

## CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER WITH MEN OF NON-CHRISTIAN FAITHS IN JAPAN

by Masao Takenaka

The question of Christian encounter with men of non-Christian faiths is not a new question. We see throughout the history of the Christian Church a constant encounter and wrestling tension of Christians with men of non-Christian faiths. Without considering this dynamic aspect of Christian encounter with men of other faiths, church history would become a very static description of the chronological development of the inner life of the Church. Without taking this confrontation adequately into consideration, there would be very little left in the history of Christian mission. So this is not an entirely new problem but an age old problem continuously faced by the Christian Church in history.

### **The Urgency of the Question**

But there are several factors which urgently call our special attention to this subject today.

First of all, due to the rapid development of technology and the resulting transformations, we are increasingly living in one small world. Geographical distance has been annihilated, and we are sharing the common destiny of one world. This does not mean that we have reached one community of peace and order, nor an integrated world civilisation. On the contrary, our world is terribly divided. There are hostile divisions created by political powers, irritating racial separation, and continuing cultural and economic divisions in our world. One of the ironic symbolic factors of this divided-one-world was acutely revealed at the time of the Cuban crisis last fall. Wherever we were living at that time, we shared one fear, the fear of massive destruction by the power which mankind has invented. It is a contradictory fact that we are one by annihilation of distance brought about by technology which is forcing men to unite in sharing one fear of massive destruction.

In this sense, we may say that man's conquest of outer space will not ultimately unite the world unless we come to a deeper penetration and conquest of the inner space of mankind in this divided world.

It is interesting to note that two outstanding scholars on this subject namely Arnold Toynbee and Hendrick Kraemer, despite disagreement on a number of issues, seem to agree on this point. Kraemer writes in the following way :

"Although I take issue with nearly every aspect of Toynbee's idea of religion, I am at one with him on the point that the religious issue is the deepest in the total meeting of Orient and Occident."<sup>1)</sup>

Both Toynbee and Kraemer believe that the important social unification of mankind will be found to lie not in the field of technology, economics, war, or

politics, but in that of religion.

A second factor which causes us to take seriously the question of Christian encounter with men of other faiths is the fact of the growing development of non-Christian religions, both old and new, on the one hand, and the widespread development of secularism throughout the world, especially in the West. In the last three centuries, both in terms of quantitative numbers of people and of qualitative power of civilization, those who were the members of so-called Christendom in the West could maintain their supremacy and leading position in shaping the history of the world.

But today we are living in a world of rapid social change. The political and colonial dominance of the Western nations has come to an end. There are rising affirmations of national self-determination everywhere. The people coming out of the colonial yoke now are trying to engage in the strenuous task of nation-building. These nations badly need the unity and the strength to integrate their people. We must see the resurgence of old religions and the development of new religions in the context of new nationalism. We can understand then the nationalistic ferment of Buddhism in Ceylon, Burma, and Thailand, and again the nationalistic fever of Islam in Pakistan and Indonesia. In Japan there has been a rather astonishing development of new religions stemming out of the old religions and making an appeal in the new situation. For example, Sokagakkai, one of the new religions that came from Nichiren Buddhism, now claims to have a membership of over three million. Sokagakkai literally means, 'Academy of Creative Value.' It seeks to provide a new frame of value system to people who have been uprooted from the traditional norm of living, and who have not found an alternative to living in a vacuum in the traditional value system. It is a very militant sect, and passionately concerned with the social and political issues of changing society, giving rather definite ethical direction and a political programme to the people. In the last election of the House of Counsellors held in July, 1962, the Sokagakkai put up nine candidates all of whom were elected, while the Communist Party could only two of their candidates. Without any assistance from outside sources, they have erected a \$1,400,000 headquarter building, and have sent "missionaries" to Hawaii and the West Coast.<sup>2)</sup>

Thirdly, there is a factor within the Christian Church which has been directing our attention to reconsidering our attitudes towards men of other faiths in recent years. In the last decade not only were a great quantity of books written, but also the level and quality of discussion improved both in the understanding of the nature of other faiths and in terms of the relationship of the Christian with men of other faiths.

