

JAN VAN BRAGT (1928–2007)

THE MAN AND HIS THOUGHT



James W. Heisig

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

The following lecture by a longtime colleague and close personal friend of Jan Van Bragt offers an overview of the history and accomplishments of the first director of the Nanzan Institute. It was delivered originally in Japanese as part of the celebrations of the Institute's fiftieth anniversary.

THE CHOICE of the title of today's talk, "Jan Van Bragt: The Man and His Thought," was mine, but the deeper I entered into the story of his life, the more I realized that "and" is not quite the right word because of how singularly his person and thought defined each other. I will have more to say of this later. For now, let me simply confess that I am humbled by the task of addressing you here today.

Overview

Born in 1928 in the city of Brugge in West Flanders, Jan joined the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM), the national Catholic missionary order of his native Belgium, at nineteen and was ordained in 1952 at the tender age of twenty-four. He took his PhD at Leuven while he was teaching philosophy at the seminary. In 1961, PhD in hand, set sail for Japan.

After eighteen months of studying Japanese and another eighteen working in a parish, he went to study at Kyoto University, where he spent six years under the tutelage of Takeuchi Yoshinori in Buddhist philosophy and in the Kyoto tradition stemming from Nishida Kitarō. In 1971, he was named provincial and had to leave Kyoto unexpectedly. He was crestfallen, but he followed the wishes of his community. How do I know this? He never said anything to me about it, but there is something that happened during his appointment that suggests it. Please let me digress a bit.

After the Vatican Council, Giuseppe Pittau, the Chancellor of Sophia University, was approached by the Vatican about initiating an Institute for Interreligious Dialogue. In 1967, he established the 東洋宗教研究所, with the celebrated historian of Zen, Heinrich Dumoulin, as its first director until his retirement in 1976. A few short years later Johannes Hirschmeier was named President of Nanzan University. He was a close personal friend of Pittau and the two talked often and leaned on one another for advice.

The 1970s were a period when Catholic universities around the world were trying to redefine the place of Catholicism in an open and liberal education. It was no different in Japan, and one of Hirschmeier's first acts as President in 1971, after calling for a revision religious education on campus, was to set up a committee to examine the possibility of founding an institute on interreligious religious dialogue similar to Sophia's. In no time, his plans had expanded from a simple in-house departmental center to a full-fledged, international center with its own building. His goal was a simple one: "to erect bridges across the divisions that cripple and impoverish the great religions of the world."

For this, he needed to build a community of scholars willing to devote themselves full-time to the task. Just how to do this was unclear, let alone how to finance it. Clearly it was beyond the means of the Society of the Divine Word, the founders of the University, and the Nanzan School Corporation. There were no precedents in Nanzan or in Japan for that matter, so he called on a range of people from around the world for advice. I was one of them, at the time a young teacher of philosophy and religion who taught at graduate schools in Chicago and Mexico City and more than a little ignorant about Japan. Meantime, he circulated among the business community in Nagoya and made contact with foundations in Europe to secure funding for the project.

As plans took shape, he began to search in earnest for the director who shared his dream, had the necessary academic background to take it on, and the personality to bring together a true community of scholars. It would also have to be someone who was not committed to other scholarly or institutional demands that would inhibit heart-and-soul attention to the task. During the planning and fundraising stages, Dr. Dumoulin agreed to be named first director, but as he told me later, it was understood that he would not actually move to Nagoya and take on the task at his advanced age. But he was eager to see the project succeed and thought long and hard about who would be the right person. Then one morning, while he was shaving he suddenly saw the face of Jan Van Bragt in the mirror and he knew at once that this would be the right choice. As I heard later from president Hirschmeier, Bragt jumped at the chance didn't give a second thought to interrupting his term as provincial of the order. The CICM graciously, and selflessly, agreed.

