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Dialogue in Religions*

On dialogue

In recent years, it seems, there has been much talk about mutual interreligious dialogue (*shūkyō-kan sōgo no taiwa* 宗教間相互の対話). However, what kind of matter is this dialogue between two religions? When we talk about dialogue, normally we think of dialogue between two individuals; but when we speak about dialogue between religions, what do we mean? Perhaps conversations (*taiwa*) between individuals belonging to different religions may be called interreligious dialogue. But when there is wide diversity among the people belonging to a religion, ranging from those with little knowledge about its teaching to those with a deep understanding, then is it appropriate to speak about mutual dialogue among people belonging to different religions? On the other hand, when dialogue is limited to official representatives –which looks like a clear definition – the question arises as to how such official representatives of religions should be chosen. Buddhism and Christianity are divided in many branches, and when there is no organization unifying these schools, how can we speak of Buddhist or Christian representatives? I will return to this issue later.

Further, it may not be a comfortable question, but is there a possibility of real dialogue between different religions at all? One supposes that in some sense religion has to do with something absolute or ultimate; consequently an attitude may easily develop that talks between such “absolutist” religions become for either side a means to proselytize the counterpart and to draw him or her to one’s own side.

Since we discover here a number of issues, I feel we need to carefully organize the problematic points concerning interreligious dialogue. First, I want to direct attention to the fact that from the very first moment when a religion in a positive form¹ comes into being, dialogue is constituting a difficulty. Then, I would like to

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1. The author refers here to “positive religion,” a term designating a religion deriving (in a historical process) from a “founder.” Since Hegel, philosophers of religions, and later scholars of religious studies, have used this term in distinction from “natural religion,” “nature religion,” or “tribal religion.”

consider the process by which interreligious dialogue became a favored and accepted way of thinking in recent years. In Western Christian societies a switch has taken place, from societies dominated by one religion towards multireligious societies, and in this transformation we can perceive a huge historical change. Against that Western background, we have to ask how the situation is in a society like Japan, which has been multireligious for a long time. Through examination of these issues I would like to clarify the interreligious dialogue (as it is called in recent years) at least up to a certain point.

First I would like to begin my deliberations with the question of dialogue among individuals. Here it is not necessary to discuss the importance of interreligious dialogue among individual persons. Even though we find in the gospels long text passages of Jesus' sermons, when viewing the whole of the gospels it is easy to see that most narrations are composed of dialogues between Jesus and individuals. Similarly Shakyamuni's sermons, being "sermons fit for the capacities of the others,"² were talks which responded to the concrete situation of the other human beings. Of course, this point does not apply only to these two eminent religious leaders. Any teacher is unable to "teach," if he or she does not listen to the talk of the student and does not respond to the student's consciousness of problems, but instead engages only in one-way communication. Now, when a positive religion such as Christianity or Buddhism comes into being, the grandeur of the first founder is naturally emphasized, and it seems that the teaching of this grand teacher has flowed one-directionally to the disciples. In the theater of real life, however, the greater such a teacher is, the more his or her talk will not be a one-way communication, but doubtlessly instead will manifest in the form of mutual dialogue. Therefore, truth in such circumstances is not transmitted unilaterally from one side to the other, but is something which will only become clear through dialogue.

However, seen from the side of the students who have experienced the conversation with a grand teacher, the original dynamics of such conversation soon recede into the background and an important goal becomes now to make the contents of the teacher's teaching consistent. Each single living word told in an original sermon fit for the capacities of the other in living dialogue is later going to become material for the theoretical construction of a systematized teaching. And through the spread of such systematized teaching, its reception, and the organization of the supporting group, the formation of a formalized religion occurs. In rough terms, a positive religion comes into being as a social entity (*shakai-teki sonzai* 社会的存在).

2. The expression *taiki seppō* 対機說法 derives from Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition.

I used the expression “positive religion as a social entity.” But of course the usage of the word “religion” differs according to the individual person, and it is said that the important definitions used among scholars are more than hundred. Still, the expression “religion” – normally we speak of Christianity, Buddhism, or other religions – is something containing regulated teachings and certain organizers, and in the social sense we can meaningfully refer to religion following that common usage.

Now, when considering religion as a problem in the wide sense of human beings’ ordinary way of living, individual conversations bear an important meaning. However, when religion becomes a social institution, the situation changes considerably. Religion as a social entity establishes itself by collecting and organizing its teachings; in general, with the process of time, the teachings will become arranged in a more rigid way. Eventually, definite distinctions between the right and the wrong receptions of the teachings will be made. To speak of “right” and “wrong” serves as assurance (certainty; *kakushin* 確信) for those persons who receive the teachings; but more objectively described, the situation probably should be understood as one reception by one group of people and a different reception by another group. In the case of the history of Christianity, orthodox doctrines were established, heresy was banned, and schisms between schools (sects) occurred; in case of the history of Buddhism, fundamental schisms occurred as well as splits of branches.

In such a process, since it is troubled by the challenge of responding to people different from oneself in a flexible way, religion as a social entity forms itself into a homogeneous group (*dōshitsu shūdan* 同質集団). In such a case, only conversation with insiders approving the same teaching inside the group is possible. Eventually, in the history of religions as social entities, even dialogue between different religious schools which originally split from each other is difficult; so how much more difficult becomes the dialogue with a wholly different religion, and indeed the latter form of communication might even be considered an unthinkable historical development. Compared with Christianity, Buddhism seems to look rather flexible at first glance, but one cannot deny that, after having formed a homogeneous group, it is difficult for this religion as well to pursue dialogue with outside groups. Thus, from the deliberation above we have to conclude that in respect to positive religions as social entities it is difficult to use the word dialogue (or conversation). Yet despite this fact, recently much talk about interreligious dialogue has emerged. So next I would like to take up the case of Christianity in the West and examine this issue.