#### **Need for New Approach**

In the light of the existence of various different approaches, it is not an easy thing to put them into a neat classification. But in order to see the general picture, I would classify them into four types.

(1) The first position is the most exclusive and rigid position. It firmly

believes that Christians are a chosen people and that others are pagans. God in Christ cannot be compared with other relative gods and values which have a human origin. The difference between the Christian religion and other religions in this approach is considered not in terms of different degrees of attainment in truth, but of entirely different kinds or qualities. It upholds the absolute and exclusive claim of the sovereignty of God, and tends to become polemical adopting an attitude of crusade against the others. We may say, in short '*Christ against other religions*' is the characteristic expression of this first type.

(2) At the other extreme from the first type we find the literal and comparative approach. The stress is not only upon appreciative knowledge of other religions but also upon the common values they share as they aspire to attain to the highest achievement in man's quest for eternity. There are varieties of emphasis again in this approach. In a popular Japanese expression this attitude is reflected in the following way :

"By routes diverse men may the mountain climb,  
Each path presenting different views sublime-But when to the proud summit they  
do rise,

The self-same smiling moon doth greet all eyes."

Both Hocking and Toynbee, whose method of comparative study stresses the common values of the various religions, belong to this type. As an extreme case, we find syncretistic efforts like the Bahai temple outside Chicago. Against this position we must point out that religion is not simply created by the effort of man however noble it may be. If it were so, the criticism of Marx on religion would become very valid. In this comparative position *Christ is identified with the goodness of other religions*, putting them all within the same horizon, thus losing the finality and vitality of the Christian message.

(3) The third type may be called the *fulfilment theory* type. In this view other religions are regarded as the preparation for the final truth revealed in Jesus Christ. An often quoted passage here is, "I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matt. 5 : 17). It acknowledges that there is a real yearning for God in other religions and believes that this yearning is met by Jesus Christ. Paul's assertion of man's aspirations and longings for God, as stated in his speech on the Areopagus, is also often cited in support of this position. A. C. Bouquet similarly interprets illustration of the logos doctrine which found its fulfilment in the Christian faith, especially in the Johannine writings.<sup>4</sup> This approach has a certain meaning in recognizing the fact that there is a universal aspiration and yearning toward the truth and ultimate existence. But this does not indicate, as some of the exponents of the theory of fulfilment consider, that the fulfilment is a straight extension of the prepared line of elevation. There must be a radical departure from the old way in order to have renewal in Christ. Repentance and confession are indispensable in accepting the revelation event in Jesus Christ.

(4) This leads to the fourth position, namely, the dialectical approach. It is usually called the *position of discontinuity*. It stresses the radical discontinuity

between the Gospel and other religions. The former is based on God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the latter are regarded as man's effort to believe. Kraemer writes, "Hence the reason why thinking which is centered on Jesus Christ is bound to insist on such a radical line of distinction between religion and revelation. The character of revelation being what it is, it cannot be subsumed under a general concept of religion. Revelation is God acting and speaking. That is not religion and never could be, for religion signifies the various ways which men have of believing together with their consequent activities."<sup>5</sup>) Kraemer has written a number of books on this subject and although we see an increasingly open attitude toward other religions, the fundamental point of his assertion does not change, namely, that religion is man's response to God's action on man's behalf. The only way of knowing God is through his self revelation in Jesus Christ. There is no other way for man to accept the revelation except through radical repentance. The approach is dialectical and in practice often contains a tone of judgement in presenting a sharp discontinuity between religions and revelation.

Probably the critical question is not how you can deal successfully with the issue of Christian encounter with non-Christian religion based on the theory of discontinuity and sharp distinction, but rather, in the light of the revelation in Jesus Christ, what is our attitude toward men of other faiths? It is the question of the relation of the particularity revealed in the revelatory event of Jesus Christ to the universality affirmed in providential grace in the light of the Lordship of Christ over all people and every realm of life. The effort to construct the position of particularity through the universal ground should not be accepted, since it represents the effort to attain infinite truth by finite men. In this sense the emphasis on repentance and humility has a valid meaning. But we must consider the universal operation and presence of grace in the light of the particular event of Jesus Christ. Here lies, it seems to me, a clue to the new approach. The need for the new approach has been expressed in various Asian churches as reflected in the report of the consultation on "The Word of God and the Renascent Religions in Asia", which was sponsored by the World Council of Churches in cooperation with the East Asia Christian Conference in Nagpur in March, 61.