By 1976 he was settled into his office, the three-story building that had been completed the year before. It was nestled in the northeast corner of the campus but was not formally a part of the university. To the faculties of theology and philosophy, the idea of a higher institute seemed hasty. After all, there was no graduate program in theology and philosophy out of which one might have expected such an establishment to emerge. It seemed like beginning a building with the roof before the foundations had been laid. But with the cooperation of Father Albert Bold, the current chairman of the Board of Regents of the Nanzan School Corporation, it was welcomed as an independent entity, whose finance and management were directly under the control of the Board of Regents. Sufficient funds had been gathered to pay for the salaries of the small staff of office workers, three full-time fellows, and scholarships for two postdoctoral researchers.

Shortly after the Institute was officially opened, plans were made for the construction of the Paulus Heim, a family-style living quarters for Institute members and visiting scholars. Jan was to live there for eighteen years.

When I joined the staff in September of 1978, I became the fourth permanent fellow after Jan Swyngedouw, who had just finished his doctoral studies at Tokyo University. Nagakura Hisako, newly arrived back in Japan with her PhD from Strasbourg had joined the year before. I was surprised at how many projects were already underway and by the number of scholars who visited us for colloquia and workshops at the Institute. None of the team were established scholars, but somehow the very idea of a forum for dialogue among philosophies and religions East and West had an instant appeal. No one really knew how such dialogue was supposed to take place in the concrete. It was top to toe an experiment. We were actors in a play without a script, without even a plot, driven only by a vague idea and the set of very abstract ideals about what it means to be open to other traditions and to create a space for free and committed thinking. As a young man I found it a dream coming true.

Jan was like an older brother, taking care of countless details so that the rest of us could stumble our way forward. But it was also he who laid the foundations for some of our proudest adventures. I'm tempted to tell you everything that was going on, but the pace was dizzying and the opportunities were opening up on every side. Let me just mention a few of the major dialogue initiatives that Jan himself had taken and in which we all took part in in addition to our own initiatives.

- Bimonthly dialogues with the editorial committee of the Pure Land Buddhist journal 『願海』 (1976–1989).
- Monthly seminars with Takeuchi Yoshinori (1976–1989).
- Cosponsoring member of CORMOS (Conference on Religion in Modern Society) (1976–present).

- The establishment of EGSID (Ecumenical Group for the Study of Interreligious Dialogue) in 1977, bringing together representatives of scholarly institutes and centers from around Japan. The meetings were held semi-annually for thirty years.
- Biannual interreligious symposia were begun and subsequently published with mainline Japanese publishing houses. The first volume 『宗教的体验と言葉』 appeared in 1978. The following symposium brought together leading figures of Kyoto School philosophy including Nishitani Keiji, Ueda Shizuteru, Takeuchi Yoshinori, and Mutai Kazuo on the theme. The results were published in 1981 as 『絶対無と神』. All together, he organized and published ten such symposia.
- In 1979 he began the “East-West Spiritual Exchange,” which brought monastics from Japan to European monasteries and vice-versa. The exchange continued for several years among a small group of collaborating monasteries, and continues today in Europe as the “Alliance for International Monasticism.” Although Buddhist participation has since dwindled, the Alliance continues and publishes its own journal.
- Also in 1979 he took over Takeuchi Yoshinori’s courses in Philosophy of Religion at the Sôtô Zen Aichi Gakuin University. He would later lecture in the Numata Chair at Harvard, in the University of Leuven, and at the Shin Buddhist Dôhō University in Nagoya, among others.
- In 1982 Nanzan became the head office for the 東西宗教交流学会, a group of philosophers and religious scholars who met annually and inaugurated an academic journal to publish their papers and discussions. The association continues to this day.
- In 1976, members of the Institute were dispatched to Himeji, Kyoto, Taipei, and Nagoya to run seminars on interreligious dialogue.
- Periodic colloquia with visiting scholars. In the first years, these included such celebrated figures as James Beckford, Nishitani Keiji, Fritz Buri, Wm. Theodore deBary, Etienne LaMotte, Bryan Wilson, Thomas Berry, Bayne Harris, Alfred Bloom, Heinrich Rombach, Yanagawa Keiichi, Nara Yasuaki, Inugai Masukazu, and Hans Küng, to mention just a few of the names.

