

BULLETIN
of the
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for Religion & Culture

Vol. 50 (2026)

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LECTORI BENEVOLO!



THE 2025 academic year marked the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. Since its opening in 1975, the mission of the NIRC has been to promote research on religion as it pertains to Japan, facilitate dialogues between researchers and representatives of religious traditions, and support the work of young scholars. We celebrated half a century of success with a lecture series on interreligious dialogue, a book talk at the annual European Network of Japanese Philosophy (ENOJP) conference, and a two-day symposium featuring talks on the three pillars of research at the NIRC: interreligious dialogue, Japanese philosophy, and translation. The institute also continued its tradition of hosting researchers from around the world as well as from within Japan.

The occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary has also prompted us to reassess the purpose of the institute and its objectives. Bureaucratic restructuring, dwindling financial resources for the humanities, technological shifts in research methodologies away from humanistic inquiry (that is, the use of AI), and a global trend toward nationalism has posed new obstacles to the NIRC's collaborative approach toward research. To overcome these challenges and endure as a world-class research institute, we believe it is essential to maintain a clear ethical and ideological basis for research activities. The institute's founding principle of understanding through dialogue, a principle rooted in the reforms of the Vatican II Council, are just as important today as they were half a century ago. By continuing to open channels of communication among religious traditions and building networks of researchers from diverse backgrounds, the NIRC—with the support of the Nanzan community and our fellow researchers—endeavors to play a vital role in the study of religion in the decades to come.

Staff of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture
Nagoya, Japan
16 October 2026

CALENDAR OF EVENTS



APRIL 2025–MARCH 2026

2025

- 3 April **Spatial Perception of Atmospheres:** Mariaenrica Giannuzzi (ATMOS-Project, University of Turin).
- 4–5 April **The Contemporary Significance of the Work of Nakai Masakazu:** Otabe Tanehisa (University of Tokyo), Uehara Mayuko (Kyoto University), Takehana Yōsuke (Fukuoka University), Michel Lucken (Inalco, Paris), Oda Kazuaki (Osaka University), Steve Lofts (Roche Research Fellow, NIRC), Philip Kaffen (The University of North Carolina), Kyle Peters (The Chinese University of Hong Kong).
- 14 April **Nishida's Conception of Creativity:** Rex Gilliland (Southern Connecticut State University).
- 25 April **The Sixth Buddhist Text Translation Seminar: Annen's *Kyōjimon-dō*:** Matthew D. McMullen (NIRC).
- 16 May **Guest Lecture: Antonin Raymond at Nanzan University:** Helena Čapková (Ritsumeikan University).
- 16 May **Documentary on the Architecture of Antonin Raymond:** Commentary by Helena Čapková (Ritsumeikan University).
- 17 May **Workshop 1: The Role of Nature in Architecture in the Anthropocene:** Bendik Manum (NTNU, Norwegian University of Science and Technology); Masatake Shinohara (Kyoto University, Graduate School of Advanced Integrated Studies in Human Survivability), Gro Lauvland (NTNU, Norwegian University of Science and Technology), Helena Čapková (Ritsumeikan University).
- 17 May **第二回のワークショップ「現代日本の建築デザイン実践における自然を考える」:** 清水郁郎 (芝浦工業大学建築学部), 篠原雅武 (京都大学大学院総合生存学館), 川島範久 (明治大学理工学部建築学科・准教授 / 川島範久建築設計事務所), 能作文徳 (建築家 / 東京工業大学環境・社会理工学院建築学系), 常山未央 (建築家, Studio mnm / HOLES).
- 25 June **Incontri interreligiosi in Italia di Shinnyoji Tempio Sōtō Zen a Firenze—Esperienze di confronto fra diverse tradizioni religiose in 20 anni di dialogo:** Rev. Anna Maria Shinnyo Marradi (Shinnyoji Sōtō Zen Temple, Florence, Italy).
- 4 July **The Seventh Buddhist Text Translation Seminar: Annen's Approach to Buddhist Repentance:** Vera Chirino (Princeton University).

- 5 July Kant, Neo-Kantianism, and Japanese Philosophy.
- 10 July Christianity's Lessons for Zen Practice in the West: Thomas Kirchner (International Research Institute for Zen Buddhism).
- 12–13 July 近代日本における仏教と神道の交差—「神仏分離」から再構築へ: 石原和(同朋大学仏教文化研究所), 芹口真結子(聖心女子大学現代教養学部史学科), 辻岡健志(宮内庁書陵部図書課宮内公文書館・文書研究官).
- 14 July 第18回南山宗教研究会: 山田智正(南山宗教文化研究所), 佐藤麻貴(南山宗教文化研究所).
- 18 July Comparative Mysticism: Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (NIRC).
- 26 Aug The Role of Institutes in the Study of Religion into the Mid-Twenty-First Century (IAHR World Congress 2025 Roundtable): Matthew D. McMullen (NIRC), Charles DiSimone (Centre for Buddhist Studies, Ghent University), Cheng Yinchun (Department of Religious Studies, Fu Jen Catholic University) Christoph Kleine (Religionswissenschaftliches Institut, Leipzig University), Duncan Ryuken Williams (Shinso Ito Center for Japanese Religions and Culture, University of Southern California), Elżbieta Przybył-Sadowska (Institute for Religious Studies, Jagiellonian University).
- 5 Sept. Translating Nishida Kitarō's Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu: A Book Talk (ENOJP Conference): Matthew D. McMullen (NIRC), Enrico Fongaro (NIRC), Steve G. Lofts (NIRC).
- 27 Sept. ポール・リクール著・杉村靖彦訳【シリーズ宗教学再考7】『有限性と罪責性』—『過ちやすき人間』/『悪のシンボリズム』: 杉村靖彦(京都大学大学院文学研究科), 鶴岡賀雄(東京大学), 山梨有希子(白百合女子大学), 袴田玲(岡山大学), 山田智正(南山宗教文化研究所).
- 8 Oct. 現代修験道研究: Caterina Vescovi (University College Cork), Josko Kozic (Heidelberg University), 小林奈央子(愛知学院大学).
- 31 Oct. The Eighth Buddhist Text Translation Seminar: *Nakatomi no harae fūsuisō*; Mariangela Carpinteri (University of California, Santa Barbara).
- 7 Nov. 宗教間対話の意義について—東西宗教交流学会(1982年～)の対話をふまえて: 田中裕(上智大学・東西宗教交流学会理事).
- 22 Nov. 三研究所若手研究員合同研究会～「宗教と社会」をテーマに～: 後藤晴子(大谷大学真宗総合研究所東京分室), 守屋友江(南山宗教文化研究所), 藤井麻央(大谷大学真宗総合研究所東京分室), 石原和(同朋大学仏教文化研究所), 繆寿楽(大谷大学真宗総合研究所東京分室), 山田智正(南山宗教文化研究所), 高橋泉(大谷大学真宗総合研究所東京分室), 佐藤麻貴(南山宗教文化研究所), 鶴留正智(大谷大学真宗総合研究所東京分室).
- 5 Dec. ハワイ・マウイ島山火事による被災とコミュニティの中における宗教—ラハイナ浄土院本尊修復に関するワークショップ—: 原まや(ラハイナ浄土院), 笹岡直美(東北芸術工科大学文化財保存修復研究センター), 安中尚史(立正大学教授).

6 Dec. **Fifth Workshop on Keiji Nishitani Philosophy of Religion: Time and Eternity in Keiji Nishitani.**

19 Dec. **Difficult Subjects: Religion and Schools in Postwar Japan;** Jolyon Baraka Thomas (University of Pennsylvania).

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19 Jan. **若手研究者が語る宗教間対話:** 石井砂母亜(跡見学園中学校高等学校教諭), 岡部友樹(神戸大学グローバルセンター).

23 Jan. **Tanabe Hajime and his relation to Nishida Kitarō:** Morten Jelby, Richard Stone, Sova Cerda, Liao Chin Ping, Wang Xiao Liang, Tajima Jurina, Kondō Kazunori, Taguchi Shigeru.

20 Feb. **16th Permanent Seminar on Nishida Philosophy “A Psychological Approach to the Philosophy of the Kyoto School”:** Claudio Rotenberg (Psychoanalyst), Felipe Ferrari Gonçalves (Yokkaichi University).

27 Feb. **Believing and Thinking in the Age of Pluralism: The Search for New Modes of Expression;** Robert Kisala (Nanzan University), Watanabe Shinya (Anthropological Institute), James W. Heisig (NIRC), Paul L. Swanson (NIRC), Joseph O’Leary (Sophia University), Roger Munsu (Nanzan University), Yamada Tomoaki (NIRC), Ryōsuke Ōhashi (Japanese-German Culture Institut), Bret Davis (Loyola University of Maryland), Alexander O’Neill (Musashino University), Christopher Mayo (Nagoya Gakuin University), Yoko Arisaka with Leon Krings (Hildesheim University).

4 March **ヤン・ヴァン・ブラフト先生記念レクチャー・シリーズ第2回:** 氣多雅子先生(京都大学), 山田智正(南山宗教文化研究所).

6 March **Life, Death and Imagination on Paul Ricoeur:** Tomoaki Yamada (NIRC), Cristal Huang (Soochow University), Kaori Sato (Toyama University), Dierckxsens Geoffrey (Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague), Cristina Alice Vendra (Univerzita Jana Evangelisty Purkyně v Ústí nad Labem), Hsueh-i Chen (National Taiwan Normal University), Olivier Abel (la faculté de théologie protestante de Montpelier).

27 March **The Ninth Buddhist Text Translation Seminar: Kūkai’s *Explication of the Lotus Sutra*;** Matthew D. McMullen (NIRC).

28 March **東海／宗教史研究コンソシアム第6回研究会:** 吉田一彦(名古屋市立大学), 老泉量(同朋大学), 西田彰一(国際日本文化研究センター), 守屋友江(南山宗教文化研究所).

ANNUAL UPDATE

JAPANESE JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES



Matthew D. McMullen

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

The following is a summary of activities and circulation of the Japanese Journal of Religious Studies during the 2025 academic year. This update includes table of contents for published issues in 2025, an overview of online engagement with articles, and notes on plans for the journal.

LAST YEAR was another busy year for the *JJRS*. We published a special issue commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the journal. The research articles were based on papers given at the Fiftieth Anniversary Symposium the previous year. The special issue includes personal reflections on the *JJRS* from longtime contributors and editorial board members. We also published an outstanding at-large issue featuring articles on Oda Nobunaga, *saimon*, reform movements in Buddhist universities, and Inari origin stories. Bryan Lowe contributed a valuable review article of recent books on the topic of esoteric Buddhism in Japan (see table of contents below for details).

The number of successful DOI attempts from April 2025 to March 2026 doubled from the previous year with approximately 126,000. This number perhaps reflects an increase in searches in databases and academic content providers such as Project Muse and Ebisco Host. The number of searches on JSTOR was back up to 106,616 after a decline in 2024. By far, most *JJRS* articles on JSTOR were accessed by unaffiliated users with Stanford University coming in second place. The journal's SCOPUS ranking, or "impact factor," was an all-time low in 2025 at .2, placing the *JJRS* in the thirtieth percentile of religious studies journals. Finally, according to Google Analytics, there were 30,145 direct engagements and 277 downloads from the *JJRS* page on the website of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (<https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/journal/6>).

It should be noted that, despite the deep affection that university administrators have for the above data points, they are mostly meaningless. The "impact factor" changes monthly, and a journal's ranking can fluctuate considerably throughout

the year. In 2023, the *JJRS* had a .8 rating, which placed it in the top twenty percent of religious studies journals. Furthermore, as an open access journal, the *JJRS* is freely available to anyone, including large language models (LLMs, popularly referred to as AI) such as OpenAI's ChatGPT and Anthropic's Claude. These nonhuman agents can and have consumed *JJRS* articles for training their models. Therefore, some of the data noted above may reflect the activity of bots rather than actual human engagement.

Although most *JJRS* readers access the PDF version of the journal, the *JJRS* is in fact a "print" journal. All articles are typeset as a traditional print journal and then shared online in PDF format. However, for paperback aficionados, print versions are available to order print-on-demand from global Amazon Marketplaces. In 2025, eight copies were ordered online, six of which were ordered by the editors.

Over a decade ago, the NIRC stopped taking subscriptions and made the print copies of the *JJRS* available through a company called CreateSpace. This company was soon bought by Amazon and turned into KDP Amazon. The method of making the journal available as PDFs online while retaining the possibility of ordering print copies through a print-on-demand service was forward-thinking at the time. Always the masters of innovation, Paul Swanson and James Heisig realized well before most people that print culture was on its way out. However, due to the lack of sales and the amount of labor that goes into producing the print copy, we are reconsidering this system. Furthermore, as anyone who has tried to contact customer service at Amazon can attest, the print-on-demand service has become extremely difficult to use due to the enshittification caused by the company's policies. There is also the ethical problem of providing content for a company that constantly violates workers' rights and, according to a recent report from *404 Media* (Emanuel Maiberg, 17 August 2026), has been destroying rare books to feed their content into Amazon's AI. We may cut the print-on-demand option or move to a more expensive but ethical company such as Lulu, through which we recently published *Nishida Kitarō: Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu*.

Perhaps we will try a new system for the current issue. At the moment of writing this update, a special issue celebrating the career of Jacqueline Stone, a longtime *JJRS* editorial board member and frequent *JJRS* author, is near completion. The issue includes nine articles by former students, which reflect the range of her influence across time periods and genres. Stone also contributes to the special issue with a monumental article, addressing long-debated topics related to medieval Japanese Buddhism.

An at-large issue is also in the works, which will be published in December. Due to a shortage of quality manuscripts, this year's issue will be rather slim. During the COVID19 shutdown, we were overwhelmed with manuscripts. However, the flow of submissions has recently dried up. Perhaps this slowdown is due to the

JJRS's longer-than-average publication process. There are certainly journals with a much faster turnaround from submission to print. However, we believe that our hands-on approach to editing, which requires extensive back-and-forth between editors and authors, is what makes the *JJRS* the top journal in the field of Japanese religions. Contrary to assumptions of some authors—and the dreams of editors—editing is not magic; it takes time to produce quality articles.

Another reason that we have received fewer submissions might be due to the increased precarity in academia, especially among scholars in religious studies, history, literature, and area studies. Austerity measures at universities, spawned by anti-humanist politicians and their allies in university admin, have left a generation of scholars without job security. It is typically tenure-track and recently tenured scholars from whom we would expect to receive high-quality manuscripts. As one colleague put it when I asked if they were considering publishing their research with the *JJRS*, "How can I find time to produce new research when I don't know if I will have a job next semester?"

The impulse to reduce faculty and eliminate job security is not only a US or UK phenomenon, but also hits close to home. The current administration at Nanzan University has decided to cut the position of Associate Editor at the NIRC. Since the *JJRS* first came to the NIRC in 1981, the journal has prospered with the assistance of an in-house copy editor. In fact, establishing an official position for an in-house copy editor was a condition for the NIRC to take over the management of the journal. During the past forty-five years, several Associate Editors have gone on to become Senior Research Fellows at the institute, including the *JJRS*'s longest serving editor Paul Swanson. After the most recent Associate Editor, Kaitlyn Ugoretz, returned to the US at the end of last year, the university decided that the position was no longer necessary. We have been assured that the decision was not financial and have been promised adequate funding to outsource the work previously provided by the Associate Editor. Until that promise is kept and essential funding is allotted to the *JJRS* budget, the future of the journal is uncertain.

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PUBLICATION ANNOUNCEMENT

NANZAN LIBRARY OF JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY



Enrico Fongaro and Matthew D. McMullen

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

The following text is a republication of the Preface to Nishida Kitarō: Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu, the first volume of the new NIRC book series Nanzan Library of Japanese Philosophy. Digital versions of the book are available for download on the NIRC website (<https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/books/13>).

WESTERN ONTOLOGY finds its starting point in the words of Parmenides: thinking, being, speaking (Χρή τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἔδον ἔμμεναι).¹ For Parmenides, and for the ancient Greeks, there was only one “word” (*logos λόγος*), and it only existed in the Greek language. According to this ancient worldview, other peoples stuttered; they were “barbarians” (literally, *barbaroi* βάρβαροι in Greek). At approximately the same point in history on the other side of the Euroasian continent, philosophers in China had a similar conception of the “word” (*yan* 言) as a marker of cultural exclusivity. For instance, Confucius (Kongzi) is recorded having stated, “Exemplary persons would feel shame if their words were better than their deeds” (君子恥其言而過其行).² In ancient China, language was an expression of ethical conduct, and proper conduct was defined by the social norms of Chinese society; concepts such as “benevolence” (*ren* 仁) were understood exclusively through the conventions of Chinese literary language.³ In both these hegemonic cultures of the ancient world,

1. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Chapter 28, Fragment B6, Line 1; John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (Adam and Charles Black, 1908), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/67097/67097-h/67097-h.htm#Page_197-198.

2. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., trans., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (The Random House Publishing Group, 1998), 178.

3. As Ames and Rosemont Jr. (*The Analects of Confucius*, 48) explain in the introduction to their translation, the character 仁 was formed by combining the graph “person” (*ren* 人) with “two” (*er* 二), suggesting that the moral act of benevolence presumes interaction between people. Therefore, unlike in ancient Greek, “the word” is not ontological but rather had a social function.

each with their own philosophical traditions, the “word” was bound to their own cultural-linguistic sphere.

We know about these traditions today because philosophy long ago escaped the boundaries of the classical Greek and Chinese languages. Yet, in many philosophy departments at universities around the world, curriculum is limited to words originating in Greek or modern European languages, specifically German, French, or English. Such a myopic focus on the study of philosophy obscures the diversity of ideas that drives philosophical discourse. Today, philosophy is a multicultural and multilinguistic discipline. And the tool that makes philosophy possible in the modern world is translation.

In ancient Greece, there was no term for “translate”; the closest term was “interpret” (hermeneuo ἑρμηνεύω). Likewise, in classical Chinese, the graph that comes closest to “translate” is 譯. One component of this compound graph is the term for “speech” or “word” (yan 言). In his etymological dictionary, Shirakawa Shizuka suggests that the other component of this term originally referred to the breaking down and scattering of a corpse and, therefore, came to mean “taking apart and dispersing.”⁴ Therefore, in order to “translate,” “words” are something to be first dissected and analyzed.

While in Greek “the word” is ontological in nature, translation of that “word” is a process. What, then, does the act of translating entail? In many Western languages, it clearly involves “transporting beyond,” as in the Latin verbs *trans-ducere*, *trans-ferre*, and *trans-latare* (from which the English “translate” is derived) as well as the modern European languages included in this volume: *traducir* (Spanish), *traduzir* (Portuguese), *tradurre* (Italian), *traduire* (French), and *übersetzen* (German). In Latin, there were other possibilities for translating this concept such as *vertere* or *imitari*, but in these modern languages the act of interpreting a concept in a different language maintains the Latin prefix denoting the “transfer,” in this case a transfer of “the word” from one language to another.

The equivalent of “translate” in modern Japanese is *hon'yaku* 翻訳, which suggests “analysis” or “making sense of” (*wake* 訳, the simplified variation of the classical Chinese character noted above) and flight (*hon* 翻). In this case, “flight” does not signify a direct and intentional motion like that of a bird or airplane such as with the verb *tobu* 飛ぶ. Rather it is an uncertain “twirling” (*hirugaeru* 翻る) of a leaf falling from a tree in autumn, or of a butterfly exposed to a sudden breeze that carries it away. Or, in its transitive form (*hirugaesu* 翻す), it expresses a sense of “turning something over in one’s mind” or even “changing one’s opinion.” Thus, as the Japanese term suggests, translation requires not only analysis but a musing

4. Shirakawa Shizuka 白川静, *Jitō* 字統, revised edition (Hebonsha, 2007), 859.

by the translator, who, after much consideration, determines where the meaning of words might land in a different language.

Without translation, Greek and Chinese philosophy would have died out in antiquity. Even in the modern variation of these languages, it is necessary to translate philosophy for a contemporary audience; native speakers of Greek do not read Plato like they would a newspaper, nor do native Mandarin speakers read Confucius as though it were a modern novel. Mediation is required. “A translator is necessarily producing new work in and for a new context... different from the original’s.”⁵ Through the metamorphosis of translation, philosophy is no longer confined to philologists and readers of ancient texts, but is made accessible to enquiring minds throughout the cultures and languages of the world. Moreover, as ideas and arguments continue to be translated, each new language adds new interpretation and meaning according to its structural and writing conventions. As Parmenides noted millennia ago: ξυνὸν δὲ μοί ἐστιν, ὅππόθεν ἄρξωμαι· τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἵξομαι αὖθις.⁶ Through the act of translation, the arising of a thought multiplies, disseminates, abides in its linguistic traces, and changes form according to the languages, writing systems, and personal experiences of the translator through which it travels.

This new book series, the Nanzan Library of Japanese Philosophy, is an experiment in allowing these linguistic traces of thought to proliferate, transform through the act of translation, and return the reader to the moment when the idea first arose in the mind of a philosopher many years ago. Specters of philosophy roam our interconnected, albeit multilingual, world. As Walter Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*), a collection of thoughts he never managed to compile into a single text, “In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.”⁷ In other words, “the text” is at the same time “texts.” This volume is a multilingual collection of texts that are a text Nishida Kitarō composed almost one century ago.

Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu 絶対矛盾的自己同一 is published on pages 147–222 in volume 9 of the first edition of the *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集 (Iwanami Shoten, 1949) and on pages 367–425 in volume 8 of the new edition (Iwanami Shoten, 2003). The two editions are identical except for the pagination, which we have noted in the translations in bracketed bold numbers. This volume also includes a transcription of the Japanese text from the first edition. We thank Iwanami Shoten

5. Damion Searls, *The Philosophy of Translation* (Yale University Press, 2024), 3.

6. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Chapter 28, Fragment B5; Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/67097/67097-h/67097-h.htm#Page_197-198.

7. Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk* (Suhrkamp 1982), 570; *The Arcades Project* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 456.

for granting us permission to reproduce the text and Nakatsugawa Isao for patiently and faithfully transcribing the text.

According to the afterword to his collected works, Nishida's diary notes that he began composing the text on 31 October 1938 and completed it on 14 January 1939.⁸ However, he did not send it to the publisher Iwanami Shoten until 2 February, probably after making further elaborations. The text was first published in issue 202 of the journal *Shisō* 思想 on 1 March 1939 and later collected as part of the volume *Tetsugaku ronbunshū dai san* 哲学論文集第三.

Absolute Contradictory Self-Identity, as the text has been translated in English, constitutes one of the key junctures in the development of Nishida's thought, as it marks the beginning of the last and most mature phase of his philosophy. If we consider *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911) to be the beginning of Nishida's theoretical adventure, then we might say that *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awareness* (1917)—with its creation of the concepts of self-awareness and absolute will—constitutes an early phase in the development of what would eventually become *Absolute Contradictory Self-Identity*. The next phase of Nishida's thought can be seen in *Place* (1926), or perhaps even more clearly in *The Intelligible World* (1928), both of which convey his thinking on the concept of place and its own logic. The first half of the 1930s witnessed an evolution of Nishida's thought in which “action-intuition” and the “historical world” gradually come to constitute the central themes of his philosophy. As a result of these reflections, in 1938 Nishida developed the concept of “absolute contradictory self-identity,” which occupied the core of his thinking until his death in 1945. This concept allowed him to explore various themes and problems, ranging from politics to science to aesthetics and so on. Therefore, “absolute contradictory self-identity” is the theoretical foundation of the final phase of Nishida's philosophy.

A seminal work in the Nishida canon, we feel that it is essential that *Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu* be the first work translated in the Nanzan Library of Japanese Philosophy. This volume is not the first attempt to translate this notoriously challenging text. Robert Schinzinger translated it into German (Verlag Walter de Gruyter, 1943) and English (Maruzen, 1958). The text has also been translated into French by Jacynthe Tremblay (CNRS Éditions, 2003), which has been updated and revised for this volume. This volume also includes new English and German translations, as well as translations in Italian, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, and Brazilian Portuguese for the first time. The editors sincerely hope that readers will find these translations engaging as “texts” of Nishida's “text,” inspiring new thoughts to proliferate and spread throughout the multilingual and transcultural world of philosophy.

8. See pages 349–351 in vol. 9 of the first edition and pages 581–589 in vol. 8 of the new edition.

Many of these translations were the result of the Japanese Philosophy Workshops and Nishida Seminars hosted at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. We thank all of the participants for their input and discussion during these events. We would also like to acknowledge that the Italian translation (Fongaro) was made possible by the 2025 Nanzan University Pache Research Grant I-A-1 and Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) 24K03368 and the Spanish translation (Wirtz) was done in the context of *kaken* research project 24K15884. Part of the Portuguese translation (Ferrari Gonçalves) was presented on 17 June 2025 at “Jornada Kitarō Nishida: 80 anos de sua morte.” Thanks to Kaitlyn Ugoretz for designing the cover and helping proofread the volume.

Enrico Fongaro and Matthew D. McMullen
Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture
1 August 2025



Enrico Fongaro, Steve G. Lofts,
Matthew D. McMullen, and Jacynthe Tremblay

Nishida Kitarō: Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu.

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2025. 356 pages.
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Summary of the Volume

With this volume, the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture launches a new book series, the Nanzan Library of Japanese Philosophy, as a venue for translations of Japanese philosophical works and essays on related topics. For decades, the Nanzan Institute has been the global leader for research and publications on Japanese philosophy. This inaugural publication of the series includes translations of Nishida Kitarō's seminal work *Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu*. Completed in 1939 at the peak of Nishida's career as a philosopher, this work lays the foundation for his concept of "absolute contradictory self-identity," which came to define the final period of his philosophical writings. By translating this notoriously complicated work into seven languages (French, English, Italian, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Brazilian Portuguese, and German), this volume not only makes Nishida's thoughts on self-identity accessible to an international readership but is also an experiment in the art of translation. We invite those interested in the philosophy of Nishida as well as the process of translation to explore how the translations in this volume, all produced by Nishida scholars, interpret the text.

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WORKSHOP SERIES

JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY



Enrico Fongaro

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

The following essay is a summary of workshops on Japanese philosophy hosted at the Nanzan Institute during the 2025–2026 academic year. It was possible to organize many international workshops and talks thanks in large part to the presence of outstanding scholars at the Institute. In addition to the workshops noted below, we continued monthly seminars on the philosophy of Nishida. We are currently preparing publications stemming from the presentations and discussions among participants in the workshops.

AS THE GLOBAL center for intercultural research on Japanese philosophy, the NIRC offers workshops and seminars designed to bring together scholars, both domestically and from abroad, to share their work and discuss philosophical issues. Since 2022, we have hosted monthly seminars on the thought of Nishida Kitarō. We have also held workshops on the work and thought of Nishitani Keiji and other Japanese philosophers. This year, we continued the Nishitani workshops, with additional workshops on Tanabe Hajime, Kant, and Neo-Kantianism in twentieth-century Japan.

The basis of the Japanese Philosophy Workshop schedule are sessions on the philosophy of Nishitani Keiji. We again hosted one session of the Nishitani Keiji Workshop in 2025. The fifth session, “Time and Eternity in Nishitani Keiji” was held 6 December. The main reference for the workshop was a Nishitani interview entitled “This Eternal Thing” この永遠なるもの, along with the chapters “Emptiness and Time” and “Emptiness and History” from *Religion and Nothingness*. The workshop proved to be an excellent opportunity to reflect on the concept of time in Nishitani’s philosophy.

Two other workshops provided wonderful opportunities to meet numerous Japanese and non-Japanese specialists and discuss Japanese philosophy. One workshop, organized by the Roche Chair Fellow Steve Lofts, was titled “Kant,

Neo-Kantianism, and Japanese Philosophy.” It was held 5 July with the goal of exploring the importance of Kant and Neo-Kantianism in Japanese philosophy in the early twentieth century. The other workshop, held on 23 January, was entitled “Tanabe Hajime and his Relation to Nishida Kitarō.” It was organized in collaboration with Liao Chin-Ping and aimed to investigate the meaning and significance of the encounter between these two great Japanese philosophers, starting from Tanabe's essay “Seeking instruction from Professor Nishida” 西田先生の教えを仰ぐ.

This year, we were once again visited by Professor Bendik Manum and some of his colleagues for an event on the architecture of Antonin Raymond organized 16–17 May by the three Nanzan Institutes. Another major event was the celebration of the Institute's Fiftieth Anniversary, which featured presentations by renowned scholars of Japanese philosophy, Ōhashi Ryōsuke and Bret Davis.

Finally, this year we were able to publish the first multilingual volume in our new book series, the Nanzan Library for Japanese Philosophy, titled *Zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu*. The book contains seven translations of Nishida's text of the same name and is unique among publications on Japanese philosophy. The book was presented at an event during the ENOJP meeting in Edinburgh on 5 September and can be downloaded for free from our website (<https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/books/13>), while print copies can be purchased print-on-demand. Recordings of presentations and discussions of this year's workshops, as well as the Nishida seminar, can be viewed on the NIRC YouTube channel (@NIRC-nanzan).

KANT, NEO-KANTIANISM, AND JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY

5 July 2025

The emphasis on phenomenology and Heidegger has often overshadowed the importance of Kant and Neo-Kantian philosophy for Japanese philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century. The conference aimed to explore the importance of Kant and Neo-Kantianism in Japanese philosophy in the early twentieth century.

Itabashi Yūjin 板橋勇仁, *Rissho University*

Sova Cerda, *Kyoto University*

Morten E. Jelby, *Kyoto University*

Ochiai Kaichi 落合開智, *Rissho University*

Steve Lofts, *King's University College at Western University*

**NISHITANI KEIJI WORKSHOP ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION:
FIFTH SESSION, TIME AND ETERNITY IN NISHITANI**

6 December 2025

The purpose of this workshop was to explore Nishitani's theory of time in relation to the texts "Religion and Nothingness" and "This Eternal Thing."

Steve Lofts, *King's University College at Western University*

Francisco Figueroa Medina, *Kyoto University*

Enrico Fongaro, *NIRC*

Katō Chika 加藤千佳, *Kansai University*

Michiel Herman, *University of Antwerp*

Taruta Yūki 樽田勇樹, *Kyoto University*

Emma Lavinia Bon, *Padua University*

TANABE HAJIME AND HIS RELATION TO NISHIDA KITARŌ

23–24 January 2026

In this workshop, based (but not exclusively) on Tanabe's essay "Seeking Instruction from Professor Nishida," the participants investigated the meaning and significance of the encounter between Tanabe's and Nishida's conceptual worlds, which were so close and yet so far apart.

Morten E. Jelby, *Kyoto University*

Richard Stone, *Tokyo City University*

Sova Cerda, *Kyoto University*

Liao Chin-Ping 廖欽彬, *Sun Yat-Sen University*

Wang Xiao-Liang 王晓亮, *Sun Yat-Sen University*

Tajima Jurina 田島樹里奈, *Tokyo College of Transport Studies*

Kondō Kazunori 近藤和敬, *Osaka University*

Taguchi Shigeru 田口茂, *Hokkaido University*

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.

BEING FREE IN THE REAL WORLD

AN INITIAL ETHICAL DIALOGUE

BETWEEN NISHIDA KITARŌ

AND JEANNE HERSCH



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*Although they come from different cultural backgrounds, Nishida Kitarō and Jeanne Hersch share a commitment to reaffirming the essential nature of everyday experience of the self in the world, rather than relying solely on abstract intellectual theory. This common stance opens the way for a meaningful ethical dialogue. A comparison between Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* and Hersch's writings from the late 1920s to the early 1940s reveals that their views on reality and freedom intersect significantly, despite ultimately reaching contrasting conclusions about the role of distinction in human activity. From there, the author identifies key ethical insights that emerge from the similarities and differences between these two philosophers, concluding that human beings must exercise their freedom in accordance with their natural personal tendency to make distinctions and incarnate in concrete forms—a necessity for genuine ethical engagement with reality in daily life.*

WELL BEFORE the publication of his early works, it is clear from Nishida Kitarō's letters and diary that his main interest lay in an ontology that, on the one hand, would immediately prove to be ethical—naturally holding together the reality and human life—and, on the other, could encompass the immediate nondual experience of Buddhism and Daoism (Fongaro 2017, 233–4). In a letter of 1907, while working on the first essays that would constitute *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida declares his intention to build his philosophy on the reality of the mind rather than on abstract theory (Yusa 2002, 89). In another letter from 1902, he is even more explicit, criticizing Western ethics for its tendency to sacrifice experience deeply in the human heart in favor of intellectual pursuit and artificial constructs: “people forget the ground on which they stand” (Yusa 2002, 74). In this regard, a few lines from his diary dated 3 March 1901 offer a powerful image: “Under a dimly lit lamp, all the family members gathered and dined. The scene was inexpressibly charming. The utmost human happiness does not belong to ‘high places,’ nor does

it exist in ‘natural scenery,’ but in ‘ordinary, everyday life.’ The moon was beautiful and bright. Took a walk at night” (Yusa 2002, 65). In a nutshell, Nishida wanted to thoroughly understand Western logic in order to formulate an alternative logic that could restore importance to the knowing, feeling, experiencing self of ordinary consciousness (Heisig 2001, 52).