"It has become evident that a fresh attempt at a theological restatement of the relation of the Gospel to the living faiths should not remain entangled in theoretical alternatives such as continuity and discontinuity or general and special revelation."<sup>6</sup>)

### **The Basic Attitudes of Encounter**

In our confrontation with men of non-Christian faiths, our purpose is not to reach our purpose or a synthesis syncretistic position, nor merely to draw the line discontinuity, nor to involve ourselves in the objective comparison of various religions. Our basic question is, in the light of the revelatory event of Jesus Christ, how do you grasp the universal grace operating among men including men of non-

Christian faiths? Here let me indicate three factors which are important elements in formulating such an attitude.

### 1) *Ecumenical Attitude*

We must recognize that there is an immense gap existing between the encounter among Christians who belong to different churches, *and* the encounter among people who belong to different religious traditions. The latter do not necessarily come to find common ground so easily, while the former acknowledge a common loyalty and allegiance. One of the important ecumenical virtues is the virtue of openness, the openness not only to one another, but essentially it is the openness to God's will and God's gift. In stating the nature of the unity we seek, the New Delhi Assembly Report stated that "Unity is both God's will and his gift to his church."<sup>7</sup> This means that we do not attain unity by human effort, but we seek for unity and accept it as His gift. Unity should not be the fruit of that compromise in giving up the ground of what a man believes ultimately. But also it is true that unity may not be attained until man recognizes it as gift and accepts it by renewing his mind to receive the gift which is beyond his anticipation.

We humbly acknowledge the difference between our partial interpretation of the Revelatory Event in Jesus Christ and the existence of the ultimate power which revealed Himself fully in Jesus Christ. In respecting others' interpretation in an open confrontation and encounter, we seek to manifest a fuller and deeper understanding of God's will and His act today.

I believe this attitude of dialogue and encounter can be extended from the realm of encounter among Christians to the realm of Christian encounter with men of other faiths. There are at least three important common factors which will make such dialogue possible and fruitful.

First of all, there should be a genuine openness to one another's position. The attitude is not the attitude of crusade but of respect for the positions of the participants in the dialogue. Unless we take this attitude seriously how can we have make a claim to religious liberty in the light of Christian faith? Christians often offended men of other faiths by their Crusading attitude without adequate understanding or respect for men of other faiths. Secondly, this does not imply support for the attitude of comparative religion or the attitude of syncretism. Real dialogue will not take place unless the participants respect one another's point of view, and also express what they really believe without any hesitation. This is more than granting the ground of coexistence of various religions. Real conversation involves the honest exposure of what one accepts as ultimate truth. It may include a challenging witness, pointing out the concrete way in which the truth was revealed to him. It may cause a stimulating tension, yet not end with exclusive crusading. While constantly opening his mind, and letting others speak what they believe and listening with respect, he does not hesitate to clarify what he is given in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, such dialogue also includes an element of self-criticism and self-transformation. In meeting with the other, one often sees himself both critically and

appreciatively. This does not mean borrowing some good elements from what the other has and making them one's own, nor does it indicate an effort to produce in a syncretistic form a better religion out of the encounter. Such an attempt would lead to a disastrous effect. Just as unity is not the product of compromise or the outcome of human effort, the dialogue and encounter of Christians with men of other faiths should not lead to artificial formulations of syncretistic religion. The openness required in dialogue is not primarily the openness to one another, horizontal openness, but the vertical openness, openness to the judging and transforming power of God. This means that in the course of dialogue with men of other faiths, being stimulated and challenged by what the other represents, one comes to grasp the deeper and fuller understanding of what has been given to him, but which he has not yet comprehended. There is a distinction between taking another's possession in order to make oneself rich, and discovering gifts which have already been given but remained hidden, I can give an example here. In confronting the rich spiritual heritage of Japanese life, Buddhism since coming to Japan has been transformed from Hinayana Buddhism to Mahayana Buddhism. For the primitive Buddhist, nature is something to be transcended in order to attain enlightenment. But a positive appreciation of nature took place in the course of the development of Mahayana Buddhism in Japan. It became related to the sensitivity of the Japanese people who live in close kinship with nature. In the course of Western history, especially along with the development of technology, nature is regarded as something to be conquered by reason. Man's domination over nature was stressed rather than man's taking nature as a companion on the earth. In this sense, in the course of the dialogue with non-Christians in Japan, Japanese theologians are forced to confront the deeper understanding of nature in the light of the Biblical message.

