are strong and vital. Incidentally, *shin* is also a word that can mean the wick of a lamp, suggesting that his light is still shining clear because of the quality of the wick.

Masatoshi Doi is sometimes called the Dean of Dialogue. The reasons are obvious. Under his twenty years of leadership, the NCC Center has pioneered the field of interfaith dialogue not only in Japan but also at the international level. The work of the Center has inspired and challenged, and in many ways provided a model for interfaith dialogue. A unique aspect of its work is that, along with various types of dialogue programs, great emphasis has been laid on pastoral aspects. Doi has always found it important to motivate, stimulate, and educate pastors and Christian workers for the encounter with indigenous religious traditions. In connection with his involvement at the Center, Doi has been actively promoting and supporting a number of dialogue projects in cooperation with others, such as the Round Table Conference on Religion (in Kyoto), the Conference on Religion in Modern Society, the Ecumenical Group for the Study of Interfaith Dialogue, the East-West Religions Project, Inter-Religio, and so forth.

Doi's firm background in systematic theology has enabled him to combine openness towards and search into other religions with a consistent commitment to his own Christian faith. He had seen too much of the wishy-washy Japanese attitude that uncritically assumes that all religions teach the same. Instead he affirms the unique identity of Christianity—and of other religions as well. Many participants at dialogue conferences who came expecting only polite and noncommitted affirmations from the old Japanese theologian have experienced minor shocks when he opened his mouth and sometimes presented extraordinary critical, frank, and even blunt comments. Again and again I have heard words of appreciation for his refreshing frankness.

I am not here going to introduce Doi's theological prophile. His *Theology of Meaning* (available in English translation as the *Search for Meaning through Interfaith Dialogue*, Tokyo: Kyo Bun Kwan, 1976), also includes a series of thought-provoking "missiological fragments." His deepest inspiration seems to come from Tillich, with whom he studied and whose *Systematic Theology* (vol.3) he recently translated into Japanese. But significantly enough, Barth, too, has exercised a strong influence on his thinking. Doi's thorough acquaintance with western theology is combined with and modified by a growing interest in eastern thought, particularly in Mahayana Buddhism. No wonder that he dreams about a Christian theology less foreign and western, and more rooted in the Japanese soil.

I have had the privilege of working with Masatoshi Doi for the past eleven years, as Associate Director of the NCC Center, and will add a few personal comments. It seems to me that his work was nurtured and sustained by a variety of qualities: his commitment to the Christian faith, his loyalty to his friends, his intelligence, his strong will, and his ambition. He has always been willing to share his insights and to introduce his many friends and contacts in the religious world. In Christian circles he is highly respected, but has several critics as well. Strangly enough, he seems to have more personal friends in other religions than among Christian theologians. Time and again I have been surprised to hear members of other faiths—spontaneously and without any obligation—express to me their admiration for Doi's warm and informal friendliness. That quality was not too obvious, but he apparently felt more free and unrestricted in the encounter with non-Christian friends than in his relationship with Christian colleagues.

I have to confess that there were moments, especially during the first years of cooperation, when I felt it was difficult as a young and inexperienced foreigner to work with a Japanese who had already found his style and pursued his ideas with dogged persistence. There

were times of quiet —almost imperceptible —tension and struggle about programs and policies. But generally we enjoyed a deep mutual respect and trust. What I especially appreciated in the years of cooperation with Professor Doi was the great amount of freedom and trust with which he allowed me to work. There was little interference in the areas which became my special responsibility: the editing of *Japanese Religions* (even though Doi figured as the Editor), missionary seminars and programs, planning of library, reports, and, of course, my own research. Without such a freedom and mutual trust I would hardly have worked for so many years at the NCC Center.

During most of his years at the Center, Doi's involvement was a part-time activity; his main occupation was teaching systematic theology at Doshisha University. He always dreamed about devoting more time to study and dialogue. Even after he retired from Doshisha, however, he was troubled by the fact that too much time and energy went into administration and fund-raising. When he now retires from the NCC Study Center as well, it is my hope that he will have more time to do what he always wanted to do: further studies in Buddhism and a systematic reflection on the theological implications of interfaith dialogue. We look forward to new contributions. May his wick be strong and his lamp burn with a clear light in the years to come.