Nishida’s critique of Western philosophical perspective—particularly its tendency to sacrifice ordinary experience in favor of intellectual analysis—is certainly well-founded. However, it is equally true that within the varied Western philosophical tradition, we can identify movements that share at least partially Nishida’s central concerns and could enter into dialogue with them. For instance, from the very beginnings of philosophy, women philosophers have approached key philosophical issues by enhancing the role of the senses, emotions, and our connection with the world (Waithe 1995). In particular, some of the leading women philosophers of the twentieth century were inspired by the cognitive failure that Kant describes in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and sought to work out possible solutions that could revive a more lived search for meaning, reclaiming the bodily dimension and the need to give concrete form to our ideal values as a benchmark for reason (Tarantino 2018, 26).

Among these twentieth-century women philosophers, Jeanne Hersch developed a philosophical approach particularly sensitive to the link between ethical experience and reality in ordinary life. Although freedom is the central category on which her entire philosophical path is based, the beginning of this path is marked by her encounter with matter and its mute presence. At the age of five, persistently questioning the real existence of the things around her, Hersch’s father invited her to place her hand on the household stove to ascertain their reality. This was Hersch’s first philosophical experience: an early confrontation with Kant’s cognitive failure, a helplessness in the face of a reality that undoubtedly *is there*, but offers no intellectual certainty about the essence of Being. From this experience, Hersch sought a way out of the *impasse* that can be experienced in daily life. She did so by trying to preserve the intuition arising from our encounter with reality from the hardening of abstract concepts, as demonstrated by her early interest in Bergson. Only later, thanks to Jaspers, did Hersch discover freedom as a gift, an avenue to overcome cognitive failure through existential decisions and their embodiment in the real world.¹

Given their shared original concern with reaffirming the essentiality of the self’s everyday experience in the world over purely intellectual abstraction, this article aims to initiate a dialogue on ethics between Nishida and Hersch. Certainly, this

1. I describe in more detail this early philosophical experience of Hersch and its implications in Severini 2019, 227–9.

is an ambitious goal: on the one hand, Hersch, faithful to Jaspers' teaching on the limits and finitude of human beings, reclaims the Latin meaning of *existence* as *ex-sistere*, the emergence of a subject who makes decisions² and is thereby distinguished from everything else. On the other hand, Nishida developed his paradigm in an attempt to overcome precisely the subject-object dualism inherited from Kant, a dualism that also grounds Hersch's philosophy. He navigated between the Scylla and Charybdis of monism and dualism, consistently challenging all forms of dualism from his first work to his last (Kopf 2004, 75–6). Such a dialogue on ethics cannot be exhausted in a few pages. My goal in this article is to clarify the most evident points of contact offering common ground for pursuing this dialogue, as well as the precise point at which the two philosophers diverge. The rest must be addressed in a more extensive future work.

More specifically, to achieve my goal, I will first clarify that in this article I focus solely on *An Inquiry into the Good*, since Nishida himself, in a prefatory note added in 1936 for the new edition of the work, affirms that while his language has evolved and his thinking has become more articulate, it nonetheless remains in continuity with the views he had already expressed in this early work (Nishida 1990, 9). Despite the simplicity and occasional naivety of certain passages when compared to his mature writings, I consider *An Inquiry into the Good* suitable for the preliminary investigation proposed here, as it allows us to grasp Nishida's original interests through language that is clearer than that of many later texts. By comparing *An Inquiry into the Good* with the ideas developed by Hersch between the late 1920s to the early 1940s, I show that Nishida and Hersch share several premises concerning the nature of reality and freedom, but arrive at opposite conclusions about the role of distinction within the dynamics they describe in their respective philosophical trajectories. It is precisely the reflection on distinction that appears to be the point at which Nishida and Hersch diverge. This point is crucial, as it invites reflection on human activity as one of abstraction, with all its potential and its dangers. In the conclusion, I highlight the principal ethical insights that emerge from this initial investigation into the similarities and differences between Nishida and Hersch. Among these insights, I consider particularly decisive the conception of freedom as a capacity to be exercised from within our natural tendency: a freedom that distinguishes and incarnates this tendency in concrete forms, ultimately returning to the initial stage of everyday life to evaluate our activity of incarnation.

2. In this regard, it is worth noting that the essence of decision in Hersch, moving again from the Latin etymology, *de-caedere*, focuses on the act of separating (Chello 2007, 75).

Points of Contact between Nishida and Hersch. Being *Free to* in a Familiar Reality

Gustav Fechner said that one morning, while relaxing in a chair in the Rosenthal in Leipzig, he gazed in the bright sunlight at a spring meadow with fragrant flowers, singing birds, and flitting butterflies and became engrossed in what he called the perspective of the daytime, in which truth is things just as they are, as opposed to the colorless and soundless perspective of night found in the natural sciences. I do not know what influenced me, but since long ago I have had the idea that true reality must be actuality just as it is and that the so-called material world is something conceptualized and abstracted out of it (Nishida 1990, XXXIII).

Nishida introduces *An Inquiry into the Good* with these evocative lines, which can be compared with equally evocative lines written by Hersch in *L'illusion philosophique*, to clearly grasp that there is something in common between the two philosophers:

I look at a waterfall. There are several ways of looking at it. It can appear to me as a force.... It can appear to me as an aesthetic spectacle.... It may appear to me as the symbol of a thought of mine, a desire of mine, a dream of mine. It may finally, losing all autonomy, become a reflection of my soul and a part of myself, the passion or despair that drags me along. In all these cases, it remains close and understandable to me.... But it can also appear to me in another way. Watching it fall, I suddenly see it in itself, naked, stripped of my feelings.... It becomes prodigiously unknown and incomprehensible.... I have no contact with this enormous indifference. I see the compact, opaque thickness of matter, into which my gaze cannot enter.... An abyss has opened between life, close and comprehensible, and inaccessible matter. For at this point falls the prejudice, which we derive from science, according to which it is matter that is comprehensible first, and life later.... As if being able to measure is enough to understand. (Hersch 2005, 35–6)

For both Nishida and Hersch the most original and intimate experience we have of reality is an enveloping familiarity in which we are immediately close and unified with things through the feelings they arouse in us, while the scientific gaze intervenes only later with its own abstractions, isolating us in a night in which we can measure precisely but without truly understanding, now separated from sounds, colors, and impressions. The reality described by these two philosophers has two features in common: it is always a concrete experience, and in it, subject and object meet without being able to do without each other.

Regarding the second feature, Nishida states clearly at the very beginning of *An Inquiry into the Good* that *pure experience* is a state in which subject and object are completely unified in one's own state of mind, because seeing a color or hearing a sound precede the thought that the color or sound is an external object or the judgment about that color or sound (Nishida 1990, 3–4). Nishida bases his entire first work on this idea of pure experience, adding that reality does not exist apart from the facts of such pure experience (Nishida 1990, 15), so reality as it is coincides with consciousness in the present. To him, the crack that Hersch also speaks of³ is created when the unity is broken and a present consciousness enters into a relation with other consciousnesses, generating meanings and judgments and leading to a departure from reality as it is (Nishida 1990, 9). Hersch's definition of reality is virtually identical to Nishida's: "Here we will define reality as anything that has a present presence in consciousness" (Hersch 2006, 4).⁴ Although she often speaks of *I* and *not-I*, using language far removed from that with which Nishida would express himself, she nonetheless agrees with the idea that separating subject and object in thought or action inevitably entails a perversion and a departure from reality (Hersch 2006, 23). For Hersch, the subject must accept that they cannot do without materiality because the subject is *condemned* and at the same time *devoted* to material creation (Hersch 2006, 184); only by becoming *the other* can they ascertain what they themselves is and thus strive for a deeper unity (Hersch 2006, 115).⁵

Regarding the first feature, Hersch concludes that reality is constituted by the relationship between subject and object, rather than either of the two terms taken individually or their simple sum (Hersch 2006, 12). Against the abstract concepts produced by science—such as that of *pure matter*—Nishida states that in real nature everything "is a concrete fact with its own special characteristics and significance" (Nishida 1990, 70). So both Hersch and Nishida agree that reality is by no means something neutral and objectively aseptic, but rather a relationship, a concrete encounter, that takes on meaning: those who reduce reality to a set of measurable data have understood nothing about the living world. Nishida takes this a step further, in that his conception of reality also influences his conception of truth, which he regards as close to the real of concrete experience, thus an individual, actual, concrete truth, at the antipodes of the abstraction of universal scientific truth.⁶ Surely, Hersch's conception of truth is different from Nishida's, but

3. It is worth noting that, in the Italian translation, Fongaro uses the word *frattura* (Nishida 2017, 59), bringing this passage from Nishida closer to the creation of the abyss in the example of Hersch's waterfall, although perhaps calling the crack Nishida speaks of an "abyss" would be overstating the case.

4. All the quotations from this book are my translations.

5. In this regard, Hersch calls "romantic betrayal" the exaltation of the will of the self at the expense of its relation to the datum and realization in it (22–3).

6. In this regard, some lines from Nishida prove relevant and deserve to be quoted in their entirety: "There are various arguments about what truth is, but I think truth is that which comes closest to the most

the *metaphysical truth* on which she grounds human existence in *L'illusion philosophique*, “comparable to a true act rather than a true explanation” (Hersch 2005, 44), again refers back to the idea that a meaningful experience is deeper than any objective, impersonal explanation, an idea shared by Nishida.

The concrete experience of the bond between spirit and the external world in the reality just described is the background to the conception of freedom proposed by Nishida and Hersch. In this regard, Nishida writes some very clear lines:

The kind of will described by those who argue for the freedom of the will—a will that is totally without cause or reason—does not exist. Such a contingent will would not be felt to be free; rather, it would be felt to be oppressive. When we function for a certain reason, that is, from the internal character of the self, we feel ourselves to be free. And we feel most free when the cause of a motive emerges from the most profound internal character of the self. The reason behind the will, however, is not a mechanical cause as described by determinists. Our spirit contains a law governing its activity, and when spirit functions in accordance with its own law, it is truly free. Freedom thus has two possible meanings: (1) being totally without cause, that is, fortuitous or contingent, and (2) having no external restrictions and therefore functioning of and by oneself. The latter indicates autonomous⁷ freedom, and this is the freedom of the will. (Nishida 1990, 98)

Again, the similarities between the two philosophers can be noted by quoting a passage from Hersch dealing with the same issue:

You say *necessity* at the moment when I was going to say *freedom*.... If we have in front of us a bag containing red balls and white balls and we draw, without looking, a red one, are we free? I don't think so. Chance or a multiplicity of things caused my hand to grab a red ball. If now I look in the bag and I am indifferent to pull out a red ball or a white one, I find myself a little closer to freedom; so, if I pull out a red ball to mend a sock, because a red one will be seen better in a white

concrete facts of experience. Truth is sometimes said to be universal but if by this one means abstract commonality, then what one is designating is actually far removed from truth. The culmination of truth is the most concrete, direct facts that synthesize various facets of experience. These facts are the basis of truth, and truth is something abstracted and constructed out of them. Though truth lies in unity, the unity is not a unity of abstract concepts. True unity lies in direct facts. Perfect truth pertains to the individual person and is actual. Perfect truth therefore cannot be expressed in words, and such things as scientific truth cannot be considered perfect truth. The standard of truth is not external, for it lies in our state of pure experience. To know the truth is to be congruent with this state” (Nishida 1990, 26).

7. It is worth noting that, in the Italian translation, Fongaro uses the word *necessaria* (Nishida 2017, 133), which is exactly the same word used by Hersch.

sock, I am even closer to freedom, because I have reasons to draw the red ball. I approach freedom progressively, to the extent that there are reasons. And in the end, when I find myself faced with two paths, one of which is that of temptation, the other that of duty, if I choose the first, I do not call it a choice of freedom, because I have the impression of giving in. (Hersch, Dufour-Kowalska, Dufour 2006, 76–9)⁸

Three points of contact deserve to be analyzed in these two dense passages. The first is the distinction between what contemporary debate has called *freedom from* and *freedom to*.⁹ As Hersch points out, confusing freedom with arbitrariness and thinking that being free means doing whatever we want is the most basic philosophical mistake one can make when reflecting on freedom (Hersch, Dufour-Kowalska, Dufour 2006, 79). *Freedom from* obstacles that significantly compromise our choices is certainly a necessary but not sufficient condition for making free choices, because we also need to be *free to* show our most original and deepest nature. Nishida clearly states that we function according to a certain, imparted motive that we cannot produce freely, and he confirms what Hersch has already said about *temptation*, arguing that we feel *compulsion* when we function in opposition to such a motive. Great care must be taken not to confuse the absence of constraints or limits with the ultimate freedom, for true freedom is rather synonymous with the systematic development of consciousness (Nishida 1990, 25). For both Nishida and Hersch, the more we decide in accordance with our own law, the more we can call ourselves free; the more freely we decide, the more we follow the necessity of our own law.¹⁰

The second point of contact concerns exactly this systematic development of consciousness, which can also be traced in Hersch's early reflections. In *Les images dans l'oeuvre de M. Bergson*, she speaks of "free and necessary organic development" that is accomplished according to a law internal to the subject, giving the

8. Hersch's conclusion explicates the coincidence of the ultimate freedom with necessity: "One can, however, take a further step. Antigone really cannot motivate her decision, as it refers to the transcendence of unwritten laws. She does so because, metaphysically, she cannot act otherwise. We all know, at one time or another, this kind of situation, in which we would like with all our good will to justify an action but we feel we cannot do it because the deep 'reasons' are unspeakable and go beyond all reason. When it becomes absolute, freedom coincides with necessity and we are entirely present in it" (Hersch, Dufour-Kowalska, Dufour 2006, 80). Hersch gives the same example in *Mensch sein: Freiheit oder Willkür* (Hersch 1982, 2–3).

9. The distinction between these two types of freedom can be traced at least back to Kant, but in the heart of the twentieth century it has been widely debated, especially within the context of political and social philosophy (but evidently it also has relevant ethical implications). To explore this issue further, see Carter (2022).

10. Cobb summarizes effectively: "An act we experience as free, then, is one that we experience as an accurate expression of who we are, and its freedom consists precisely in this expressive character, not in the absence of causal conditions" (Cobb 1998, 274).

example of the development of a plant from seed (Hersch 2001, 141).¹¹ Although this passage contains a criticism of Bergson, De Vecchi rightly points out that Hersch will always remain faithful to the idea of freedom as organic development (De Vecchi 2008, 28). So for both Nishida and Hersch, the necessity of manifesting our own law in our free decisions is determined by a seed that is in us from birth, and which we must take good care of if we want our life to sprout luxuriantly and bear fruit. Nishida gives special attention to these person's internal qualities, which constitute the motivating force and a unifying reality from within, both in conscious conceptions and unconscious feelings (Nishida 1990, 53). Such *individuality* is something that begins to act at the moment a person is born and develops in accordance with various experiences until death, and that everyone can actualize¹² regardless of natural talents or life circumstances: "Just as everyone has a different face, everyone possesses unique characteristics that cannot be imitated by others" (Nishida 1990, 137).

At this point, Nishida poses a legitimate question: if being free means acting in accordance with one's nature, why is only the will free and everything else considered necessary? The answer to this question constitutes the third point of contact between Nishida and Hersch. Nishida states that the occurrence of a phenomenon in the natural world is determined strictly by a particular set of circumstances, according to a blind necessity, whereas the phenomena of consciousness do not simply arise; we are conscious of them, namely, we are conscious that taking something includes the possibility of not taking it, and this is because consciousness is never controlled by other things. Even when we decide to follow necessary laws, nothing forces us to do so (Nishida 1990, 98). Hersch finds the perfect definition to sum up this insight of Nishida's: *to want fully* (Gagnebin 1950, 292). We are free when we do something not because we are compelled by external forces, but because we want it; we want *that* precise possibility among several that always present themselves to our autonomous nature: "Conduct therefore is not generated from without, but from within" (Nishida 1990, 99). Of course, we are ultimately free when our free decisions follow our own nature. Consciousness is free not because it acts without reasons, but precisely because it knows good reasons. And, the more we advance in knowledge, the more we have good reasons to choose among possibilities, the freer we can be. "If we go even farther and realize the unavoidable reason for the situation, then the oppression turns into freedom" (Nishida 1990, 99).

Before concluding, two clarifications appear necessary. The first concerns Nishida and his reference to individuality: he states that the highest good is for our

11. Nishida gives the same example of the development of a plant from seed in Nishida (1990, 17–18).

12. It should be noted that *actualization* is a key concept also in Hersch's thinking, especially in *L'être et a forme*.

spirit to develop its various abilities and to achieve and display its innate nature just as a bamboo plant or a pine tree does (Nishida 1990, 125), but then adds that this actualization advances from the small-scale development of individuality to a culmination in the large-scale unified development of all humankind and the world (Nishida 1990, 142–3). The second clarification concerns Hersch, who does not go so far as to achieve a profound unification as Nishida does, but still values the harmony with and the essential nature of what is *outside the self*, stating that freedom should not be conceived as an affirmation of the self *against* external, material or social obligations, because the external world is an instrument of freedom rather than an obstacle (Gagnebin 1950, 292).

In conclusion, Nishida's and Hersch's considerations of freedom appear to be perfectly in continuity with their considerations of reality: the link between spirit and world, and the concrete experience of the dynamics associated with consciousness, are confirmed as indispensable. Regarding the link between spirit and world, Nishida conceives of a deeper unification than Hersch, but undoubtedly, for both, the systematic development of our own law takes place in intimacy with what is outside of the self in a relationship that, as it matures, reveals new possibilities, occasions, and reasons for being free. Regarding the concrete experience of the dynamics related to consciousness, Hersch has certainly dealt with it more than Nishida, and the processes of *giving form* and *incarnation* analyzed extensively in *L'être et la forme* are a pillar of her philosophical path. But even Nishida does not fail to emphasize several times that true freedom is functioning and being active from the internal character of the self (Nishida 1990, 163), it is an action that aims to create an objective result in the world of facts (Nishida 1990, 136). What is clear from this initial analysis is the importance of approaching the issues addressed by also reasoning in concrete and practical terms—reasonable though not purely logical—and valuing the experience of the encounter between our spirit and the world it inhabits, rather than stifling their relationship by separating them sharply.

The Distance between Nishida and Hersch: Distinction as Differentiation or Giving Form

Returning to Hersch's example of the waterfall, the crack that is created in matter's surface and its being mute marks the beginning of the distinction between subject and object, and with it the possibility of beginning to exist. She calls it a *philosophical problem*: “Will I examine it or escape it?... Will I decide, or let it take me? Will I go to the end, will I affirm that I am, or will I erase myself and suppress the wrinkle that has been made on the surface of that world that hitherto went by itself?’ So: ‘Will I face things or will I cease mixing with them? Will I be or will I not be?’” (Hersch 2005, 25). Having emerged from the *state of matter* (Hersch 2005, 26), in

which the absence of distinction offered no alternative, the subject's consciousness can distance itself for the first time from its object, and, observing that object from this detached position, such subject's consciousness can finally conceive of different possibilities and begin to use its freedom to decide on the being or non-being of its existence. Now that the problem is posed, it is no longer possible to return to the previous state and postpone the decision, because to postpone is already choosing not to be. To be, the subject must create themselves by isolating themselves and opposing matter (Hersch 2005, 38).

As mentioned above, also in Nishida there are cracks that break the unity of pure experience when conflicts and contradictions of various kinds arise. "Where there are conflicts and contradictions there is spirit" (Nishida 1990, 75), and as the conflict between motives become more distinct we can become more conscious of our will and mind. These moments are certainly important, for it is through them that we can progress and become more conscious. But, contrary to Hersch, in Nishida this is all directed toward the realization of an even greater unity rather than the increasing distinction of the subject from its object. Knauss is right when he states that in Nishida, "The content of pure experience is analyzed and dissected only through being the object of knowledge and reflection. In the process of unfolding, a totality becomes apparent and reflects itself in contradictions and conflicts" (Knauss 2018, 18). Nishida likens this moment of knowledge and reflection to the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, a necessary phase but one destined to be overcome in view of a greater good, whereas Hersch values Eve's "sweet disobedience" and the separation that follows her act as a condition of the possibility of choosing, existing, loving (Hersch 2000, 18). Here, the paths of Nishida and Hersch separate.

For Nishida, to start from the assumption that pure experience naturally imposes itself as the most immediate state of consciousness is to assert that it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience (Nishida 1990, xxx); and it is not that the individual possesses feeling and the will, but rather that feeling and the will create the individual (Nishida 1990, 50). In a nutshell, the fact of pure experience is the alpha and omega of our thinking, and our thinking is just a wave¹³ on the surface of a great intuition, the process by which a great system of consciousness develops and actualizes itself (Nishida 1990, 16–17). However deep and great a state thinking may be, it always retains its place as only a part of pure experience. In order to understand what Nishida has said so far about individual consciousness, it is necessary

13. Once again, Nishida and Hersch are at the antipodes: for Nishida, thought is a wave destined to be reabsorbed into the ocean of a great intuition, while for Hersch it is that which digs a space for existence in the crack of matter.

at this point to specify that for him, in addition to individual consciousness there is also the consciousness of a universal system, which, at the end of *An Inquiry into the Good* he comes to call *God*. As partially mentioned earlier in this article, the activity of individual consciousness has as its ultimate goal unification with the consciousness of the universal system: “What we call the demands of reason are actually demands for a greater unity; they are demands of the universal system of consciousness that transcends the individual person, and they can even be seen as the manifestation of a great, trans-individual will. The sphere of consciousness is never limited to the individual person, for the individual is no more than a small system within consciousness” (Nishida 1990, 28). The activity of reality is the spontaneous self-development of a single entity, and the distinction between internal and external, active and passive, contradiction and unification is something that thought uses to explain this spontaneous self-development (Nishida 1990, 57). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that, precisely because contradiction and unification are both indispensable and one would not be given without the other, our individuality is not merely a false appearance which, like a bubble, has no significance whatsoever; rather, it is part of God’s development, an offshoot of divinity (Nishida 1990, 170).

After clarifying that the consciousness of universal system precedes individual consciousness, the last passages of Nishida’s reasoning follow almost naturally from this premise. If the highest aspiration of individuality is to be unification with the universal system of consciousness, the goal to be pursued is intellectual intuition, that is, a deepening and broadening of our state of pure experience as a return to unification via differentiation:

[I]ntellectual intuition is the unifying activity in pure experience. It is a grasp of life, like having the knack of an art.... For example, when inspiration arises in a painter and the brush moves spontaneously, a unifying reality is operating behind this complex activity.... It is actually the state of oneness of subject and object, a fusion of knowing and willing. In the mutual forgetting of the self and the object, the object does not move the self and the self does not move the object. (Nishida 1990, 32)

Nishida points out that this intuition is an extremely common phenomenon: it can be achieved in the arts in which we have attained great skill and, differentiation after differentiation, we go deeper and deeper, reaching a unification in which consciousness is no longer given; but it can also be achieved in everyday life, whether the family members gather and dine under a dimly lit lamp or while relaxing in the

Rosenthal, gazing in the bright sunlight at a spring meadow.¹⁴ In these situations, all distinctions between matter and spirit are abolished, all subjective reverie is removed and the true self is shown, for the will cannot do anything as long as it is purely subjective; it can only realize itself by following objective nature: “To move water is to accord with its nature, to control people is to accord with their nature, and to control oneself is to accord with one’s own nature. Our wills are effective to the degree that they become objective.... Those without a self—those who have extinguished the self—are the greatest” (Nishida 1990, 77).¹⁵

If Nishida bases his whole path on the assumption that pure experience naturally imposes itself as the most immediate state of consciousness, Hersch asserts rather that “it is impossible to trace back beyond the fact that being is a value. It is the very fact that founds the human spirit” (Hersch 2006, 90).¹⁶ To be, the existing subject who has affirmatively and responsibly answered the *philosophical problem* must produce something concrete, in line with the concern for the world and the natural datum already retraced in Hersch; that is, they must give a subjective form to objective matter:

[N]othing is real in human consciousness without *taking form*. For consciousness there exists only a specific and limited being, there are forms.... But those who say form immediately say matter that has taken form thanks to a force that shaped it. We will define *matter* as the raw, anonymous datum that the spirit transforms into reality of

14. In this regard, it is worth noting yet another similarity between Nishida and Hersch. Nishida writes: “When we are absorbed in something the self loves, for example, we are almost totally unconscious. We forget the self, and at this point an incomprehensible power beyond the self functions alone in all of its majesty; there is neither subject nor object, but only the true union of a subject and object” (Nishida 1990, 174–5). Hersch describes something very similar, calling it a *moral paradox*: “We know from daily experience similar examples of duplicity. Thus, we establish as a principle of morality that one must do good. But we do not at all love those who do good by virtue of this principle. When we say of a person that he is good, this does not mean that he conforms to that principle of morality, but that he thinks of his neighbor, that he loves his neighbor, and that in thinking of his neighbor he performs acts that manifest his goodness. To think of his goodness would be to destroy it: one is only good by forgetting to be good” (Hersch 2006, 28).

15. In conclusion, these considerations allow us to add something about Nishida’s conception of truth, partially supplementing what was said earlier in this article: “Truth is not something we can produce—it is something in accordance with which we should think. We must now ask whether truth ever exists totally separate from the subject? From the standpoint of pure experience, there is no such thing as an object divorced from the subject. Truth is that which has unified our experiential facts, and objective truth is the system of representations that is most effective and most integrating. To know the truth or to accord with it is to unify our experience; it is to proceed from a lesser to a lesser to a greater unity. If we regard our authentic self as being this unifying activity, then to know the truth is to accord with this greater self, to actualize it” (Nishida 1990, 23–4).

16. Since Hersch explicitly states in the introduction of *L'être et la forme* that this book assumes an anthropomorphic perspective in which the question about being is inevitably a question about being as existence (Hersch 2006, 3), it seems clear that in this quotation from Hersch “being is a value” refers to existence, thus for the existing subject being is a value.

consciousness, into forms. We will define *hold* as the act by which the spirit takes possession of matter, giving it a form. (Nishida 1990, 4)

To exist is to take matter and give it a personal form, to impress one's own effective mark (Nishida 1990, 13) and bring something new into the world. This is the process of incarnation that constitutes the mission of the human being in Hersch (Nishida 1990, 114), something that does not aim to recompose the distinction between subject and object with a view to a deeper unification as in Nishida but rather considers this distinction as the starting point for a *philosophy of contours* (De Monticelli 2007), that sculpts ever more sharply the features of the existing subject.

L'être et la forme is a study of the ways in which forms, arising from the encounter between the existing subject and the objective world, come to constitute subjective reality, reaching results opposite to those of Nishida: on the one hand, form is opposed to any kind of totality and is a matter of *appropriation* and *exclusion*, *finiteness* and *separation*; on the other hand, the process of giving form—thought of in these terms—is necessarily based on a polarity between a passive element and an active element (Nishida 1990, 70–1), although Hersch frequently reminds us of the complementarity of these two elements. For Hersch, too, the dynamics described aim at unity, but we do not speak of the unity of Nishida's universal system, but rather of a unity so determined that it constitutes itself as a limited totality that excludes everything that remains outside of it (Nishida 1990, 75). At the end of her analysis, Hersch declares that we can define form as “any elaboration of a matter which, paradoxically, by seizing the traits of particularity and finiteness of this matter and pushing them to the extreme, transposes the datum onto a plane in which it becomes unity and totality” (Nishida 1990, 78).

In conclusion, this study of forms implies for existence that *exclusion* is the fundamental spiritual requirement of the human condition (Nishida 1990, 129). In the beginning, as we have already seen, we are so much in being that thought is impossible; with the possibility of denial begins thought, there is the possibility of existence and a return to being at a deeper level. However, to Hersch, this return to being through distinction, it is now clear, does not occur with Nishida's unification, but by asserting one's exclusive unity through our subjective forms: “When we conceive of being by means of forms, or rather, when we conceive of being as existing in forms, it is irretrievably torn from its plasticity. The exclusive character of forms is even the first tragedy, the eternal tragedy. The more plastic the form, the more plastically it closes in on itself, the more being is split. The serenity of forms destroys the serenity of being” (Nishida 1990, 128).

The study of forms in *L'être et la forme* serves Hersch to deepen the implications of the philosophical problem and its existential decisions on an even more practical level, in everyday life. Answering the philosophical problem in the affirmative

means holding the mute matter around us and giving a form to it through the original mark of our decisions, because for Hersch deciding one's metaphysical truth is not enough; one must also incarnate this truth in the world. If matter is fundamentally mute, what we decide to do with it creates an unbridgeable crack around the formed matter, because the specific form with which one has given a subjective contour to that part of matter depends on the unique freedom of a subject: something that cannot be fully explained or imitated by others. In a nutshell, Hersch's aim in *L'être et la forme* is to awaken the existing subject to an inevitable *decree of presence* (Nishida 1990, 51): on the one hand showing the exclusivity of form (enough has been said about this), and on the other hand emphasizing the extent of this decree of presence. In this regard, Hersch's decree of presence invites us to consider that "Possible freedom varies with the confidence we will have in it; the possibility of a form increases or decreases with boldness or contrition in the face of the datum. In theory there is no equal and determinate responsibility, for it can only be proportional to the part of the imagined form" (Nishida 1990, 43–4).

There is no objective limit to our freedom from outside; it is we who determine the limits of our action, according to how much matter we decide to hold, how many traces of our existential appropriation we decide to leave behind (Nishida 1990, 56). Only we can leave these original traces, only we can give a quantity of matter that specific form, because other subjects before us have given it other forms, and other subjects after us will give it other forms. For Hersch, the human being was born to *decrystallize* the world, to break into the pure being of uniquely determined matter and initiate a diversification of the identical through their own forms (Nishida 1990, 7). She concludes with a provocation, which might invite a rethinking of Nishida's own conclusions:

If the spiritual moves away from the vocation for which it is devoted to incarnate in matter, if it is content with itself and pleased with itself, it necessarily, and increasingly, moves among undifferentiated possibilities, exempt from hierarchies that make sense only with respect to the real. Everything is leveled, everything is easy, light, interchangeable. Contradiction itself ends up simulating conciliation. There are no more laws, because a law is a condition of existence, and the spiritual has moved away from existence. Then the spiritual is lost with the law, and the "purity" of its disinterestedness becomes a consent to nothingness. It floats, it gives itself up to the flow, it is no longer a subject, it is like "everything else", and it is impossible to distinguish it from the floating of materiality. (Nishida 1990, 133)

Conclusion: A Time for Activity, a Time for Acquaintance with Things as They are in Freedom

Comparing the differences between Nishida and Hersch in order to understand how to further develop their reflections is certainly useful. However, one must at the same time avoid overlooking the importance of the crossroads where their two paths meet, especially when considering the long stretches where these paths take different directions. The similarities between Nishida and Hersch make it possible to identify at least two main insights to take the contemporary debate about ethics forward: the priority of a personal experience of reality as a relationship and encounter that takes on meaning, and the use of freedom from the necessity of our own internal law that is in us from our birth as a seed rather than from a perversion of free will as an absence of limitations that allows us to do whatever we want.

The first insight invites consideration of the need to view reality as the phenomena of subjective consciousness rather than as an objective, neutral data set that can be measured scientifically. Both Nishida and Hersch are far from asserting that the various possible scientific approaches to reality are useless and produce no benefit. However, they are undoubtedly more concerned about the risk that the meaningfulness of ordinary real experience could be diluted and dissolved by the solvent of a purely intellectual logic that too often hastily dissolves what it fails to grasp in order to be able to best apply its own categories. Even before it is measured, the world speaks to us. If it captures our attention, it is because of an experience of enveloping familiarity that creates an immediate, inexplicable bond, in which explanation is not even sought, because at that moment we are entirely absorbed in an experience in which it really does not matter who is the subject and who is the object. Only later, after distancing ourselves from this experience, might we want to analyze it, to ask how long it lasted, what physical laws determine it, what psychic processes make us perceive it that way. Whether it is a path to deeper unification or to exclusive incarnation, both Nishida and Hersch remind us that the experiencing self of ordinary consciousness is our starting point.

This insight immediately proves to be ethical because to ignore this *intuition* that occurs in everyday human life is to uproot the human being from their natural ground, significantly limiting effective reflection on their good and the dynamics that determine their actions. The experience of the real relationship that is more than the mere sum of subject and object and makes them complementary is not only the starting point of the self, but also its ending point. The differentiating dynamics of thought, at the end of their activity, aim precisely at returning to the world with deeper awareness through concrete acts. This is evident in the process of giving form and incarnation in Hersch, which, when creating cracks, is always concerned to act while preserving its own relationship of harmony with everything

outside of the self. It is also evident in Nishida's philosophy, where the goal is the creation of an objective result in the world of facts. One last detail should not be overlooked: Hersch speaks explicitly of *mute matter*, but Nishida's considerations of pure experience also confirm (and he will continue to do so in all of his later works) that it is impossible to know our object in its purity regardless of our relationship to it.¹⁷ This again confirms the inadequacy of any scientific artificial construct designed to measure data rather than relations that include subjective aspects.