Christianity and dialogue
1. *The changes of "Christian society"*

After a long historical period in which Christianity did not show much interest in dialogue with other religions, recently roughly three causes have led it to move in this new direction. I would like to examine each of them in a simple way. The first cause is that recently people with many religious beliefs have migrated into Christian societies in Europe. Since the beginning of modern times, Western people travelled to Africa and Asia, and their reports about religions which had not been in the West reached Christian societies; however, the limits of such reports were that they treated religions as objects of research and understanding, they did not initiate dialogue. Since the middle of the 20th century, i.e. after World War II, a considerable number of people with many religious beliefs migrated into Christian societies. The result of such migrations has been that, in spite of the differences among the Christian denominations, the societies which were constituted in the big frame called Christianity changed rapidly into multireligious societies. Obviously it became a big question for Christianity as to how view religions outside Christianity. Of course, for a long time Christian theology had considered this question theoretically; but Christianity had not often encountered other religions in reality. Now a change in the theological debate occurred and it was a debate which occurred in public discussions. The social situation in the second half of the 20th century leaped over the theological debate and, since it was a question of survival, interreligious dialogue became an inescapable challenge. Theological reflections, labeled with new terms such as "theology of religion(s)," pursued that situation, but at first interreligious dialogue was not recommended by the change to theology of religions. This meant that theology of religions did not really constitute a new section or field of theology, but had to be understood mainly as denoting a form of traditional theology in a multi-religious situation.

In short, for a long time, Christian theology had overlooked its surroundings and had been conducted purely in the context of Christian societies, that is, mono-religious societies. Its terminology and logic had become understandable only among its fellows. However, in a society in which different religions are coexisting and have to cooperate mutually, the form of such conventional theology has to be questioned fundamentally. Unfortunately, dialogue between religions has not been conceived of as the task and method of theology. The cultivation of interreligious dialogue has not been a desirable matter or a must, but has emerged simply because it could not be avoided.

2. *The problem of Christianity and Judaism*

We have examined one of the external causes which led Christianity to pursue interreligious dialogue. Now we have to consider one more cause: the issue of Judaism in Western Christian societies. In the previous section I mentioned concerning Western Christian societies that theology has overlooked its surroundings and has been conducted purely in the context of Christian societies, that is, mono-religious societies. In Western societies, however, in fact Jews were everywhere. Hence, expressions such as “a social context which had come to neglect Jews” or “a social situation which could not see the Jews” would actually be more appropriate. Of course, it was not the case that Jews were completely neglected in Christian societies. However, European societies were dominantly societies which forced the neglect of Jews; such was the mode according to which “Christian societies” were maintained.

The holocaust of the Jews in Germany under Hitler’s system urged deep historical self-reflection upon Christianity after World War II. The realization has spread that the terrible phenomenon marked by Auschwitz does not just end with abnormal actions by certain people at a specific time, and the consciousness is developing that the dialogue with Jews belongs among the responsibilities of Christians. Whereas interreligious dialogue with non-Christian religious people was urged as “unavoidable” by the reality of society owing to the immigration of people with many religious beliefs, the interreligious dialogue with Jews was rather urged as a “must” by an interior obligation.

However, even though Jews were in the immediate neighborhood of European Christians since Roman times, there was no tradition of conversation in a decent form. This issue is really a strange thing which brings us to return to the question of what Christianity was in a Christian society up to that time. In any case, theology of religions is a word which describes the form of theology in the new situation. Thus, when speaking of the relationship with Judaism, theology of religion does not only ask how Christianity views Judaism, but it also has to be asked in return what theology and what Christianity more fundamentally are in their relationship with Judaism.

Until now, the Christian understanding of Judaism consisted, in one word, in a developmental (or evolutionary) view of history. This is essentially an understanding that Christianity is the sublation of Judaism. Under such a perspective, because Jews continue to remain on a stage prior to that of sublation, even if one holds provisional dialogue with them, it would be only for the purpose of one-directional teaching, i.e. for leading the way and for elevating the Jews; it would not become a mutual conversation on equal footing. The conviction of the supremacy of Christianity as a social totality came into being by Christianity’s not recognizing Jews. This is a terrible problem, we must admit. Now – depending on the progress of interreligious

dialogue – we must not stop at the dimension of merely living together with Jews in a good relationship and on an equal footing. Instead, the greater revolution would be that we do not lose sight of the fact that Christianity is continuously keeping its origin in Judaism.³

3. Encounter with other religions in the mission field

Finally, I would like to point to the third cause which urged Christians to pursue interreligious dialogue. This was the religious reflection occurring at the frontlines of the world mission (*sekai dendō* 世界伝道). Christian world mission in modern times was started in the expansionary wave of Western Christian societies. The sense of vocation (*shimei-kan* 使命感) for missionary propagation (*dendō fukyō* 伝道布教) of Christianity and the vocation to spread the West and its civilization were fused mutually and subtly. Christianization and Westernization were entangled with each other, so that missionary propagation to convert individuals occurred together with attempts to transform whole societies into Christian societies. However, non-Christian societies were not non-religious societies before Christianity arrived. Moreover, it was not only one non-Christian religion that was involved in these many countries, but many diverse religions. Even though the Christian side perceived many deficiencies, each non-Christian religion formed its own tradition accumulated during a long history and maintained the own specific spirit. Standing at the frontline of such traditions, missionaries increasingly became aware of these issues. Gradually, instead of one-directional missionary propagation, over time demands were made that in each world region dialogue with religions should be conducted as a matter of course.