As I said, none of us was prepared for the response to the forum we had opened for philosophies and religious dialogue. It was an idea—or perhaps better, a hope—whose time had come. I remember writing to my parents that I sometime felt as if I could toss seeds out the window with my feet kicked up on the desk, and the next day gather in the harvest.

The flurry of activity did not escape the attention of the University, and in 1981 we were invited to become a formal part of the University. Besides a mini-

mal teaching load, we were exempt from departmental meetings and allowed to work with a great deal of independence. It was a welcome blessing, one which gave us financial and institutional stability for the future. At that time efforts were underway to establish a graduate school in religious studies as a formal pontifical institute. To the surprise of everyone, the Vatican conditioned their approval on the agreement of the Institute to offer courses on interreligious themes in the new faculty. Jan was the first of us to take up the challenge, which eventually led to his little book on the theology of religions.

Jan the Thinker

A listing of Jan's academic writings in Japanese and European languages was prepared for the two-volume selection of essays published after his death.¹ Together they show the breath of his learning and an uncommon ability to get to the heart of the matter. In preparing this talk I dipped here and there into his texts and always came up with new ideas and the discovery of things I had not noticed before.

But one achievement has gained more notoriety, so much so that it is hard not to hear Jan's name and not think of his collaboration with Nishitani Keiji on the translation of his classic work, *What is Religion?* The project took shape when he was living in Kyoto and was completed only shortly before his move to Nanzan. Initial attempts to have it published were not successful. Nishitani was unknown and the content was outside the mainstreams of philosophy and theology. As a way to prepare the way for the publication of the book, he thought it might be a good idea to translate a recent *Habilitationsschrift* by Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nichts*, which tried to draw Nishitani's thought into dialogue with theology. He asked me if I would be willing to do it and I jumped at the chance. Within a few months, I had a completed manuscript, but we had no idea where to publish it. Jan suggested I go to New York and contact publishers in person there to see what might be done. Within a couple of weeks I was knocking on the door of Paulist Press and speaking to its editor, Richard Payne. He was immediately taken by a project he had in mind. In 1978, he had started a series of books called "Classics of Western Spirituality," which would eventually grow to more than 125 volumes. Already, he was thinking of a classics of Eastern spirituality and was taken by Nishitani's approach—or at least my presentation of it. He offered us a contract and the book was published in

1. *Interreligious Affinities: Encounters with the Kyoto School and the Religions of Japan*, ed. by James W. Heisig and Kim Seung Chul, reprint (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2014; reprint by Chisokudō Publications, 2023); *Shūkyō kan taiwa ni michibikarete: Kyōto gakuha, Bukkyō, Kirisutokyō* 宗教間対話に導かれて—京都学派・仏教・キリスト教, ed. by Kim Seung Chul 金承哲 and Terao Kazuyoshi 寺尾寿芳 (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2014; reprint by Chisokudō Publications, 2023).

1980.² And two years later, Jan's English translation of Nishitani's book appeared as *Religion and Nothingness*. But that is another story all its own.

One and off, for nearly 16 years, Jan labored over the translation. He began in 1966 and finished a final draft 1969, always in close contact with Nishitani himself, who even saw fit to make adjustments as a result of Jan's questioning. After the initial failure to find a publisher, it was decided to serialize it in the pages of *The Eastern Buddhist*, where it attracted the attention of Justus Lawler, Tom Altizer, and others. But when a publisher still could not be found, he asked me if I would be willing to go through the text and loosen up flow of the English. Having read Waldenfels' work, I set at the task confidently, but I soon realized how much I still had to learn. I spent my days pounding away at the typewriter in search of a middle ground between the Japanese original and Jan's rendition. But like Penelope at her loom, what I wove by way ended up unraveled at night. Every day after supper, for months on end, we would sit at the dining room table for an hour or two going over my improvements, many of which were simple misreadings of the text. I count those hours one of the greatest blessings of my philosophical education. He would get excited when I had caught Nishitani's sense with just the right phrasing, but most of the time he would shake his head and point out where I had gotten it wrong.