The second insight seeks to shed light on an ever-present problem, that of the relationship between freedom and free will. For Nishida and especially for Hersch, who devotes the second half of her life to reflecting on the *outer conditions of liberty*,¹⁸ being able to exercise one's free will is a necessary but not sufficient condition. True freedom acts with good reasons. There is in us a law, a natural tendency that determines our uniqueness, and which we are free to follow.¹⁹ The path we are to follow is somehow already indicated, and we can feel truly free only by deciding to walk it. If we choose to ignore it, to walk it only partially or without conviction leaves us with a feeling of dissatisfaction, like having given in to temptation or not really having done enough. This is the good reason to use freedom and a very significant statement on an ethical level: there is a different seed planted in each of us, present and active from birth, whether we are aware of it or not. By paying attention to listening to ourselves and intuiting what is outside of us, to the relationship we form with it, and to the aspects that capture our attention—immediately, before any instrumental division between subject and object—we can gain clear insights into how that seed grows within us and how best to care for it.

Moreover, what distinguishes the conscious from the natural is the awareness of possibilities beyond actual events. This is especially surprising in Nishida, who hopes for the unification of the self with the consciousness of the universal system, yet cannot avoid noting the self's uniqueness within the universal system. As already mentioned, human beings have a natural tendency to follow, but they can also conceive of alternative possibilities. In their case, having a natural tendency does not guarantee that they will necessarily choose that possibility. For both Nishida and Hersch, the path of the free human being begins in the indeterminate

17. Although Nishida tries to overcome Kant's subject-object dualism, he cannot help but implicitly confirm Kant's impossibility of knowing the thing-in-itself.

18. See Severini 2002, 111–67.

19. Regarding the importance of following our natural tendency, it is interesting to note that in Nishida and Hersch the problem of evil in the sense of an evil natural tendency does not arise. In Nishida, the Buddhist influence leads one to immediately consider any expression of the natural tendency as good, but also in Hersch the problem of evil emerges only at the intersubjective level, when one is in danger of harming the freedom of another, whereas in reflection on the personal use of one's freedom in existence there is no possibility that the authentic embodiment of one's natural tendency could somehow be evil.

fusion of subject and object and continues through the cracks opened by the various possibilities that arise. However, what must be noted at this point is that this path is also, and above all, a progress. As mentioned earlier, the more we advance in knowledge, the more we have good reasons to choose among possibilities, and the freer we can be. This means that there is a formal direction, a common end to be reached, even if each follows their own personal path. That is why we can speak of progress: as we become more knowledgeable about our characters and our possibilities in the world, we also become more aware of our being who we are. Our zigzagging through the world is not a leisurely visit without a destination; it must be guided by a definite end—a promise—to know the seed of our own law, so that we can be free at the highest level and understand who we ought to be in order to want it fully. Being free is, first and foremost, a matter of responsibility. The timing and depth of our path of differentiation can make all the difference.

Hersch has always argued for the profound connection between freedom and responsibility, while at this stage of reflection, Cobb rightly points out, one would expect Nishida to discuss the nature of responsibility. However, such a discussion does not materialize, in line with the common Buddhist expectation that it is best to allow one's character to express itself rather than worrying about the traditional moral questions (Cobb 1998, 275–7). Here, Nishida's perspective appears to be at odds with the tragic tone used by Hersch in her study of forms. This distance of perspectives is evident in their reflections on the role of distinction in human experience. I believe that the similarities between Nishida and Hersch provide a valid premise for exploring the distance between these two philosophers, and it is from reflecting on this distance that the contemporary ethics can derive significant insights.

First, we must reconsider the strong and significant experiences that have directed to Nishida and Hersch's philosophical paths. What most captures Nishida's attention is the immediate nondual experience of the Buddhist tradition, with which he became familiar in his mid-twenties through Zen practice, combined with a natural need for clarity and rigor, typical of philosophical minds. Fascinated by the benefits of his progressive liberation from a deeply rooted ego, and critical of the Western tradition's arbitrary dogma of the distinction between subject and object, he sought to express the liberation of the self from the ego, making identity the primary principle of philosophy (Kopf 2004, 78). What most captures Hersch's attention is the powerlessness she felt in the face of a fact that cannot be doubted, but also cannot be known with certainty, an experience she had at the age of five. This led to the discovery of freedom as a gift that allows one to prevail over such an *impasse* and overcome cognitive powerlessness through decision. It is through this relationship with matter that powerlessness becomes a possibility, not an incapable fact.

In light of this, and the findings of this article, I would like to suggest that from their personal significant experiences, Nishida and Hersch valued two complementary aspects of the human being. Both conceive of the human being as free to follow their natural tendency in the deepest connection with the world, through a disciplined thought process that leads to progress. When Nishida states the need to rid oneself of everything that is purely subjective, he is simply inviting us to discard everything that our thinking has made us regard as important during its process of differentiation, but which does not truly belong to our natural tendency. At the same time, when Hersch states that the subject must isolate themselves and oppose matter, she is pointing out the importance of giving a definite form to our existence, without desiring separation or disinterest in everything external to the subject. From their common conception of the human being, Nishida valued harmony with a more universal system beyond the individual, a relationship so close that, by surrendering to it, we can express our truest depths. By shedding all subjective superstructure—useful for advancing our understanding, but also potentially diverting us from our path—we can immerse ourselves in unexpected self-discovery, remembering and expressing our deepest nature. In the everyday, when our guard is down, we can experience connection with our surroundings. Yet, this experience also speaks to us, describes us, and allows us to finally come home. On the other hand, Hersch valued the originality of a unique capacity within the most universal system: the freedom to conceive of alternative possibilities. This capacity can focus on what is absent or unknown, remain unexpressed, or it can enable us to exist. It is the responsibility to decide how much to retract out of fear and how much to give form with joy, how far to go in incarnating ourselves and offering something new to the world: not by creating *ex nihilo*, but by reworking matter in an original way, thus decrystallizing it.

Ultimately, what is the role of distinction in human experience? Providing a precise answer here seems impossible. However, the dialogue between Nishida and Hersch allows us to limit the weaknesses of one through the strengths of the other. Reducing the ability of the human subject to distance themselves from their object to a mere moment to be recomposed within a deeper unification risks denying the responsibility and innovative scope of human existence, as manifested through personal natural tendencies and the production of something new in the world. To distinguish, to give a clearly delineated form, and to say yes to one possibility and no to others are acts that appear necessary for the optimal use of one's freedom. We must never forget that there are forms that only we can incarnate, and giving them up can be tragic for the world and for our existence. It is also true that intense activity of incarnation risks overemphasizing the subject's activity at the expense of the natural conditions in which it takes place, conditions that we must always remember to conform to. These conditions should be seen as starting

points, not obstacles to overcome. At any moment, they can take us back to our innermost depths, because incarnating something that does not truly express our natural tendency can be dangerous and harmful. In summary, distinction is necessary in order to have the proper distance from our object and be able to give form to it effectively. Nevertheless, distinction can involve both the incarnation of our natural tendency and its perversion and estrangement from it. It really seems to be a matter of preserving “a link between actively thinking about things and passively being acquainted with things as they are” (Heisig 2001, 53). To distinguish means to abstract, to take responsibility for moving away from the initial state of pure experience in order to incarnate our existence more and more: not to get rid of the world, but to exist more authentically in it. And so, what the contemporary debate about ethics can derive from the distance between Nishida and Hersch is the need to incarnate our novelty into the world without ever betraying our relationship to it and to our deepest self.

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THE FIGURE AND GROUND OF TIME DŌGEN'S *UJI*, HEIDEGGER'S FOURFOLD, AND THE LIMITS OF BEING AND TIME



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This article compares Dōgen's conception of time in the "Uji" fascicle of the Shōbōgenzō with Heidegger's early and later accounts of temporality. While previous comparative studies have concentrated on Being and Time, this article draws on recently published posthumous manuscripts to clarify the significance of Heidegger's later thought. The distinction between the "figure" and "ground" of time provides a framework for examining two shared concerns: the temporal horizon within which individual moments become meaningful, and detachment from excessive concern with the present. I argue that Being and Time remains limited by its orientation toward Dasein's finite existence and its projection of possibilities. Dōgen's account of being-time (uji), by contrast, articulates a more radically non-anthropocentric and non-teleological temporal field. Heidegger's later reflections on time-space, the fourfold, and the fourth dimension of time extend the temporal horizon beyond individual existence and challenge the subordination of time to human purposes. These developments bring Heidegger's later conception of time closer to Dōgen's and provide grounds for reconsidering claims of residual anthropocentrism in his later thought. The comparison reveals an affinity between Dōgen and later Heidegger in their understanding of time as a relational ground that exceeds human control and calls for receptivity, detachment, and awe. An earlier version of this article was presented on 8 March 2025 at the workshop "Japanese Philosophy and its Auseinandersetzung with Heidegger," held at the NIRC.

THIS STUDY undertakes a comparative analysis of Martin Heidegger's and Dōgen's respective conceptions of time. Both Heidegger's seminal work *Being and Time* and Dōgen's "Uji" fascicle in his major work *Shōbōgenzō* feature the notions of "being" (Sein, 有) and "time" (Zeit, 時) in their titles, and scholars have frequently noted the conceptual affinities between their perspectives.¹ However, existing research has primarily focused on

1. For a history of comparative studies of Dōgen and Heidegger, see the preface by Heine in Abe (1992).

early Heidegger—particularly *Being and Time*—in comparison with Dōgen, while examinations of later Heidegger, especially his notion of the “fourfold” (*Geviert*), in relation to Dōgen remain limited. One possible reason for this scholarly gap is the relative scarcity and complexity of Heidegger’s later discussions on time. For instance, his lecture “Time and Being” (1962) appears somewhat abruptly in relation to his earlier discussions of time. Furthermore, even within Heidegger scholarship, no definitive consensus has been reached regarding the interpretation of his later thought on time. Nevertheless, with the recent publication of the so-called Black Notebooks (GA 94–102) and other posthumous manuscripts (GA 80, 82, 91, etc.), Heidegger’s later reflections on time are becoming increasingly accessible to analysis.²

This article first examines the relationship between Heidegger and Dōgen in general in light of previous scholarship. It will then extend the comparative inquiry to later Heidegger’s conception of time in relation to Dōgen’s thought. I argue that, in certain respects, Heidegger’s later thought exhibits a greater affinity with Dōgen’s conception of time than does his earlier work.³ This article uses the distinction between “figure” and “ground” as a heuristic framework. The “figure” of time refers to a determinate present moment, event, or being that appears within ordinary experience. The “ground” of time refers to the wider temporal and relational field that allows such a figure to appear as meaningful. In Dōgen, this ground is articulated through notions such as *uji*, *nikon*, *jinkai*, and *kū*. In Heidegger, it appears first through concepts such as significance, horizon, and temporality in *Being and Time*, and later as the fourfold and the fourth dimension of time. Heidegger’s fourfold is his later name for the relational gathering of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. It is not a cosmological theory in the ordinary sense, but a way of describing how things appear within a world that exceeds human control and instrumental use. This article argues that Heidegger’s later thought comes closer to Dōgen’s “Uji” because it radicalizes the non-anthropocentric and non-teleological character of this temporal ground.

2. I have recently been working with posthumous manuscripts to clarify Heidegger’s theory of time in his middle and later period. See Nukui (2020), (2022), (2024), and (2025).

3. A key advantage of comparative research lies in its capacity to transcend the specific terminologies employed by individual thinkers, thereby abstracting their ideas from the confines of Heidegger and Dōgen studies. The comparative process necessitates the adoption of a more general conceptual framework, facilitating engagement with broader philosophical discourse beyond the immediate context of these two figures. It is my hope that this study will not only contribute to the interpretation of Heidegger and Dōgen but also offer meaningful insights into the broader fields of temporality, philosophy, Christianity and Buddhist thought.

Commonalities in Heidegger's and Dōgen's Philosophical Projects: Against "Scholastic" Understandings

As Heine shows, Heidegger and Dōgen "both attempt to overcome their respective philosophical traditions" because they both feel that those traditions "express unacknowledged and deficient presuppositions concerning time."⁴ Dōgen and Heidegger both maintain that "the problematics of existence and the limitations of metaphysics are fundamentally and directly related to basic misconceptions concerning time."⁵ Both Heine and Stambaugh emphasize a fundamental philosophical parallel between Dōgen and Nāgārjuna: both Dōgen and Nāgārjuna conceptualize liberation as intrinsic to samsara rather than as a transcendent state beyond it. The Abhidharma school traditionally regarded liberation as an event occurring beyond time.⁶ In contrast, Nāgārjuna posited that liberation can occur at all times. As Stambaugh notes, "Dōgen follows Nāgārjuna in his rejection of nirvana or liberation as something beyond the cycles of birth and death."⁷ Nāgārjuna, a second-century thinker of the Madhyamaka school, criticized substantialist readings of Buddhist teaching through his emphasis on emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Dōgen, writing in thirteenth-century Japan within the quite different setting of Zen, nevertheless continues this anti-substantialist line of thought. In contrast, the Abhidharma tradition is understood here as a scholastic system that tends to analyze reality into distinct dharmas and to separate liberation from ordinary temporal existence.

Like Nāgārjuna, Dōgen rejects the notion that anything can exist beyond time. Instead, he perceives time and the being of things as fundamentally interdependent and inseparable, and it is precisely within this inseparability that he locates liberation.⁸ However, while Nāgārjuna articulates his philosophy through "logical" argumentation,⁹ Dōgen approaches the subject from an "experiential and phenomenological" perspective.¹⁰ Through concrete examples, such as pine trees, mountains, and the human condition, Dōgen demonstrates that being cannot be conceived apart from time. Thus, he critiques what Stambaugh refers to as "Buddhist scholasticism."¹¹

4. Heine (1985), preface.

5. Heine (1985), 1.

6. Heine (1985), 6–7; Stambaugh (1990), 25.

7. Stambaugh (1990), 1.

8. Tsunoda (1997), 87.

9. Sakurabe and Ueyama (1996), 240. If there is one immutable law called karma, it should not disappear forever, even after some consequences have occurred. (There should be no escape from karma forever.) In contrast, if karma is not permanent, then it is gone by the time any result occurs, so it cannot even produce a result. (There should be no karma in the first place.)

10. Stambaugh (1990, 1) states: "Thus, while Nāgārjuna's orientation was primarily logical, that of Dōgen is experiential and phenomenological."

11. Stambaugh (1990), 25.

Heidegger and Dōgen share a fundamental philosophical orientation. A comparable structure can be found in Heidegger's early engagement with Christianity. In Heidegger's 1920–21 interpretation of the Pauline Epistles in the New Testament, Heidegger critiques the conventional understanding of eschatological waiting, which frames the anticipation of God's return in a linear, sequential manner. That is, he rejects the notion that one simply waits for God's Second Coming at a determinate point in linear time. Instead, Heidegger proposes that the very disposition of waiting for God's kingdom itself already has a religious—or even divine—character. For Heidegger, such a divine character is not situated beyond worldly time, as if it emerges only when temporal existence ceases; rather, it coexists with time.

This perspective closely parallels Dōgen's conception of liberation as being possible within time rather than outside of it. Both Dōgen and Heidegger challenge scholastic interpretations of their respective traditions, advocating for an understanding of phenomena in accordance with phenomena themselves. Thus, they seek a more authentic understanding of their respective traditions. Rather than perceiving events as merely occurring within a linear temporal flow, both thinkers understand past and future events within a non-linear temporal structure, relating past, present, and future to the self in a fundamental sense—expressed in Dōgen's case as “myself” (*ware われ*) and in Heidegger's as “*Dasein*.” Furthermore, both critique the instrumentalization of the present as merely a means to the future. In other words, they reject the interpretation—found in both Christianity and Buddhism—that this life (or the present) exists primarily for the sake of the next life (or the future). Instead, they emphasize the immediacy of the present, maintaining an awareness that truth can manifest itself at any moment. As Tsunoda observes, “Dōgen's esoteric philosophical thought on worldview, ontology, and temporality may seem to lead to a simple conclusion: life is really a series of ‘living’ in the ‘here’ and ‘now,’ and we are reminded that we must strive to do so.”¹² For Dōgen, enlightenment entails a capacity to perceive time from a broader, all-encompassing perspective, and this state of realization can occur at any moment. Similarly, for Heidegger, each present moment is of great importance, offering the existential “choice” (*Wahl*) between authentic existence and a reversion to inauthentic existence. In Heidegger's view, to delay this choice by reasoning that death remains distant or that the Second Coming is yet to arrive constitutes an evasion of the possibility of authentic existence. Having outlined the general similarities between Dōgen and Heidegger by drawing upon previous scholarship, I will now examine these commonalities in more depth, specifically through the lens of the relationship between “figure” and “ground” in their respective conceptions of time.

12. Tsunoda (2001), 88.

Commonalities in Heidegger's and Dōgen's Conceptions of Time (1): The Condition for the Meaning of the Present (Horizontalty)

One of the most striking similarities between Dōgen's and Heidegger's conceptions of time is their rejection of the idea that the present moment arises independently. Instead, they emphasize that time as a whole—past, present, and future—functions as the movement that makes the present possible (this totality of time will be referred to in this paper as “time as ground” or “context,” the contextual horizon within which each present moment becomes meaningful). Dōgen designates this all-encompassing temporality as “*nikon*” (而今, right now) and equates it with “*jinkai*” (尽界), meaning “the entire world.”

Similarly, in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, the holistic conception of time is articulated through the notion of “significance” (*Bedeutsamkeit*) (sz, 87), which is also referred to as “worldliness” (*Weltlichkeit*) (sz, 83). In the discussion of time in Division Two of Part One of *Being and Time*, Heidegger further elaborates on this as the temporal “horizon” (*Horizont*) (sz, 365), also known as “Temporalität” (GA 24: 324), and reinterprets this horizon as the “world” (*Welt*) (sz, 366). “Horizontalty” here means that a present thing or moment becomes meaningful only against a wider background. To examine these ideas in more depth, we will first consider Dōgen's perspective before turning to Heidegger's.

Dōgen's Concept of the World: Jinkai

In Dōgen's major work, *Shōbōgenzō*, he frequently employs the phrase “*jinjippōkai kore ikkamyōju*” 尽十方界は一顆明珠, which translates to “the entire world is one brightly shining gem.” For Dōgen, this world—this luminous jewel—is also “*kū*” 空 (emptiness).¹³ Emptiness does not mean sheer nothingness. Rather, it signifies “*mujishō*” 無自性, the absence of independent self-nature: nothing possesses a self-sustaining essence, and all things exist only through relations, conditions, and mutual dependence. Dōgen refers to the totality of this interdependence as “the entire world” (*henhōkai* 遍法界, the pervasive dharma world, or *jinjippōkai*).¹⁴

Dōgen's Concept of Time and Being: Uji

The concept of this world as *kū* also appears in the *Uji* fascicle of *Shōbōgenzō*. In *Uji*, Dōgen states: “I arrange and place myself (*ware* われ) as the entire world (*jinkai* 尽界). Each thing in this entire world should be thought of as each time.”¹⁵ “For this reason [that being, time, and self are one and the same], we must learn that various things and events exist in the entire ground (*jinchi* 尽地) and that each and every

13. Yōrizumi (2005), 58.

14. Yōrizumi (2005), 58.

15. The text of Dōgen in this paper is from Masutani (2006) and Takahashi (1971).

thing exists against the background of the entire ground.” “The mouse is time, the tiger is time, living is time, and the buddha is time.” These passages suggest that “the entire world” is constituted by “myself” (*ware* われ) that is positioned and arranged. At any given time, something, which is “myself” (*ware* われ), exists. In the background of that time, there exists “*jinkai*,” or in other words, the totality of time, which is the totality of “myself” (*ware* われ) that has existed until then and will exist in the future. Yorizumi illustrates this totality, or “*jinkai*,” as follows:

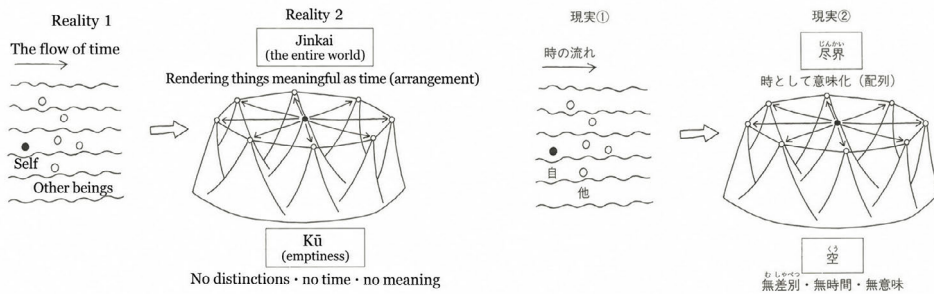


FIGURE 1: Diagram from Yōrizumi (2005), 103.

The Figure and Ground of Time for Dōgen

Iwata interprets the same passage from Dōgen (“I arrange and place myself as the entire world. Each thing in this entire world should be thought of as each time”) through the framework of the relationship between the “figure” (*gara* 柄) and the “ground” (*ji* 地) of time.¹⁶ The “figure” of time refers to distinct temporal instances, expressed as “at a certain time...” and “at a certain time...”—corresponding to the central “mountain top” (a black point) in Yōrizumi’s illustration. The “ground” of time, by contrast, serves as the background that enables the “figure” of time to appear as a discrete moment. This ground corresponds to the areas surrounding the central mountain top in Yōrizumi’s picture. Iwata states: “if we interpret “*u-ji* 有時” as “*aru-toki*” (at a certain time), it is the same as in our everyday usage, which means that what is at issue is the “figure” of time. However, if we read it as “*u-ji*” (being-time), it is probably trying to show the form of the “ground” of time. At

16. I translate *gara* 柄 as “figure” rather than “pattern” in order to emphasize its contrast with *ji* 地, “ground.”

least, we are looking at the “figure” from the “ground” of time, just as if we were looking at the shape of the waves shimmering above our heads from underwater.”¹⁷

Moreover, this “ground” functions as the site where multiple “figures” of time coexist. Iwata further argues that there exists a kind of “place” where the “time” of forty years ago and the “time” of today intersect and coexist. This “place” constitutes the very “core” of one’s being, and this totality of “place” is, in essence, the totality of time.¹⁸ This idea parallels the representation of time through the illustration of mountains by Yōrizumi. In this “ground” of time, there is no passage of time in the usual sense of the word. The particular movement of the “ground” of time is called “*kyōryaku* 経歴” by Dōgen (and Heidegger would call it “happening” [*Geschehen*]). In *Uji*, Dōgen writes: “*Kyōryaku* is from today to tomorrow, from today to yesterday, from yesterday to today, from today to today, from tomorrow to tomorrow.”¹⁹ What “is” there in the “ground” of time does not pass away, but continues to exist, and continues to influence the present, “figure” of time.²⁰

Kū and the Figure and Ground of Time

The concept of *kū* 空 (emptiness) signifies that no being exists independently but always arises in relation to other beings. In other words, the “figure” of each moment is inseparable from the “figure” of other moments, which together form the “ground” of time as its totality. Yōrizumi explains this interdependent nature of existence as follows: “in everyday consciousness, one’s self and the other objects are considered to exist as separate entities, but Dōgen rejects this elemental reductionist attitude and insists that being is only possible when it is signified by the self...

17. Iwata (2007), 224–225. “Dōgen’s use of the word “*uji*” is, of course, different from our everyday usage of the word. It has a variety of meanings and its meaning fluctuates. Therefore, it is useful to organize them and describe the two types of time in advance. The first is the “figure of time” and the second is the “ground of time.” Time has its “figure” and “ground” just as in the waters of rivers and oceans, waves are the “figure of water,” while water in the deep or water itself is the “ground of water.” The water that flows smoothly and noisily is the “figure” of the water, while the water that is blue in color at the edge and shows a clear and calm surface is the “ground” of the water.” For further discussion, see also Iwata (2007), 225.

18. Iwata (2007), 252.

19. The original text of Dōgen is: 今日より明日へ経歴す、今日より昨日に経歴す、昨日より今日へ経歴す、今日より今日に経歴す、明日より明日に経歴す。

20. Dōgen’s “ground” of time may also have a certain commonality with the temporality in Freud’s “unconscious.” The characteristics of the time in the unconscious, which Freud (1933) says is “highly peculiar and awaits appreciation in philosophical thought,” are as follows: “In Es, there is nothing that corresponds to the [ordinary] concept of time (*Zeitvorstellung*), no recognition of a temporal sequence (*ein zeitlicher Ablauf*); and, what is highly peculiar and awaits appreciation in philosophical thought is that there is no change in the mental process due to the passing of time. Desiring-impulses (*Wunschregungen*) that have never crossed [the boundary of] Es, as well as impressions that have sunk into Es through repression, are virtually immortal (*unsterblich*), behaving after decades as if they had happened for the first time (*neu vorgefallen wären*).” The same could be said for Heidegger’s “having-been” (*das Gewesen*) or Freud’s unconscious. Derrida (1967) also points out the similarity between Heidegger’s “always already” (*immer schon*) and Freud’s unconscious.

For example, the existence of a ‘flower’ is possible in its difference from a ‘tree’ and a ‘stone.’ A ‘flower’ is not a ‘flower’ by itself, but becomes a ‘flower’ when one’s self divides his world and ‘arranges’ it into ‘flowers,’ ‘trees,’ ‘stones,’... and a ‘flower’ becomes a ‘flower’ when it has a differentiating relationship with a ‘tree,’ a ‘stone,’ and other beings.”²¹ The functioning of time as this underlying structure is referred to in this paper as the “contextuality” of time. This term signifies that no moment exists in isolation; rather, each moment is constituted through its relational positioning within the totality of past, present, and future.

Similarities between Kū and Heidegger’s Theory of Time

Both Dōgen’s “Uji” and Heidegger’s *Being and Time* share a fundamental concern with the contextuality of time. In *Being and Time*, a “hammer” cannot exist on its own, but only within a web of interdependent relations, within the temporal structure of being, can a “hammer” be defined as a “hammer.” Heidegger calls this structure “significance” (*Bedeutsamkeit*) (sz, 83).

Todoroki observes that Heidegger consistently emphasizes the contextuality of time throughout his work, regardless of the period: “when we see a flying bird, we perceive not only what the bird is doing now, but also what it has already been and what it could be in the future, i.e., ‘from where’ and ‘to where’ of the bird. In other words, when we understand that a bird is ‘flying,’ we understand not only the ‘present’ but also the ‘past’ and the ‘future,’ and based on this very understanding, we understand the bird’s ‘flying’ as ‘flying.’”²² “‘Being’ has some kind of contextuality, and the meaning of ‘being’ can be understood only by grasping this context. It is fair to say that Heidegger redefines this context as ‘time.’”²³ “The inauthentic way of *Dasein* means an attitude that separates a being from its relationships with various other beings that are essential to its being, and makes it alone present. The authentic way of being, on the contrary, is an attitude that sees a being in relation to the surrounding beings.”²⁴ Moreover, Todoroki notes a conceptual parallel between the Buddhist notion of emptiness and Heidegger’s temporal ontology, although he does not explicitly connect Heidegger’s ideas to Dōgen’s. Both the Buddhist idea of emptiness and Heidegger’s account of temporality suggest that each being and each time has its own context (background context) which is indispensable for its formation, and the recognition of this relational structure is called “enlightenment” (*satori* 悟り) in Buddhism and “authenticity” (*Eigentlichkeit*) for Heidegger.²⁵

21. Yorizumi (2021), 138.

22. Todoroki (2017), 37.

23. Todoroki (2017), 37.

24. Todoroki (2017), 47.

25. Todoroki (2017), 48–50, 422–423.

As previously discussed, Dōgen's thought on time is rooted in an emphasis on emptiness. According to Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, *Genjō kōan*, "To practice and realize all things (*banbō* 万法) by carrying oneself is to be lost. To practice and realize oneself when all things come forward is enlightenment."²⁶ Here, "*banbō*" means "all beings."²⁷ Takahashi interprets this as follows: "lostness is the act of establishing the self (which should not be able to be established) and working on all objects. Enlightenment is the illumination of the self from the side of the objects, which should constitute a unified whole."²⁸ In the experience of enlightenment, time is perceived from an expanded, all-encompassing perspective. What is ordinarily conceived as the non-self or the other is recognized as integral to the self. Everything is understood as the time of the self.

Commonalities in Heidegger's and Dōgen's Conceptions of Time (2): The Relaxation of an Excessive Preoccupation with the Present (Detachment)

Beyond the interplay of the "figure" and "ground" of time, another significant commonality between Dōgen and Heidegger is their shared emphasis on the liberation of the individual from attachment to the mundane. In Heidegger's *Being and Time*, this liberation involves breaking free from the inauthentic existence of the everyday self (*das Man*), while in Dōgen's thought, it corresponds to the realization of emptiness. Furthermore, this process is intimately linked to an expansion of temporal awareness—the ability to perceive time in its totality. This transformation is from an ordinary state, in which one fixates solely on the immediate "figure" before them, to an enlightened state, in which one perceives time as the "ground."

The Time Structure of "Significance" (Heidegger)

In Heidegger's framework, the everyday structure of "significance" is constituted through the "projection" (*Entwurf*) of a particular "possibility of *Dasein*'s being," which is situated before the possibility of one's death. Heidegger's "significance" does not mean subjective importance. It refers to the network of practical relations within which something shows up as what it is. For instance, when the possibility of "protection against bad weather" is projected, a given being X is interpreted as a "hammer" or as a "tool," serving as a means of realizing this possibility (sz, 84).²⁹

26. Nishitani (1972) also quotes this passage by Dōgen several times in his *What is Religion?* For example, on p. 184, he also considers it in conjunction with Heidegger's later thought.

27. Masutani (2006), 42.

28. Takahashi (1971), 10.

29. English quotations from *Being and Time* follow Joan Stambaugh's translation; see Heidegger (1996). The following passage is from p. 78 (sz, 84): "For example, the thing at hand which we call a hammer has

However, when the projected possibility shifts to “defending oneself against an armed group,” for example, the same being X may instead be interpreted as a “weapon,” functioning as an instrument for combat. Thus, the interpretation of any given being is contingent upon the specific projection at play. While a being may be understood in multiple ways (as a tool, a weapon, etc.), the interpretation that most effectively serves the realization of *Dasein*’s possibility tends to take precedence.

This is the structure of everyday “significance.” However, when the possibility of one’s own death is understood as an imminent and ever-present possibility, these ordinary hierarchies of importance cease to function. This is because when faced with the possibility of death, the ordinary “in-order-to” (*das Um-zu*) linkage (which presupposes that one will not die for some time) ceases to function. No matter what we do or do not do, death, when it comes, will come. Since we can die without doing anything (without using any means), no interpretation of a being can function as a “means” in the face of death. In the face of death, their ordinary hierarchy of practical significance collapses. As a result, a state of “insignificance” (*Unbedeutsamkeit*) emerges (sz, 186), and even in “the authentic existence of *Da-sein*,” its “taking care” (*Besorgen*) becomes “indifferent” (*gleichgültig*) for itself (sz, 352).³⁰

This “indifferent” perspective offers insight into an alternative experience of time—one that differs fundamentally from the ordinary, linear understanding of temporality. In this experience, every moment of one’s past, present, and future is valued as equivalent, without hierarchical distinction, and is apprehended as integral to one’s own being.

Heidegger’s conception of time in this regard may resonate with Bergson’s philosophy. According to Bergson, when one’s “attention to life” (*attention à la vie*) “diminishes” (*faiblir*), time ceases to be structured in a manner conducive to the pragmatic demands of daily existence. As he observes in *Spiritual Energy* (1922): “now, if your attention to life (*l’attention à la vie*) diminishes (*faiblir*) for a moment,... then the mind, whose gaze was forcibly directed forward, relaxes (*se détend*) and thereby looks back, where the mind finds all its history (*toute son histoire*). The panoramic vision of the past is therefore due to a sudden disinterest (*désintéressement*) in life, born of the sudden conviction that one is going to die at any moment.”³¹ For Bergson, this “sudden disinterest in life” allows the past—typically subordinated to the demands of the present—to resurface in its own right, liberated from its usual instrumentalization.

to do with hammering, the hammering has to do with fastening something, fastening something has to do with protection against bad weather. This protection “is” for the sake of providing shelter for *Dasein*, that is, for the sake of a possibility of its being.”

30. The relationship between insignificance and the authentic existence of *Dasein* is complex and will not be entered into here. See Nukui (2021) for more details on this relationship.

31. Bergson (1922), 82.

A similar movement of time is evident in Heidegger's notion of time as something that "stretches out" (*sich erstrecken*). The possibility of recognizing wider temporalities—what Heidegger refers to as the "extension of *Dasein* between birth and death" (*die Erstreckung des Daseins zwischen Geburt und Tod*) (sz, 373)—ordinarily obscured by everyday absorption in the world, is reawakened as something that truly belongs to *Dasein*. This recognition, in turn, enables the existential process of authentic "projection" and "retrieval" (*Wiederholung*) (sz, 385), through which time is reclaimed in its authentic dimension.