In the initial period of world mission it was thought that the Christian vocation (“mission”)⁴ should consist of one-directional missionary propagation in the narrow sense, for the purpose of increasing the population belonging to Christianity. Increasingly, the word vocation (“mission”) now came to be understood in a broader sense, not to simply offer to each region the model of a Christian society formed in the West, but to consider an important different kind of vocation (“mission”) as well. This other kind of “mission” was to serve people of each region by reviving indigenous expressions of thinking and spirituality and forming social communities which were suitable for each respective area. Of course, such an endeavor cannot be made without dialogue with the indigenous religions. In doing so, the interreligious dialogue occurring on the frontline of world mission even urges a fundamental reexamination of the Christian vocation (“mission”).

3. See Paul’s application of the “root-branch” metaphor for the relationship between Jews and gentiles in *Romans* 11.
4. The author plays here with two meanings of “mission,” one being “vocation,” another the missionary propagation, or promulgation of the gospel.

4. Christianity and the meaning of dialogue

I would like to summarize the three issues we noted above. First, when people with many religious beliefs enter a so-called Christian society and the latter subsequently is transformed into a religiously pluralistic society, dialogue with other religions becomes a necessity of survival. Second, in a Christian society after Auschwitz the need to be conscious of hitherto neglected Jews has to be taken properly into sight and it becomes clear that dialogue with Jews is a duty. Third, through missionizing the consciousness emerged that in the context of so-called non-Christian societies the dialogue with other religions is a necessity. We recognized that during a long history in the West, Christianity formed a mono-religious society, in which it constituted the only religion; now in the time of a religiously plural society it has had to reconstitute itself as one among many religions in a society. Of course, since ancient times many religions had existed in the world. And at the specific time when Christianity emerged many religions existed in the Mediterranean area. However, because Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, it became the only recognized religion in later European society. Of course, afterwards in history it knew of the existence of other religions, but they remained a matter of other worlds outside the sphere of its own life. Now the new situation is that Christianity meets other religions constantly in daily life. Today, theology and missionary methods, which were formed in the time when Christianity was the only religion in society, have to be reexamined fundamentally. Until recently, Christianity did not have any concern for other religions, but now it is not sufficient to show only bits of interest in other religions and to perform perfunctory greetings with their members. But dialogue with another person requires the process (work, *sagyō* 作業) of nothing less than questioning one's own way of being.

We cannot say that the meaning of such fundamental interreligious dialogue is sufficiently understood by Christianity at this point. Above we saw in the expression "positive religion as social entity" that dialogue becomes a difficulty for any organized religion. The fact that Christianity as one of such religions must go out to the place called dialogue is in itself already a pretty huge endeavor. In the present situation, however, at most it tries to understand the other religion or to cooperate with the other, and then the communication comes to a halt.

Thus, seen from the position of Christianity, what about the religion which should become partner for dialogue? Based on Christian initiatives, interreligious dialogue advanced considerably; however, it seems that as long as one thinks only from the side of Christianity, actually partners are not received positively. There

is a strong impression that they can achieve only some kind of superficial social fellowship with Christians. Lack of skill in dialogue leads to the predicament in which Christians end up tilting at windmills.⁵

So the situation is contradictory. Since the times have changed considerably for Christianity, it feels the necessity for dialogue, but seen from the establishment of the “positive religion as social entity,” boundaries still appear to be strong. Christianity simply has not much experience of interreligious dialogue. Still, it has managed one advantageous accomplishment in its modern history: because of the divisions between the various Christian denominations themselves, it has collected extensive experiences of intrareligious (or interdenominational) dialogue (*shūha* [kyōha]-*kan taiwa* 宗派[教派]間対話).

*Interreligious dialogue and intrareligious dialogue*⁶

Above I touched briefly on the problem of denominations (*shūha* 宗派) or sects (*kyōha* 教派) in religions. I said that dialogue between denominations (sects), which split from each other is difficult. This phenomenon is striking especially in Buddhism and Christianity with their long history. Nevertheless, even when divided into “sects” (factions, schools; *ha* 派), and in case of divisions (schisms) between doctrinal schools (*gakuha* 学派), it is still possible to hold mutual conversations in constructive ways, and hence it is possible to deepen the understanding of the religious Other. Such examples can be seen in the debates (*ronsō* 論争) between the different schools in the time of early sectarian Buddhism (*buha bukkō* 部派仏教), or in the debates of the different law schools in Islam. Sectarian splits do not necessarily lead to divisions of the religion itself; in Islam, for example, even if it is divided in schools, everywhere in the world Muslims gather in a single mosque in a given locale. But over against such communalizing phenomena are the schools (sects) which gather at different places with different rituals and worship, and whose organizations differ as well; here, the various schools (sects) do present the aspect of a “positive religion as a social entity.”

In the case of Buddhism as well as of Christianity, judging from the original ideal (*rinnen* 理念) of their emergences as positive religions, such denominational (sectarian) entities were not supposed to come into being. In early Buddhism, the concord (unity; *wagō* 和合) of the *sangha* was emphasized; to take refuge (*kie* 皈依) in

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5. The original expression *hitori sumō* 独り相撲 here denotes the awkward situation in which a *sumō* wrestler is trying to fight alone in the arena without the required partner.
 6. Yuki treated this subject already in 1988 in the essay *Shūkyō-kan taiwa to shūkyō-nai taiwa* 宗教間対話と宗教内対話 (Interreligious dialogue and intrareligious dialogue). *Deai* Vol. 9 No. 3, 1988: 1-4.

