

In Memoriam

Jan van Bragt (1928-2007)

On April 12, 2007, Prof. Dr. Jan van Bragt passed away at the age of seventy-eight in Himeiji, Japan. Jan van Bragt probably was best known for being one of the leading promoters of interreligious dialogue in Japan and East Asia. At the same time, to many he was an esteemed scholar, teacher, priest, and – a dear friend.

Born and raised in Belgium, at the age of nineteen years he entered the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (C.I.C.M.), was ordained priest in 1952, studied philosophy at Leuven University and received there his doctorate on Hegel's philosophy. He taught philosophy at his order's seminary until he was sent as missionary to Japan in 1961. After language studies, he first served as assistant priest in a congregation in Sakai, and from 1965 on became research fellow at Kyoto University in the field of Japanese religions and philosophy. He studied mainly with Takeuchi Yoshinori and Nishitani Keiji, whose work *Shūkyō to wa nanika* he later translated (*Religion and Nothingness*, 1982). This book became an influential work for Buddhist-Christian dialogue on the philosophical level. In 1969 he became member of the Oriens Institute in Tokyo, at that time under the directorship of Father Spae, one of the Catholic dialogue pioneers in Japan, and taught also at Sophia University. From 1971-76, he served as provincial superior of C.I.C.M. In 1976 he became professor at Nanzan University as well as the founding director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture; in this position he served until 1991. During this time, among other endeavors, he initiated the Nanzan Symposia, the contributions to which were published in a book series. He wrote many articles on Buddhism and interreligious dialogue, and together with Paul Mommers he authored the book *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian – Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec* (1995).

He also was one of the founders of the East West Spiritual Exchange, enabling Zen monks to spend some time in Catholic monasteries in Europe, and Catholic monks to participate in Zen monastic life in Japan. From 1985 to 1990 he was a member of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. After his retirement from Nanzan 1996, he returned to his beloved Kyoto where he taught courses at Hanazono University and Otani University, an indication of his recognition among Buddhist scholars.

The close connection between the NCC Study Center and Jan van Bragt began in 1965, the year he had become research fellow at Kyoto University. First he met Prof. Ariga Testutarō, the Study Center's former

director and emeritus of the chair for Christian Studies at this university, whose important article on “Hayatology” (an attempt to overcome Greek ontological thinking by the dynamic Hebrew or oriental world perception) he later translated (*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* Vol. 11 Nos. 2 & 3, 1984). Then he also came into close contact with the Center’s next director, Prof. Doi Masatoshi, who asked him to write a book review on Nishitani’s *Shūkyō to wa nanika* which became Jan van Bragt’s first contribution to *Japanese Religions* (1966)¹ and probably marked also his academic debut in Japan.

Fr. Dr. Peter Baekelmans mentioned at Jan van Bragt’s wake in Himeiji that during his early time in Japan he had an inner struggle concerning his call as missionary, but that the Second Vatican Council solved it by opening a new kind of relationship to other religions. It was during the same time that he first experienced a new attitude of Christians towards members of other religions in concrete terms at the NCC Study Center. This resulted, one may say, in his mission of dialogue. Once he remarked: “Dialogue is simply one aspect of Christian universal love, and love has no Why.”

Jan van Bragt’s relationship with the NCC Study Center was apparently closer than generally perceived. In his contribution to the Commemorative Volume of *Japanese Religions* at the 40th anniversary of the NCC Study Center, he wrote that the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture was “partly modeled on the NCC Center” and he would not exaggerate to “say that, right from the beginning, Professor Doi served as the guardian angel of that new institute.” It was not to remain a unilateral relationship. For example, both institutes established together with the Oriens Institute and the Institute for Oriental Religions (Sophia University) the Ecumenical Group for the Study of Interfaith Dialogue (EGSID).

My own early memories of Jan van Bragt, in fact, go back to such an ecumenical meeting. Once, in a small chapel at Nanzan, he administered the Holy Communion for the members of the participating institutes. First of all, it was his spiritual way of speaking the words and administering bread and wine that left a deep impression on me. Then, it was his natural way of including us Protestants in the Communion that opened my eyes to the impact that interreligious dialogue has on ecumenical dialogue and communion for the first time. This was also, in my view, one of the great achievements of the “Inter-Religio” meetings in East and Southeast Asia which the Nanzan Institute initiated and coordinated for many years.

One result of these ecumenical experiences was that when we established the Interreligious Studies in Japan Program (ISJP) at the NCC Study Center five years

¹ Among his subsequent articles were “Buddhism – Jōdo Shinshū – Christianity: Does Jōdo Shinshū Form a Bridge Between Buddhism and Christianity?” (JR 18 No. 1, 1993) and “Apocalyptic Thought in Christianity and Buddhism” (JR 23 Nos. 1 & 2, 1998).

ago, it was clear right from the beginning that it should become an ecumenical program open to all denominations. We were most fortunate that Jan van Bragt had already moved to Kyoto at this time and that he was willing to serve on the ISJP-Board as Catholic representative as well as to design the curricula of the courses “Theology of Religion” and “Theories of Interreligious Dialogue.” Most of all, he taught these courses right from the beginning in 2002 until 2006. Quite a number of foreign students, Protestant and Catholic, have greatly benefitted from his experience, knowledge and wisdom he shared in this class.

One of Jan van Bragt’s last contributions to interreligious dialogue and ecumenical theology is probably his translation of articles by Mutō Kazuo, Ariga’s successor on the chair for Christian Studies at Kyoto University as well as colleague and friend of Nishitani. Among these translations was the important treatise “Christianity and the Notion of Nothingness” published in *Japanese Religions*.² Jan van Bragt continued to translate a number of Mutō’s articles upon my request since I was planning to edit together with him a book of Mutō’s articles in English in order to make these contributions to interreligious dialogue and ecumenical theology accessible to a wider audience. He completed his translations as planned, but unfortunately we had not sufficient time to edit the volume together.

In the end of December 2006, for health reasons Jan van Bragt had to move from Kyoto to the headquarters of his order in Himeji. The evening before, I had the chance to meet him in an *izakaya* near his residence, and we enjoyed *sake* and *kushikatsu* almost as much as we used to do before. – After he had passed away, somebody who knew him told that she had “seen” and “heard” him saying, with his characteristic smile on his face, that we should not be sad about his departure! Finally, after having completed his long pilgrimage between continents, cultures and religions, apparently he had reached his eternal home.

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² Jan van Bragt’s translations of Mutō’s articles published in *Japanese Religions* are as follows: “‘Immanent Transcendence’ in Religion” (Vol. 12 No. 1, 1981, pp. 1-20); “Christianity and the Notion of Nothingness” (Vol. 21 No. 2, 1996, pp. 199-227; reprinted in Vol. 25 Nos. 1 & 2, 2000, pp. 53-82); “Watch Your Step!” (Vol. 30 Nos. 1 & 2, 2005, pp. 99-111).