The Time Structure of Kū (Dōgen)

Analogous to Heidegger's notion of the ever-present possibility of death (*der Tod, das Vorbei*) and Bergson's idea of detachment from present-centered consciousness, Dōgen's philosophy is characterized by the recognition of *kū*—the impermanence and non-substantiality of all things. This entails an awareness that all phenomena lack fixed essence and cannot serve as ultimate objects of attachment. Through *kū*, one attains a non-discriminatory apprehension of time—a perspective in which all temporal moments, whether joyous or sorrowful, sacred or mundane, are understood as constituting an undifferentiated "array" of the self. In this sense, all moments are of equal significance, equally proximate, and equally detached from hierarchical valuation.

Minami articulates this idea as follows: "the time consciousness that lies before our everyday time consciousness, the time consciousness that lies before the division of time into past, present, and future, if we dare to call the former time consciousness 'original temporality,' in the 'Uji' fascicle, such temporality is called '*nikon*' 而今 (or *shikin*), and the way of the movement of '*nikon*' is called *kyōryaku* 経歴."³² What this means is that time that "flows" and "passes" cannot be realized unless the act or the memory of the act is arranged with a sense of purpose (*mokuteki* 目的) in mind. If a person who needs to hurry to his destination (*mokutekichi* 目的地) gets on a train, he will be conscious at every station that "I am here now, I will be there next, and I am almost there." It is in this consciousness that the scenery seen from the window of the train "flows" and "passes." But for those who are riding vaguely or wandering without any particular purpose (*mokuteki*), it does not matter at all when and where they arrive. Then the view from the window is merely changing within the window frame. Even when we recall the scenery later, there is no clear back and forth order in our memories, and we will only be able to talk about how we saw this and that. This is the "time to look over a thousand peaks 千峰万峰をみわたす時節," a situation that is said to "not pass away すぎぬるにあらず" (by Dōgen). When climbers stand at the top of a mountain and take a break

32. Minami (2008), 145.

to look around at the mountain peaks, they do not necessarily look at them in the order in which they climbed them.”³³

In essence, Heidegger, Bergson, and Dōgen converge on a fundamental insight: detachment from one’s immediate pragmatic concerns—whether Heidegger’s projected everyday “possibility,” Bergson’s “attention to life,” or Dōgen’s ordinary man’s (*bonbu* 凡夫) teleological view of time—enables a broader, panoramic apprehension of time. (By “teleological,” I mean a structure in which the meaning of the present is organized in relation to an end or purpose.) This expanded temporal awareness manifests itself as “stretched” time in Heidegger’s thought, a “panoramic view” in Bergson’s, and “*nikon*” in Dōgen’s. In all three cases, time is experienced as an undivided whole, wherein past, present, and future are recognized as equally integral to one’s being, equally proximate, and equally freed from instrumental valuation.

Early Heidegger’s Pauline Interpretation

A parallel structure can be observed in Heidegger’s early theological reflections, particularly in his 1920–21 Pauline interpretation, which anticipates several themes later developed in *Being and Time*.³⁴ In interpreting First Corinthians 7:29–32, Heidegger articulates a stance toward the world that closely resembles his later notion of anticipation of death. Of particular importance is Paul’s repeated construction ὡς μὴ (“as though not” / “as if not”): “But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.”³⁵

Heidegger emphasizes that Paul does not use “οὐ” (*ou*, negation) but “ὡς μὴ” (*hōs mē*, as though not), signaling an attitude of detachment rather than outright denial. Heidegger argues that Christian existence is characterized by an acute awareness of the “compressed temporality” (*zusammengedrängte Zeitlichkeit*), in which the believer must live constantly in “the Little... Left” (*das Nur-Noch*), without deferring action into an indefinite future. This urgency precludes “procrastination” (*Hinausschieben*) and necessitates a mode of being in which one is simultaneously engaged with the world and yet not wholly defined by it.³⁶

33. Minami (2008), 152–153.

34. Macquarrie (1994).

35. The English quotation is from 1 Corinthians 7: 29–31 (KJV). The Greek text is as follows: τοῦτο δέ φημι, ἀδελφοί, ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος τὸ λοιπὸν ἐστίν, ἵνα καὶ οἱ ἔχοντες γυναῖκας ὡς μὴ ἔχοντες ᾤσι, καὶ οἱ κλαίοντες ὡς μὴ κλαίοντες, καὶ οἱ χαίροντες ὡς μὴ χαίροντες, καὶ οἱ ἀγοράζοντες ὡς μὴ κατέχοντες, καὶ οἱ χρῶμενοι τῷ κόσμῳ τούτῳ ὡς μὴ καταχρώμενοι· παράγει γὰρ τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου.

36. Heidegger GA 60: 119–120. “There is little time left, the Christian lives constantly in the Little... Left (*das Nur-Noch*), which increases his distress. The compressed temporality (*zusammengedrängte*

This notion parallels Dōgen's critique of conventional attachment, wherein an unenlightened individual (*bonbu* 凡夫) perceives only certain moments as integral to the self while excluding others. In contrast, the enlightened perspective regards all moments as equally constitutive of one's being, without privileging one temporal moment over another.

In this expanded view of time, Heidegger sees the possibility of reinterpreting one's past, future, and present in a manner fundamentally distinct from the conventional, goal-oriented experience of time. Dōgen, likewise, argues that Buddhist enlightenment is not a matter of attaining some future state beyond one's present condition but rather a realization of time itself from a vantage point unbounded by teleological constraints. Ultimately, both thinkers locate the essence of their respective traditions—Christianity and Buddhism—not in doctrinal formulations but in this transformed understanding of time as a totality.

Differences between early Heidegger's and Dōgen's Conceptions of Time: the Limits of (1) Horizontality and (2) Detachment in the "Tool World" of *Being and Time*

In the preceding discussion, this paper has delineated the fundamental similarities between Dōgen's and Heidegger's conceptions of temporality. For both thinkers, the "ground" of time is characterized by (1) its role as the condition that renders the meaning of the present possible (horizontality) and (2) a state of detachment from an excessive preoccupation with the present, allowing for a more comprehensive, panoramic view of temporality.

Abe, however, contends that early Heidegger differs fundamentally from Dōgen, as Heidegger ultimately maintains an "anthropocentric" framework.³⁷ Here "anthropocentric" does not mean that Heidegger values human beings more than other beings. It means that the structure of world and time is still analyzed primarily from the standpoint of *Dasein*, that is, human existence. Although there are significant thematic parallels between the early Heidegger and Dōgen, Abe's claim is persuasive in this respect. This difference, I argue, stems from the fact that, in the early Heidegger, despite the emphasis placed on (1) horizontality and (2) detachment from immediate temporal concern in "time as ground," Heidegger's conception of temporality remains fundamentally anthropocentric and teleological.

(1) For the first point, in *Being and Time*, the boundaries of "time as ground" are limited to the individual's "birth" (*Geburt*) and "death" (*Tod*) (sz, 373). (2) For the

Zeitlichkeit) is constitutive of Christian religiosity: a "Little... left"; there is no time to procrastinate (*zum Hinausschieben*). Christians should be such that those who have wives have them in such a way that they do not have them, etc."

37. Abe (1992), 126–128.

second point, even when Heidegger describes the process by which extreme concern for the present is relinquished in anticipation of death, enabling the projection of authentic possibilities and the retrieval (*Wiederholung*) of the forgotten past, “time as ground” remains structured teleologically by an authentically projected purpose.

However, Heidegger’s posthumously published manuscripts (GA 82) indicate that by the mid-1930s, he had grown self-critical of these aspects of *Being and Time*. He acknowledges what he calls an “error” (*Irrtum*) in his earlier work, particularly in defining *Dasein* as an entity that exists “for the sake of itself” (*existierend umwollen seiner*). In 1936, he writes: “the deepest error (*Irrtum*) in *Being and Time*... is first of all the determination of *Dasein* as existing for the sake of itself (*existierend umwollen seiner*).... *Dasein* is neither for the sake of itself nor at all for the sake of (*es ist weder umwollen seiner noch überhaupt umwollen*). ‘For the sake of (*Umwollen seiner*)’ arises from the existential approach—care (*Sorge*)—instead of fighting (*Bestreitung*)” (GA 82: 174–175). “Connection of history (*Geschichte*) and world, but existentially bent (*existenzial verbogen*)! and narrowed to ‘tool’ world (*auf »Zeug« Welt verengt*)!” (GA 82: 132).

To restate this in relation to the core argument of this article, “time as ground” in *Being and Time* was conceived in an anthropocentric and teleological manner. This teleological structuring of the world concept in *Being and Time* is precisely what Lévinas critiques in his *Totality and Infinity* (1961). According to Lévinas, “activity does not borrow its meaning and value from a single, ultimate goal, as if the world formed a system of useful references, the end of which concerns our very existence.”³⁸ “The tools themselves, which are-in-order-to... (*sont-en-vue-de*...) become objects of pleasure (*jouissance*).”³⁹ Yet, significantly, prior to the criticism by Lévinas, Heidegger himself had already begun to critically reassess this teleological orientation of temporality in *Being and Time* by the mid-1930s and initiated the line of thinking that would later culminate in the fourfold. His work in the mid-1930s introduced the concept of “time-space” (*Zeit-Raum*) as a non-objective, non-anthropocentric articulation of time.

Abe and Heine, though for somewhat different reasons, question whether Heidegger’s later thought completely overcomes the anthropocentric limitations of his earlier philosophy and thus reaches the radically de-anthropocentric standpoint they find in Dōgen.⁴⁰ Abe maintains that even in Heidegger’s later thought, “the priority of openness over presence, that is, the priority of time over being, shows a trace of anthropocentrism.”⁴¹ However, this claim remains debatable. It is not

38. Lévinas (1961), 106–107.

39. Lévinas (1961), 106.

40. Abe (1992), 72, 126–128; Heine (1985), 101.

41. Abe (1992), 130. Abe’s criticism, however, requires some qualification. He does not simply maintain

evident that, even in his later philosophy, Heidegger's conception of temporality retains the residual anthropocentrism that Abe detects in the priority of openness over presence, or of time over being. This article interprets the issue raised by Abe in terms of what it calls a human-centered teleological structure of time. According to Jung, "Heidegger's later philosophical orientation would, however, make superfluous Abe's contention concerning Heidegger as contrasted with the Zen master Dōgen."⁴² Similarly, Stambaugh and Jenkins identify important affinities between later Heidegger and Dōgen, particularly in connection with the fourfold.⁴³

By engaging with recently published posthumous manuscripts, this paper argues that Heidegger's later conception of the fourfold represents an overcoming of the limitations of (1) wide horizontality and (2) the form of detachment found in *Being and Time*. This development marks a more radical move away from anthropocentrism, thereby reinforcing the similarities between his later thought and Dōgen's thought.

that later Heidegger remains anthropocentric in the same sense as the Heidegger of *Being and Time*. The issue raised by Abe is not whether later Heidegger moves beyond the anthropocentric limitations of *Being and Time*, but whether this movement is sufficiently radical to eliminate the remaining privilege accorded to the human relation to time. By contrast, this paper interprets this residual privilege as closely connected with the teleological structure of temporality found in *Being and Time* and argues that later Heidegger's move beyond this structure provides grounds for reconsidering Abe's diagnosis of residual anthropocentrism.

42. Jung (1987), 244. Jung does not, however, develop this observation into a detailed analysis of later Heidegger's conception of time. His remark establishes the possibility of reconsidering Abe's criticism but does not by itself demonstrate how the temporal structure of later Heidegger overcomes the specific problem identified by Abe.

43. Stambaugh (1990), 100. According to Stambaugh, "the real affinities between Dōgen and Heidegger lie... in conceptions such as sustained exertion and perdurance (*Austrag, Inständigkeit*), thinking, gathering and the Fourfold." She also speaks, with qualification, of "Dōgen's version of the Fourfold." Stambaugh does not thereby claim that Dōgen has the same fourfold as Heidegger; she emphasizes a structural affinity between them.

Stambaugh identifies a structural affinity between Dōgen and Heidegger's fourfold, but she does not develop in detail the relation between the fourfold and Heidegger's later conception of time. Drawing on recently published posthumous manuscripts, however, it is possible to show that the "fourth dimension of time" constitutes the temporal structure of the fourfold itself. This, in turn, makes it possible to reconsider, at the level of Heidegger's later conception of time itself, the affinity with Dōgen that Stambaugh identifies primarily in the fourfold rather than in their respective explicit conceptions of time.

Jenkins (2018), 168. According to Jenkins, "the fourfold is a crucial bridge to enjoin the two philosophers." Stambaugh's and Jenkins's formulations support the view that the fourfold provides an especially important point of contact between later Heidegger and Dōgen. They should not, however, be taken to mean that Stambaugh and Jenkins have thereby established that the fourfold completely resolves Abe's objection concerning anthropocentrism. The more specific claim advanced in this paper is that, through this article's examination of Heidegger's recently published posthumous manuscripts concerning time-space, the fourth dimension of time, and the fourfold, the development of Heidegger's later conception of temporality provides grounds for reconsidering the residual anthropocentrism that Abe still detects in later Heidegger.

Commonalities in Later Heidegger's and Dōgen's Conceptions of Time: the Radicalization of Horizontality and Detachment in the Fourfold

(1) For the first point, in Heidegger's later thought, the temporal horizon of the future and the past extends beyond the individual's birth and death—limitations characteristic of *Being and Time*—to encompass the entirety of “the history of being,” thereby integrating, rather than outright rejecting, the framework of *Being and Time*. Heidegger himself acknowledges this shift already in the mid-1930s in his posthumous manuscript (GA 82), where he critically reflects on the limitations of his earlier existential perspective: “history and time-space, the “mistake” (*Fehler*) here is the limitation to the extension (*Erstreckung*) of the “in-between” (*Inzwischen*) (existential)! Birth and death only as the end of this in-between, where they themselves belong to history!” (GA 82: 132) Heidegger critiques this existential limitation as “the arrest (*Verhaftung*) in “temporality” (*Zeitlichkeit*)—care (*Sorge*)” (GA 82: 132) and laments that “the existential orientation is too narrow (*eng*) and too poor (*dürftig*)!” (GA 82: 132).

By contrast, in Dōgen's thought, the scope of time is not constrained by anthropocentric existential parameters but is inherently vast from the beginning. In “Uji,” he states that even *jōroku hasshaku* 丈六八尺 (symbolizing the Buddha) is time, as are “the great earth and the empty sky” (*daiji kokū* 大地虚空).⁴⁴

(2) For the second point, a crucial shortcoming of *Being and Time* is its inadequate detachment from purposefulness, even in anticipation of death. While anticipation of death affords a broader perspective on time (*Erstreckung*) compared to the myopic engagement of *das Man* (the everyday absorption in the present), it ultimately remains bound to the projection of particular existential possibilities. Consequently, *Being and Time* does not fully overcome the instrumentalization of time, as it continues to be oriented toward an authentically projected future. “Only being free for death gives *Dasein* its absolute goal and knocks existence into its finitude” (sz, 384). In contrast, Heidegger's conception of the fourfold moves beyond this purposive framework. As already mentioned, Heidegger critiques the earlier, objectivistic conception of the world, describing it as a “tool world” that is “bent” and “narrowed” (GA 82: 132).

In Heidegger's later thought, the fourfold signifies a mode of being in which things are inseparably entwined with earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. The thing is surrounded by the four, reflecting the four, within the time of the fourfold. Heidegger calls this movement of “time as ground” involved in the fourfold “the fourth dimension” (*die vierte Dimension*) of time in his posthumous manuscripts. “The fourth dimension” should not be understood as an additional measurable

44. Dōgen's original text in Masutani (2006), 252.

dimension, like a fourth spatial axis. It names the gathering (*Sammlung*) or nearness (*Nähe*) that lets the past, the present, and the future belong together in the first place. This may be described as an awareness of being situated within the whole temporal context of their mutual belonging. Although “Time and Being” (1962) ostensibly retains some terminological continuity with *Being and Time*, its fundamental difference is that time is no longer conceived in humanly teleological terms.⁴⁵

The precise relationship between Heidegger’s later temporal theories and the fourfold has traditionally remained ambiguous. However, an examination of recently published posthumous manuscripts clarifies that “the fourth dimension” of time is the time that constitutes the fourfold. Heidegger states that “the fourth” dimension of time is the “authentic and only dimension of the fourfold” (GA 98: 172). Heidegger also writes: “The fourfoldness (*Vierheit*) of the dimension of time in the sense of the inter-divorcing (*unterschiedlich*) time-space is based on the fourfold of inter-divorce (*Geviert des Unterschieds*) but does not coincide with it; rather, the full essencing (*Wesen*) of time is in the fouring fourfold (*das vierige Geviert*)” (GA 99: 139). Each element of the fourfold—earth, sky, divinities, and mortals—is possible within this “fourth dimension” of time.

Dōgen, by contrast, does not conceive of time in teleological terms from the outset. His assertion that pine trees and bamboos are also time reflects a fundamentally non-instrumentalized view of temporality. Pine trees and bamboos can be taken in multiple senses, like shoes in Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art,” or the jug in his lecture “The Thing” (*Das Ding*). Thus, an examination of Heidegger’s later work, particularly in light of his posthumous manuscripts, reveals that he ultimately moves beyond the anthropocentrism of his earlier theory of time, bringing his later thought into even closer alignment with Dōgen’s de-anthropocentric temporality.

The Uncontrollability of Time as Ground and the Awe it Elicits

As discussed above, Minami argues that once an objective is established, it becomes easier to structure and organize time as a means to achieve that goal. However, in the absence of a defined purpose, the temporal sequence becomes ambiguous—analogous to the way one easily forgets the order of passing scenery observed from a train when a defined destination is absent. In Dōgen’s thought, “time as ground” corresponds to this latter, indeterminate form of temporality, in which sequential order remains unclear. Ordinarily, such ambiguous experiences of time are regarded as lapses in memory, errors, or distortions that should be

45. Inoue (2015) also sees parallels between *Time and Being* (1962) and Dōgen.

rectified through accurate recollection and documentation. For Dōgen, however, this seemingly chaotic temporality constitutes the fundamental reality of time itself, whereas an orderly conception of time is a secondary, artificial construction derived from this primordial ground of time.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes “significance” (*Bedeutsamkeit*) as the temporal mechanism that enables *Dasein* to interpret a being—a hammer—as what it is. However, in anticipation of death, familiar, routinely ordered time is radically dismantled. Through this existential confrontation, an authentic possibility is projected, the past is retrieved as an authentic past, and the entire order of time is reorganized. This implies that, as in Dōgen’s view, a more fundamental form of time underlies sequential, teleological time, serving as the very condition for its emergence. During the period of *Being and Time*, however, both everyday time and authentic temporality were framed within a teleological structure. Heidegger’s focus at this time was not on the dynamic process through which time undergoes reconfiguration—what he later refers to as the “unity” (*Einheit*) of time—nor on the more fundamental, pervasive temporality that underlies and enables these transformations. In a posthumous manuscript written in his later years, Heidegger self-critiques *Being and Time* as follows: “First of all, in ‘Being and Time’ the question of the ‘unity’ (*Einheit*) of the three ecstasies is not discussed anywhere - because the unity, that first one, cannot be grasped from any of them” (GA 82: 250). According to Heidegger, such “unity” is “the fourth dimension of time”: “‘Time’—it has not one and not three, but four ‘dimensions.’ The fourth, however, is the first. The first here does not mean the series of ordinal numbers, but the essencing in the event (*das Wesende im Ereignis*). This determines the essencing of the dimensional (*das Wesen des Dimensionalen*). The first is the lighting-covering (distant) eventful inter-divorcing ‘closeness’ (*die lichtend-bergende [fernende] ereignishaft unterschiedliche »Nähe«*), in which an own arrival (*Ankommen*) and therefore initially the “future” and the known characters are emphasized” (GA 82: 250).

By the mid-1930s, “The Origin of the Work of Art” reinterpreted the “significance” of *Being and Time*, reducing it to a discourse primarily concerned with “usefulness” (*Dienlichkeit*) (GA 5: 18). Heidegger then introduces a deeper stratum—“reliability” (*Verlässlichkeit*)—which underlies and makes possible the domain of usefulness. This shift is exemplified in his discussion of Van Gogh’s famous painting of shoes, where the depicted shoes are not merely understood in terms of their instrumental function (“to wear”), but as things that belong to a more profound reality of the “earth” (*Erde*) and the “world” (*Welt*). Although “The Origin of the Work of Art” does not explicitly address the temporality that underpins this dimension of reliability, it is this deeper aspect of time that Heidegger would later explore more fully in his lecture “Time and Being” and posthumous writings. In these later works, Heidegger turns his attention to a pervasive, pre-objective temporality that

underlies the teleological, goal-oriented structure of time. He refers to this as “the fourth dimension of time,” a notion that is also central to his conception of the fourfold. This form of temporality bears striking similarities to Dōgen’s notion of aimless time.

This pervasive aspect of time resists objectification and instrumental control.⁴⁶ For both Heidegger and Dōgen, this fundamental nature of time is intimately tied to a certain religiosity. It entails an awareness of what exceeds human control, as articulated in Dōgen’s notion of *kū* (emptiness) and Heidegger’s notion of the “divinities” within the fourfold. Rather, they may be understood here as naming the dimension of what exceeds human control and gives measure to human existence).⁴⁷ This recognition fosters a sense of awe before what exceeds human grasp, along with an attitude of attentiveness and engagement with this religiosity to the extent possible.⁴⁸

Neither Dōgen nor later Heidegger treats enlightenment or the divine simply as a future goal to be attained through purposive human effort. Both emphasize attentiveness to what exceeds human control. In this respect, their thought challenges the treatment of the present merely as a means to a future attainment. Heidegger’s later notion of “waiting” (*das Warten*) and Dōgen’s practice of “just sitting” (*shikantaza* 只管打坐) may thus be read as forms of openness that cannot be reduced to the pursuit of a predetermined future goal and that also cultivate an awareness of the overwhelming character of the reality already present. As Tsunoda emphasizes, “just” in Dōgen’s “just sitting” does not mean that an ego performs *zazen* (sitting) to become a Buddha. Rather, it indicates a non-teleological practice in which sitting is not subordinated to an external goal. In this respect, Dōgen’s “just sitting”—described by Tsunoda as “sitting sits sitting”—may be read alongside Heidegger’s later formulations, such as “the world worlds” (*die Welt weltet*), insofar as both displace the event from the purposive activity of a subject.⁴⁹

46. This may be similar to how Freud’s unconscious remains elusive to direct conscious manipulation.

47. See Todoroki (2023), 462. “The inclusion of the ‘divine’ among these four may seem particularly arbitrary. However, the acceptance of ‘things’ as ‘things’ by ‘human beings’ presupposes the acceptance of the constraints of ‘earth’ and ‘sky’ as one’s destiny. And this is nothing less than the recognition of what is not at one’s will, the domination of the Other that gives one one’s own norm. If we call such an occasion ‘the divine’ as sacred and inviolable, then ‘earth,’ ‘sky,’ and ‘mortality’ are inseparable from ‘the divine.’”

48. Cf. Virilio (1990), 152. Paul Virilio argues that modern technology fosters the illusion that everything can be subject to control, thereby dulling our sensitivity to the very world we inhabit, which is filled with coincidences. He suggests that a return to phenomenology—reawakening the sensitivity inherent in human beings—may allow for the recovery of a lost sense of religiosity.

49. Tsunoda (2020) quotes the following words of Dōgen’s from *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki* volume 6: “Those who study Buddhism should not study Buddhism for their own sake. They should learn Buddhism for the sake of Buddhism.” According to Tsunoda, this “for the sake of” here is not the ordinary “for the sake of.” There is no “I” (ego). It is “for the sake of” without the “self.” This is what “just” (*tada*) means [in Dōgen’s “just sitting” (*shikantaza; tada suwaru*)]. Tsunoda describes this “just” as follows: “It is not that ‘I’ do ‘zazen’ and become a ‘Buddha,’” rather, “sitting sits sitting” (*zazen ga zazen o zazen suru*) and “buddha buddhas

Conclusion

This article has examined Dōgen's and Heidegger's conceptions of time through the distinction between the "figure" and the "ground" of time. Both thinkers reject the view that time consists merely of a succession of isolated present moments, understood here as "figure." Instead, for both, each moment or being becomes meaningful only within a broader temporal field, understood here as "ground." Yet, with respect to both horizontality and detachment, Heidegger's *Being and Time* remains limited. Its temporal horizon is still centered on *Dasein*, and its detachment from everyday concern remains bound to the projection of inauthentic and authentic possibilities. By contrast, Dōgen's *uji* is already more radically non-anthropocentric and non-teleological. In Dōgen, each being is constituted as an individual time, while at the same time these beings are mutually related within "the entire world" (*jinkai*), a non-teleological and all-encompassing temporal field. Later Heidegger's thought deepens these two points. With time understood as a gathering that exceeds human control and instrumental use, the fourfold and the fourth dimension of time expand horizontality beyond *Dasein* and radicalize detachment from instrumental and purposive understandings of time. In this respect, later Heidegger's conception of time may be understood as moving closer to Dōgen's. Thus, both Dōgen and the later Heidegger invite us to understand time not as something to be fully mastered, but as the ground within which beings appear and to which human beings are called to respond with detachment, receptivity, and awe.

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buddha" (*hotoke ga hotoke o hotoke suru*). This is similar to later Heidegger's "the world worlds" (*die Welt weltet*) after Heidegger criticized his own concept of the world based on "for the sake of" in *Being and Time*.

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Abbreviations

GA Heidegger, Martin. *Gesamtausgabe*. Vittorio Klostermann, 1975–. References give the volume number followed by the page number.

sz Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit*. References are to the standard German pagination reproduced in the margins of the English translation by Joan Stambaugh; see Heidegger (1996).

PHILOSOPHY AS CONVIVIALITY



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THE TRUTH of philosophy is measured, in the end, by its contribution to the good life. The purpose of philosophy rests in that pursuit. As a discipline, philosophy is instrumental for clarity of thought, expansion of the horizons of reason, contact with the ideas of the past, appreciation of the ebb and flow of rationality, guidance in judgment, a foundation for law, and a common forum for dialogue among cultures and moralities. But its crowning purpose is the pursuit of the good life, which itself is useless.

To describe the pursuit of truth as a way of life may seem parasitical on the philosophical tradition, a kind of pale shadow, even misappropriation of the traditional meaning of the word, especially to the academic specialization that has appropriated the name. The exact opposite is the case. If thinking clearly about what it means to live a good life and looking to that thinking for motivation to pursue it are the purpose of philosophy, then the entire wisdom of humankind, accumulated in the past and still in the making, is the final judge of the contributions of certified professionals who monitor philosophical traditions proper.

Now without some idea of what we mean by “the good life,” we have no way of judging what contributes to it and what does not. On the face of it, we only really seem to understand what it means in hindsight of having achieved it, or at least of acknowledging the achievement of others. This is hardly to be wondered at. Like any ideal, the idea of the good life is not a certitude that can be defined in the abstract and then inflicted on behavior. It is explored, identified, criticized, and refined in its practice, expressed in conviction but forever out of reach of certitude.

And yet, like Plato's Idea of the Good, it remains more real than any of its concrete realizations—almost transcendental.

What makes the good life good is not only determined by *how* we define the good but also by *why* we choose to pursue it. For my part, I believe that the quest of the good life is an essential part of being human, a natural impulse of the conscious mind. If it were merely a matter of submitting to the demands of coexisting in society with other individuals, whether out of rational conviction or trust in a higher authority, or through some combination of the two, the choice to practice the good would have to be seen as an imposition on our inborn human desires, a regulation of instincts that, left to themselves, would corrupt the social order at every opportunity. The only way the quest of the good life can itself be embraced as a good is if it is seen to be so deeply rooted in the desires that define us as human that it can neither be eradicated nor satisfied once and for all. The aboriginal goodness of that ambiguous and inconsistent jumble of impulses that make up our humanity is a different kind of goodness from the moral restraints put on the baser of our instincts. It is an unwavering trust in the goodness of our nature, a fundamental option without which our provisional ideals of the good, however critically reasoned, would never amount to more than an imposition.

The idea of a good life is universal but not uniform. A good life can never embrace the completeness of *the* good life. Its universality is not a fixed concept; it reveals itself only in a plurality of changeable forms, all of them culturally and epochally specific. Whether one speaks of it as the triumph of reason over appetite or the flourishing of the self or social harmony, as *eudaimonía* or *beatitudo* or living according to nature, these generalizations do not constitute an objective "good" that can be defined, codified, or maximized in cultural institutions. They point to an ideal whose truth resides in their continued practice and refinement.

I have settled on the word *conviviality* to describe the ideal of the good life. I do so without any intention of removing the ambiguities in the idea of the good life, to substitute one working definition with any other, or to make a composite of traditional descriptions of the concept. This would only express something unknown with something still more unknown, *ignotum per ignotius*. Rather, I will take conviviality as a guiding fiction whose truth is entirely dependent on whether and how far it guides us or distracts us from aligning the philosophical vocation with the pursuit of the good life. In short, I mean to reclaim the purpose of philosophy as the pursuit of conviviality.

The academic captivity of philosophy has threatened its primordial vocation. The combination of training for careers in existing institutions and standards of accreditation for publication have constrained the style of philosophy so tightly that whole libraries of the classics of the intellectual history of the West, not to mention that of the wider world, can be denied admission. Where philosophy

survives and flourishes, it is not because of such institutionalization but in spite of it. That said, my primary frame of reference here remains the philosophical traditions with which I have some familiarity. The problem is that, again and again, questions about the good life overflow that frame. It may help us refine a language for structuring our thoughts, but ultimately philosophical expression has to be translated into more vernacular discourse if we are to measure its truth. Literature, art, folk wisdom, ritual, scientific exploration, technological developments, and the evolution of common sense are not mere resources for philosophy to reinforce its architectural ambitions. Nor are they mere objects for philosophical principles to rearrange into some kind of general order. They are the building materials for which philosophy is only a cornerstone. They point to “more things in Heaven and Earth” than are dreamt of in our philosophies. Without attention to the vernacular, any ideal of the good life is no more than an irrelevant distraction, a castle in the sky. The good life cannot be the measure of a philosophy’s truth if the measure is not taken in the first place.

These past weeks I have been browsing the bookshelves scattered around my house looking for hints of how to proceed with reclaiming the vocation to philosophy. As I looked over the titles randomly, I realized that there is hardly a single book that I have considered important in my life that does not have something to say about conviviality. From the ancient world of the Mediterranean and East Asia, to the medieval scholastics and mystics, to the poets and novelists I admire most, to the idealists and post-industrial social critics—all of them have something to say about what it means to pursue a good life, each in their own idiom and mode of thought. Their different models for structuring society and educating its institutions to the service of the good life are as varied as can be. But the impulse behind their ideals of the good life is as common as can be.

Conviviality, then, is not a single idea but a scattering of ideas reflecting off one another. Like a constellation in the night sky, its composite image is specific to the cultural and historic circumstances of those who contemplate it. What the Greeks saw as Orion’s Belt, the ancient Egyptians linked to the dying and rising god Osiris, the Inuit to a legend of three hunters who got lost and perished in the ice, and the Lakota saw as a great hand reaching across the sky. As a way to navigate the complex domain of philosophy’s quest of the good life, I would like to triangulate the notion of conviviality from three thinkers: Pierre Hadot, James Hillman, and Ivan Illich. Their different perspectives are more than variations on a single theme. Not only does each point of view alert us to blind spots in the others; it protects the notion of conviviality from captivity to any one point of view. When Jaspers highlighted *Kommunikation* as the hallmark of philosophy, he meant to reject the idea of a shared horizon or a common authority in favor of a joint struggle with

uncertainty. The three thinkers I have singled out are of one mind in this regard: certitude is the grave of the good life.

I begin with Pierre Hadot, whose 1987 book *Philosophy as a Way of Life* is an eloquent challenge to redirect the theoretical discourse of philosophy away from its self-containment towards “spiritual exercises” aimed at transforming one’s way of seeing the world and appropriating the gift of human life. He was critical of the evolution of the primary role of the philosopher from that of representing an exemplary style of life to that of a specialist who trains other specialists in a carefully studied language and logic. He considered it historical vandalism to represent the philosophers of the past as career professors.

Hadot’s frame of reference for philosophy’s contribution to the good life is a careful analysis of varieties of diagnosis and therapeutic regimens for regulating the human condition as found in ancient Hellenistic philosophy from Socrates to the Epicureans, Stoics, Skeptics, and Neoplatonists. The “spiritual exercises” he had in mind went beyond the external asceticisms and cathartic contemplations of the Orphic rituals that thinkers like Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Plato had woven into their philosophies. What interested him above all were practices like the discipline of *prosochē*, the intense efforts continually to be “aware” of *what* one is doing and *where* in the cosmic scheme of things one is doing it; or meditation on death and the rehearsal of evil and misfortune; or the continued examination of conscience and regulation of desire. He was particularly drawn to the cultivation of detachment from self-importance, an expansion of one’s ordinary habits of thought by means of what he called a “view from above.” Through the exercise of imagination particularly evident among the Platonists, Stoics, and Epicureans, one’s perspective is opened to the vastness of the universe where one’s thoughts can soar freely into multiple possible worlds, where the interconnectivity of all things reveals itself, where one can break free of the superfluities of life and leave behind our crippling preoccupation with the weakness and shortcomings of human existence. This was the sense in which the Cynics referred to themselves as *epískopoi*, the “overseers” who sought to place themselves above the absurdities of life. All of this lay in the background of the surprising exhortation of the normally rationalistic Aristotle at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the good life as the flourishing (*eudaimonía*) of contemplation (*thēoría*) and practical wisdom (*phrónēsis*).