Buddha and in the *dharmā* (*hō* 法) in a divided form would reflect a self-negation of Buddhism.⁷ Also in the case of Christianity, the “one holy church” is its ideal mark, and we have to say that the proliferation of separate churches constitutes a self-contradiction.

However, real history does not move according to ideals (*rinnen*); numerous *sanghas* and multiple churches, in other words, denominations (sects) emerged. Especially in modern Christianity great numbers of denominations (sects) have emerged and now exist side by side (*heizon* 併存). Denominations (sects) think of themselves as being complete (or perfect), and hence they live side by side with others almost without any mutual conversation.

Such a configuration (*keитай* 形態) of denominational pluralism both on the one hand contradicts the ideal of primitive Christianity and on the other hand breaks the monistic principle (*ichigen shugi* 一元主義) to which Christianity in Europe – as being the only one religion in one society – over a long time had gotten used to. However, historically it prepared the way to understanding pluralistic societies in which multiple religions really live side by side. When considering religion as a social entity, in such a configuration of denominational pluralism it is difficult to view Christianity as one single religion, inasmuch as each single denomination (sect) appears as its own religion. Almost all denominations (sects) of modern Christianity were proceeding according to such a configuration.

Critical reflection of such a configuration occurred first on the frontline of world missions during the second half of the 19th century. Despite what had been considered obvious in a society with the tradition of Christianity at its center, considerable doubts came into sight via the contact with non-Christian societies. The trigger for such reflection began simply enough, but soon it urged a strong theological examination which became the great wave of the ecumenical movement. At this point we can see that although it seems that I have pursued some digressions concerning denominations (sects), in reality the emphasis on dialogue in Christianity is the result of the ecumenical movement. Thus the history of “religion as social entity” is a history which has become more and more complicated through the dialogue between the denominations (sects) which split from each other. To respond to such suffocating difficulties, the practice of dialogue was urged, to serve like the opening of an air hole. However, what was such a dialogue aiming at? Obviously, it was aimed at overcoming the divisions between the denominations (sects), moving toward a renewed merger of churches, and again achieving unity. However, the opinions varied whether such a union or unity included a concrete

7. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddha, *dharmā* and *sangha* is the basis of Buddhism, which becomes problematic when there emerge different *sanghas*. *Sangha* is translated into Japanese (resp. Chinese) als *wagō-shū* 和合衆 (crowd or people of concord, united community).

organization or not, whether it *should* include it or not, or whether it *could* include it or not. However that may be, the first step was to deepen mutual understanding through dialogue, and so the dialogue between denominations (sects) was carried on. Dialogue brought forth cooperation, and through cooperation the dialogue again was deepened.

Since such a dialogue is pursued within the frame of Christianity in the broad sense, it is strictly speaking a dialogue between denominations (sects) and not a dialogue between religions; yet, when we consider a denomination (sect) as a social entity like one separate religion, we may call this process in effect also a dialogue among religions. However, in the case of interreligious dialogue in the more accurate, literal sense, different sources, completely different historical traditions, and different languages pose factors for the mutual conversation. In contrast, intra-Christian dialogue between denominations (sects) can use basically the same language for mutual conversation, even if they have become distant from each other for a long time. Yet because as social entities they followed different paths for extended periods, their dialogue is still certainly not easy, and dialogue between denominations (sects) in Christianity proceeds only slowly through various complications. Nevertheless the experience of such dialogue became the positive background for the enthusiasm for interreligious dialogue.

For convenience's sake, our present considerations accept the distinction between interreligious dialogue (*shūkyō-kan taiwa*) and intrareligious dialogue (interdenominational dialogue, *shūha-kan taiwa*); however, how much do both differ essentially? Recently it became customary in Japan not to talk about the differences between the Protestant churches and the Catholic Church within Christianity. On the other hand, some twenty years ago, when in 1973 the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions chose the Catholic Church as the theme for its annual seminar (which normally is dedicated to the study of "other religions") almost nobody considered the choice strange, for the reason that for Protestants as well as for Catholics, the respective partner belongs to a "different religion." In China, both have been treated clearly as different religions for a long time, and they differ also in their Chinese names ("Teaching of the Lord of Heaven" (*tenshū-kyō* 天主教) and "Teaching of Jesus" (*yaso-kyō* 耶穌教)). In Germany and Switzerland, among the same Protestant churches the (Calvinistic) Reformed Church and the Lutheran Church also have been treated as different religions since long ago. Even within Buddhism, when Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhists and South-East Asian Theravāda Buddhists meet directly, without prior knowledge and explanation, will it seem at all apparent that both belong to the same Buddhism?

One may thus conclude – at least in respect to Christianity – that intrareligious dialogue is essentially the same as today's interreligious dialogue. After all, when tracing back in history, the different denominations emerged from the same place; and depending on the emphasis of the awareness of this issue, one can support

that idea that this is intrareligious dialogue within one religion. However, if this position is granted, then in the case of the Jewish religion, since Christianity emerged from the same place, it is not strange to call conversation between Judaism and Christianity intrareligious dialogue. The same can be said also in respect to Islam. Yet especially in respect to the latter, from the Christian side today it is not easy to conceive it as belonging to the same religion.⁸ Of course from the side of Islam, it traditionally viewed Jews and Christians as closely-related “people of the Scripture,” and it draws a distinction between them and adherents of other religions. Islam respects the representative prophets of the Old Testament and views Jesus as an important prophet. Therefore, whereas Christians consider dialogue with Islam as interreligious dialogue, one may say that Muslims consider this as intrareligious dialogue. After observing such attitudes, making the distinction between interreligious dialogue and intrareligious dialogue seems to be really no more than a matter of convenience.