A section of the report of the Faith and Order Study Committee in Kyoto, Japan, states the issue in the following way :

"In Western civilization nature is something to be conquered by reason. But this attitude toward nature is foreign to the Japanese. Therefore, Japanese Christianity must develop a unique theology of nature in order to make itself more acceptable to the Japanese. It is not difficult to find Biblical support for such a theology. In the Bible nature stands in solidarity with man. It was created together with man. (Gen. 1) It was cursed by God, sharing with man the result of his disobedience (Gen. 2). It waits with eager longing for the revealing of the Sons of God. (Rom. 8 : 18). It will participate with man in the New Creation at the end of history. (Rev. 21 : 1). To develop a theology of nature is quite different from developing a natural theology."

(The Kyoto Local Faith and Order Study Group, *Report on Three Major Problems of the Japanese Church*, January, 1963, p. 40).

## 2) *Attitude Toward Men*

Encounter is a meeting. What is the component of such a meeting, of the Christian encounter with men of other faiths? D.T. Niles reminds us that the Christian component of encounter is the Gospel, not Christianity or even the

Christian Church. It is the power of the Christ which meets with men of other faiths.

“All this means that the discussion is not about the relation between the religion, or the religious life, of Christians and that of those who are not Christians; nor is it about the relation between the religious beliefs of Christians and the beliefs of those who are not Christians; rather, it is about the operation of the Gospel itself among those who are Christians and among those who are not.”<sup>8)</sup>

The non-Christian component of encounter should be clarified. Our major focusing point is not a religious system or a religious institution, but *men* as they are placed in this earthly life, and as they face joy and suffering in this world, and as they try to overcome the power of estrangement and death. Here we stand as fellow companions in the earthly pilgrimage to enter into a conversation on the reason of the hope that we have in Christ. The message of the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi in 1961 expressed this concern in the following way :

“When we speak to men as Christians, we must speak the truth of our faith : that there is only one way to the Father, namely, Jesus Christ his Son. On that one way we are bound to meet our brother Christians. We meet also brother man and before we speak to him of Christ, Christ has already sought him.”<sup>9)</sup>

This statement, although still very general since it was a part of the pastoral letter addressed to the member churches, was not written on the ground of idealistic theological optimism with a good intention of discerning the goodness among all religious teachings and practices. But it was written on the basic affirmation of the Lordship of Christ over the world. Through the acceptance of the particularity in Jesus Christ, in the light of the Biblical Revelation, we are now coming to see its ultimate meaning of universality in this one world today. A much debated and revised statement in the section on witness, which indicated the attitude of Christian encounter with men of other faiths, also started with the basic affirmation of the Lordship of Christ.

“Above all else, the Spirit stirs up the Church to proclaim Christ as Lord and Saviour to all spheres of life. The Church is sent, knowing that God has not left himself without witness even among men who do not yet know Christ, and knowing also that the reconciliation wrought through Christ embraces all creation and the whole of mankind. We are aware that this great truth has deep implications when we go out to meet men of other faiths. But there are differences of opinion among us when we attempt to define the relation and response of such men to the activity of God amongst them.”<sup>10)</sup>

As the latter part of the quoted sentence indicates, there was a heated discussion in the Assembly on the question of the work of God among men of other faiths. If we affirm Jesus Christ as not only the Lord of ourselves and or the Church, but also as the Lord of the universe, it puts a new light on the reflection

of his work among men of other faiths. In the light of this cosmic lordship, we regard all humanity, including men of other faiths, as created according to his image, and they are the object of the costly love of Christ whose cross stands also for them. Christ died and has risen for all humanity. This indicates that the dialogue between Christians and men of other faiths can fruitfully take place only in the consciousness of the New Humanity which has been inaugurated in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The point is stated in the report of the Asian Regional Conference of Life and Mission of the Church, sponsored by the World Student Christian Federation in Bangalore, December, 1961.