For these thinkers of the Hellenistic period, philosophy was an art of living, a way of being. Hadot traces the consideration of philosophy as primarily philosophical discourse from modern times to the Middle Ages. Early Christianity, he argues, did not hesitate to present itself as a philosophy precisely because “philosophy” had been conceived in antiquity as a way of life. As Christian philosophy evolved into a “servant of theology” and provider of conceptual, logical, and metaphysical foundations, it became increasingly abstract and theoretical. Exiled from philosophy,

spiritual exercise found its home in Neoplatonic and Christian mysticism. In time, the classroom became the temple of philosophical education, professionals training professionals, or, as Schopenhauer put it in his wonderfully acerbic wit, “a mere fencing in front of a mirror.” Philosophy as a way of life was degraded to the way of a professional career.

For Hadot, the renewed emphasis on transforming one’s perspective of the world that we see in thinkers like Bergson and Husserl, the insistence on bonding theory to practice in Hegel and Marx, or the existentialist attempt of Heidegger and others to engage freedom and action in the philosophical process, is primarily a matter of manicuring philosophical discourse. And unlike Foucault’s project of the “care of the self,” which drew directly on his work, Hadot was not simply concerned with a reconstruction of the *withinness* of the individual person but also with its overcoming and opening to the totality of the *withoutness* in human society, nature and the cosmos. He pursued the good life, we might say, as a transformation of the convivium.

Hadot himself was not overly optimistic about redirecting the focus of academic philosophy from the study of doctrines and techniques of argumentation to questions about the good life. Nevertheless, in addition to guiding students to imitate the “spiritual exercises” of exemplary thinkers of the past through inquiry, dialogue, and silence, he felt it necessary to remove career certification from its dominant position and replace it with ethics in Descartes’s sense of “the practice of wisdom.”

This brings us to the second philosopher in our triangulation of the notion of conviviality, James Hillman. For a few short months while Hillman was finishing up his Yale University Terry Lectures, published in 1975 as *Re-Visioning Psychology*, I was living in Zurich and had ample opportunity to discuss his assault on established psychology and its views of human nature. Those hours sitting around the Spring House or nursing a beer in a local café had a stimulating effect I remember to this day. I found the dizzying pace of his mind and the unconventional vocabulary in which he expressed his ideas at once suggestive, perplexing, and liberating. I still do.

Hillman was appalled at the tendency of psychology to envision itself as a kind of metaphysical *regina scientiarum* into which all other disciplines could be collapsed without remainder. He set out to re-vision such psychologism by “seeing through” the fanciful assumptions it imposes on the primal mystery of “soul.” To psychologize, he countered, is to engage in “soul-making” or seeing through the things of life as windows to a fuller and more genuine experience of life. This has two important consequences. First, it exposes the perennial “nominalism” in philosophy as it disempowers language by turning it into *nomina* that erase soul from the language of the psyche and turn its words into “implements in the hand

of specialists.” He cites Bergson to the effect that the flowing, mythical dimension to life is frozen solid by the ruling modes of psychological thought, condemning the very symbols that metaphysics had set out to replace but which are needed to relate sympathetically to the world and to others.

Second, soul-making frees itself of the shackles of the monotheistic “heroic ego,” the more freely to roam the borderlands of conscious and unconscious mind, that uninhibited realm of the imaginal whose multidimensional productions give depth and resonance to human interiority. For Hillman, the good life is not grounded in a reassurance of order and harmony and meaning through unassailable concepts but an awakening to the indefinite and chaotic unreason by which soul reveals itself. The psychologizing he advocated seeks to appropriate the imagery of this twilight world by “personifying” it. That is, rather than seeing the inner figures of fantasies and dreams as projections of the ego or a scrambled residue of its memories, he insisted on their autonomy as windows to the diversity of the psyche. It was not a question of positing multiple egos, but rather of rejecting the very idea of a governing or unifying ego. In this regard, he refused to dismiss the polytheism of the ancient Greeks as a primitive and literal theology, approaching it instead as an imaginative map of a dark and mysterious inner life that no monotheistic principle could express.

Hillman’s explicit critique of all forms of philosophical “personalism” entailed not only a dethroning of the imperial self but a “dehumanizing” of soul, a rejection of the assumption that the inner life can be evaluated primarily in terms of human interests, personal development, and individual happiness. Ironically, he later came to acknowledge the pressure of thinkers like Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein to distance philosophy from human flourishing in favor of truth and logical clarity—but with one important difference. Hillman would restore the good life as the measure of truth precisely by disassociating it from *exclusively human* good.

Re-Visioning Psychology was focused on freeing the idea of therapy from the model of medical diagnosis and treatment in order to reinforce contact with the imagery and myth-making functions of the psyche. But in subsequent writings he came to recognize a shadow of anthropocentrism hanging over his ideas. Therapeutic obsession with the individual had tended to privatize what in fact were more collective pathologies in the social and ecological spheres. To express the shift, he turned to the classical notion of the *anima mundi* to mark a break with the bonding of soul to the skin-bound individual in order to reconsider the depth of the outer world of nature and expose the shallow glitter of efficiency in the way societies reconstruct their habitat.

Ten years after *Re-Visioning Psychology*, Hillman published a book he called *The Soul’s Code* in which he proposed the presence of an inner *daimōn* to persons and

things, an innate impulse to realization. Whatever is so ensouled, he argued, can never be seen as a mere resource. He turned Kant's maxim that human beings must never be treated as a mere "means" on its head, inviting us to draw a straight line from the psychology of persons to the psychology of things. He came to see the pathology of persons reflected both in the pathology of the clinical institutions that were entrusted with their care, as well as in the institutionally sanctioned desecrations of the temple of the natural world. Therapy, accordingly, must be more than an instrument for private self-cultivation or the manipulation of cultural development by self-appointed experts. It must be directed toward a renewed attentiveness and response to the call of the *anima* that guides fate the way an acorn guides the emergence of the oak, and away from the temptation to *animus* that fractures and isolates. (I write this with a smile, because it reminds me of the words he used to advise me to revise a manuscript I had submitted to him for a series he was editing.) To Hillman's way of thinking, the good life was the pursuit of soul in the whole of the convivium.

It was Ivan Illich, a contemporary of James Hillman and one whom he considered "such a beautifully radical thinker," who gave the word *conviviality* its currency in the 1970s and 1980s. I choose him as the third triangulating point for considering the restoration of philosophy's service to the good life. His lifelong critique of modern institutions was aimed at their role in diminishing our capacity for living well by organizing the entirety of the social economy toward the advertisement of a "better life," whose definition was a function of the survival and growth of those very institutions. It was only through a deliberate renunciation of their modes of valuing and disvaluing the tools for managing things and persons and the natural world that we will be able to return to the gratuity and blessings of a life made to the measure of the ordinary freedoms of ordinary people.

Although Illich was convinced that the special way in which philosophers express the mentality and the cultural certainties of their age merits close attention, he maintained a healthy skepsis towards the abstractions and conceptualizations that from the time of the ancient Greeks served to isolate philosophy from the concrete imagery and feelings towards the body and the sense of cosmic belonging they were seeking to replace. He set out to examine the slow evolution from direct and autonomous contact with the things of life to their transformation into utilities best managed by experts certified by the institutions who profit from their providence. In the Christian West, that process is reflected both in the development of an increasingly disembodied, dogmatized theology and in the turn of manufacturing to industrial production. These are huge generalizations, of course, which gloss over the more careful pace at which Illich takes them. Behind it all is his puzzlement over how we have come to live in a world that people of an earlier age would have considered "unfeeling brutality and absolute nonsense."

In his 1973 book, *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich defined conviviality in terms of our relationship with tools and other human beings. It was for his criticism of social control over the tools that manage the demand for learning, health, and the consumption of natural resources that he is best known. He saw schools, hospitals, and transportation in post-industrial society as subject to the same degeneration into “counterproductivity” as Latin Christendom had undergone from the Middle Ages through the Reformation: the institution grows beyond a certain threshold and it begins to promote the opposite of what it was founded to promote, and to diminish the ordinary capacity it was designed to supplement. In this way he set up a confrontation between tools that liberate and systems that dominate the pursuit of a good life. His target was a spiritual malaise deeply rooted in modern civilizations’ relationship to its own institutions. He called this a “radical monopoly” in the sense that it was not bound to any particular enterprise but to modes of thought elevated to the level of unassailable certitude.

Although Illich was aware that the solution lay in the political will to bring technology under control, he did not offer much in the way of a blueprint for change. But beneath the surface and between the lines of his social criticism flowed a spirituality that many critics have confused with a bleary-eyed romanticism. He understood it rather as the hallmark of philosophy’s commitment to the good life. In the end, the change he hoped for would not come through legislation or the regulation of institutions but only through a transformation of perspective—a contemplative conversion. The locus of such conversion is always personal but never private. Hence the frequent reference in his final writings and interviews to the ideal of *philia* and the importance of the *convivium* or *symposium* as a commons where friends gather to discuss the things that matter to them the most. It is there, he hoped, that we might cultivate the common sense about the good, which he came increasingly to understand as what “fits,” what is appropriate. He was skeptical of shared values as a universal coin, as well as of the institutions that minted them. He, too, was pessimistic about the possibility of reforming the modern university and came to consider gathering around a podium less suitable for philosophy than gathering around a bottle of wine.

In addition to friendship, a second theme that Illich turned to late in life was that of protecting the notion of ecology not only from the temptations of mass consumption but also from the control of experts. He resisted the idea of reducing the study of the relationship between living things and their habitat to a system to be analyzed and regulated uniformly across cultures. As I understand it, this was the motivation behind his renewed interest in the body. When he and his colleague Barbara Duden visited the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in 1986, Illich had begun to question the ways in which the senses had lost their direct connection to the good life. On a long walk, we envisaged a series of seminars to be held in

Europe and Japan on the “expropriation of the senses” and the involuntary asceticisms of modern life. I offered to write a working paper on the topic, which I in fact finished some years afterwards. But as the sizeable tumor on his neck, already evident at the time of his visit, worsened, our plans evaporated.

I had first met Illich in 1963 in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he had opened an “open university” that was just finishing its first round of courses. I had qualified for participation in a national anti-illiteracy campaign and was living in a poor village to the north of Mexico City. He took the time to sit down with me and vent his frustrations with the Peace Corps and other initiatives for “developing” the “underdeveloped” cultures of Latin America. I knew at once I was in the presence of an extraordinary mind. Aside from a few letters exchanged over the years, we only met briefly again in London in 1970 where we discussed, of all things, a sixteenth-century alchemical text. To this day, his image is still fresh in my mind when I read his writings, which retain for me a freshness all their own.



The three points of triangulation from which I have tried to survey the idea of philosophy as a contribution to the good life may, I am afraid, present a muddled picture without any clear outlines of what the proper role of the philosopher might look like in the concrete. If anything, I may have made it seem that philosophy’s failure to engage its own *Lebenswelt*, which Husserl had identified as the crisis of the modern age, is mainly an issue for the *scriptorium* and the *oratorium*. But here is the problem. The reason we have trouble conceiving philosophy as the pursuit of the good life in the concrete is that the scholarship that speaks to that pursuit has wrapped itself up in an idle sentimentalism. The philosophical tradition as we have inherited it is an accumulation of ideas *about* the “reality” of life that does not actually *acquaint* us with philosophy as part of life itself.

To reattach philosophy to everyday experience through personal discipline, to restore the expectation of mystery to a pathologically demystified world, to campaign for greater autonomy from the institutions that superintend the tools governing our relationship to ourselves, society, and the natural world—all of this begins to sound like one set of impotent abstractions replacing another when we turn from the criticisms of modern life to our efforts to address them. Between our everyday perceptions and feelings and habits of engagement with life and our aspiration to a good and truly convivial life there stand immovable, inescapable, and monstrously controlling structures that philosophy is powerless to alter. The pessimistic wisdom of Will and Ariel Durant’s verdict that nature and history define the good as “that which survives” haunts our every effort. It seems that the

more light social criticism sheds on our condition the more our ideals are washed out of the picture.

The idea of unraveling the immense interlocking of forces that keep modern civilization in place, or even simply opting out of it, is delusional in the extreme. The systems we depend on for day-to-day existence are the very systems we depend on to criticize that dependency. The thick walls of the stronghold close in about us, and the best we can do is pelt it with petty complaints that crumble to dust when they strike the wall. There is nowhere to hide and no choice but to give in.

In this context, the argument that philosophy had best keep its distance from ethics collapses as a generalization, but not before exposing the structural faults of traditional normative morality. We cannot further risk capitulation to the diffusion of a tacit, unexamined ethic in the political action that continues to distort our relationship to the things of life. Rather than purify philosophy of ethics, we can no longer afford not to reconstruct a more convivial approach to morality. It is becoming increasingly apparent that a simple faith in the capacity of the ruling institutions of technological society to cure their own disorders and reverse their own excesses is a naïve superstition that endangers the whole of the convivium, both human and ecological.

I am not talking about further policing private morality or reinforcing international legal systems and universal ethical principles. It is not a morality of rules, embedded in technical vocabulary, that will guide philosophy back to its pursuit of the good life, but a renewed attentiveness to the “ought” or sense of “obligation” as a normal human sensitivity. This is not a private affair but a thoroughly convivial one that sets its sights on chastising the varieties of public immorality that pass as ethically neutral “mores” in the ongoing “progress” of civilization. Without boundaries, ethics is meaningless. Still, the establishment of uniform boundaries engraved in maxims that pretend to transcend the epochally and culturally specific conditions of the human community is more prone to abuse than an ethic grounded in spontaneous moral sentiment whose awareness cannot be legislated or acted on vicariously by one segment of society for another. The spontaneous impulse to convivial good is a discovery that is made personally or it is not made. The tempering of universal norms and their imposition through law or custom are grounded in a distrust of such impulses. Philosophy’s commitment to the good life comes down, in the end, to a question of a love of human wisdom and a trust in its guidance to regulate our counterconvivial impulses.

The language of conflict resolution, individual rights, and litigated justice becomes instrumental for maintaining a deliberately constructed competitive society that requires them to protect itself from imploding. The philosophical release of ethics from the captivity of social law entails the freedom to encourage alternative modes of thought about how to structure society without the inbred aggressions

that threaten simple conviviality. It is only through a plurality of experiments that the definition of “needs” can be liberated from the idea of “affordability.” What we *need* is to explore ways to replace involuntary asceticism with deliberate renunciation of excess and a return to the importance of “sufficiency.” Without viable and more convivial alternatives to the addiction to betterment through greater consumption of the latest goods, services, and information, moral sentiments of the good life will float higher and higher into the ether of sentimentalism.

Aside from the broadside assault on modern civilization implied in what I have been saying above, I would like to target a more specific threat, namely, artificial intelligence, a microcosm of the institutional resistance to associating philosophy with the good life.

AI has already sounded the death knell for the monopoly of the lecture hall where teachers face learners as donors to recipients. The direct and critical engagement with ideas that philosophy relies on is sabotaged when the audience already has a whole library history of philosophical texts and arguments, positions and counterpositions at their fingertips. No attempt to outlaw the use of AI, even on a limited scale, is likely to survive the appeal of such a resource. The solution will have to be sought elsewhere.

Perhaps the only realistic reform of society available to individuals is what the Zen farmer and philosopher Fukuoka Masanobu called a “one-straw revolution.” In his case, this meant renouncing “green revolution” technology and the complexity of modern agricultural science with its chemicals, machinery, and deployment of labor, and learning to feed ourselves by leaving nature alone as far as possible. His idea of setting up alternatives for specific tasks by disestablishing them from any kind of corporate control and making them a better fit for autonomous control on a smaller, if more fragile and less widely broadcast scale may be applied to the practice of philosophy as well. For the professional academic, trained to teach philosophy and contribute to its advance, any break with the established curriculum and its mechanisms of peer-evaluation may seem too great a risk to job security and career advancement. The mere hope of contributing to the good and convivial life seems rather watery gruel compared to the hearty buffet of options available within a university career. Despite the pressures to postpone that hope or confine it to academic venues like this, the vocation is available for those who have the courage to follow it.

For the philosopher, the task at hand is to rescue intelligence from its captivity to information algorithms. Boethius’ distinction in *De consolazione philosophiae* between *ratio* and *intellectus* can help us here. *Ratio* is the discursive, syllogistic mental labor of moving sequentially from premise to conclusion. Its idea of truth is a function of argument and inference operating at the periphery of reality. *Intellectus*, in contrast, is the simpler achievement of insight that comes to rest in the

stillpoint at the center of the circle, the moment of eternity in time. Rather than scanning the landscape rationally piece by piece, it views it as a constellation of the whole of its parts, both the outer landscape of the world as reconstructed in mind and the inner landscape of our feelings towards the world.

The convivium I have tried to triangulate is aimed at the restoration of *intellectus* in this sense through discipline, attentiveness to the *anima mundi*, and the disestablishment of institutions that menace the autonomy of relationships within the social order and to its ancestry in the natural world. The “intelligence” of AI, on the other hand, is achieved through the coordination and manipulation of “data” extracted from scientific measurement, rational concepts, and factual history. Insofar as it is incapable of human insight in its fuller sense, AI amounts to a kind of *artificial insemination*. Unable to reach the stillpoint of *intellectus*, it is designed to reproduce itself through the constant and chaotic turbulence of more data and more analysis. The errors of “hallucination” that creep regularly into AI’s remittance of data are not corrigible through more data or more complex methods of resolving problems and rationalizing the chaos it creates. At a more basic level, they are symptomatic of the absence of the stillpoint of reasoning that William James referred to as the “sentiment of rationality.” Any philosophical truth disassociated with *intellectus* by design is as far from the pursuit of the good life as philosophy can get.

In addition to experiencing firsthand how AI can create and simplify computer scripting with alarming efficiency, I have conducted enough experiments with retrieving and evaluating philosophical texts from AI to convince myself that the young generation of scholars in the field and their students will never return to writing essays and consulting the sources the way I have my entire life. As larger and larger libraries become digitally “searchable,” the intimate relationship to a personal collection of books scribbled in the margins and dog-eared from reading and rereading is already becoming a relic of the past.

The greatest promise, but also the greatest peril of AI is its pretense of a total democracy divorced from external governance and censorship. The widespread assumption that AI is simply a tool whose utility and limits depend on the person who wields it is an empty shell of a promise. AI is not simply a new development of software that one can access through a personal computer or digital device. It is an institution in the sense that Durkheim and Foucault used the term, namely, that it has already begun to redefine the contours of what it means to “know.” It is, we might say, a mental institution without walls. As we watch companies joust for financial control of the profits of this “new technology,” consuming astronomical amounts of electricity and budgeting a well-paid but increasingly expendable workforce, we assume that this is just another example of corporate enrichment at the expense of the stability and security of the lower strata of the social order,

whose dependence on the technology finances this caricature of democracy. What we do not take seriously enough is the *institutional* dependency and colonization of these very corporations by a mass superstition that they feed and at the same time feed on.

Thinking of AI as a mere tool with revolutionary potential for supplementing the acquisition and application of knowledge is no less a conceit than the belief that the structural changes brought about by the industrial revolution would one day democratize the consumption of goods and services by optimizing access for all to everything from food and clothing to literacy and health. Unless we recognize AI as an institution that transcends the control of the economic systems that develop and monetize it, we have little hope of assessing its moral and political consequences. This includes its consequences for the pillar institutions that sustain the corporations providing the means for a modern civilization to feed, clothe, educate, medicate, and police its citizens as well as the means for nations to engage each other economically and militarily. At some level, the cures that AI provides will introduce their own diseases. The challenge is to identify the point at which the logic of the algorithm becomes too toxic and claims too many fatalities. It is not enough to outlaw certain uses of AI and limit access to certain blocks of its storage. The technology is too persuasive for such measures to last very long. As a technology it has its own internal demands, which have no loyalty to corporate demands. I suspect that the political forces that monitor the institutionalization of AI and scramble to adjust their laws to protect it from its dark side will come to their senses only after disaster strikes. And strike it will.

Think of it. If the individual mind is subject to deterioration, forgetfulness, and emotional breakdown that can hamper one's ability to think clearly, a mind whose memory is tethered to dependency on the immediate accessibility to vast banks of digitized information growing vaster by the second is subject at any moment to the crippling dementia of an electronic shut down or criminal interference with the authenticity of the data stored in corporate banks by siphoning confidential data or erasing data essential to everyday life. The history of libraries destroyed by accident or willful barbarity will pale in comparison.

To repeat, the control of AI is no more firmly in the hands of those who commercialize it and legalize its use than the world view that rooted the industrial revolution in the modern imagination was. At the surface, it includes a wealth of data for self-evaluation and critique. Beneath the surface, its coding is immune to change as long it is embedded in the imagination as a comprehensive tool for managing the social order down to its smallest units. The ways in which AI has begun to threaten the fundamental structures by which the history of philosophical thought is transmitted as well as the credibility of the expertise that keeps academic philosophy academic, oblige the philosopher committed to the pursuit of the good life to seek

alternatives ways to communicate and restore respect for philosophical thinking outside the confines of peer review. My colleague Kim Seung Chul has convinced me that the captivity of theological style by the Christian West has had a paralyzing effect both on the pluralism of theological expression that marked the greatest advances in the openness to world to religions, and on the possibility of alternative modes of theology in the lyrical traditions so important to the intellectual history of the East. It strikes me that the same may be said of philosophy, whose survival depends on preserving the variety of literary forms that have been its life's blood.

It no longer matters that this sense of urgency did not arise from within the profession itself, any more than it matters that philosophy was shaken into awareness of its moral responsibilities to the natural world by thinkers at the fringes of the academy. What matters is that philosophers find the will to do more than monitor the changes theoretically. Not that exposing the collective modes of thought behind AI is unimportant. If anything, critical vigilance becomes even more crucial as the current role of the academic philosopher accedes to a predictable rise in unemployment among its ranks. The attention span of that vigilance needs to embrace the dominant modes of thought woven into our entire social fabric, beginning with the way in which they are passed on to children through the marketing of toys that prepare them for the certitudes of the prevailing social order. Still, theoretical debate is no substitute for political action at a non-governmental level through experimentation with alternative, more convivial lifestyles.

Viewed in terms of our triangulation of conviviality, AI's pursuit of truth brackets the moral concerns of the good life by treating them as a collateral benefit for those who feel they need them. In so doing, it devalues spiritual exercise; it removes the soul and mystery from life by translating the uncontrollable into manageable problems; it converts human relationships into instrumental tools that are subject to institutionalization. Defending the philosophical vocation requires putting AI in its place, and this is not possible without an awakening to the impulse to conviviality and the will to reclaim its guidance.



To return to where we began, the pursuit of the good life is not the same as the desire for moral guidelines. It is rather, I should say, a return to the origins of morality. The role of the philosopher is crucial here only if it is exercised in the public forum outside of the academy. The survival of religious traditions from internal corruption relies not only on its keepers but also on the ability of believers to rehearse the origins of religious faith, to recover the native spiritual needs of our humanity that give rise to images of the unknown, uncontrollable forces that envelop our lives, and to the myths that weave them into stories of the invisible.

The same may be said of the origins of our impulse to conviviality, no less natural and irrepressible than our impulse to speak of a world of gods and spirits beyond our control. Just as the doctrines and practices of a particular religion can darken the way back to the origins of religion, so, too, moral precepts that aim to guide the way to the good life can overshadow the way back to the birthplace of the ideal in the “sprouts” of goodness that Mencius recognized in all human beings. The idea of the good life is, after all, a cipher of impulses that none of us can see clearly enough but to which every soul of us on earth has access.

If conviviality is the summit of wisdom, the certification of its pursuit cannot be entrusted to the keepers of any tradition of ideas or mental discipline. Philosophy, to reiterate, is not the achievement of conviviality but its constant quest. Its goal cannot be mapped and measured any more than the goals of love and peace and selflessness can. The story of conviviality is not a history that can be carved in stone and then piled up into a sturdy edifice for the future. Its wisdom is that of the twice-told tale, never the same and never definitive, never with a clear plot and never with an end.

Just how the impulse to the good life is to be embedded in culture and law is the stuff of debate and experiment. But the fundamental trust in that impulse beyond our understanding and control comes down, in the end, to a matter of philosophical faith. Put another way, trust in our impulse to conviviality is where even the most delicately argued and rigorously rational systems in the history of philosophy are driven to acknowledge a fundamental orientation whose origins are as dark as they are real. In one sense, we don't really know what we're talking about; in another, we know too much to know how to talk about it. This is because the knowledge of the impulse to conviviality is learned by *living* the good life, not by *thinking about* living the good life.

In his *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Tanabe Hajime argued that philosophy can only be reborn through the collapse of its current state, and this collapse can only take place by overturning the habits of thought that sustain it, that is, through *metanoia*. Insofar as philosophy is in peril of disestablishment as an academic specialization, the authority of its professionals in the public sphere may be expected to decline further. AI has had a big role to play in exposing philosophy's failure to find alternative ways to carry on a tradition and transmit it, but the basic malady has been chronic for too long to lay the blame on advances in information technology.

Nishitani Keiji made much the same point in his last book, *The Cold Mountain Poems*, by citing Wuzu Fayan's kōan of the water buffalo whose head, horn, and legs pass through a window while its tail end gets stuck. “The kōan presents a situation,” he says, “where orthodox reasoning fails, revealing an irrational residue that logic cannot fully explain, a tail, an integral part of the thing itself that protrudes through the mesh of ‘law’ and the lattice of ‘reason.’” We have come to a point,

according to Nishitani, where the intellectual life needs to “stretch beyond the bounds of its internal logic.” And to do this, it needs to rediscover its inner mystery in the “perfectly ordinary life of day-to-day experience.” The image of philosophy climbing into the academy with its tail end hanging out the window seems just right. The paralysis will not be relieved by widening the window or pushing harder on it from behind. The unmasking of AI as a kind of uroboros slowly but inexorably choking on its own tail is one best handled in the open space where the ordinary mind can understand what it is philosophy has to contribute to the good life.

INTERFAITH MEETINGS IN ITALY

EXPERIENCES OF EXCHANGE BETWEEN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS



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The following lecture occurred on 25 June 2025 at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture as part of a lecture series commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute.

I AM HERE in my capacity as a missionary nun of Sōtō Zen Buddhism, therefore as a religious guide and not as an academic. So I will present my experience and the meetings I have attended as a representative of our tradition and will discuss how they have developed over the years in ways that are different, increasingly complex, and specific.

Our Shinnyoji Temple was founded in September 2004 by my teacher, Rev. Ryūshin Azuma Rōshi, formerly the 72nd Abbot of Tōkōzan Daijōji in Kanazawa, by composing in calligraphy on a wooden board: “*Shinnyoji Daijōji Italia Betsuin*.” In 2020, he confirmed my appointment as abbot, writing the following: “*Tōkōzan Daijōji, Temple located in Italy, Temple with the same heart: Shinnyoji, abbot Marradi Shinnyo.*”

On a personal level, I first experienced interfaith dialogue in Japan. In 2002, I asked Azuma Rōshi to receive monastic vows, while expressing my desire not to renounce my Catholic Christian faith. Azuma Rōshi, with the characteristic magnanimity, compassion, and open-mindedness that always distinguished him, accepted my request without reservation.

Later, following the same “inappropriate” criterion, I had my second experience with interfaith dialogue when I was interviewed on 6 August 2004 by journalists from the *Hokukiku Chunichi Shinbun* and *Hokkoku Shinbun* in Kanazawa as well as by a local television announcer following the ordination ceremony at which Azuma Tōshi conferred monastic vows on me at Daijōji Monastery. The first question they asked me, in various forms, was essentially the same: “Why did you, who live in Italy, a Christian country par excellence, where the Vatican is located and the Pope lives, start practicing Buddhism and not stay with your Christian

faith?” My answer was: “I approached Buddhism to overcome my sense of guilt, because of the absence of dogma and because, being an awakened religion and not a revealed one, it is up to me to decide every day whether or not to awaken to the ultimate truth.” At that time, their question surprised me greatly: I would have expected a request for clarification as to what had prompted me, at my age, to come all the way to Japan to be ordained as a Zen nun. Over time, I came to understand their curiosity, also because I have been asked the same question many times in Italy during meetings with monotheistic religions.

We began participating in interfaith meetings in 1995—long before becoming Shinnyoji in 2004—as a Sōtō Zen Temple officially recognized by the Sōtōshū Shūmūchō in Japan. At that time, we had founded the cultural association, Florence Zen Center (Centro Zen Firenze), of which I was the guide as a senior practitioner and because I had received the Jukaie Ordination as a bodhisattva. Together with practitioners from other traditions, we collaborated to organize the first interfaith meetings in our city of Florence, at a time when Tuscany had become the first region in Italy to promote dialogue between different religious faiths.

We felt the need to promote these meetings in order to dispel the fear of diversity and to engage with other faiths by opening ourselves to dialogue, while remembering that the path of Zen is never a solitary one but one illuminated by mutual support and shared awareness. There was also a strong search for brothers to walk with on a common path toward spiritual peace, to realize brotherly unity between different faiths. A true brotherhood, based on principles and not on conventional, emotional, or superficial dialogue. However, this was not the case for all of our practitioners. Some felt embarrassed to present themselves as representatives of Zen Buddhism because they attended the Catholic Church too. Others were afraid of being confused by the encounter with other traditions; evidently, they were not certain yet about their Buddhist choice.

Personally, I believe that in order to understand the meaning of interreligious dialogue it is essential that each person first undertake a journey of inner exploration to clarify what an encounter really is. Otherwise, participation in dialogue is merely intellectual, without a genuine understanding of an approach based on mutual respect. Such an authentic approach translates into concrete encounters and exchanges aimed at building relationships based on fraternity, as a contribution to a more peaceful world.

Opening up to others and welcoming them does not mean confusing or diluting one's own religious identity, but rather strengthening and reaffirming it in the light of the encounter with something different. That gives the opportunity to increase our knowledge by building a dialogue based on mutual respect, allowing those who participate in the dialogue to maintain their own autonomy.

In the beginning, the interfaith group consisted of members of the following: the Christian Meditation Center, the Tibetan Buddhist Ewam Center, the Japanese spiritual group Sukyo Mahikari, the Florence Zen Center, the Baha'i Community, the Jewish-Christian Friendship, and the Islamic Community. In the following years, the association "A Temple for Peace," the Hare Krishnas, and the Ananda Marga yoga center joined us.¹ We thus formed an itinerant meditation group that continued to meet until 2018. We had established a protocol according to which, on the last Thursday of each month, we would rotate meetings at various community centers. The meetings would follow a specific procedure: for each of them a topic was chosen (peace, compassion, generosity, anger, spirit of service, etc.) and a coordinator was appointed. After collecting the names of those who wanted to speak, the coordinator established the order of the speakers and called each person to speak for a set time of five minutes, marked by the sound of a bell at the beginning and end. Participants were free to choose, according to their own tradition, whether they would read an excerpt from a text or a poem, share a reflection, sing a sacred hymn, recite a prayer, or recite a sutra.

At the time, I had only received Jukai and, not having completed my training, I limited myself to reading a short excerpt from texts by contemporary Zen masters, as I did at our Zen Center during the second zazen of the evening. So, I could read words from Japanese masters such as Shunryū Suzuki, Shōhaku Okumura, Dainin Katagiri, Kōshō Uchiyama, Taisen Deshimaru, or from American masters such as Dennis Genpo Merzel, Bernie Glassman, and Charlotte Joko Beck. After the speeches, there was a twenty-minute period of silent meditation, which participants did according to their own ritual. In the early days, the meetings ended like this. Over time, a final session of sharing was introduced, which sometimes became a harmonious space, and some other times a time for the showing-off of some participants' egos.

Personally, I have always maintained that after a period of listening to words followed by meditation, it is recommendable to let what had been said settle down, without altering that very moment with new speeches. As we know the ego and its manifestations, which are more and more reinforced today in a world of opinion-makers and narcissists, at Shinnyoji the teachings of Dharma (Teishō) are always preceded and followed by a time of zazen.

In a slightly later phase, other meetings began in parallel in the Frantoio (the ancient oil-press room) of the Basilica of San Miniato al Monte, a Benedictine abbey in Florence. This is a special chapter in the history of Italian interreligious dialogue, because the meetings took place as a bilateral sharing between Catholic Christianity and Zen Buddhism under the direction of Father Luciano Mazzocchi. Meetings were held on the last Friday of the month, and followed this sequence: first the Mass and the reading of a passage from the Gospel, with a homily by

Father Mazzocchi about universal concepts common also to Buddhism; then thirty minutes of silent meditation with the Zen followers sitting in zazen on a zafu, while the Christians remained seated on chairs. The ceremony concluded with the Eucharist. After the ceremony, there was a time for dialogue with questions and answers. These meetings, which went on for several years, were mainly attended by Father Mazzocchi's Florentine group or by the students of Rev. Giuseppe Jisō Forzani, a Sōtō Zen missionary monk.² Sometimes we from the Florence Zen Center also joined in. Suddenly, however, the Abbot of the Basilica of San Miniato received an order from above to stop these meetings.