However, at least for Christianity one may say that this is a convenient distinction. To accept Jesus as God’s son and to belong to the one holy catholic church means to be a Christian; intrareligious dialogue is pursued within such a frame; outside of it interreligious dialogue is conducted. Moreover, in respect to chronology, it is a process which begins first with intrareligious dialogue, develops gradually, and eventually interreligious dialogue appears. The analogous situation of dialogue in Japan has been such that there was traditionally almost no intrareligious dialogue within Buddhism;⁹ however, suddenly in the Meiji period began a dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism, and from the site of such dialogue intrareligious dialogue was stimulated within Buddhism. However, something like ecumenism or an ecumenical movement in Christianity has not yet occurred in Japanese Buddhism. One reason for this may be that Japanese Buddhism has neither the concept nor the experience of mission abroad. In modern Christianity, overseas missionizing was pursued with dedication, yet the missionaries felt in the mission fields that the divisions among the Christian denominations posed a serious stumbling block for their work. Japanese Buddhists do not have such experience. Instead, now being concerned mainly with the secure progress of their own temple congregation (*danka* 檀家) and its economic support, they are not interested even in intrareligious dialogue.

The Buddhist and Christian views of holy scriptures also differ. Here I would like to take up some reasons why Japanese Buddhists did not proceed in intrareligious dialogue. According to the Bible, Christianity is one even though

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8. After the establishment of Islam, for some time Christian theologians considered it as a “(Christian) heresy.”
 9. It should be mentioned here, though, that in Japan formal disputations and informal debates occurred among Buddhist denominations already since ca. 800 CE.

it may be split in many denominations. Precisely speaking, the attitude may be different when treating the apocryphical books, but the main biblical scriptures are in unison in this respect. Even though the denominations separate themselves because of different interpretations, the text of the Bible, the canon, is common to all. In case of Buddhism, because the selection of central sutras differs according to each school, it is difficult to detect a common scriptural base except of the sutras deriving from Shakyamuni in India. Even with the basic claim that Buddhism is the teaching of Buddha, questions such as what is Buddha, or how is he seen, exhibit a great diversity of Buddhism. And especially when it comes to Japanese Buddhism, the founders of each school are easily deified or made absolute, and these denominations maintain a strong aspect of self-definition by founders-belief (*soshi shinkō* 祖師信仰). One may obviously say that each school looks like an independent religion. I think that for Japanese Buddhism intrareligious dialogue poses a greater difficulty than interreligious dialogue. However, among the different schools within Jōdo Shinshū, intrareligious dialogue has proceeded considerably, and they have managed to establish the Federation of the Ten Shinshū Schools (*shinshū jūha rengō* 真宗十派連合).¹⁰ Could there not develop also the possibility to proceed one step further and establish something like a federation between Jōdo shinshū and Jōdo-shū? Also, should it not be possible to establish a federation of the different Zen schools? In case of Zen, there exists the pioneering attempt undertaken together with Catholic monasteries to pursue the international program known as the East-West Spiritual Exchange.¹¹ Yet even if it is possible to swiftly initiate dialogue with a different religion, dialogue with a closely-related school is all the more difficult; I think that this matter applies to all religions. There is not only the chronological pattern according to which one tends to proceed from intrareligious dialogue to interreligious dialogue, there is also the pattern that interreligious dialogue becomes the stimulus for advancing intrareligious dialogue. Still, I hope that interreligious dialogue and intrareligious dialogue will proceed according to combinations of various patterns.

Dialogue between religions in Japan
1. *The religious situation in Japan*

I have treated several issues ranging from the problem of Christian denominations to Japanese Buddhism; now I would like to consider the situation in Japan in a more general way. In Japan there is not one specific religion which

10. This alliance is also called *shinshū kyōdan rengō* 真宗教団連合 or Federation of the Shinshū schools.

11. The inter-monastic East-West Spiritual Exchange started in 1979. See the reports by Jan Van Bragt in *Nanzan Bulletin* No. 3 and subsequent issues.

dominates the others, but a continuous history of a “mixture of Shintō and Buddhism” (*shinbutsu konkō* 神仏混交).¹² Also, Buddhism itself split into many schools, and further since the 19th century Japanese new religions arose one after the other. One can say that the coexistence of many religions – which can be seen in Western Christian societies only recently – is in Japan a phenomenon apparent from very early on. How then was something like dialogue between religions in Japan conducted? At first sight it looks as if it was very active, but how was it really?

In order to consider this problem, we should not see the phenomenon of the coexistence of many religions superficially, but we have to focus our eyes carefully on the way religions exist in Japanese society. Dialogue becomes a possibility first when clear-cut subjects in conversation exist; dialogue presupposes religions as identifiable entities which are distinct subjects. However, I think that the pattern of a religion becoming such a clear subject has assumed a rather peculiar form in Japan.