When the work was done, the prospects of publishing brightened. In fact, we had several publishers interested. Nishitani himself selected the University of California Press and chose to steer clear of any sectarian religious presses. The work was almost an immediate success and soon talk of the "Kyoto School" of philosophy could be heard around Western academia. Older translations of the writings by philosophers associated with the School were revived and new ones followed from the Nanzan Institute and elsewhere. But it was Jan's translation that was the greatest stimulus and the best selling of all Kyoto School translations.³ The first and strongest waves of enthusiasm were from Christian theologians, not philosophers. As more of Nishitani's thought came to be known, the theological audience did not dwindle but was eventually overtaken by its impact on philosophy.

I should like briefly to mention a second long-term project. During his time at Nanzan and after, he read Pure Land texts and grew increasingly interested in the writings of the controversial Pure Land thinker Soga Ryōjin. His tinkering with the unconventional through comparisons with Christian theology and his firm commitment to put Buddhist doctrine at the service of the religious life and not the other way around, attracted Jan. Each night he would retire to his room and pour through Soga's collected works, translating passages he found interesting. After his

2. Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness* (Paulist Press, 1980).

3. Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. by Jan Van Bragt (University of California Press, 1982).

retirement in 1996, he continued to work on the translations. I gathered up these translations from his computer, which the CICM sent me after his death. They were edited and published in a 580-page book in 2017.⁴

Jan died on 12 April 2007 at the age of seventy-eight. His funeral was held in the city of Himeji at the Provincial headquarters of the CICM. He was laid out in his casket appropriately with a crucifix, a book of crossword puzzles, and a pack of cigarettes laid across his chest. The simplicity of it all for a man with whom I had shared so many years in the world of words, and books, and ideas, was striking.

On a personal note, I consider Jan to be the most important mentor in my life. From the very beginning, he strongly encouraged me to wrestle with Japanese philosophy. Whenever I had doubts or felt stuck, I would knock on his door and engage in discussions with him. I placed complete trust in his advice and continued reading the literature he selected for several years. Eventually, I gained the confidence to choose Japanese philosophy texts on my own and to carve out my own path amid the vast collection of materials stored in the institute's library.

Jan the Man

Jan Swyngedow, our colleague at the Institute from its founding for nearly twenty years had this to say of Jan's life: "He kept everything was in remarkable harmony. This harmony seems to me what defined him; it was the most basic thing about his personality."⁵ Indeed, but his was not a static harmony. Like the Greek goddess Harmonia, who was a child of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and Ares, the god of strife, Jan's life was not a well-ordered routine but a constant struggle with disorder. It was a harmony in the making whose language was one of a constant back-and-forth, a *dia-logos* grounded in the hope for kindness amidst the unfamiliarities, the misunderstandings, the inhumanities, and the cruelties that keep the plurality of cultures and religions and philosophies mired in disharmony and divisiveness.

In my view, looking back, his life was an embodiment of the subtitle to Gandhi's autobiography: "The Story of My Experiments with Truth." By this, I do not mean that he strove to apply a set of clear and unshakable principles to concrete problems. Quite the opposite, I see him as man who experimented by refusing to allow established certitudes—including those of religious dogma—to suppress constant doubt, questioning, and groping for new ways of thinking and behaving.

I recall one particular discussion in 1987 we had at our home after supper with Ivan Illich and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, both of whom happened to be staying with us at the same time and both of whom had labored tirelessly in the effort to draw

4. *A Soga Ryōjin Reader*, ed. by Wamae Muriyuki (Chisokudō Publications, 2017).