“In accepting our new humanity in Jesus Christ, who is not only our Lord, but Lord and Redeemer of all men, we accept our solidarity with all men. Our approach to men of other faiths, and even to men of no faith, is not one of superiority, but rather that of forgiven sinners.”<sup>11</sup>

This indicates on our part the readiness to discern the judging and redeeming power of God among men with whom we meet, and a constant effort to enter into conversation by pointing out the power of the Gospel, as a partner in the life of pilgrimage.

### 3) *Attitude of Life Together*

When the churches of Asia gathered in the capital city of a newly independent nation, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, for the formation of the regional fellowship, the East Asia Christian Conference, in facing the trend of rapid social changes, they acknowledged two temptations: the one syncretism, and the other ghettoism. We should continuously remind ourselves of the danger of syncretism, which is the effort to adapt ourselves to social and cultural values by sacrificing and compromising of the fundamental power existing in the Christian Gospel. In this sense we are a bit sensitive about using the term ‘identification’, which is a dangerous word. Identification tends to put the Gospel in a relative position, although on the same level. Rather, we prefer to use the term ‘Christian involvement’ or ‘presence’ among men of other faiths or of no faith. We cannot identify our perspective in Christian faith with the position of the labor union movement, or with the system of non-Christian religions, but we should encourage the making of a Christian presence among atheistic people and among men of other faiths.

Churches in Asia by and large in the past have tended to fall into the danger of ghettoism more than into the danger of syncretism. There is a constant temptation for a small minority to enclose themselves in a pure and neat religious shell without regarding this world as the arena and the stage of God’s drama of redemption. Kraemer, while making continuous proclamation of the power of the Gospel, increasingly speaks about the need for genuine communication and openness.

“A church (in this case the younger churches) which neglects the challenge to seek, on the highest intellectual and spiritual level, genuine communication in word and in



writing with the intellectual and spiritual spokesmen of the age-old, deep-rooted religious civilizations of Japan and India, for instance, condemns itself in the long run to become-in the entire social body-a ghetto, a blind alley."<sup>12)</sup>

This self-criticism of the ghetto mentality within the Asian churches was strongly stated at Kuala Lumpur, and more positively the attitude of involvement and presence was expressed in the conference message.

"Searching new questions are forced upon every man. What is man? For what has he been brought into this world? What can he rightly hope for, and how can he attain it? The only sufficient answer to these questions is in our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself the way, the truth and the life. But we, His ambassadors, cannot give that answer unless we stand where men stand. Lace their questions with them, and enter into real conversation with them."<sup>13)</sup>

In this process of rapid social change, Christians and non-Christians equally share the same problems as a member of the trade union, managerial association, political party, or the faculty in the changing university community. Non-Christian friends are keenly interested in the concrete way that Christians make their secular presence and participation in worldly affairs. Particularly in this secularized period in which increasing numbers of people especially young intellectuals in Asia, are not making definite religious commitments. They are skeptical, if not in revolt against the traditional religions, and the religions are at least partially taken as the social customs and the accepted national way of life. There is an inner vacuum in the minds of men and women. There is a searching for the ultimate meaning and end of life and the hope to live in the struggle of life without losing the outlook of humanity. Here I believe the real dialogue takes place, not in an attitude of isolated proclamation, but in the process of mutually sharing the burden and suffering together with an attitude of solidarity and servanthood.

Kraemer also places rather strong emphasis on encounter through service in his recent book, *Why Christianity of All Religions?* :

"In that respect they are sitting . . . in the same boat, even if in the end each religion has its own way of approaching these problems and finds itself on a different plane of encounter from those in the nest . . . one of the most fruitful forms of genuine communication between the religions would be if we were to steep ourselves in one another's problems and be ready to serve one another in word and deed."<sup>14)</sup>

I could testify to this through our personal involvement in service among men in industrial society in Japan. In Kyoto, the traditional ancient capital city of Japan, there is a special industrial section called Nishijin where about 20,000 working people, half of them young women, are engaged in elaborate handwoven work. The industry is about two-hundred and fifty years old and the working conditions are not very favorable, with long hours of work and rather low wages.