I would like to make a short digression on Father Mazzocchi's personal history. He entered the Xaverian Missionaries congregation and was ordained a priest in 1962. The following year, in 1963, he was sent as a missionary to Japan. In 1982, he returned to Italy and devoted himself to promoting interreligious dialogue in local churches. In 1987, as a Christian advisor, he founded *La Stella del Mattino*—Comunità Buddista Zen Italiana (The Morning Star: Italian Zen Buddhist Community) together with Jisō Forzani and Mauricio Yūshin Marassi, which from 1994 to 2005 ran a center of practice in Galgagnano (Lodi),³ a place where anyone could practice both the Way of Zen and the Way of the Gospel as a single personal and social path. It was from Rev. Kōhō Watanabe that came the impulse for this type of Christian-Buddhist community cultivating knowledge and witness of Zen Buddhism in Italy and Europe, particularly in dialogue with Christianity and Western culture. Rev. Watanabe had settled in Italy for five years, and his thinking and teaching had certainly shaped his two students, Jisō Forzani and Yūshin Marassi. In an interview, he talked precisely about his joint study of the *Shōbōgenzō* and the Bible.

After almost fifteen years of activity, as the result of a divergence of views, Jisō Forzani closed this place of practice in Galgagnano on 19 April 2009 and relinquished “also the responsibility for the direction of the Zen Buddhist community *Stella del Mattino*, while my brother Mauricio Yushin Marassi takes over its leadership in every respect.”⁴ Since then, *La Stella del Mattino* has remained active as an online magazine.

As for Father Mazzocchi, together with some friends in Milan, he founded the association *Vangelo e Zen*—Comunità di dialogo interreligioso (Gospel and Zen: Community of Interreligious Dialogue) in 2008, in which the values proclaimed by the Gospel and those preserved in the silent meditation of Zen illuminate each other.

I knew Jisō Forzani personally. He worked for Sokanbu Europe at its first headquarters in Milan, and visited Shinnyoji twice, accompanying Sekkei Harada Rōshi, the first European Sōkan, and then Gensho Imamura Rōshi, the second Sōkan, as their secretary. Later, when the Sōtō Zen Buddhism Europe Office moved to Paris, Jisō himself became Sōkan for Europe.

I was very sorry when I heard about the shutting down of the center in Galgagnano, but talking to Jisō Forzani, I could see his apparent distrust regarding Italians' ability to practice Zen. Certainly, in Zen centers and temples in Italy there is always a great movement of people coming and going, especially going. In fact, in thirty years of activity more than a thousand people have stepped into our Zen Center first, and then into Shinnyoji Temple, but no more than around ten have remained.

Reflecting on the reasons for abandoning the practice, on the possible difficulty of freeing oneself from a Catholic heritage, and also on Jisō's decision to close his community, I decided to carry out an anonymous survey using Google Forms among old, new, and former practitioners of Shinnyoji. Nine questions were asked, including: "Why did you approach Zen? What were you looking for?"; "If you left Zen Buddhist practice, what drove you away?"; "What put a distance between you and the Catholic Christian religion or your original religious beliefs?"; "Do you live or have you lived your spiritual path through an interreligious approach? If so, how?" The survey revealed a remarkable variety of personal motivations which are difficult to trace back to a common thread, even in broad terms. The pluralism that emerged reflects a Western egocentric mentality, which identifies with freedom of thought and interpretation. These factors, in my opinion, are the primary cause of people's departure from places of worship, as they conflict with entrusting oneself to a Way without clinging to self-centered dynamics by which the individual subject always want to have the last word.

As to the relationship with Catholicism, in my experience it is felt by most people as an insufficient answer to a spiritual question, certainly not as a deterrent to following Buddhism. However, for others—and they are many, especially in the middle-age bracket—the Catholic faith is an insurmountable obstacle, made so by the criticism that often comes from priests and confessors who accuse Buddhists of arrogantly and blasphemously replacing God with Buddha. Few practitioners of the Way of Buddha manage to reconcile the two faiths, partly because, in my opinion, it is not possible to integrate them, but only to live them in parallel without mixing the one with the other. How could it be possible to reconcile reincarnation with the resurrection of the dead? How can God's grace be reconciled with the concept of karma? How can original sin be reconciled with *hōngaku* (original enlightenment)?

Returning to our interreligious journey, the association "A Temple for Peace" was founded in 1996 in the fertile spiritual context of Florence, it was born "initially from the need to involve young people in the great themes of life, peace, and encountering 'the other,' in order to awaken consciences that are too often dormant or distracted."⁵ In the early years following its establishment, it became a bridge between various religious communities, hosting monthly meetings. The

ultimate goal, which unfortunately was never realized, was to build a temple for peace on the hills surrounding Florence, on land that had already been donated. The envisioned architectural design was that of a hemispherical building, which would house various niches each with specific furnishings for the celebration of rituals in different religious traditions. The association, A Temple for Peace, ceased its activities in 2015.

In Florence, and in Italy in general, interreligious dialogue is much developed, mainly between the religions of the Book: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. In September 2005, at an interfaith dialogue between imams and rabbis held in the Salone dei Dugento in Palazzo Vecchio on the theme “The role of religions in peace processes and the fight against terrorism,” the then mayor, in his greeting, reaffirmed Florence’s role as a city of peace and dialogue.

Since December 2005, thanks to the then President of the City Council, the Municipality of Florence has supported the interfaith group (of which Shinnyoji had been a member for a year in its new capacity as a temple) by allowing them to meet in the Municipal House of Florence (Palazzo Vecchio) for a series of interfaith meetings called Together for Peace, with readings, prayers, and silent meditation.

On 13 December 2005, the first interfaith meeting opened with a silent meditation walk called Steps of Peace, starting from the churchyard of the Basilica of Santa Croce and ending at Palazzo Vecchio. Hundreds of people took part, some with candles in their hands, others with small torches, walking in procession through the main streets of the heart of Florence, and gathering new participants along the way until they all reached the entrance to the City Hall. After an hour’s walk, going up the monumental staircase of Palazzo Vecchio, the procession arrived in the Sala Incontri, which had become the new venue for interfaith dialogue in Florence, open to all citizens. The meeting opened with a greeting from the President of the City Council, who expressed the need to “break the elements of conflict between cultures and religions and work for peace.”

The initial group consisted of the associations A Temple for Peace, the Christian Meditation Center, the Ewam Tibetan Buddhist Center, the Sukyo Mahikari Center, Hare Krishna, the Baha’i Community, the Florence Shinnyoji Zen Center, the Jewish-Christian Friendship, and the Islamic Community. It benefited from the patronage of the Municipality of Florence and the support from the Commission for Peace and International Solidarity.

Four meetings were held in 2006, at the first of which the Steps of Peace meditation walk was repeated.⁶ The meetings continued throughout 2007, always in the Sala Incontri.⁷ The cycle of initiatives aimed at involving individuals as well as secular and religious institutions in sharing moments of spirituality, silence, and prayer for peace. In this sense, meeting in the City Hall, the common house of every inhabitant of the city, became almost “natural” in cultivating a dimension

of spirituality beyond political and religious factions, with an open-minded and open-hearted approach to others.⁸ The meetings continued in 2008.⁹

For four years, following a change in political agenda, the Municipality of Florence no longer allowed meetings to be held in Palazzo Vecchio, until 2013 when it was opened again to the meetings. They were called Together for Peace: Meetings of Spirituality, Meditation, and Interfaith Prayer and were hosted in the Sala Miniature of Palazzo Vecchio from October 2012 to June 2014. Then the Municipality of Florence gave us the opportunity to meet in the spaces of the Oblate Library until 2017. In the meantime, the original group had expanded with the participation of new associations: Engaged Buddhism by Thich Nhat Hanh, Sakya Ngon Ga Ling Dharma Center,¹⁰ Clip2000 Yoga Center, Falun Dafa,¹¹ Himalayan Yoga Institute, Humanist Movement, and Native Americans.

Over time, however, differences and misunderstandings arose among the members of the interfaith groups that had formed, so that two separate monthly meetings were created: one continued the itinerant meditation meetings, the other met first in Palazzo Vecchio and then in the Oblate Library. There were two main reasons for the division among the participants. The first and most significant was that some considered the hospitality of the Municipality of Florence to be *political interference*, seen as a means to gathering votes in future local elections. The other reason was that, having been opened up to all citizens, the meetings had become difficult to manage. A wide variety of people attended the meetings: some took the floor and improvised fierce environmentalist speeches or harangue against certain kinds of people, for example against omnivores. Some, equipped with musical instruments, played songs by Bob Dylan or Bob Marley, or unlikely songs by Native Americans, or recited poems they had written on themes such as the environment or peace. It was difficult to enforce the established time limit of five minutes per person. Moreover, sometimes the speeches were far from the spirit of sharing and respect for the thoughts of others. They were more like self-centered proclamations with underlying nuances of verbal violence.

Personally, I withdrew our membership over time. The City Hall had become a stage, a sort of festival, often with strong political overtones, far from the early spirit of these initiatives, which had also included the opportunity to get to know each other in our own places of worship, as it was made possible by holding the meetings in different locations. In my opinion, the intimacy and sacredness of those places also contributed to maintaining the balance and sobriety required by the intention and purpose of the meetings. The itinerant meditation meetings, on the other hand, required a commitment that over the years I was no longer able to guarantee: I had to devote myself to the direction the Temple and to its growing Sangha.

Another initiative that developed over many years in Florence was a three-day series of interreligious and intercultural meetings at the Fortezza da Basso, as part of the international expo “Terra Futura.” This was an expo-conference aimed at spreading good practices of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. The event consisted of cultural events, including conferences, round tables, and exhibitions, which offered reflections and insights on a range of topics related to sustainability, from the individual daily choices in lifestyle to the rediscovery and care of common goods such as water, air, security, but also peace, human dignity, and respect for rights.

In 2004, 2005, and 2006, we participated in the interfaith meditation that took place in the Sala Ottagonale of the Fortezza, right at the entrance to the expo. Each tradition was given one hour, which included half an hour for the presentation of a theme, followed by instructions on the form of our practice and a short meditation together. Our determination to bear witness to our practice was strong and constant, and many people visiting the expo approached us and participated, while having a wide choice of different spiritual paths available to them.¹²

In 2010, the online magazine *Lo Zefiro: Interfaith Newsletter* was founded in Florence. It was published every two weeks and opened with a significant picture accompanied by a caption related to its theme and an editorial on the focus of the issue. The magazine reported on the activities carried out in all the centers and associations involved in interfaith dialogue in Florence and in Tuscany. The magazine was published from 2010 to 2021.¹³

In November 2011, in the Salone dei Cinquecento in Palazzo Vecchio we were excited to attend the Koyasan Shingon-Shomyō Concert at which twenty Japanese monks performed with the Gregorian Choir Viri Galilaei of Florence and the Otsuma Ranzan Girls’ School. The chanting of the monks from Koyasan was offered as a sign of gratitude to the citizens of Florence for their support after the 2011 earthquake and as a prayer for all those who had lost their lives in such a disaster. The concert was also meant to be a message of solidarity to the survivors, a “light of hope” for the future as indicated by *kizuna* (solidarity) prepared in calligraphy by young Japanese people.

In January 2015, we participated in an interfaith meeting in Florence in the conference room of the Oblate Library as part of the series of meetings, Together for Peace. It was a special meeting, which, instead of customarily focusing on a specific topic of discussion analyzed in different ways according to specific traditions, was dedicated to all the victims of violence: those in France in the Paris terrorist attack against the headquarters of the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, those in Nigeria in the Baga massacre, and all those caused by intolerance and fanaticism throughout the world.

Over time, the rotating meetings in different places of meditation lost their appeal. Over the years we found ourselves drained and exhausted, as if we had already expressed everything we could in the effort of building an interreligious network. We had become friends with each other, even though our faiths were different. We had learned to know and respect each other, not to be afraid of those who are different from us. However, our time had come to an end. Certainly, from the point of view of phenomena, everything rises and perishes, and yet the commitment and responsibility of those who had participated in the experience left a sour taste in our mouths. There were many reasons for our exhaustion, all equally valid and at the same time insufficient to explain that feeling. Then everyone drew conclusions and made assessments from their own point of view. In the end, however, what I believe remains valid is that this twenty-year long experience shaped the way we relate to the presence of others, and that the seeds sown during that time urged us to give new forms and content to future interreligious encounters.

Thus, new initiatives were born, which were the natural evolution of that earlier experience and were only apparently detached from what we had put in place before. Indeed, what we had built early on reemerged, at a later point, in other shapes or modalities.

In December 2016 I was invited to participate as a speaker at the conference “We Guard the Earth Together: Interfaith Cooperation to Protect Life on the Planet,” organized by the Municipal Administration of Bagno a Ripoli in collaboration with Religions for Peace Italy and the Municipal Commission for Peace and Rights. It was the first time I found myself in an auditorium with a diverse audience of citizens, practitioners, students, and politicians.

In December 2017 I met with students to talk about our Sōtō Zen tradition for the first time in a school in an Interfaith meeting at the Spinelli Institute in Scandicci. It was part of the project “The Culture of Dialogue,” which aimed at educating students through an approach of dialogue and discussion rather than closure, aversion, or ostracism. It was an exciting meeting, enhanced by many questions from young people and by the testimony of a Chinese student who declared his Buddhist affiliation. The students listened to me with interest when I spoke to them about how opening our heart to the other nurtures and educates us to respect the diversity of thought and faiths.

At the end of 2018, the City of Florence, in the person of its Councillor for Relations with Religious Confessions and Intercultural Policies, invited us to participate in the making of a booklet (published by the City’s printing house) in which the religious communities of our city were introduced. Thus, in February 2019, the booklet *Firenze Comunità In Cammino: Incontrarsi, conoscersi, accogliere* (Florence Community on the Way: Meeting, Knowing, Welcoming Each Other) was

published. Twenty-one religious groups were involved, each of which was introduced in page accompanied by a photo and contact information.

On that very occasion, the Councillor also proposed to create the interfaith peace flag. It was not a specific flag, but a symbol representing the commitment of the City of Florence to promote interreligious dialogue, tolerance, and respect for different cultures and religious beliefs. It was decided that each community would bring a 20 x 20 CM rectangle of cloth with a representative symbol, phrase, and picture. The pieces were sewn together to create the flag that was then displayed in Palazzo Vecchio for some time, hence becoming the symbol of all future interfaith initiatives in Florence and Tuscany.¹⁴

On 3 February 2019, an event organized by the City of Florence together with religious denominations was held as part of the World Week for Religious Harmony called by the United Nations. The event was called a “Florence Community on the Way” walk in which more than 2,000 people participated. From the Abbey of San Miniato al Monte the walk filed through the streets of the city to Palazzo Vecchio. Participants stopped at various religious sites to read some texts in the spirit of interreligious dialogue.¹⁵ The walk was followed by a buffet dinner with food prepared and offered by the various denominations as well as a concert in the Arengario Hall of Palazzo Vecchio featuring music from different traditions. The then mayor gave an opening speech, declaring Florence a universal symbol of dialogue, peace, and welcoming.

From the success of this initiative came the idea of the first interfaith dinner organized by the City of Florence together with the Religious Communities and Spiritual Traditions present in the Florentine territory. It was then held in March at the Teatro Del Sale, hoisting the interfaith flag that had been created for the walk. More than one hundred twenty people participated; representatives of the various religions brought dishes typical of their traditions, which they served and shared with fellow citizens most in need.¹⁶

In December 2019, we accepted the invitation from the then Councillor of Interreligious Dialogue to join a preliminary meeting toward the establishment of an Institutional Table for Interreligious Dialogue to be activated in the year 2020. Soon after that, the first signs of COVID19 emerged. The pandemic was officially declared in Italy on 29 January 2020 and ended on 5 May 2023, with lockdown from 9 March to 18 May 2020. For this reason, all subsequent meetings, which lasted for almost two years, were held on online with an average participation of twenty speakers (spiritual guides, religious leaders, academics) belonging to twenty-five spiritual traditions, each participant speaking for five minutes on the topic chosen for the day.¹⁷

Post lockdown, in June 2020, an official letter from the Vice President of the Tuscany Region invited us to work toward the creation a Regional Table for Dialogue

with religious denominations and spiritual traditions. At the first informal meeting, the various communities introduced themselves to the representatives of the Region of Tuscany, and a work plan was programmed based on four themes (health, food, prison, and school) to be discussed in sub-sessions, the results of which would be summarized in a plenary session. The sessions were held both online and in-person at the Sala Pegaso in Piazza Duomo in Florence. Six meetings were held between July 2020 and May 2021 on topics including religious diets in university cafeterias, spiritual care in prisons and hospitals, and burial requirements according to one's own beliefs.

On 26 July 2020, I was welcomed into DIM Italy (Monastic Interreligious Dialogue), an international monastic organization that promotes and supports dialogue especially at the level of spiritual experience and religious practice between Christian monks and nuns and followers of other religions.¹⁸ Although the natural dialogue partners of Christian monks and nuns are monks and nuns of other religious traditions, DIM has also engaged in spiritual dialogue with adherents of religions that do not have an institutionalized form of monasticism, particularly Muslims. Primarily the DIM community consists of cloistered and non-cloistered Catholic monks and nuns, with a smaller number of representatives of Zen, Tibetan, and Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Islamic Contemplative Tradition.

Each year DIM Italy meets in the fall for a meeting; for some days, a theme is discussed, comparing the different traditions. The meeting is held at a place of worship offered by one of the participating religious faiths, which serves as the host. The first meeting I attended as a new affiliated member was in October 2020, with part of the participants online and a small number in presence in mixed online and small numbers in attendance, given the COVID emergency.

In 2022, together with Ikuko Sagiya and Aldo Tollini, I edited a collection of essays *La dimensione mondana e il distacco. Lo Zen e le altre tradizioni religiose a confronto* (The Worldly Dimension and Detachment. Zen and the Other Religious Traditions in Comparison), published by Mimesis Edizioni, Milan, in the wake of the success of the international conference “Lo Zen e il distacco: essere nel mondo ma non del mondo (Zen and Detachment: being in the world but not of the world)” held in Florence on 27 March 2021.¹⁹ The conference was sponsored by our temple Sōtō Zen Shinnyoji and cofunded by the Italian Buddhist Union (UBI). The conference, which focused on Zen Buddhist practitioners' relationship with the secular world, highlighted the importance of addressing the issue from a larger point of view, in particular by sharing the topic with other religious traditions that could add an interesting perspective to the subject. Thus, was born the idea of a collection of essays dealing with the theme of “detachment.” Academics and religious

people belonging to the following traditions joined the project: Catholic and Waldensian Church, Sōtō Zen, Tibetan, and Seon Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism.

In the preface, Rev. Shōten Minegishi, then Director of the Sōtō Zen Buddhism Europe Office, maintains that interfaith dialogue is an urgent need for our modern society in which people from all walks of life and backgrounds mix and interact.²⁰ The book was met with great public support and was presented with panel discussions and debates in eleven Italian venues, including a mosque, a cloistered Benedictine monastery, a university and some Buddhist centers.²¹

In the context of the interreligious dialogue that has developed and consolidated over the years in the city of Florence as a result of the arrival and rooting of new ethnic groups, further forms of interrelation have emerged. Among them, a significant example is the creation of “rooms of silence” in some public service buildings: Meyer Children’s Hospital,²² Careggi Hospital,²³ and the University of Florence.²⁴ Such spaces have been designed to accommodate the need for inner concentration and spirituality in an inclusive perspective open to all religions as well as for secular meditation and reflection. Some of these rooms hold furnishings typical of each tradition; in others, there are no religious symbols to avoid any form of discrimination.

As a representative of the Sōtō Zen tradition, I have been invited to various conferences, roundtables and lectures with themes based on different religious perspectives to be presented and discussed in fraternal confrontation. I have never seen arguments or controversy at such meetings. Below are some of the events at which I spoke:

- “Spirituality for the Common Welfare: A Conference for Dialogue and Collaboration,” Palazzo Vecchio Municipality of Florence. Speakers: Catholic Church, Romanian Orthodox, and Adventist, Zen Buddhism, Soka Gakkai Buddhist Institute, Jewish Community of Florence, Hare Krishna, Islam.
- “Peace, ‘Deep Yearning of Human Beings of all Times’: 60 years of *Pacem in Terris*,” Triveneto Faculty of Theology, Padua. Speakers: Catholic Church, Zen Buddhism, Islam, Judaism.
- “The Feminine in Religious Traditions: the force of a voice - Dialogue between Buddhism, Christianity, Islam.” Organized by our Shinnyoji Temple with the contribution of the Italian Buddhist Union. Oblate Library, Florence. Speakers: Zen Sōtō and Rinzai Buddhism, Catholic and Waldensian Church, Islam.

We have just formed the Florence interfaith group of Religions for Peace Italy, an international nongovernmental organization founded in Kyoto in 1975 that promotes cooperation among religions for peace, justice, and human development. The organization is committed to building bridges of dialogue and cooperation between different faiths, promoting mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. Joining to date are the following traditions: Catholic Church, Waldensian,

Adventist and Romanian Orthodox, Zen Sōtō Buddhism, Hare Krishna, Judaism, Islam, Baha'i Community.

Conclusions, Reflections, and Final Considerations

It was and still is our firm belief that interfaith dialogue and discussion between different religions and their communities is necessary to seek ways of encounter that could foster peaceful coexistence, in the utmost absence of proselytism and propaganda, with initiatives that speak to the global community. Openness to dialogue with other religious traditions and practices has always been a fundamental pillar of our understanding of the practice and Way of Dōgen Zenji in directing the Florence Zen Center first and Shinnyoji later. Meeting in interfaith dialogue, besides being a free moment of sharing and exchange, is also a moment of mutual recognition and renewed inspiration, which strengthens one's sense of belonging to one's own community. The chance to see how different traditions, with different cultural and linguistic roots, continue to walk together on a common path, over years of shared work and growth, consolidates the will for peace and personal ethical responsibility.

The plurality of faiths and practices is not an obstacle, but an asset: a constant dialogue that is renewed in mutual respect, sharing and listening, a common path realized in unity in diversity. Interreligious dialogue is a practical example of possible harmony, a laboratory of coexistence that has peace at its core, and respect for diversity as its common guide. At a time when the world often appears divided, interfaith dialogue clearly shows that it is possible to move forward together, even in multiplicity, cultivating awareness, compassion and wisdom as shared values.

I approach the end of my talk with two quotes from the Catholic world. From Pope Leo XIV's address to representatives of other churches and ecclesial communities and other religions: "Today is a time for dialogue and for building bridges." Pope Francis in the *Abu Dhabi Declaration*: "There is no alternative: either we will build the future together or there will be no future."

I want to share with you a bitter *last-minute* reflection on the journey in interreligious dialogue since 1995 until the present, where each community has given its own contribution of wisdom, compassion and commitment for the benefit of humankind. Something frighteningly tragic for a civilized society is taking place in the Gaza Strip: the refusal to apply the norms of humanitarian law to citizens exhausted by starvation and deprived of medicine. After nearly three months of blockade, Israel is allowing limited access to food aid in Gaza. International food security experts have warned that Gaza is in danger of officially entering famine. This is unacceptable. This fact is a crime against humanity regardless of religious, political, economic or social issues.

Italian Head of State Sergio Mattarella, at the Quirinale Ceremony for the 79th Anniversary of the Italian Republic Day, said the following words:²⁵ “Let the Israeli army make the territories of the Strip accessible to the action of international bodies, thus making possible again full humanitarian assistance to people. That an entire population, from children to the elderly, be reduced to starvation is inhuman.” To date, despite requests and reminders from us as Shinnyoji Zen Temple Florence, we have been unable to organize a silent walk to say NO to the blockade of humanitarian aid that prevents the free flow of trucks with food and medicine into the Gaza Strip. Failing to intervene with a compact, orderly, silent march undermines our sense of collective responsibility as an interfaith community, guided by the meaning of the word *responsibility*: the ability to bring a response, to find the word in response to an event, to not remain silent. In Hebrew, being silent is spelled just like the word violence. If remaining silent and violence have the same root, then returning to the word, to a gesture of solidarity, can become a key to getting rid of violence.

I conclude with an act of faith, trusting in a shared dialogue of greater awareness, with a quote from the message of good wishes on the occasion of Vesak 2025 in Milan, “Buddhists and Christians in Dialogue of Liberation for our Time,” with which the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue puts emphasis on the commitment we share:

In our time, marked by divisions, conflicts, and suffering, we recognize the urgent need for a liberating dialogue that is not limited to words but is capable of translating those words into concrete actions for peace, justice, and dignity for all... The dialogue that takes place between us serves to communicate the treasures of our religious traditions and to draw on their wisdom to address the urgent challenges of our time.²⁶

Thank you for your attention. Gasshō

A word of thanks filled with gratitude to my Master for all that he has taught me, all that he has transmitted to me, and for the task he has entrusted to me.

Endnotes

1 A social and spiritual movement founded in India in 1955 by Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (1921–1990), also known by his spiritual name Shrii Shrii Ānandamūrti.

2 Born in 1949, he studied philosophy at the University of Genoa. A Sōtō Zen Buddhist monk, he lived for seven years as a disciple of Watanabe Rōshi at the Antaiji Monastery in Japan.

3 www.lastelladelmattino.org

4 www.lastelladelmattino.org/archivio-2/rovofiorito/archivio-2/la-casa-di-galgagnano

5 From <https://www.untempioperlapace.it/chi-siamo/>.

6 In February, March, May, and November.

7 In January, February, March, April, June, November, and December, with themes respectively: Justice, love, nature, death, joy, peace and love, peace and justice.

8 <https://press.comune.fi.it/it/comunicato/500743>

9 In January, February, March, April, and June, on the theme of peace: peace and diversity, peace and nature, peace and compassion, peace and solidarity, peace and beauty.

10 A Tibetan Buddhist center founded by His Holiness Sakya Trizin in 2003, with its headquarters in Tresanti, Montespertoli (Florence).

11 Falun Dafa, noto anche come Falun Gong, è un movimento religioso fondato e guidato da Li Hongzhi. Diffusosi in Cina negli anni '90, afferma di avere seguaci in più di 100 Paesi. La sua pratica comprende esercizi fisici, meditazione e la lettura di testi scritti da Li Hongzhi.

12 <https://press.comune.fi.it/it/comunicato/508765>

13 <https://www.cmif.altervista.org/public/zefiro/default/index/page/2.html>

14 “EkiZen,” no. 38 spring 2019, *Shinnyoji Sangha Newsletter*, 15–18. https://www.zenfirenze.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Ekizen-Primavera2019_bilingue.pdf

15 <http://met.provincia.fi.it/news.aspx?n=284157>

16 <https://www.comune.firenze.it/comunicati-stampa/grande-successo-la-prima-cena-interreligiosa>

17 La Pira Center and Focolare Movement, Hare Krishna, Waldensian Church, Methodist, Adventist, Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Lutheran and Romanian Orthodox, Islamic Community, Jewish Community of Florence, “I Ricostruttori nella preghiera” Community, Shinnyoji-Florence Zen Center, Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute, Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples, Islamic Community, Sangalli Institute of Florence, Catholic Action, ADRA Italy, Franciscan Youth Monte alle Croci, Jerusalem Fraternity, University of Florence, Family Federation, Christian Science, Interfaith Dialogue School, Baha’i Community of Florence.

18 <https://www.dimitalia.com/>

19 <https://www.mimesisedizioni.it/libro/9788857591193>

20 Born in Gunma, Japan, trained in Zuioji Senmon Sōdō (Ehime Prefecture). Director of the Soto Zen Buddhism Europe Office from 2020–2023.

21 Milan Mosque in Via Meda, Civic Palace of the City of Sarzana, Benedictine Monastery San Giovanni in Lecce, Oblate Library in Florence, Association for Mindfulness Meditation in Rome, City of Milan, Episcopal Palace in Bologna, Far East Film Festival 25 in Udine, Sōtō Zen Fudenji Temple in Salsomaggiore Terme, Congress Hall of the Hotel Royal in Sanremo, DISSGEA Department of the University of Padua.

22 In 2007, the “Space of the Spirit” was inaugurated at the new Meyer Children’s Hospital following a project involving the Religious Communities of Florence designed as a place for free recollection, meditation, and prayer. Its circular, modular structure welcomes and embraces those who pass through and stop there. “Space of the Spirit,” plural and welcoming, holds the symbols typical of each denomination and is open to all worship, meditation and secular reflection. <https://www.meyer.it/images/pdf/utilita-spazio-dello-spirito.pdf>

23 In 2016, the “Hall of Prayer and Silence” was opened at the Careggi University Hospital Company. A place of recollection open to everyone, patients, relatives and staff, believers of various religions and lay people who need a quiet place to retreat to face and process the conditions of suffering experienced in the hospital, or to give thanks when the care provided has made it possible to overcome difficult and painful situations. An agreement between the hospital and representatives of all religious communities in the area plus atheists and non-believers provides for spiritual or moral assistance to non-Catholics (there is already a specific agreement with the Church) inside the hospital. The Hall of Prayer and Silence overlooks a small

flower garden, furnished with antique furniture from the Medici Villa and a large rug, available for anyone who wishes to gather, pray, meditate, or read the sacred books offered by the religious communities, put together in a special shelving unit. To encourage maximum openness and avoid any form of discrimination, no religious symbols are present. <https://www.aou-careggi.toscana.it/internet/come-fare-per/luoghi-di-preghiera/>

24 In 2024, the “Room of Silence,” a physical space dedicated to recollection, prayer, and meditation, was opened at the University of Florence in the atrium of the Library on the Social Sciences Campus. The opening of the space, furnished only with benches, is part of the path marked by intercultural dialogue initiated between representatives of different denominations and students of the University and is a plural, symbol-free place. In addition to the President of the University of Florence, representatives of the following Traditions attended the inauguration: Catholic Church, Zen Buddhism, Islam, Judaism. <https://www.unifi.it/itSpazio dello Spirito - Firenze/news/inaugurata-la-stanza-del-silenzio>

25 https://www.corriere.it/politica/25_giugno_01/mattarella-disumano-ridurre-alla-fame-un-intera-popolazione-i-palestinesi-hanno-diritto-a-un-focolare-ecfd4194-f2b9-40e6-9ab6-0c50d9eccxlk.shtml

26 <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2025-05/messaggio-dicastero-dialogo-interreligioso-festa-vesak-buddismo.html>

WHAT MIGHT CHRISTIANITY HAVE TO OFFER ZEN?



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The following is a lecture presented on 10 July 2025 at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture as part of a lecture series commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute.

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO a Christian seminary in Germany asked if I would talk on Zen to their students. In itself this wasn't all that unusual—there has long been an interest in Buddhist contemplative traditions among educated Christians, especially in Europe. What was unusual was the topic the seminary asked me to speak on. Generally speaking, Christians interested in Zen wish to know what Zen might have to contribute to Christian spirituality. The German seminary, however, wanted to hear what I, as an American Zen monk who was raised as a Catholic, thought Christianity could offer to practitioners of Zen. Although I was a bit unsure how to proceed at first, I ended up finding it a very rewarding subject to consider. In the present talk I'd like to expand a bit on my thoughts at that time.

Before taking up this topic, however, I think it's necessary first to consider what we mean by "Zen." Zen is by no means a single, unified tradition—even in its home territory of East Asia it has a number of variations. Back in high school when I first started reading D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and the other early writers on Asian religions, I had the impression that Zen was pretty much defined by the Japanese Rinzai style of monastic life and koan work. Later, after arriving in Japan, I gradually became aware of the separate monastic tradition of Soto Zen and its quite different view of practice. Later still I found out about Obaku Zen, which is typical Japanese Rinzai Zen in its meditation practices but which preserves a very different sixteenth-century Chinese monastic lifestyle.

I've also had the opportunity to visit Korea and Taiwan and stay briefly in Buddhist temples there. Although these temples were all of the Zen school, I was struck by the differences in monastic life and practice. In Korean Zen temples, for

example, there seems to be less emphasis on physical labor (known as *samu*) than in Japan, where *samu* occupies a major part of the monastic day. Conversely, there seems to be more time devoted to *zazen*, though with a more relaxed atmosphere in the meditation hall than in Japanese meditation halls. The overall ambience also seemed more fraternal in Korea—at the monastery Songguan-sa, for example, meals were characterized by cheerful socializing rather than strict etiquette and silent, fast-as-possible eating.

I was also intrigued by small lifestyle differences. In Japanese monasteries, for example, it's regarded as very important that socks never be worn in the temple buildings, even in the dead of winter. In Korea, on the other hand, the monks are *required* to wear socks even in the hottest part of summer.

In Taiwan, Zen practice seems to have turned more toward study than *zazen*, with notable exceptions like Dharma Drum, which has been influenced by Japanese Zen. There is also more of an emphasis on social engagement, and many of the larger temples have become permanent residential communities, similar in some ways to Christian monasteries. This is in contrast to Japan, where the monasteries are training halls, and the monks are required to leave the community after their time of training is completed.

I think all of these systems have their strong points, and I was very impressed by the sincerity of many of the monastics I met in both Korea and Taiwan. My point is not to make any value judgments, but simply to point out that there is no set, standard Zen monastic life as such. Zen practice takes different forms according to the culture it's in.