5. 「ヤン・ヴァン・ブラフト元所長を偲んで(一九二八～二〇〇七)」『南山宗教文化研究所所報』17 (2007): 63.

social and religious beliefs away from the unassailable, assuredness of their right to impose one mode of thought over others. That night, as I saw those two intellectual giants discuss the importance of faith in the assault on certitude, I understood better than ever why Jan considered someone like Nishitani the epitome of dialogue, namely, because he always kept his Buddhist convictions and practice at the service of a higher function of religion: to seek meaning in the meaninglessness of life. In Jan's own words, "Nishitani himself is responsible for that orientation of my interest and, I could add, of my very life."⁶ Like Nishitani, he felt that organized religion had failed to recognize that it had lost sight of its higher purpose in the course of honing its identity and defending the language of its self-understanding against opposing points of view.

One might well say there was a mystical element at work in his reflections on the doctrinal tradition: an awareness of mystery that is beyond our words and absent to reason, and yet somehow present between the lines, smiling at our poor attempts to understand. Despite his great interest in the mystical tradition, there are few direct allusions to mystical authors in his own writings. That said, it is no mere coincidence that some of his clearest reflections on religion appear in a work he co-authored with Paul Mommaers on the fourteenth-century Flemish mystic Jan Van Ruusbroec.⁷

As for a theological explanation of his distrust of certitude, I would point to his reflections on a symposium we organized in 1990 on "Salvation and Enlightenment" in Pure Land Buddhism. Jan was sympathetic to Yagi Seiichi's idea that Christian religious language needs to shift its pivot from an "informative" role to its "expressive" and "imperative" roles.⁸ If I may use my own language, the aim of doctrine is not with salvation *from* human limitations and human failings, but salvation *in* that condition. It is a struggle for harmony in the here and now, a series of short steps—flickerings of insight, not a bright sun of clarity—that need confirmation in the individual more than they need institutional impressiveness. That confirmation begins with recognizing religious belief in a rhythm that transcends our own as the expression of a desire for salvation, not a clear, unshakable trust in any particular, unassailable set of facts about an otherworldly order. That is why, I believe, he put the stress on Christian faith in "realized eschatology," that is to say, in a Kingdom of God that surrounds us like the air we breathe a reality as accessible to the religious mind of all faiths as it is to those defined by organized religion as unbelievers. In the end, he was less anxious about compromising traditional Christian doctrine than he was with excluding anyone from the expression of the

6. *Interreligious Affinities*, 331.

7. Jan Van Bragt and Paul Mommaers, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian* (Crossroad, 1995).

8. 八木誠一「宗教の言葉:キリスト教の場合」『浄土教とキリスト教:宗教における救済と自覚 (Shunjūsha, 1990), 81–4.

fundamental human desire for salvation and the freedom to respond differently to the claim such desire makes on our ideal of the good life.

As I indicated, Jan was suspicious of the hidden agenda that attachment to certitude left latent in the theology of religions. He put it this way:

In rather extreme form, the problem of the theology of religions might be expressed as follows: How can the other religions have any legitimacy and role in God's plan for humanity if the claim of Christianity to possess the absolute in truth and salvation is true?⁹

He saw a tension between the unknowable mystery of life and existence, on one hand, and the intellectually reasonable defense of a particular religion's doctrine. The inexhaustibly intelligible mystery is not only a check on catechetical certitude; it is the fulfillment of catechesis. Mystery is dangerous, or at least of very little use for institutional stability. But then again, the primacy of traditional teaching or sacred texts is a peril to religion itself. This was the reason he expressed discomfort at seeing Christianity or any other religion as absolute. The mystery is absolute; its names and descriptions are always relative.