There is a small minority in a militant Union with a membership of approximately 800 under Communist leadership. Once the governor of Kyoto said that there are three areas in Kyoto which we can not easily touch, one is Gion (The Geisha House area), the second is Honganji (the Buddhist Headquarters) and the third, Nishijin. The difficulty with Nishijin is the wide gap between a conservative, small-scale management and a small number in a militant and radical union, while the majority of the working people are both indifferent and unorganized. Several years ago a small number of interdenominational Christians started a voluntary cultural and educational program among the working people in a spirit of solidarity and service. Due to the lack of an adequate meeting place in the community, we asked one of the older Buddhist temples called Enmado for the use of their building for a three-months' labor school from September to December 1960. A priest of the temple responded gladly, saying, "This temple exists for the people of Nishijin." In the labor school we discussed chiefly three things: a) the problem of industrial relations which the workers face every day; it is important for the working people to know the labor standard law and the history of labor union movements in order not to repeat the same mistakes; b) the subject of cultural and social enlightenment to widen the perspective of working people so that they will regard the problems they face in Nishijin in the light of what is happening in the world today; c) and finally, the ethical and moral problem of man, often coming from the analysis of everyday subjects in newspapers, TV drama, popular movies and current novels, and leading toward the question of the essential ethical problems each one faces today in old, yet changing Nishijin. In such a process of involvement, communication between the people was established both in and after the class, often leading to spontaneous conversations on the reason for one's hope.

I remember one of the cold nights at the end of November in 1960 when Hendrik Kraemer and a group of friends from East Asia attended the Nishijin Labor School. After the session Kraemer made the remark, "This was the first time in Japan that ordinary people could be seen discussing ordinary problems with extraordinary interest with a Christian professor in a Buddhist temple!"

We are all in the midst of rapid social change, sharing a common social destiny as well as a common struggle for the improvement of our life. The late Dr. Paul Devanandan, former director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore, India, stated in his address at the New Delhi Assembly:

"We are all involved in a common social crisis, tied together by a community of interests; our common humanity serves as a common denominator; and on the frontiers of renascent faiths, doctrinal barriers no longer foreclose religious commerce."<sup>15</sup>

Here, I believe, the Christian encounter takes the form of Christian participation and presence as a joint partner in service to common humanity. To be sure, our service is very fragmental, and far from completion. But it is a part of

our total response to the ultimate service which Christ performed for the redemption of lost humanity. In this sense our service is a humble effort to point out the unfolding and continuous drama of redemption to the whole of humanity. We do not need to go out with a fear of an unknown world since He is there before us inviting us to participate in his reconciling ministry by saying, "Come and Follow Me!"

- 1) Hendrik Kraemer, *World Culture and World Religions*, 1960.
- 2) Raymond Hammer, *Japan's Religious Ferment*, 1962.
- 3) Werner Kohler, *Die Lotus-Lehre und die modernen Religionen in Japan*, 1962.
- 4) A. C. Bouquet, *The Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions*, 1958; also, Nathan Soderblom, *A Scandinavian Scholar on the History of Religion*, belongs to this type.
- 5) Hendrik Kraemer, *Why Christianity of All Religions?*, 1962, p. 77.
- 6) *Church and Society*, the half-yearly publication of EACC, No. 5, March, 1962, p. 44.
- 7) *New Delhi Speaks*, p. 55.
- 8) D. T. Niles, *Upon the Earth*, p. 233.
- 9) *New Delhi Report*, p. 321.
- 10) *New Delhi Report*, p. 81.
- 11) *Church and Society*, No. 5, March 1962, pp. 52-53.
- 12) Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, pp. 412-3.
- 13) Witnesses Together, Inaugural Assembly of East Asia Christian Conference, May, 1959, v-vi.
- 14) Hendrik Kraemer, *Why Christianity of All Religions?*, p. 123.
- 15) *Ecumenical Review*, Vol. XIV, p. 161.