Zen itself is originally a product of the contact between Indian Buddhism and Chinese culture and spirituality, and the final result was a form of Buddhist practice quite different from that in India. Just one example of this is the emphasis on work in Chinese Zen. Whereas in Indian Buddhism the monks and nuns were forbidden from engaging in physical labor, considering it a karma-generating activity and thus a hindrance to escaping the world of *samsara*, in China attitudes toward work have always been quite different. There's the ideal, for example, of the retired Confucian scholar-official who spends his time tending a vegetable garden and writing poetry in his free time. In Chinese Buddhism, work therefore came to be regarded as, if anything, an ennobling activity, and an important part of bringing the fruits of meditation into the everyday world.

Just as there are Chinese expressions of Zen, Korean expressions of Zen, and Japanese expressions of Zen, there will inevitably arise distinctive Western forms of Zen, and those forms will inevitably be shaped by the predominant spiritual culture here. Christianity is certainly not the only spiritual tradition in the West, but as the predominant tradition it will inevitably influence the way that Zen develops in this country.

Before proceeding any further I'd like to emphasize a few other points.

First, when I ask "What might Christianity have to offer Zen?" I think it's important to keep in mind exactly what kind of tradition Zen is within Buddhism as a whole. The word "Zen," deriving from the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, actually means "meditation," so that the Zen school of Buddhism means the meditation school of Buddhism. It's the tradition of Buddhism that primarily emphasizes the practice of meditation as a means of realizing the central goal of Buddhism, which is the resolution of the problem of human suffering.

In other words, Zen is, to put it in Christian terms, a contemplative tradition. Thus a meaningful discussion of Christianity's possible contributions to Zen must be, I think, a discussion of Christianity's possible contributions to the Zen contemplative path, rather than, say, an argument for Zen taking on more of the type of social activities that Christian groups often engage in.

The second point when I ask, "What might Christianity have to offer Zen?" is that the issue is, more specifically, "What might Christianity have to offer Zen *in the West*?" This is a rather different issue from what Christianity might have to offer Zen in Asia. I was once asked why, although there is significant interest in Zen among many Western Christians, it seems to be a one-way street, with little corresponding interest in Christianity among Asian Zen Buddhists. I've noticed the same thing, and I believe it's related to what exactly it is in Zen that interests Christians.

In many ways the original meditation practices of Zen and Christianity are very similar. Both involve emptying of the mind of images, in the understanding that limited human thought can never grasp the reality of the Absolute and that it is only through a process of emptying (*kenosis* in Christianity) that we can come into accord with the Absolute.

In Western Christianity, however, this tradition of "emptying" prayer was largely lost during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, whereas in Zen it has always remained. Zen meditation has also been deepened by the Asian understanding of the role that the body—posture, breathing, and physical relaxation, for example—can play in the practice of meditation. This aspect of Buddhist meditation has been of particular interest to the Christian contemplatives I know.

Thus Christian contemplatives are interested in Zen in large part because they see in its meditation a way to recover their own very similar, but now lost, contemplative practices. The influence of Zen, in other words, has been on the level of technique.

When it comes to doctrine and ritual, however, there are qualitative differences between Zen and Christianity. Scholars in the respective religions may study these differences with interest, but little mutual influence is possible without changing the basic thought structure of the religions. Both Asian Buddhism and Western

Christianity have their own traditions of ritual and doctrine that have served them well over the millennia, so, despite the congenial dialogue between the two traditions, influences at this level have been limited.

But when it comes to Western Zen, as opposed to Asian Zen, I think the situation is rather different. By Western Zen I mean the Zen practiced in the West by people who identify themselves primarily as Buddhist, in contrast to people who still strongly identify with Christianity but find Zen meditation to be a helpful part of their religious life.

Westerners who identify themselves primarily as Buddhists are generally interested not only in the meditative practices, but are also quite interested in Buddhist thought, and often look to Buddhist concepts to give structure to their religious lives. At the same time, though, many have had Christian upbringings or have at least been influenced by the Christian concepts that are part of Western culture. Often these Christian influences have been rejected at some point in their lives, but the imprint remains.

My own story is pretty much in this mold. I was raised as a Roman Catholic, with communion, confession, Sunday mass, and weekly religious instruction from the nuns. But later came the usual adolescent questions about relationships, careers, and the meaning of life. At the time Christianity didn't seem to offer me any path to that meaning, since I saw it as requiring faith in Christian beliefs, and it was precisely this kind of faith that I didn't have. What I did have was a lot of doubts, and not much idea of how to resolve them.

When I first read about Zen in high school, it seemed to offer a way out of this. For one thing it provided a clear-cut method of practice, something that I could actually do with my body and mind and that promised an experiential understanding of what religion is all about beyond just an acceptance of beliefs. And Zen actually welcomed the sort of questioning and doubt that I had. The proverbial "crisis of faith" is welcomed in Zen, with the attitude of, "If you doubt and question, then by all means doubt and question, but go all the way with doubting and questioning and see what finally remains at the end."

It was with these things in mind that I went to Japan and began my Zen practice. As the years passed my ideas about the practice changed, of course, and many things that I had thought of as uniquely Zen seemed more like Buddhist expressions of insights found in all of the contemplative traditions.

I started reading books on Christian contemplative prayer and the Christian mystics, and was introduced by a Zen master to a German Jesuit priest named Father Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, who lived from 1898 to 1990 and was practitioner of Zen meditation. He had lived in Hiroshima before WWII and was a survivor of the atom bomb attack on that city. Fr. Lassalle started Zen practice in order to better understand Japanese culture. At least that's the way he justified his interest in Zen

to his Church superiors—I suspect his interest in Buddhist practice actually went deeper than that.

I was very impressed by Fr. Lassalle, who struck me as an utterly unpretentious man with a very natural sense of grounded spirituality. It is largely owing to his influence that Christians in Europe started practicing Zen meditation, and that the Vatican accepted the notion of Zen retreats being held in Catholic monasteries.

All of this prompted in me a lot of thought on the subject of my talk today, the possible contributions of Christianity to Zen. As I just mentioned, I believe these contributions are not a matter of Christianity offering Zen something that Zen entirely lacks, but are rather a different approach to expressing the truths that are already common to both traditions.

People throughout the world are, I think, basically similar in their spiritual needs, for forgiveness, for devotion, for transcendence, and the world religions have responded to these similar needs in accordance with the cultures they developed in. For this reason I think that the way in which Christianity, or Judaism, or even the modern Western “religion” of science, have expressed or dealt with these basic spiritual needs can make them more accessible or inspiring for Western Zen practitioners.

This can be the case for quite fundamental issues, such as meaning of grace or the significance of suffering—I’ll discuss these later—but it can also be simply a matter of how a certain concept is expressed. For example, as in Mindfulness, Zen places great emphasis on being in the present moment, “right here, right now.” There is a Japanese word for it, *narikiru*, meaning to become one with what you do. I’ve never really heard an explanation for this, though—Zen doesn’t like to explain much, and the teaching of “right here, right now” can remain rather ambiguous, another thing to do without really knowing why.

Contemplative Christianity has the same teaching, but puts it into more concrete terms that in my experience often resonate more deeply with Westerners. In contemplative Catholic orders they speak of a concept known as the sacrament of the present moment, a sacrament being something that brings us closer to God. Baptism is a sacrament, for example.

My Christian monastic friends tell me that the present moment is called a sacrament because it is only in the present moment that the divine can manifest in our lives. The past is a creation of our memory; the future is merely our past experience projected onto what hasn’t happened yet. So in Catholic monasticism being “right here, right now” is regarded as a way to give the divine the maximum opportunity to manifest in our lives.

Another issue where contemplative Christianity might have something to offer Zen in the West is in the validation of purely contemplative practice. Of course, as the meditation school of Buddhism, Zen hardly needs to have the practice of meditation validated. This is as true of Zen in the West as it is of Zen in Asia. However,

I do sense a certain shift in the center of gravity in Westerner Zen toward more of an emphasis on action in the world, as opposed to the single-minded focus on contemplative practice seen in Asia, at least during a Zen monk's years in training.

Now I hasten to add that I don't wish to criticize Engaged Buddhism or any of the other movements that seek to get Buddhism more involved in the problems of the world. Certainly Zen practitioners with a vocation for such activity are doing very important work, and I think everyone recognizes that this is a very significant development in Western Buddhism.

But what concerns me is what seems to be—when it goes too far—a certain prioritizing of social action over meditative practice. For example, I know an American Buddhist teacher who has taught meditation tirelessly for decades and even encourages anyone who has done a retreat with him to call him up at any time of the day or night if they're really suffering and need help. In fact, he says, he likes the 3 AM calls the best, since these calls usually involve the most significant and interesting problems. Yet I have heard him criticized because he's not doing soup-kitchen type social work.

I'm sure this teacher would never himself claim that what he's doing is any more important than soup-kitchen work, but I think it's important to recognize that it's not *less* important either. He's helping suffering people, and in a capacity that very few people are capable of.

The reason I mention this in the context of a lecture on Zen and Christianity is that many people feel that this impetus in Western Zen toward more social activism is rooted in the Christian stress on the importance of good works, like caring for the sick, visiting those in prison, and so on. Thus it's important to remember that Christianity, though it does indeed place great value on good works, equally values prayer and contemplation (here I referring specifically to those Christian traditions that have contemplative traditions—the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches; the situation is, of course, more complex when it comes to Protestantism).

On the one hand you have clergymen who are constantly involved in activity and are sometimes rather averse to contemplation. I remember once I was doing a retreat at a Catholic contemplative monastery on Big Sur, and as I worked in the garden had a chance to speak briefly to another retreatant, a Catholic priest from one of the active orders. He told me that his order required all of its priests to attend a ten-day meditation retreat once every year. I commented that he must find this a welcome break from all the busy-ness and stress of his usual schedule. He replied, "Are you kidding. It's the hardest ten days of my entire year. The inactivity drives me nuts!"

On the other hand, you have groups like the Carthusians, who in their communities live basically as silent hermits. They each have a small house, with a room that serves as a workshop and another room where the monk prays, eats,

and sleeps. The house also has a large garden that the monk may use as he wishes. The monks live in a community, but have no contact with the other monks except during chapel services and during weekly walks that they take in the mountains, during which they're allowed to talk.

Their lives are basically devoted entirely to prayer and meditation, with no provision for activity in the world. Yet the Carthusian vocation is highly regarded in the Catholic Church. The reason is that in the Catholic Church the prayer of any individual monastic is thought to affect not only that particular individual but to infuse every member of the body of the Church. The practice of the monastic is, in other words, a deeply valuable form of action in the world.

The next Christian concept that I believe has something to offer Western followers of Buddhism is the concept of grace. Grace in the Christian sense is, of course, a divine act from above, a freely given gift of God offered to people independently of their own effort. At first it might seem that Buddhism, as a nontheistic religion, would have no place for the concept of grace. Who or what, after all, would be doing the giving? And Zen, as a tradition usually regarded as espousing "self-power," would in particular seem to regard grace as unnecessary.

And, in fact, there is in Zen a real tendency to ignore this aspect of spirituality. Many Zen writings quite clearly encourage attempts to force the experience of enlightenment through effort and strain. This often leads Zen practitioners, both Western *and* Japanese, to misconstrue meditation as a matter of forcefully suppressing thought to generate extraordinary states of mind. I've seen that far too many times this results in burnout, frustration, and eventual abandonment of meditation. I myself wasted countless hours in the monastery doing precisely this type of meditation.

So I think that an openness to Christianity's message on the role of grace in the spiritual life might help Western practitioners of Zen not only avoid such dangers, but also see that the concept of grace is in many ways quite in line with Zen spirituality. For example, there are passages in Zen writings that definitely point to what can only be identified as the concept of grace. One is a famous passage in the "Shōji" chapter of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*:

Just letting go of body and mind and forgetting them both, throw yourself into the house of Buddha. When you allow yourself to be acted upon from the side of the Buddha, then, with no strength needed and no thought expended, you are freed from birth-and-death and become a buddha.

Another example is a short poem that the great twentieth-century Zen master, Yamada Mumon Rōshi, wrote after his first spiritual awakening. In Japanese this reads: *Ōi naru mono ni idakare aru koto, kesa fuku kaze no suzushisa ni shiru*

(“That I am embraced by something vast, I know by the coolness of this morning’s breeze”).

Yamada Mumon’s successor, Harada Shōdō Rōshi, often says that the practice of Zen is all about what he calls *makaseru*, learning to surrender or entrust. Far from being “self-power” in the sense of the self powering itself to enlightenment, Zen can better be regarded, I believe, as the active practice of learning to let go.

Although the notion of being “acted upon by the side of the Buddha”—basically the concept of grace—is not often spoken of in Zen, particularly Rinzai Zen, it is in fact implied by the fundamental Mahayana teaching that enlightenment is possible only because we are in essence already enlightened through our inherent possession of buddha-nature.

In his essay, “Is There Room for ‘Grace’ in Buddhism?” the great Buddhist scholar Marco Pallis argues persuasively that buddha-nature is a dynamic presence always moving toward manifestation in sentient beings:

The key to the problem lies in a property of transcendence itself: given the incommensurable gap... between Enlightenment and the seeker after enlightenment—ignorant by definition—it is self-evident to anyone who thinks at all ... that such a seeking on the part of a human being with his necessarily imperfect vision and limited powers does not really make sense when taken at its face value alone; Enlightenment (or God for that matter) cannot possibly be situated at the passive pole in relation to Man’s endeavor... intrinsically Enlightenment is the active factor in our situation and... it is man who, for all his apparent initiative and effort, represents the passive term of the supreme adequation. Meister Eckhart puts this whole question into proper perspective when he says that “in the course of nature it is really the higher which is ever more ready to pour out its power into the lower than the lower is ready to receive it...” for, as he goes on to say, “there is no dearth of God with us; what dearth there is wholly ours who make not ready to receive his grace.” Where [Eckhart] said “God” you have but to say “Enlightenment” and the result will be a Buddhist statement in form as well as content.

This is the action of grace—the Unconditioned striving to manifest itself in the limited, conditioned mind. A greater emphasis in Zen on the concept of grace, of being “acted upon by the side of the Buddha,” might help clarify that zazen is a practice, not of forcing the mind into extraordinary states, but of doing our part to allow our intrinsic buddha-nature to manifest itself. As I’ve heard the process described by Christian contemplatives, meditation is the art of learning to get out of God’s way.

This reminds me of the problem I had as a young Catholic with the notion of faith. The Zen writer Alan Watts had something interesting to say about faith as opposed to belief:

Belief, as I use the word here, is the insistence that the truth is what one would 'lief,' or wish it to be.... Faith, on the other hand, is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconditions; it is a plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go.

In this sense, I think, Zen meditation can be seen as training in faith.

I believe that the concept of grace can also help in dealing with an aspect of suffering that often arises in the course of spiritual practice. It is here, I think, that Christianity has much to offer Westerners practicing Zen.

Several times people have come to me after a Zen retreat and said something to the effect of, "I can't understand it. I've been doing zazen for years now, yet after every retreat I find myself feeling depressed for a couple of weeks."

It's as though the thinking is that since the starting point of Buddhism is about resolving the problem of suffering, then if you begin your Buddhist practice with x amount of suffering, after a year you should have x amount of suffering minus one year's worth of meditation, and after two years of practice you should have x amount of suffering minus two years' worth of meditation, and so on. Yet what often ends up happening is that once the initial enthusiasm for the practice wears off an even greater sense of suffering and meaninglessness sets in.

To some extent such suffering is only natural, particularly when people are just beginning their meditation practice. Ordinary we invest a good bit of time and resources to distracting ourselves from the worries and sorrows of everyday life, but this approach no longer works when, with meditation, we set aside the distractions and start observing the mind as it is. This, of course, makes us more clearly aware of the sufferings that have always been there, and this is to be encouraged. If we wish to attain genuine transformative growth we have to work with the reality of our minds, not our illusions about who we are.

There is, however, a deeper, more existential form of suffering that emerges with longer practice, known sometimes in Christianity as the Dark Night of the Soul. When this occurs in Zen, the practitioner is often told to just keep sitting and rely on the meditative technique. "Just sitting" may be a productive approach for a certain type of strong-willed personality, but for many people such suffering is very confusing and leaves them feeling that their practice has failed. Many quit their training as a result.

Perhaps it is precisely because the techniques of meditation have been so highly developed in Zen that Zen hasn't had to examine more closely the nature of the

deeper suffering that can arise during practice. The techniques alone are, indeed, often enough to get a person through the rough spots if he or she has a natural affinity for the practice.

Conversely, Christianity, perhaps precisely because its methods of meditation are not as developed as those in Buddhism, has examined the psychology of this suffering and recognized its importance in the purification of the mind. Saint John of the Cross, one of the greatest Christian writers on the path of prayer, likens the purification process to fire burning wood, which starts off with a lot of smoke and crackling. Similarly, the purification process starts with much discomfort for the spirit. But, just as wood finally turns to brightly glowing coals, the purified spirit is peaceful and luminous with the light of God. Saint John lays out a clear map of this process, which informs the practitioner of what to expect on the path of purification and sensitizes him or her to the benefits it brings.

Another Christian mystic, the author of the text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, describes the significance of suffering in a way that brings to mind the Mahayana concept of buddha-nature as a dynamic presence that seeks to manifest itself in sentient beings.

The Cloud of Unknowing says that the deepest form of spiritual suffering is the self's consciousness of its own existence. As Buddhism and modern psychology tell us, the ego-self is basically a thought-construct, and thought, being based on past experience, is always conditioned and thus has no access to that which is unconditioned. As the Cloud of Unknowing puts it, "God can well be loved, but God cannot be thought. By love God can be grasped and held, but by thought, neither grasped nor held." Thus in all of the mystical traditions thought is identified as the cause of the subtlest and most profound form of unease or dissatisfaction. That thought, with which we ordinarily identify so closely, cannot approach God is the source of the suffering that is closest to the essence of our spirit, yet, Christian mystical theology tells us, it is this suffering that finally drives us to transcend the limits of thought.

A number of long-time Zen practitioners who I have lent Christian texts on prayer to have mentioned to me how much these texts helped them make sense of the frustration and confusion they were experiencing with the meditation practice. "To be forewarned is to be forearmed," and this is as true in spiritual practice as in anything else. The insights of Christianity on the Dark Night of the Soul would be, I think, a valuable addition to the body of knowledge every serious Zen student should possess.

The final point I would like to make does not really concern doctrine or technique, but is rather more of a matter of description. Buddhism speaks of the goal of the path of practice as nirvana or buddhahood, but Buddhism, always wary of

conceptualization, doesn't really try to describe what such a state might actually be like.

Christian mystics, however, despite all their talk about the suffering involved in contemplation, seem more willing to take a stab at describing the joy related to union with the divine. Meister Eckhart has a description of it that reminds me of the Buddhist notion of "the Samadhi of play." Eckhart says:

I have often said that there is something in the soul that is so closely related to God that it is one [with God] and not just united.... Now all things are alike in God and are God himself. Here in this sameness God finds it so pleasant that he lets his nature and his being flow in this sameness in himself. It is just as enjoyable for him as when someone lets a horse run loose on a meadow that is completely level and smooth. Such is the horse's nature that it pours itself out with all its might in running about the meadow. This it would find delightful; such is its nature. So, too, does God find delight and satisfaction where he finds sameness. He finds it a joy to pour his nature and his being completely into the sameness, for he is this sameness himself.

And perhaps on this upbeat note I should bring this talk to an end. Thank you for listening.

REMEMBERING THE FIRST GENERATION



James W. Heisig and Paul L. Swanson

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

The following is a revised transcript of the oral presentation by James W. Heisig and Paul L. Swanson at the symposium “Believing and Thinking in an Age of Pluralism: The Search for New Modes of Expression,” held on 27 February 2026 to celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. The oral contents have been corrected and supplemented.

Matthew McMullen: Our program today consists of two sessions, a morning session and an afternoon session. The morning session will consist first of a talk from the professors emeriti at the Institute, James Heisig and Paul Swanson, who will talk about the history of the Institute.

So without further ado, I would like to introduce the president of Nanzan University, Robert Kisala, who will give some introductory remarks.

Robert Kisala: Good morning. I’m grateful for this opportunity to welcome all the participants to the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture Fiftieth Anniversary Symposium. The goal of the Nanzan Institute has always been believing and thinking in the age of pluralism, and in the search for new modes of expression. In this quest, the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture has contributed to the development of religious studies in Japan and around the world by holding research seminars, workshops, in-house seminars, and international conferences on interfaith dialogue and the dialogue between Japanese and Western philosophy. It has produced numerous publications and translation series on Japanese and world religions and philosophy, including the long-standing publication of journals such as the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* and *Interreligio*. It has attracted scores of leading scholars of religion from around the world and has become a venue for collaborative research. The NIRC has taken the initiative to accept visiting fellows from Japan and abroad and has attracted donations for the establishment of scholarship and lecture positions, such as the Van Bragt Chair

and the Roche Chair for Interreligious Research. Over the years, the permanent Research Fellows have received numerous awards for their publications and scholarship both within Japan and abroad, and the Institute has contributed to the international recognition of Nanzan University. The NIRC has been recognized as a leader in the dialogue among religions, within the Catholic Church, as well as by other leading religious practitioners.

I am proud to say that I was a member of the Institute for ten years, from 1995 to 2005, and it has played a foundational role in my own career as a religious researcher. This symposium is an opportunity to both look back on the contribution of the NIRC over the past fifty years, as well as to imagine the future of the Institute. I will close by expressing some of my hopes for the future. In this age of polarization, the cultivation of the spirit and skills for dialogue cannot be emphasized enough. Building on its long experience as a leader in promoting dialogue, I hope the Institute will continue to develop as a school for dialogue. I also hope that dialogue will extend to cultivating dialogue among the various academic disciplines, beginning with collaborative research with the other research institutes here at Nanzan University. In terms of specific research topics, the ethical use of AI is of pressing concern, and I hope that the NIRC will be able to make its own unique contribution to this dialogue as well. More than anything else, I hope that the Institute will continue to develop as a place for encounter for religious researchers and practitioners from Japan and abroad, a place to cultivate the values of human dignity, diversity, and dialogue. I pray for the success of this symposium and offer my congratulations for the fifty years of service, and my best wishes for the continued development of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. Thank you.

Introductory remarks by Kim Seung Chul, former Director

Kim Seung Chul: Good morning, everyone. I'd like to welcome you. This is for me a privilege and a great honor to introduce my two senior colleagues here to you, James Heisig and Paul Swanson. They are surely well known to all of you, and some of you know them better than me, so my introduction will be very brief. First is James Heisig, who received his PhD from Cambridge University in 1973. He worked as a lecturer at graduate schools in Chicago and Mexico City, before moving to Japan in 1977, where he had the position of a permanent fellow at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, as one of the founding members of NIRC. Sometimes I imagine that he was here at Nanzan even before the world was made. There are many things to say as an introduction, but in brief, he has published books in English, Spanish, Italian, and also in Japanese, and they were translated into even more languages worldwide. He served as director of the Institute from 1991 to 2001, following Jan van Bragt, the second director. Jim

received an honorary doctorate from the Tallinn University in Estonia in 2015. In 2021 he was awarded the Kanazawa University International Award in commemoration of D. T. Suzuki and Nishida Kitaro. And in 2023 he was awarded Japan's Order of the Sacred Treasure.

Paul Swanson did his graduate studies at Sophia University, the University of Tokyo, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He came to Nanzan in 1986, serving as the editor of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, the academic journal published by NIRC, and I'm very proud to say that this journal is considered as a gateway to success for scholars publishing on Japanese religions. Besides his work as an editor, his area of specialization was Japanese religions and Buddhist studies, especially Chinese texts. He also served as director for many years (2001–2010). Among many contributions and various publications, I want to mention *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight*, which is a translation of the *Mohezhiguan* (Jp. *Makashikan*) in three volumes, for which he was awarded the 2019 Toshihide Numata Book Prize.

Both Jim and Paul were Roche Chair holders at NIRC, which was made possible by the generous donation from Mr. Robert Roche and the Roche Family Foundation.

This is just a short introduction. Now, I want to ask Jim and Paul to tell us about the fifty years of the history of NIRC, which was enabled by and reflected in their own contributions.

Paul Swanson (PLS): Okay, I'll start out. Thank you all for coming. We will be covering the early period that Jim and I were here at the Institute, so we may give short shrift to the last ten or twenty years, focusing instead on the first thirty-four years, remembering the first generation. My notes say that we hope we can be here for the seventy-fifth anniversary celebration, so we can hear the tales of the second generation, but I will be happy if I am still around for the sixtieth anniversary.

As I look around at the audience, I see so many (I hate to say) old faces, but many of whom will appear in pictures as much younger in our presentation. We will be presenting mostly in English, but, if something comes up that you want to ask and say stop, can you tell us more about this or that? And comments or questions in Japanese is also fine.

James Heisig (JWH): We'll be talking spontaneously off the slides and our thinking is that even if we have a half hour at the end for questions, they will have lost the context by that time: So if you have questions please feel free to interrupt and ask, as Paul said, in any language you're familiar with—except Flemish and Russian.

Let me say something about the beginning of the Institute. Soon after becoming president of Nanzan University in 1972, Johannes Hirschmeier began to dream of forming an institute at a Catholic university for dialogue with the

philosophy and religions of Japan and Asia. The inspiration of this came in the aftermath of the Vatican Council, which took a more open attitude to the reality of religious pluralism.

As a member of a religious missionary order, he understood that conversion from one religious establishment to another was not as important as sharing the ideals of one's own Christian belief as widely as possible. The mood in the Catholic Church had shifted to a greater interest in the teachings and practices of religions traditionally considered an open market for religious conversion to Christianity. He felt that this mood required a proper theoretical background, grounded in high academic standards. Hence his dream of the Institute, towards whose realization he quickly began to raise funds.

At the time, it seemed to most of the Nanzan University establishment that building such an Institute would not succeed without graduate programs in philosophy and religion, and that the whole idea was ill-conceived, like beginning a building with the roof. As a result, the project was removed from the University and put under the control of the Nanzan School Corporation.

Shortly after groundbreaking, I was invited for a consultation on the structure and workings of the Institute. At the time I was dividing my time between teaching at graduate schools in Chicago and Mexico City. I had already decided against an academic career that would involve tenure at any particular institution. I was young and idealistic, and had seen enough of academic politics and mad professors during my years in Europe. At the time, the adjunct professorships I enjoyed seemed perfectly suited to my hopes of teaching and doing research on the borderlands between philosophy and religion.

I was thrilled with the idea of visiting Japan and flattered that I would be able to join others in a discussion about the shape such an Institute might take. When I arrived, I immediately went to the president's office to inquire about the consultation. After a cup of tea, President Hirschmeier took me for a walk to the corner of the campus where the Institute was to stand. There was nothing more than a large hole in the ground. He asked me, if I were to imagine my ideal research institute, what would it look like? I thought to myself, well, everyone is going to be more guarded at the formal meeting, so this is my chance to speak frankly. I talked about institutes I had visited in Europe and shared my experiences in South America, and also that many of them had failed to create a true community of scholars, instead gathering together a collection of first-rate scholars, each of whom was doing his or her own research. I recommended, therefore, that he begin not with well-established scholars who already had their own careers and interests, but find younger scholars who are willing to pioneer the field. If the time was right, and if they were devoted to it, I was convinced the idea would succeed. Also, I said, it's important not to burden them with pre-established

goals and tasks. They should be allowed to find their way in uncharted territory. And then, since I was in Japan, I thought I'd better say something suitably Oriental. On the plane over I had been reading Zhuang Zhou's *Inner Chapters* and one image in particular came to mind. The Institute, I said, should be like a teacup. The teacup itself is useless. Its purpose is the emptiness that it creates for something to happen.

That seemed a sufficiently wise thing to say at the end of my remarks. "Okay," he said, took me back to his office. After another cup of tea and a little small talk, he handed me an envelope with some money and suggested that I return to Tokyo, visit some museums and take in a kabuki show before heading back home. I left his office embarrassed. It seemed to me that I had spoken so foolishly that I would not even be invited to attend the consultation with other scholars from around the world.

A few months later he wrote me a letter saying that the teacup was finished and would I like to join him in a cup of tea. He was inviting me to help found the Institute. Only years later, actually at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Institute, did I hear from one of his vice presidents, Nagasaka Genichirō, that in fact there had been no formal meeting, and that he had invited individual scholars one by one to stand in front of the same hole and tell him what they saw. The others were much more reasonable than I, speaking of the need for established scholars, a good library, for an academic journal, for electric typewriters in all the rooms and so forth. But for some reason, he chose me.

While he was raising funds and searching for an acting director, the president asked Heinrich Dumoulin to be the face of the Institute until a suitable candidate could be found, knowing that he had retired and would never be coming



Architect's drawing of the Nanzan Institute

down to the Institute to direct its activities. Meantime, the two of them were looking for someone to serve as the first director. By the time the buildings were completed, they had found what they were looking for in the person of Jan Van Bragt. I might note here that Professor Dumoulin later told me that during the search, while he was shaving one morning, he looked in the mirror and suddenly saw the face of Jan Van Bragt. President Hirschmeier agreed and made the proposal at once. At the time, Jan was the provincial of the CICM order in Japan and jumped at the chance to return to academic life. The order generously backed him up and in no time he had relocated to Nagoya to assume his new post. But he was so much more than director. Until his retirement in 1996, he was the *soul* of the Institute. His presence gave us stability and a steadfast focus on our purpose, all the while protecting us from being used by church groups and academic groups and government groups for their own agenda.

To further bolster the ideals of the Institute, President Hirschmeier agreed that it would be a good idea to build a family style home to house visitors, young researchers, and others connected to its work. The Paulus Heim was built in 1977 and five of us immediately took up residence. The hundreds of scholars who have stayed with us over the years are testimony to his foresight.

PLS: As you just heard, Jim was here from the very beginning. I didn't join the Institute until 1986, ten years after the founding, and so I was kind of a young outlier, but happily was quickly accepted as part of the community here. I first came as the associate editor, not as a permanent fellow. At the time, I worked on editing and publishing the journals and various publications from both the Nanzan Institute and the Anthropology Institute, and I immediately, to the detriment of other parts of my job, focused mostly on the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*. At the time, Jan Swyngedouw was the editor of the *JJRS*. He was an excellent proofreader, and with wide knowledge in the sociology of religion, but he kind of let me take over, and I was happy to do so. After four years, as I heard later, there were discussions at the Paulus Heim saying, how can we get Paul to stay for the long term? And Jan Swyngedouw very graciously volunteered to resign his permanent position at the Institute and move to a teaching position at Nanzan. He was a great teacher, always able to spontaneously give an exciting lecture despite little or no formal preparation. By the way, at the time the members of the Institute did very little teaching and were able to concentrate on the responsibilities of the Institute. In any case, Swyngedouw volunteered to give up his position so I could shift over and become a permanent member, and also the editor of the *JJRS*.

Jim talked about the importance of being a community, but it wasn't just a community of a few permanent scholars. The office staff were very important, as were the many visiting scholars constantly coming and going. We worked very



closely with the staff and everyone who was involved in the Institute. We used to have tea time at 3:30 every day that would often go on to 4:00 or even 4:30, which served as a very comfortable opportunity to discuss things that needed to be done at the Institute. And we also had this ongoing tradition of garden parties at the Paulus Heim. And this was great because it involved not only the people working at the Institute, but they would bring their children and their families. I have many great memories of these garden parties, and this illustrates the importance of the wide network that was created at the Institute that included the staff, the secretaries, the temporary visitors, lots of people coming in and out.

Next I'd like to recall the early members of the "first generation" of permanent fellows. Starting from the top, we have already mentioned the "founding fathers" trifecta of Jan Van Bragt, Jan Swyngedouw, and James Heisig. Nagakura Hisako, an early member of the Institute, very quickly shifted over to the Nanzan faculty. As we swing around the circle a bit more, we see that gradually people were



Keta Masako



Ota Yoshiko



Ōtani Eiichi



Sulak Sivaraksa



Awazu Kenta



Erin McCarthy



Jeanine Sawada



Saitō Takashi

added, Watanabe Manabu and myself joined the Institute at about the same time. As Robert Kisala mentioned in his opening comments, he was a permanent fellow at the Institute for about ten years. Unfortunately (for us), he did not stay longer. We were sorry to see him go, but he went on his own way to (perhaps) greener pastures. Okuyama Michiaki was with us for a long time, but he retired early from the Institute and is now working in Tokyo. He was very also active in, as we will see later, many of the Institute publications and research activities in Japanese. Finally, I'm not sure he belongs with the "first" generation, but Kim Seung Chul joined and is still active as a permanent fellow of the Institute.