To the criticism that this leads to the relativism, he remarked:

The way to recognition of and unity with other religions does not lie in a "universalization" of Christianity in the sense of giving up or diluting the fundamental particular elements of the Christian tradition by a wholesale symbolic interpretation or an evaporation into a humanistic philosophy; or in a "relativization" of Christianity, by demoting it from the status of a universal faith to a "culture religion," relevant only in its own cultural and historical situation.¹⁰

He considered such culture religion naïve, as if one could stand above all religions and declare them all failed attempts to understand the mystery. Religion means struggling with the mystery, not conceding to it. Our truth may not be final, but it still needs experimenting with for its validity, universality, and moral consequences. To forfeit this insecure, uncertain truth for mere insecurity and uncertainty is to forfeit religious desire itself. It is also to discard centuries of wisdom accumulated along the way. We may not like a particular language or not be comfortable with what it cannot say, but we cannot not like language. So, too, with religious stories and doctrines. I believe this is where his theology landed him, even though he rarely made statements of his personal beliefs.

9. *Interreligious Affinities*, 210.

10. *Interreligious Affinities*, 228.

Having said that, there was more than one occasion when I worked to polish one of Jan's texts that he became frustrated at my paraphrasing and insertions. It was not a question of his rejection of those ideas, but only his rejection of how I represented his. I suspect the same is true of what I have been saying about his views of theology. I can only recommend you read his essays for yourself. Even rereading them, I never fail to find something new. They are a delight for his choice of quotations and the rigor of his argument. They also have a unique English style: clear yet with an extraordinary vocabulary. It was in some measure the influence of the shelves of cowboy books he read, not to mention his daily lunches which consisted of two cups of coffee, three cigarettes smoked down to the nub, and a crossword puzzle, which he inevitably filled in down to the last box—with a pen.

Skepticism about religious certitude and religious colonialism did not leave Jan isolated from the establishment. I am convinced that it was the richness and diversity of Christian tradition above all else that kept him faithful to the Church. When the leadership in the Catholic Church decided it was time to dialogue with other religions, Jan was well aware that it did not have to start from scratch. There were several generations of pioneers working at the fringes, some of them censured, some of them in hiding from view, but none of them working with the full approval of the establishment. Vatican II's approval to respect the truth of other religions and broaden the notion of salvation beyond the confines of membership in the Church drew a line for the keepers of the tradition: on one side, the commitment to converting the whole world to the Christian faith; on the other, opening the Christian faith to the truth and goodness in the religious wealth of humanity outside of its own tradition. For some, it was an either/or. For Jan, it was a personally uncomfortable dual citizenship, moving back and forth between two worlds, belonging to both and yet neither. The love of tradition was the bridge. In fact, I would note that he served for five years as a consultant for the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue based in Rome and always spoke with pride of his supporters in Rome, among them Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli and Archbishop Jean Jadot, whom he credited with avoiding unwanted scrutiny in the early years of the Institute by Church authorities fearful of the consequences of dialogue.

The discomfort was very real, even after the Council. For those of us who were educated in the twentieth century, there was no way to ignore the impact of the new sciences of sociology, anthropology, and the history of religions on the exclusivity of Christian's claims to truth. It was clear to us that there was great wealth in other traditions; the problem was how to inherit it in a Christian way. Theologians who held firm to the superiority of Christianity on principle were a shrinking minority in academia even as they were bolstered by popular forms of fundamentalism. After the Vatican Council, the traditional claims to exclusivity among the high-level doctrinal vigilantes were unconvincing and were soon replaced by a

more philosophical assault on the relativity of truth. I say “philosophical,” but they were taking place by and large among theological conservatives in isolation from mainline philosophical currents. In any case, it was an assault at those who questioned the hegemony of the Christian faith, not an invitation to discussion among religions on an open forum of dialogue. At the very time that dialogue was finding its legs in the Christian world, professors of theology lost their jobs and suffered open condemnation from the established Church under the guidance of the two papacies that followed the Council.