First there is the problem of how people belong to a religion. For example, in the 1970s the Agency for Cultural Affairs announced that among the religious population of Japan were 93 million Buddhists and 112 million Shintoists.¹³ Since the whole population of Japan consisted of 120 million people, a simple calculation shows that most Japanese belong to Buddhism as well as to Shintō. Originally, these figures were based on reports by Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines; in other words, these are statistics of the population which temple and shrine officials think belong to their institutions. If one would base the statistics on reports by the individual believers, the figures would differ considerably. In some hospitals, official forms for the hospitalization of patients contain an entry asking about affiliations with religion, school, and temple or shrine. Since first this form does not provide space for two entries, one may say that it became the general consciousness that a person belongs to one religion. However, affiliation in such cases does not denote so much individual belief as it signifies the old traditional affiliation of one’s family (*ie* 家) which is enacted when attending funeral service and festivals of the respective school’s temple. Individuals as such do not know much about the teaching of a school or religion or about the practice of the ceremonies, and most do not even try to learn about it. In reality it becomes a non-affiliation, because except for funerals the participants have no relationship with religion. As it is often said, on New Year’s Day Japanese families visit a Shintō shrine, and during equinox (*higan* 彼岸, the Japanese all-souls festival) they go to the Buddhist temple. Funerals are conducted

12. In modern religious studies this phenomenon is normally called *shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合 (amalgamation of Buddhism and Shintō resp. *kami* 神 worship). This hybridizing process began to flourish during the Heian period (794-1185) by the latest.

13. Such figures can be found in detail in the *Shūkyō nenkan* 宗教年鑑 (yearbook religion) published annually by the *Bunka-chō* 文化庁 (Agency for Cultural Affairs) in Tokyo. For older statistics in English, see *Japanese Religion – A Survey by the Agency for Cultural Affairs*. Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International 1972.

in temples; the ceremonies for a new-born baby and for children at the age of three, five and seven years, as well as weddings, are normally performed in a shrine; one also visits the shrine for prayer and purchasing a talisman after having bought a new car, or before undergoing an examination for entering school or a company – such practices can be seen daily in Japan.

Such patterns are difficult to understand for most of those who are acquainted with the concept of religious affiliation as it was formed in Western Christian societies. Of course, in Japan also religious groups exist emphasizing a clear-cut affiliation. Especially in certain Buddhist schools, such as in the Pure Land lineages (the lineages deriving from Hōnen and Shinran) or in the lineages deriving from Nichiren, we detect a strong consciousness of affiliation. In the new religions which have arisen since the modern period we observe a clear consciousness of affiliation as well. However, viewing Japan as a whole, involvement with religion looks in most cases like “using” religion rather than being committed to religion. To “belong to” a religion in Japan does not mean to share the fate of a religious community; rather, to speak in metaphor, it seems more like the pattern of behavior of a customer who buys a commodity at times when it is necessary. In Western Christian societies, when people belong to a religion resp. denomination (sect), such a group constitutes a community consisting of the production and consumption of “religious goods;” it is one kind of self-sustaining society. For members of such a group it is not necessary anymore to go “shopping” elsewhere. In Japan on the other hand, numerous religions and schools constitute so to speak an open market, where at an opportune time the people buy from a suitable shop. Seen from the perspective of the shop, the customer is important, yet, seen from the perspective of a customer, it is not necessary to have a permanent affiliation with a certain shop. Since religions resp. denominations (groups) are lined up like stores at the market place, the people do not search for constant relationships, but are like customers peeking into the shopping mall when it is handy. So the salesman (the religious official, *shūkyō-ka* 宗教家; the priest, *seishoku-sha* 聖職者) and the buyer (the ordinary people) are divided into two interest groups.

In many religions we find the phenomenon of a division between priest (*seishoku-sha*) and believer (*shinto* 信徒) (secular believer, *zoku-shinto* 俗信徒, or lay believer, *hira-shinto* 平信徒). However, as a rule this is an internal classification among those persons with a clear religious affiliation. For example, since the very beginning of Buddhism its group consisted of celibates (or monks and nuns; *shukke-sha* 出家者, lit. those who left house and family) and householders (*zaike-sha* 在家者).¹⁴ In this case, the celibates and the householders cannot be identified simply with priests and lay people in religions other than Buddhism. Normally in instances of

14. In case of Jōdo shinshū, however, the clerics were not celibate and the ordinary members have a strong affiliation with this group.

religious institutions, people committing themselves completely to religion, as well as people involved in religion while pursuing work in the secular world, constitute the subject of a religion. As we saw before, however, the peculiarity of Japan is the relative absence of such subjects. (As one historical factor for this situation we have to name the system of temple congregations (*danka seido* 檀家制度) established during the Edo period (1603-1868).¹⁵ Here, the celibates had only to administer the family registers and to conduct ceremonies for the dead; in their relationship with the householders they lost the meaning of being celibates, and one can say that their work became one kind of detached profession.)

2. Dialogue between priests

Dialogue between members of religions in Japan was actively pursued after World War II; as mentioned above, such dialogue had its limits, because it was conducted between priests and for priests (*seishoku-sha*; or religious officials, *shūkyō-ka*). Of course, the real situation is that most interreligious dialogues are dialogues among priests. In most religions priests have kept all the believers inside the boundaries of the temple or the religious organization. With changing times, however, the ideas of equivalency (*taitō* 対等) and equality (*byōdō* 平等) have become stronger, and a religion consisting of the unity of lay believers (*shinto*) and priests has come to be more and more emphasized. (For example, recently in the Catholic Church the ecclesiology of the “gathering of believers”¹⁶ had been emphasized.) So interreligious dialogue is also conducted on the level of lay believers today, and mutual understanding, cooperation and conciliation on the level of lay believers are constantly proceeding. Unfortunately, however, if priests and ordinary people are associating according to a relationship of seller and buyer, the meaning of interreligious dialogue changes considerably. In such cases, the priests will aim to confirm their own position, since their motivation to secure their share in the religion is strong. They will try to preserve the common profit among companions. In the society of today, where natural science and technology have progressed and general education has spread, people do not think that religion unquestionably belongs to the necessities of life. Consequently there is no guarantee that they will routinely buy a commodity called religion. The priesthood responds by appealing to the importance of religion, endeavoring to preserve the market for religion (*shūkyō-*

15. The Edo period is also called Tokugawa period. For an English study, see, e.g., Nam-lin Hur, *Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan – Buddhism, Anti-Christianity and the Danka System*. Cambridge (Mass.) & London: Harvard University Asia Center 2007.

