

FEATURE:
BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN DIALOGUE

Introduction:
Contributions to Dialogue

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SINCE ITS EARLY DAYS, *The Eastern Buddhist* has been a forum for various kinds of dialogue. It has carried relevant articles by well-known figures such as its founder Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966), Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900–1990), Ueda Shizuteru 上田閑照, Abe Masao 阿部正雄, and many others. It has also been a vehicle for intra-Buddhist dialogue, whether between the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, or in the Japanese context, notably between Suzuki, Nishitani, Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881–1976), and Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875–1971). In fact the very existence of this journal might be regarded as an act of “dialogue” in the broadest sense of the word. The global conversation about Buddhism, especially Mahayana Buddhism, and its place in the wider intellectual and religious culture of the world has been pursued in the pages of *The Eastern Buddhist* for nearly a century since the first issue was published in 1921. Translations and various other scholarly studies have played and continue to play a part in the journal, for without sound knowledge there can be no meaningful exchange of ideas and values. Yet philology is not an end in itself, at least not in these pages; rather, it serves the greater end of intellectual and religious interaction.

The word “dialogue” covers a number of meanings that require reflection. It can, for example, be translated into Japanese both as *taiwa* 対話 and as *mondō* 問答; put the other way round, it is hard to translate these Japanese terms into English without the word “dialogue” coming into play. However, while *taiwa* is used for well-intentioned exchanges between the

representatives of different religious communities, supposedly on an even basis, *mondō* generally refers to exchanges between an authoritative figure and a learner, as for example in the dialogues of Plato or between a Zen master and a disciple. This was pointed out by the editors of the *Myōtei Dialogues* (i.e., *Myōtei mondō* 妙貞問答) in an English translation reviewed in this issue.¹ This work, written by the Christian convert Fukansai Habian 不干齋巴鼻庵 (1565–1621) while fascinating for many reasons (cf. review), is more or less catechetical and apologetical and presents an exchange of views on the basis of a Catholic Christian *parti pris*.

By contrast, dialogue in the sense of *taiwa* is usually understood, at least in its ideal intention, to be an open-ended exchange of information and interpretations, in which the outcome is not a foregone conclusion. In practice however there are very often reserved positions which resurface in various ways, so that apologetics or even missionary commendation may seem to be after all the main objective. However, much depends on the individual participants and on the choice of themes for a particular meeting. Discussions on the nature of personhood or individual destiny might run in one way, but discussions on family ethics or environmental issues might run quite differently.

The global culture of “religious dialogue” has now become so complex that an overview of what takes place, or a summary of simple advisory guidelines from a particular point of view, has become quite impractical. This may be one reason why the series of important documents issued by the Catholic Church in recent decades, beginning with *Ecclesiam suam* (1964) and leading to *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), has come to an end, at least for the time being. These documents have all been presented in a helpful manner in another work reviewed in this issue.² It is probably fair to say that, among the Christian churches, the Catholic Church has the most formal approach to interreligious dialogue. While many Catholics who participate in such dialogue take a most flexible, even liberal approach, this is possible partly because in the background there is always the security of the dogmatic framework which is carefully safeguarded by the Vatican, as is reflected in the style of Kuruvachira’s presentation. Representatives of Protestant churches, on the other hand, may seek an equivalent religious security by projecting firm contours of Biblical theology into the surround-

¹ James Baskind and Richard Bowring, eds., *The Myōtei Dialogues: A Japanese Christian Critique of Native Traditions* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).

² Jose Kuruvachira, *The Philosophical and Theological Aspects of Interreligious Dialogue: A Catholic Perspective* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2015).

ing cultural context. The result is that, being without the ecclesiastical fall-back position of the Catholics, they tend to be less flexible about debatable subjects in the wider field, such as ancestor veneration. If they wish to be flexible anyway, and sit more lightly to “the Bible” as a single dominant reference point, Protestant or Anglican theologians are more likely than Catholics to travel far into pluralism and/or relativism. For a courageous and practical example see Alan Race’s *Interfaith Encounter*,³ though there are many others.

The more liberal positions are nowadays quite widespread, and their very firmness means that they evoke strong reactions from conservative quarters. A reaction of this kind is found in a recent work by Ernest M. Valea (2015), that is also reviewed in this issue.⁴ Valea writes from a Romanian Orthodox point of view. His approach illustrates that a partial readiness to learn from a different religion, in this case Buddhism, can be combined with a deep-seated reserve position that is absolutely non-negotiable. To a Buddhist, this approach might seem to be based on a kind of doctrinal fundamentalism. On the other hand, is such a position very different, in terms of its intellectual structure, from the apparently unassailable, positionless “nothingness” associated with the Kyoto School? It is, moreover, not so different from the congenial approach taken by one of the doyens of Christian-Buddhist dialogue, Heinrich Dumoulin, SJ, as in his *Christianity Meets Buddhism* (1974),⁵ although his work was on the whole adventurous for its time and replete with various insights.

One of the similarities that Dumoulin shares with Valea lies in the pejorative use of the term “syncretism” to indicate a danger which above all is to be avoided (Dumoulin 1974, p. 34), but this term requires further differentiation from mere synthesis. If there is to be any significant interaction, any learning, or any sharing, then the usual dynamics of a syncretistic situation will surely come into play. That is to say, particular elements, such as a form of meditation or a particular concept such as “compassion,” will take on an ambiguous role in the religio-cultural space between two apparently separate religions, such that its significance can be drawn out in varying directions. However, the simplistic use of the term “syncretism” to mark out

³ Alan Race, *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue* (London: SCM Press, 2001).

⁴ Ernest M. Valea, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue as Theological Exchange: An Orthodox Contribution to Comparative Theology* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015).

⁵ Heinrich Dumoulin, S. J., *Christianity Meets Buddhism*, trans. John C. Maraldo (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1974).

danger *per se* to a presumed theological or religious purity is quite misleading. Any interaction between religious systems will entail some movement and exchange of some elements of those systems. Without that there can hardly be any dialogue at all.

Yet, the ever-strengthening globalization of culture in fact leads to more and more dialogue events between religions, and to a greater variety in both the form and the substance of such dialogues, many of which are informal rather than in any way official. The internal debates between those who “do dialogue” are also increasingly complex. The overall pattern is therefore hard to discern. It is like a giant *go*-board on which, despite the passage of much time, the game has only just begun. Some initial positions have been marked, especially in the corners, and a few threads and entanglements are being sketched out; but there is still a long way to go before the connections between various focuses of play will be fully worked out across the board. Meanwhile, new initiatives emerge. The call by Pope Francis for “fraternity” in interreligious relations reaches out to the fertile soil of “engaged” Buddhism. It seems that metaphysics might be giving way to a shared concern for the practical needs of an endangered planet. Doctrinal matters will no doubt re-emerge at other points. At the same time, each religious community that finds itself in dialogue with others has to respond to fundamentalisms within its own ranks. There is a great need for leadership and education, as Kuruvachira points out, if worthwhile paths forward are to be found.

The contributions in the thematic section of this issue of *The Eastern Buddhist*, which all speak for themselves from various viewpoints, make no heady claims to finality or to the resolution of major problems. However, they are a part of our ongoing exploration and help to draw new lines of interaction across the board. The game of *go* is of course competitive, but here the metaphor stops. For in this kind of dialogue there are no winners or losers. Progress is cooperative, and that is what we have sought to illustrate above all in this special feature.