This did not have the desired effect on the theological world. For every-growing numbers of Christian thinkers, the need for dialogue with the truth and goodness and salvific power of other religious traditions was an irreversible insight. Forgotten voices of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were brought to mind—people like M. D. Chenu, Yves Congar, Edward Schillebeeckx, and above all Romano Guardini and Henri DeLubac, all of whom Van Bragt cited regularly. More importantly, discussions about different approaches to dogma among the religions of the East were too great a challenge to simply wish aside out of fidelity to some ideal of a single, universal truth. Here, too, Jan was in the forefront.

In addition to these intellectual experiments with re-imagining Christianity’s understanding of itself as one tradition of pursuing truth in dialogue with others, there was a dialogue going on at the level of shared monastic life and the practice of alternative forms of meditation. Attempts to drag these experiences into the camp of doctrine and discredit it for contradicting Christian beliefs were of little effect. The *Stimmen der Zeit* was too strong and persuasive to be silenced by papal documents sound the alarm against the corruption of Christianity prayer. Van Bragt himself not only initiated the inter-monastic exchange mentioned earlier, but he also sat in meditation under Zen masters and practiced on his own at the Paulus Heim. He even persuaded Cardinal Godfried Danneels of Belgium to join us for a session at the temple of Nishimura Eshin, a longtime participant in the dialogue with Christianity. But I would say that prayer and meditation were not simply formalized practices. His prayer was in his work and his meditation in his openness to others. Long hours of devoted reflection and writing is a form of prayer, as sure as is the no-mind of quiet sitting.

For Jan, Vatican II was part of the tradition, but not for that reason above criticism. Despite its advances, it had not really come to terms with the truth of other religions compared to the truth of Christianity, not to mention its fixation of the Church on the intellectual world of the Mediterranean basin. In particular Vatican II, for all its openness, had been careful not to separate itself from the reigning theological bias of the twentieth century that other religions were “pedagogical tools” preparatory to the acceptance of the one true faith divest. For this reason, Van

Bragt felt it necessary to keep dialogue free of theological control and see it as a gift and a service to society at large. His words are strong and clear:

Among the different possible formulations of the mission of the Church in the world, I prefer to see it as spreading the *evangelion*, the “good news” that Jesus brought and Jesus is. As traditionally interpreted, namely, “bringing all people into the Church, that sole ark of salvation,” the message could not possibly be experienced as good news by those to whom it was addressed. It can only seem to say that we have come to tell you that, at least from now on, access to salvation has been limited to contact with that (geographically and culturally) very particular group of people that is the Christian Church. We thus impose a new obligation on you: to leave your own religion, join us, and follow our laws.¹¹

We do not inherit the religious wealth of another tradition by absorbing it and digesting it. We have to preserve its otherness within a wider religious plurality. In this sense, when dialogue becomes a tool for achieving absorption, it is no longer dialogue but missionary subterfuge. This is why Jan repeatedly insisted that its goal had to be to remain “without a goal.” It was in this spirit that he initiated formal dialogues at the Institute and that he resisted attempts to subvert dialogue to conversion. We had our share of authorities from Rome attempting such interventions, but he was always firm in his insistence of the independence of dialogue from religious authority.

Dialogue itself had to be plural, not uniform. There are those who will view religions as a cafeteria buffet, those who keep a foot in tradition, those who engage in ritual and meditative practice, those who dialogue academically, or some combination of all these things. Any attempt to give dialogue a purpose defeated this inherently plural nature of dialogue. This was not just Jan’s “opinion,” it is one more demonstration of how the man and his thought were one.

But above all, dialogue for Jan was about thoughtfulness. As Henry James is reported to have remarked to his nephew, the son of the philosopher William, “Three things are important in human life. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind.” By his life and writings Jan showed us, in a most special way, what that means.

11. *Interreligious Affinities*, 153–4.