16. *Shinto no atsumari* 信徒の集まり. This is the Japanese translation of *communio sanctorum* from the Apostles’ Creed, which permits the interpretation of saints as “(lay) believers.”

ichiba 宗教市場) and then finally looking for some joint pioneering work. But again, simple preservation of the market for religion in an age characterized by “parting from religion” (*shūkyō-banare* 宗教ばなれ, i.e. secularization) becomes for priests (or religious officials) an especially urgent task. By appealing to the importance of the “heart” (or mind, *kokoro* 心) or the significance of mental (emotional; *seishin-teki* 精神的) and spiritual life (*rei-teki seikatsu* 霊的生活), they emphasize the necessity of religion, which implies, in fact, the necessity of the religious officials (the priests). Such a mechanism becomes also an important function of interreligious dialogue. Therefore, dialogue among religions becomes necessary to sustain the existence of priests (religious officials).

However, interreligious dialogue serves not only to preserve the conventional religious market, but is also pioneering in new areas. Through their joint undertakings, priests (religious officials) interpret the news for their “consumers” and have to respond to current events. Of course, today there exists a gap between those who feel the necessity of opening up new markets and those who reject that attitude. However, as a trend, I think that engagement with contemporary issues will become an important area in dialogues among religions from now on. In various areas, such as preservation of the environment, protection of nature, care for the terminally ill, medical ethics, human rights, peace, etc., dialogues among religions are already continuously proceeding. Again, however, whereas these activities manifest interreligious cooperation for society and humankind, one must still admit that the motive of reinforcing the position of religious officials (or the priests) is strong as well.¹⁷

3. A new situation

We should be careful to say that the above discussion involves broad generalizations concerning Japan as a whole. However, while they may not represent the dominant character of Japanese religion, there are also communities of people who have a clear consciousness of their religious affiliation. Particularly in the case of so-called new religions (*shin-shūkyō*) many members possess a strong consciousness of their affiliation. In such religions, generally speaking, their believers have also a strong consciousness of being engaged subjects. Above I have

17. These critical reflections refer mainly to certain Japanese and some other Asian religious groups whose officials instrumentalize interreligious dialogue in order to promote their own organizations. For example, by inviting famous speakers to interreligious and international conferences on topics relevant for religion and society, the organizers use such events as a means of PR inside the group as well as outside, quite often also internationally. Normally, however, a theoretical and practical follow-up of the important issues discussed is missing in spite of the necessity to pursue such problems more thoroughly.

pointed out that dialogue among religions in Japan tends to remain dialogue between priests; yet, the situation is considerably different in new religions (*shin-shūkyō* 新宗教) which have a strong consciousness of affiliation. Many new religions joined the Federation of New Religions (*shin-shūkyō renmei* 新宗教連盟; abbreviated *shinshū-ren* 新宗連), and the youth organizations of these new religions seem to be very active in gatherings and other activities. These religions also present the new historical phenomenon that a division between priests and lay believers did not develop so much. This constitutes a big difference compared to those established religions and schools which present an image of a group consisting only of priests. A new type of priest does appear in the new religions; although viewed according to the conventional concept, it is difficult to call such a new type a priest because it fits only the loose meaning of a priest, i.e. a special profession or occupation.¹⁸ Nevertheless, among such people, the self-awareness of being a non-conventional priest is strong; moreover, many of them eagerly get actively involved in dialogue among religions. As such new religions continue to grow, they will change the religious world of Japan considerably.

4. The problem of State Shintō

Finally, when considering dialogue among religions in Japan we have to treat one more issue, the problem of State Shintō (*kokka shintō* 国家神道) in modern Japan. Traditional Japanese religious life involved a mixture of Buddhism and Shintō (*shinbutsu konkō* 神仏混交) and the co-existence of the various schools of Buddhism; since the end of the Edo period (1603-1868) the so-called new religions also emerged. Over such situation was cast a net from above called State Shintō, which was an invention of the Meiji government (1868-1912). This was in fact a peculiar imitation of the political structure in Western Christian societies. According to the explanation by Itō Hirobumi,¹⁹ religion constituted the axis in Western societies. Since in Japan there was no such religion at the time which could have functioned as axis, the new construct of “State Shintō” centered around the emperor had to play such a role. Religion was here conceived of as power for unifying control. Itō thought that the traditional religions of Japan, Shintō, Buddhism and Confucianism, were absolutely unable to exert such power. And he was completely unconcerned about how under the unifying control of such an axis these religions would coexist. Therefore, at the same time as the system of State Shintō was being brought about,

18. Such phenomenon is found in new religions such as Risshō Kōsei-kai and Sōka Gakkai.

19. Itō Hirobumi (1841-1909), an influential statesman in the Meiji period during which Japan opened up to the West and modernized, was the chief author of Japan's first constitution.

the Constitution contained an article protecting freedom of belief (*shinkyō no jiyū* 信教の自由)! In such a situation it was extremely desirable that religions would engage in dialogue. In 1912, the government invited religious representatives and staged a meeting for interreligious dialogue called the “Assembly of the Three Religions” (*sankyō kaidō* 三教会同).²⁰

When looking back today on such a dialogue between religions, which transcended the differences among religions and schools while aiming at active cooperation with the system of State Shintō, we must say that there is space for much criticism. (However, although the religions’ prewar cooperation with the system of State Shintō in Japan must be criticized, it does not mean that in every case dialogue among religions for the sake of the state should be uniformly criticized. This can be seen today in various regions of the world. Interreligious dialogue in China, for example, is being pursued in the clear consciousness that its aim is the support of the People’s Republic, and in the city-state of Hongkong, interreligious dialogue is being carried on with the consciousness of a community bound together by a special destiny.)

With Japan’s defeat in World War II the system of State Shintō collapsed. Subsequently a new form of spontaneous interreligious dialogue was actively undertaken in Japan. Because the system of State Shintō broke down, all religions and denominations enjoyed freedom of belief in the literal sense, without any limitation. Even though there were a number of groups which pursued activities irresponsibly under such freedom, as a whole the necessity for mutual connections, exchange of information and cooperation was felt in the midst of such huge freedom. Especially members of new religions felt this necessity strongly; soon after the end of the war they established the Federation of New Religions.

Although interreligious dialogue began to flourish after World War II, the system of State Shintō, which was supposed to have collapsed, remained in various traces which caused some distortions in the dialogue. I would like to examine this last issue briefly.

One problem concerned the existence of specific Shintō shrines. Under the system of State Shintō, shrines were institutions of the state and their priests were civil servants of the state. After the collapse of the system of State Shintō, all the shrines were supposed to be separated from the state, but officials of a number of shrines claimed that such an endeavor was impossible. The first of such shrines

20. In the situation after the Russo-Japanese War, the Vice-Minister for Home Affairs initiated this meeting in order to get spiritual and moral support from the religious leaders. (Cf. Notto R. Thelle, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan – From Conflict to Dialogue 1854-1899*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1987: 251 f)

is the Yasukuni Shrine (*yasukuni jinja* 靖国神社).²¹ This shrine was founded by the Meiji government and compared with traditional shrines has been quite a heterogeneous one. Being situated on the apex of the State Shintō System under the presupposition that the Tennō (the emperor) was absolute, the Yasukuni Shrine elevated military figures who had died for the Tennō to hero status, granting them the status of deities (*shinkaku* 神格), and venerating (worshipping, *hōsai* 奉斎) them. By beautification of death in war for the sake of the Tennō, this shrine functioned as support for a militaristic country. In view of the process of its establishment and its basically military character, and because this shrine embodied the system of State Shintō, it must be said that – unlike ordinary Shintō shrines after World War II – Yasukuni Shrine separated from the State would be unable to continue existing. Therefore, as Ishibashi Tanzan²² and others insisted, there were plenty of reasons that this shrine should be dismantled and liquidated. The postwar Yasukuni Shrine tried to appear on the surface as having parted somehow from the system of the state, but various strange things happened when it actually tried to maintain itself as an independent religious corporation (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法人). All the time Yasukuni continued to insist that the deities to be worshipped (*saijin* 祭神) were essentially acknowledged by a state organ and that it was a matter of course that officials of the state would worship (*sanpai* 参拜) there.

The second case concerns the Ise Shrine (*Ise jingū* 伊勢神宮). Unlike the Yasukuni Shrine, this shrine was not constructed by the Meiji government, but had an ancient history of well over a thousand years. Under the system of State Shintō, though, this shrine had become the place of veneration of the ancestors of the Tennō, who had become the apex of the State Shintō; it was especially sanctified and beautified, and its deities to be worshipped (*saijin*) were further believed to be the ancestors of the Japanese people as a whole.²³ After World War II Ise was separated from the state and the worship of the Tennō's ancestors was revised into an understanding that the *saijin* were merely the private ancestors of the Tennō family; however, this issue of public and private was kept ambiguous (*aimai* あいまい).

The problematic of the existence of these special shrines is in fact the problematic of the existence of the Tennō. According to the new Japanese Constitution after the war, the emperor has no political power or authority

21. Lit. shrine for the pacification of the country. The souls of those who have died in war, i.e. prematurely and under terrible circumstances, are feared to become angry and cause trouble to the country or the government. Hence, by venerating them it is believed that they will be pacified and hence do not cause any harm.

22. Ishibashi Tanzan (1884-1973) was journalist and politician; he was member of the Liberal Democratic Party and served as Prime Minister from 1956-1957.

23. According to the nationalist ideology of that time, the Japanese people were one homogeneous race which constituted the body of a huge family with the emperor as its head.

whatsoever; he is supposed to function only as symbol. Nevertheless, notions of his divinity and absoluteness which derive from the era when he was the apex of the system of State Shintō are still alive today in various forms.

Because of such circumstances, dialogue between religions in Japan tends to avoid the fundamental problems of religion and politics in the life of the citizens. General conversation about issues such as justice or peace is possible, however, to pursue dialogue frankly about the situation of Japan in concrete terms is difficult. For example, interreligious dialogue about the discrimination against former outcasts (*buraku* 部落) is quite flourishing;²⁴ yet, in order to avoid the problem of the Tennō in a subtle way, such a dialogue tends to end quickly and politely. In addition, because such conversations will not touch the core of the problem of war responsibility, communications will end only in ambiguity.

My reflections above are rather crude, but I hope that they will introduce the problematic issues of interreligious dialogue in Japan. My wish is that the quality of dialogue about the problematic issues will be substantially improved. There are problems, but I hope that dialogue in various forms will advance.

Translated by Martin Repp

24. This has become possible because the problem of discrimination has been acknowledged by the state and influential parts of the society; the victims now receive financial compensation and the sensitivity of the issue has declined.