This is a quick roundup of the first generation of permanent members, but as I've mentioned already, there were also many people constantly coming in and out, whether for a year or two, or just a few days, weeks, or months. We've prepared a quick list of the postdoc fellows (see following page). It is important to note that from the very beginning, there was a system to support budding Japanese post-doc researchers to spend two years continuing their research before landing a more permanent job in academia (or elsewhere). The list contains the name of many people who have gone on to become influential figures in the world of Japanese religious studies, including Oda Yoshiko, Keta Masako (Kyoto University, president of the Japanese Academy of Religion), Horo Atsuhiko, and so forth. These were postdocs that came for usually two years right after they

Post-Doc Researcher Scholarships	Gilbert L. JOHNSTON (1982, 1984)	Keller KIMBROUGH (2005–2006, 2007, 2009)
瀨瀬康兵 (1976–1977)	Wilhelm MÜLLER (1982–1983)	Paul ATKINS (2006)
成河峰雄 (1977–1978)	William CENKNER (1983)	Joel BRADSHAW (2006)
小田淑子 (1977–1978)	Jean-Noel ROBERT (1984)	Christina HOFMANN (2006)
小林一葵 (1978–1980)	Karel DOBBELAERE (1984)	Manfred HOFMANN (2006)
日野紹運 (1979–1981)	Whalen W. LAI (1984)	Timothy W. RICHARDSON (2007)
赤松明彦 (1981–1982)	Richard E. WENTZ (1985)	Charlotte EUBANKS (2005, 2007)
井桁 碧 (1982–1984)	Joseph O'LEARY (1986–1987)	Erin MCCARTHY (2006, 2007)
氣多雅子 (1982–1984)	Winston L. KING (1985–1986)	John C. MARALDO (2005, 2007)
土田友章 (1985–1986)	Lawrence SULLIVAN (1985–1986)	Rafael SHOJI (2007–2008)
川上光代 (1986–1988)	Gerald B. COOKE (1986)	John TUCKER (2007)
木村登次 (1988–1990)	Steve ODIN (1987–1988)	Martin Lu 呂 武吉 (2007)
保呂篤彦 (1991–1993)	Frank PODGORSKI (1988)	Mark BLUM (2007)
瀨上恭子 (1991–1993)	YOSHIWARA Kazuo (1988–1989)	Victor S. HORI (1999–2000, 2008)
奥山倫明 (1993–1995)	Eugene ROOSENS (1989)	Annwieke VROOM (2008, 2009)
小野寺郷 (1993–1995)	Paul INGRAM (1989)	Andrea MOLLE (2006–2008)
梅澤弓子 (1995–1997)	Roger CORLESS (1991)	Aasulv LANDE (2009)
稲葉広由 (1996–1998)	Jan NATTIER (1991–1992)	Nikki BADO (2011)
崔 賢民 (1998–2000)	Jamie HUBBARD (1991–1992)	Eric WAITE (2011)
近藤光博 (1998–2000)	Harrie VANDERSTAPPEN (1991–1992)	Edward DROT'T (2012)
岩本明美 (1999–2001)	Peter IGARASHI (1991–1992)	Ricardo BAEZA (2012)
奥村浩基 (2000–2002)	Paul MOMMAERS (1992–1993)	East-Asian Research Fellowships
堀 雅彦 (2001–2003)	遊佐道子 (1993–1994)	李 完載 (1983–1984)
長谷千代子 (2002–2004)	Paula ARAI (1998–1999)	南 基英 (1985–1986)
山梨有希子 (2003–2005)	Janine A. SAWADA (1998–1999)	Prachar HUTANAWATRA (1987–1988)
山口亜紀 (2004–2006)	高田信良 (2001–2002)	Rosana TOSITRAKUL (1989)
川上恒雄 (2006–2008)	Tiziano TOSOLINI (2001–2002)	都 琬淳 (1990–1991)
大谷英一 (2005–2009)	Jay FORD (2003)	吉 熙星 (1990–1991)
長澤壮平 (2008–2010)	Donald ORR (2003)	Sulak SIVARAKSA (1992–1993)
長澤志穂 (2010–2011)	Scott SCHNELL (2003–2004)	梁 曉虹 (1994–1995)
栗津賢太 (2009–2010)	Gereon KOPF (2002–2004)	Antony FERNANDO (1995–1996)
Visiting Research Fellowships	Thomas KASULIS (2004, 2005)	蘇 軍 (1996–1997)
Mathias EDER (1976–1980)	James W. JONES (2005)	Pratoom ANGURAROHITA (1997–1998)
Ansgar PAUS (1979)	Philip VANHAELEMEERSCH (2005)	金 承哲 (2001–2002)
Gilbert HARDING (1979–1980)	Audrius BENARIUS (2006)	
John BRINKMAN (1979–1980)		
John KEANE (1980)		
Hans WALDENFELS (1980)		
Frederick FRANCK (1981)		
Jay MCDANIEL (1981)		

finished their PhDs. We also had an almost endless stream of visiting research fellows. These were people who usually came with a grant or some independent support to come to Japan for some specific project. You see some of the big names there, including Mathias Eder, Frederick Frank, Jean-Noel Robert, Winston King,

to mention just a few, Larry Sullivan spent almost a year here working on editing the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. There's a picture here of Sulak Sivaraksa, who was a visitor many times. You may know him as a famous social activist from Thailand. One of his visits here was when he had to escape from Thailand because he was in danger of being arrested for *lèse-majesté*, so he left the country for a while and stayed with us. But those are just a few of the people that came, and we're very proud that many of these people came and contributed much to the international network that we developed as an institute.

JWH: For many years, Paul and I played basketball on Thursday afternoons with a group of foreign students at the University. With a job as sedentary as ours, we had to do something to keep body and soul together and in good health. One of the students who played with us, Robert Roche, became interested in the work of the Institute, and after he had completed his law degree and returned to Japan, where he set up the first company in the country for telemarketing which proved to be an enormous success.

And a few years later, he called me into his home and said that he would like to share his good fortune by supporting the Institute with a million dollar grant to honor people who have spent their lives doing work in religion and culture, philosophies East and West. The Roche Chair for Interreligious Research, as it came to be known, continues to this day. I'm sure many of you recognize some of the shining faces on the screen—including your own.

PLS: The Roche Chair was just part of our support for interreligious research and interreligious dialogue. One of the first series of projects to support interreligious dialogue was the so-called Nanzan Interreligious Symposia, which started almost as soon as the Institute started functioning. The picture on the facing page is from 1980, and you may recognize a number of faces, such as Nishitani Keiji. These were interreligious symposia that were academically focused, unlike many interreligious dialogues that were already going on, focusing on practice. You had Japanese monks going to Europe and spending time in Christian monasteries, and European or American monks coming and spending time in Japanese temples. We'll talk about that a bit more later. But these were, as pointed out, academically focused dialogues, not necessarily the best way to do interreligious dialogue, but it's one way, and that's what we focused on. These were intense and open discussions between representatives of various religious traditions. And it was interesting because there were some people who took part who were academics, but were also members of a certain religious tradition, say, Buddhist or Shinto or some new religious movement. There were other academics whose academic specialty was maybe Buddhism, but their personal religious tradition was different. So, you had a mix of people, sometimes representing their academic expertise, sometimes representing their own personal religious

position. That's where I kind of fit in, as a specialist in Tendai Buddhism, but with my background as a Protestant Christian. This brought together a very interesting mix of various opinions and expertise, on various aspects of religion, and how we could talk about matters without getting stuck in just one religious tradition. The contents of these symposia were eventually published. The very first symposium was on "Religious Experience and Language." The second one, basically members of the Kyoto School of philosophy, was on "Absolute Nothingness and God." And then you have symposia on Shinto, Esoteric Buddhism, Tendai Buddhism, and Pure Land Buddhism. And then the focus shifted to themes rather than individual traditions, so we had the symposium on "Religion and Culture," and on "Faith, Institutions, and Social Practice: Catholic and Soka Gakkai," which was a bit tricky putting together. We didn't know until the last minute whether the Soka Gakkai establishment would actually allow their people to take part in such a project, but it all worked out in the end.

And then we had this meeting on "What does Christianity have to learn from Buddhism?" hoping that other traditions would pick up the ball and discuss, say, what does Buddhism or Shinto have to learn from Christianity? Finally, we had a symposium on "Religion and Social Problems": this was around the time of the sarin attacks and the problem of Aum Shinrikyo and religious cults.

JWH: From the early years of the Institute, when we were not yet affiliated formally with the university, we were surprised again and again by the famous scholars who found their way to our door. We knew it was not because of anything the staff had done. The Institute had become a visible symbol of dialogue and the hope of change. And so people like Étienne Lamotte, Hans Küng, Fritz Buri, Frederick



Nanzan Interreligious Symposium 3 (1980)

Copleston, and Raimon Panikkar came one after the other to share their thoughts and make plans for collaboration. In time, the university realized that this could be an important asset to the growing, or the newly developed, graduate schools of philosophy and religion, and as a result invited us to incorporate.

It was our custom to invite visitors to participate in a program of colloquia, where a small group would sit around for an intense discussion on one or the other question of mutual interest. As you can see from the slide, these people came from all over the world. Figures like Sulak Sivaraksa, Ursula King, Ivan Illich, Nishitani Keiji, Gustavo Gutierrez, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and the spiritual father of the Sandinista revolution Ernesto Cardinal. I count it as one of the great blessings of being at the Institute that we were able to sit down with these people for intense discussions and often host them for a few days at the Paulus Heim.

PLS: One of the best colloquia that we had was with Jane Goodall and, if I might add some background to this, we received a very handsome grant from the Templeton Foundation to conduct a two-year project (which was extended at a larger scale for an additional three years) on science and religion in Asia. The Templeton Foundation, as is well known, offers various means of support for the dialogue between science and religion. Around this time, about twenty years ago, they began to look outside of the United States and Europe. There was an awareness that until then, most Templeton Foundation grants that supported projects on “Science and Religion” were basically about science and Christianity, focusing on questions like evolution and the creation of the world, how does God the creator fit with modern science, and such questions that did not make much sense in the Asian context. So, I made a proposal to Templeton. We had welcomed a representative who came here with the idea that they wanted to expand the dialogue to the Asian context, and asked us what ideas do you have? And I thought, if I went to top-notch researchers in the hard scientists, like people at RIKEN, and say, “do you want to be involved in a dialogue about religion?” I figured this would be a counterproductive way to approach it, and it would lead to a lot of misunderstanding. Instead, I refocused the theme to “science and issues of the heart/mind (*kokoro no mondai*), and this became the focus of our project. I visited many places. I went to RIKEN and found two people who wanted to take part in the project. I went to the Primate Center in Inuyama, the Kyoto University Primate Research Center, and talked with the director there, Matsuzawa Tetsuro, who is famous for his work with chimpanzees.

JWH: And Paul won’t tell you this, but when he was there the director sat him down alongside Ai-chan, the female chimpanzee who had shown significant cognitive abilities (some superior to human beings), and her son. They were both seated in front of computers and given a test. A screen full of consecutive numbers flashed for a second and then were covered up. Each of them had to point to

the places where the numbers were in consecutive order. And the chimpanzee won every time!

PLS: She had more experience....

Anyway, because I had developed this relationship with the Director of the Primate Research Center, he became a link to Jane Goodall (who unfortunately passed away last year). Jane Goodall was a world traveler and was in the habit of coming to Japan every year. At that time



Jan Goodall addresses the Institute's "Science and *Kokoro*" project (2006)

Matsuzawa contacted me and said, "is it okay if Jane Goodall could be sponsored for a talk at Nanzan?" And I said, "Oh, is the pope Catholic?" But the problem was, at that time, Nanzan did not have the current large auditorium that holds 700 people; the biggest auditorium at the time was a place that held only 300 or 400 people. And Matsuzawa said, "Well, usually we expect 500 to 1,000 people to come to see Jane Goodall," but happily we ended up working it out, and it turned out to be one of the most successful and popular events in Nanzan history.

Jane Goodall's presentation was the most well-attended of our colloquia, but we had many other meetings, colloquia, and so forth, which were very exciting. As I said, there were many top-notch scientists who joined us, brain science specialists from RIKEN, and a robot specialist from Waseda University whose goal was to develop a robot that has a "kokoro" (heart or mind). I remember during these meetings he modified that statement and said, "I no longer want to build a robot, but develop (or "grow") a robot who will rebel against me. And if he rebels against me, then I know that I have succeeded." This also led to the publication of a number of books, one in Japanese on "Science, Kokoro, and Religion" (科学、こころ、宗教), and also in English on "Brain Science and Kokoro," which was the focus of the last three years of the project, which focused specifically on the implications of brain science and neuroscience.

We have also published many periodicals over the years. Some have discontinued, but many of them are still ongoing. The *JJRS* has been mentioned already, but we also published, first, an annual bulletin in English, which would report on the activities of the year, and then, with some overlapping content, a bulletin in Japanese; these are still ongoing.

I should talk about the background and history of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*. This journal was originally published in Tokyo, for ten years as a journal called *Contemporary Religions in Japan*. David Reid was the editor, and then it was discontinued, but a few years later, David Reid revived the journal,

and instead of focusing just on contemporary religions he renamed it to *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* with a wider focus. After a few more years of David Reid's stewardship, with Jan Swyngedouw assisting him in Tokyo, but then Jan Swyngedouw coming to Nanzan and other factors made it increasingly difficult for David Reid to continue. He then approached Nanzan to see if we would take it over.

JWH: It was a certain Professor Ōishi Shūten 大石秀典, then head of the Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan 新宗教連盟 who was charged with finding a home for the journal, a place that would be non-sectarian and academic. At the time, it had been in the hands of the Risshō Kōseikai, but they lacked adequate staff to carry on. When he came to Nanzan and asked us if we would take over the journal, we were flattered and enthusiastic. The following evening, we invited President Hirschmeier to supper and he gave his full support. I remember remarking, "Well, you know, we would need a copy editor, someone to edit our books and our journals, to make sure that they're ready for publication, and to keep our standards high. Otherwise..." "Okay," he interrupted. "We will create the position." And that he did. In fact, it was in that capacity that Paul Swanson first came to the Institute.

PLS: So, actually, I was the third copy editor, or associate editor [after Michael Kelsey and John Keenan]. And as I said before, I immediately grew into the position, as it were. And is this a good time to talk about desktop publishing?

JWH: Let's hold that for later.

PLS: Well, we could go on and on about working on the *JJRS* and other publications and the use of computers in desktop publishing, but I guess we will be discussing that more later.

JWH: Moving on to other publications, from 1977 until 2007, the Institute served as the headquarters for an association called the ecumenical group for the study of interreligious dialogue, or EGSID (which sounds more like something from a breakfast menu...). Twice a year members from the NCC center for the study of Japanese religions, the Orient Institute for Religious Research in Tokyo, the Institute for Oriental Religions in Sophia University, and the Nanzan Institute would meet to discuss their projects and see how we might help one another in our respective endeavors. This photo here actually shows a meeting we had with Cardinal Francis Arinze, who was in charge of the Secretariat for world religions at the time in the Vatican in 1992. I won't say much about his visit, except that he was none too happy with the Nanzan Institute for refusing to support Pope John Paul II's skepticism towards Buddhism and other religions. The Cardinal gathered the Institute staff and the heads of the other Institutes into the second-floor conference room upstairs where he addressed us directly. "I've called you



EGSID meets with Cardinal Arinze of the Pontifical Secretariat for Dialogue (1992)

here because I have a serious question for you. The Pope published an encyclical on prayer some time ago and it was translated into languages around the world, but there's still no Japanese translation. I want you to explain why, because it handles interreligious themes." Somebody spoke up politely, "Well, you know, the Pope's thinking is complex, and to put it into Japanese..." He wasn't having it and insisted on a straight answer. At last, Ishiwaki Yoshifusa, a fellow at the Institute, spoke up. "Actually, I'm the one who has been translating such documents these past many years. I have finished the translation. It's been on my desk now for over two years." "Why don't you publish it?" the Cardinal asked. "Because... because I love the church and want to protect it from embarrassing itself over its criticisms of prayer and meditation and religion in Japan in general. I just couldn't bring myself to put this out." To which the Cardinal replied, "Well, what will you do?" He smiled "I think I'll wait another year, until things have calmed down, and then we'll just print a small number of copies to distribute to a few libraries and parishes. And everything will blow over without confrontation or embarrassment."

So those are the EGSID meetings. But then, in 1982, we set up a meeting in Manila for directors from sixteen centers around Eastern Asia devoted to inter-religious work. At the time, most of these centers were unaware of the others. Their attention was focused mainly on Europe to establish contacts, organize projects, and secure funds. Discovering neighbors engaged in the same work was a turning point. We decided to establish a network called "Inter-Religio," for which the Nanzan Institute would serve as headquarters. We gathered the funds to finance the annual meetings at one of the centers and publish a bulletin twice a year, which was distributed around the world. As an offshoot of these meetings,

the Institute took over the publication of the annual Protestant journal, the *Japan Christian Review* for several years until it was discontinued. Inter-religio itself eventually disbanded in 2005, as it had served its purpose and several of the centers had closed down or been absorbed into other institutions.

Also, in 1982, Jan Van Bragt teamed up with the theologian Yagi Seiichi, the Zen monk Akizuki Ryōmin, and the theologian Doi Masatoshi to form a group called 東西宗教交流学会, for which Nanzan served as the headquarters until recently. The annual meetings, which are still continuing, bring together around twenty or thirty people for concentrated discussions on some question of the dialogue between philosophy and religion, usually centered on presentations by a living scholar in the field, among them Takizawa Keiji, Nishitani Keiji, and Ueda Shizuteru. The association's journal 『東西宗教研究』 is still produced annually at the Nanzan Institute. In 1985 the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies was established in Hawai'i and our association became affiliated with it and participated regularly in its annual meetings.

Among the publication projects Paul alluded to earlier was the production of a *Sourcebook* in Japanese philosophy. With combined grants of about \$250,000 and the collaboration of 120 translators, we were able to edit a volume of over 1,000 pages, since translated into Spanish, Korean, and Chinese. The *Sourcebook* is not simply a book about the history of philosophical thought in Japan from Prince Shōtoku to the present but represents a seven-year project involving specialists in Japanese intellectual history from around the world. During that time we organized preparatory workshops on Pure Land Buddhism, Tendai, Confucianism, modern academic philosophy, ethics, and woman philosophers. In order to hear from younger scholars, we set up conferences in Europe and Japan. The result were published in an eight-volume series entitled *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy* which is still active today.

PLS: Shifting to different kinds of meetings, we also ran a series of discussions with local scholars. Hayashi Makoto (of Aichi Gakuin University) was very much involved with us in this. Basically we just provided a place for local scholars to talk about their recent research and to discuss it among colleagues.

From 2013, and this is fairly recent, Okuyama Michiaki had an idea: there are many young international scholars in Japan working on their PhDs, at the stage of just before presenting their thesis. And so we thought, well, why don't we invite them to present in Japanese, before a panel of local Japanese scholars, and conduct the presentations and discussions in Japanese. We were worried about how this would work, but it turned out to be a great success. The young generation of scholars are all excellent speakers of Japanese. We had three of these meetings, and now these young scholars are in various academic positions around the world.



There are also various inter-religious workshops that we sponsored in cooperation with other religious groups. One of these meetings was held in Tunisia, mostly with European scholars who got together in Tunisia for a meeting in search of dialogue around religions in the Middle East. We also had a project in which we had a grant to visit research centers around the world. We ended up contacting forty-six centers in nineteen different countries and laid the foundation for a much broader, international network.

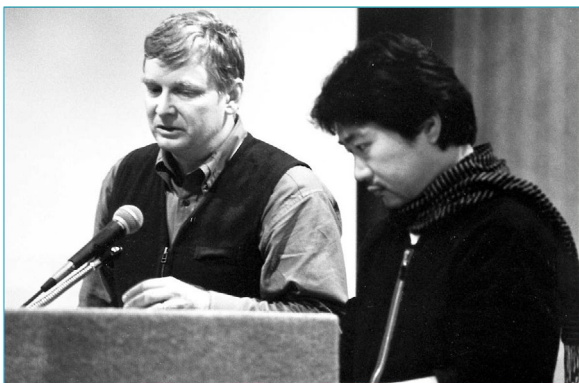


Seminars for Doctoral Students from Abroad

These sorts of meetings led to two very fruitful accomplishments. One was that we promoted the internationalization of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies (日本宗教学会, JARS). In 1999 the Japanese Association for Religious Studies held its annual meeting at Nanzan University, and we wanted to encourage the internationalization of the JARS, despite some resistance. We pushed for an increase in the use of topical panels, and the president of the American Academy of Religion came to Japan at our invitation and was on a panel with Shimazono Susumu and other key figures from the Japanese Association for Religious Studies. This, in turn, led to cooperation with the American Academy of Religion, with whom we worked to sponsor a “Focus on Japan” as the theme of the 2003 AAR annual conference in Atlanta. This is one of the first times that the AAR had a focus on a specific area, and they were also very interested in having more international input and participation from outside of North America. One of the big coups we pulled off was successfully inviting Kore'eda Hirokazu to attend and had a showing of his movie “Distance” (a tale of people connected in various ways to others involved in a cult mass suicide), followed by questions and answers....

JWH: And Paul served as the translator for Kore'eda in a question-and-answer session that followed the screening.

PLS: This was before Kore'eda became well known internationally when, a couple years later, one of his movies was an awardee at the Cannes Film Festival. The



Paul Swanson and Kore'eda Hirokazu

AAR also sponsored a reception in which they presented Shimazano (president of the JARS) with some gifts as a token of cooperation between the AAR and the JARS).

JWH: The Institute has always been conscious that it is part of the Catholic identity of Nanzan University. From the beginning we counted on the support of the Vatican through

relationships that Jan Van Bragt had nurtured. Two of these stand out: Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli and Archbishop Jean Jadot of Belgium. Pignedoli was president of the Secretary for Non-Christians. He supported the Institute and made Jan van Bragt and later Jan Swyngedouw counselors for the Vatican on interreligious matters. Archbishop Jean-Jadot came to Japan in 1983 where we guided him around numerous Shinto shrines and Buddhist monasteries. His progressive approach put him out of favor with Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger. But he remained, to the end, a staunch supporter of the Nanzan Institute.

Paul spoke earlier of the inter-monastic exchange we were involved in. With the assistance of these two prelates in Rome, we were able to bring together abbots and abbesses from mainstream monasteries of Japan for extended stays in Catholic monasteries in Europe and the United States. On one occasion, Jan Van Bragt introduced Yamada Mumon (chief abbot of Myōshinji in Japan) to the Pope. These visits were then reciprocated with leading monastics from the west invited for stays in Japanese Buddhist monasteries. Father Kadowaki Kakichi, Jesuit from Sophia University in Tokyo, took over the program after two years. It continues independently to this day and publishes its own journal.



Jan Van Bragt and Yamada Mumon meet the Pope

In response to some pushback from certain quarters in the Church against interreligious dialogue, we decided in 1987, in collaboration with Stichting Porticus, a long-time supporter of the Institute, to invite two leading cardinals from Europe to introduce them firsthand to the religious reality of Japan. Cardinals Carol Martini and Godfried Danneels graciously accepted our offer to visit in successive years as ordinary citizens.



Cardinal Godfried Danneels



Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini

Question from the audience: Sorry, was this for visa purposes, or is there a reason why you wanted them to come in this way?

JWH: If they had come as Church dignitaries, they would have been expected to meet with their diplomatic counterparts. We wanted them to come as ordinary people and both of them agreed that this was for the best. It proved to be an electrifying experience for all of us, and we came to realize what extraordinary men they were, and their good humor, and their spiritual acumen.

PLS: Now we come to the book series. We're running out of time, and we still have this vast list of books, which we'll look at quickly. But first we should talk about desktop publishing. When I came to Nanzan in 1986, we were still using a daisy wheel printer to prepare the camera-ready copy. It was like an electric typewriter, with a replaceable wheel to type the text, and then we would cut and paste the kanji to the copy and send it to the printers. We took advantage of the great strides in computing and printing technology and software enhancements to develop a desktop publishing system before there was a name for it; it was a real pioneering effort, mostly driven by Jim's efforts.

I should add that at first we were not allowed to use our research funds to buy computers or software, because the university said, well, why does an academic need computers? To play Pac-Man? So we went to Hong Kong and bought our own computers, until the university recognized the role that computers could play for research. We gradually evolved to using laser printers with better and

better resolution, which allowed us to produce offset-quality camera-ready copy. We were also quick to put the material online as true open access, available freely for all, again even before there was a term for it.

JWH: As you see the list of our publications scrolling, we would like to point out that we typeset most of these books for the publishers, which gave us control over the contents and kept the price down. But more than that, these were not just based on manuscripts that were sent to us, typeset and published with Nanzan's name on it. The authors, in most cases, came to Japan, lived with us, and presented their work in seminars where the staff offered their criticism and suggestions for improvement. As a result, our fingerprints are on every page of these books. One such author is Mark Mullins, who is here today all the way from New Zealand. His first book on *Christianity Made in Japan* went through this process, and most recently we issued his study on Yasukuni fundamentalism.

PLS: As Jim said, people would come, either at our invitation or on their own, and we would sit down with them and discuss their work. They would often give informal presentations, or we would give feedback. We worked with various publishers. At first, we worked with different publishers for different books. We eventually set up a series with University of Hawai'i Press. We had a book called *Rude Awakenings*, and we invited Pat Crosby, one of the head editors of the University of Hawai'i Press to come to the Institute. We explained to her what we do, we've got this book, and we want to start a series and she said, "Well, with only one book, you don't have a series, you have a 'serie.'" As it turned out, we had another manuscript in the pipeline, the book on *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, so then we had the basis for a series. And that series now has seventeen volumes, the latest volume being *The New Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, edited by Matthew McMullen.

JWH: With a growing interest in Japanese philosophy in Italy in 2004, I teamed up with a number of colleagues to edit a series of translations of modern Japanese philosophy into Italian called Tetsugaku. Later we collaborated with the Sisters of Seton Hall in Korea and their center, the Seton Center for Interreligious Dialogue, to launch a series of books called Seton Studies in Korean Religions. Later our own Kim Seung Chul inaugurated a collection in Korean whose seven volumes include translations of Japanese philosophical works, as well as works of interreligious dialogue previously published at the Institute in Japanese.

PLS: Last but not least, there are a number of books in Japanese, which are worked on mostly by Okuyama Michiaki, who unfortunately is not with us anymore, but he has a series of books on Japanese religion called *Gendai sekai to shūkyō* 現代世界と宗教 (Religion and the Modern World) published by Transview. There is another series that Okuyama is working on, *Shūkyōgaku saikō* 現宗教学再考

(Rethinking Religious Studies) which consists of translations and introductions to classic Western works on religion.

I wish we could spend more time looking at these, but we're running out of time. In closing, I'd like to go back again to the image that Jim presented of the teacup, and how it creates a space for something to happen, to have a cup of tea. And to me, this is what the Institute has been, and it has been such a great privilege for me to work here. The Nanzan Institute has truly been a place that provides the time and the space to creatively produce work that is not necessarily assigned to you, but which you think is important and worthy of attention, and often requires a long-term commitment. And I hope that Nanzan, the Institute, will continue to be like a teacup. But another feature of a teacup is that it is fragile, and can easily be chipped or broken. I pray that the Institute will maintain its role as a sturdy cup that is inviting, that includes a lot of people from around the world, and encourages creative research.

JWH: Like Paul, I too, am proud to have been part of this history, proud of its covered-wagon days, proud of its achievements, but also proud of the obstacles we had to struggle against which drew us closer together, and eventually brought us closer to achieving President Hirschmeier's original dream of a forum where religions of philosophies east and west can talk to one another and learn from one another. Thank you for your attention.

THE SCIENCE OF RELIGIONS AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE



Joseph S. O'Leary
Sophia University

The following is a lecture delivered on 27 February 2026 at "Believing and Thinking in the Age of Pluralism: The Search for New Modes of Expression," a symposium commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture.

IN THE Hebrew Bible, we meet a people who believe that God has made a unique Covenant with them. Is this just another form of the nationalistic or sectarian arrogance that has wrought such havoc in human history? We can no longer read ancient tales of genocide in the name of God (e.g. Num 31; Josh 7-8; 1 Sam 15) without shuddering. We can no longer sanitize them into allegories of a battle of good against evil. But we can attend all the more to the other side of the biblical picture, in which Israel is not concerned with its own victories but with all the peoples of the earth. Israel is a people who look beyond themselves to all other peoples, for its Lord has given it a world mission of justice and peace. 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Is 49:6; also 42:6). Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, begins with the words: 'Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church.'

That is why the biblical writers often refer to the other nations, and cast their minds back to primeval times, long before Abraham was ever heard of. In the time of Adam's son Seth, we are told, 'people began to invoke the name of the Lord' (Gen 4:26). While the Bible often rages against idolatrous cults, such verses as these reveal that true worship is not an exclusive privilege of Israel, and that the people of God are ready to recognize it wherever it is found. The Bible is its own interpreter, *sui ipsius interpres*, as Luther remarks in *De servo arbitrio*. We may add that it is its own critic and corrector as well. Today we may read the Bible in light of the history

of religion, stretching back not only to the religions of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, and Greece, which have left so deep a mark on biblical understandings of God, humanity, and the cosmos, but also to Indian and Chinese creeds unknown to the scriptural authors, and still further, to the pre-historic religions of humanity, as we have joyfully rediscovered them over the last two centuries.

The Hour of Dialogue

The most revolutionary innovation of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was its turn toward dialogue with the world, and with the religions of the world. The Council's tones of deep respect for modern culture, and for Judaism and Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, had no equivalent in previous utterances of Councils or of the papal Magisterium. Indeed they are diametrically opposed to the fulminations of the Council of Florence and to the strictures of Pius ix.

Paul vi kept the nations, the cultures and religions of humanity, in his mind and heart. The theme of his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam* (6 August 1964), is dialogue with humanity, and it begins with the words 'The Church was founded by Jesus Christ to be the loving mother of the whole human family and minister to its salvation.' He continues: 'The aim of this encyclical will be to demonstrate with increasing clarity how vital it is for the world, and how greatly desired by the Catholic Church, that the two should meet together, and get to know and love one another.' A point Paul vi liked to make is that the Church exists not for itself but for the world. He read widely in history of religions and would have known the writings on the religions of Jean Daniélou, SJ (1905–1974) whom he chose as *peritus* at the Council and created Cardinal in 1969. I remember seeing him on a televised Mass (probably for the Epiphany in 1976) when he declared ardently: 'I see the religions of the world gathered around the crib, and as I say this my voice trembles, not with uncertainty, but with joy, *la mia voce trema, non d'incertezza, ma di gioia*.'

It has been said that Greece and Persia were the two eyes of the ancient world, and Persia is represented at the crib by the Magi (from whom comes the word 'magic'), a very striking presence. Paul vi himself performed an equally striking act in his address to the members of the non-Christian religions during his visit to India, on 3 December 1964, feast of St Francis Xavier, where he recited lines from the *Upanishads*: 'Rarely has this longing for God been expressed with words so full of the spirit of Advent as in the words written in your sacred books many centuries before Christ: "From the unreal lead me to the real; from darkness lead me to light; from death lead me to immortality" (*Br.* 1, 3, 28).' In another address on the same day he quoted Tagore: 'Day after day, O Lord of my life, shall I stand before thee, face to face?/ With folded hands, O Lord of all worlds, shall I stand before thee, face to face?/ Under thy great sky, in solitude and silence, with humble heart, shall I stand before thee, face

to face?/ In this laborious world of thine, tumultuous with toil and with struggle, among hurrying crowds, shall I stand before thee, face to face?' He also quoted the *Mundaka Upanishad*: 'Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood. The divine path to liberation has been laid with truth, which the seers who have overcome desire tread, and wherein also is that supreme treasure to be gained by truth.'

In *Ecclesiam suam*, Paul VI talks of concentric circles of dialogue: first dialogue with the human race, then dialogue with worshippers of the one God, and finally with fellow-Christians. This stance forbids the tones of scorn and contempt in which very many Catholics would speak of Jews and Muslims and of Protestants in the time before Vatican II (and with much less excuse today). Here is what Paul VI says about the second circle: 'We would mention first the Jewish people, who still retain the religion of the Old Testament, and who are indeed worthy of our respect and love. Then we have those worshippers who adhere to other monotheistic systems of religion, especially the Moslem religion. We do well to admire these people for all that is good and true in their worship of God. And finally we have the followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions.' Here is the basis on which *Nostra Aetate*, the 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions' (28 October 1965), would be erected a year later, in the last days of the Council. It is also the basis of Pope Francis's declaration in Singapore that 'all religions are paths to God.' Paul VI hastens to add: 'honesty compels us to declare openly our conviction that the Christian religion is the one and only true religion, and it is our hope that it will be acknowledged as such by all who look for God and worship Him.' This is the standard 'inclusivist' Catholic attitude to the religions, which the future Benedict XVI tightened by declaring (CDF document, *Dominus Iesus*, 2000) that the multiplicity of religions was *de facto* but not *de iure*, and which Pope Francis loosened somewhat by seeing all religions as on the same path together to the Kingdom, on terms of equal respect.

The hour of dialogue had struck in 1964 and it was in the bliss of that dawn that the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture was founded in 1975. 'Dialogue' was still a word to conjure with into the late 1980s; Nanzan held a conference on 'Partners for Dialogue' in 1985, when the Institute was the Mecca of dialogue, drawing churchmen and theologians from everywhere; Fr. William Johnston kept referring to 'the dialogue' and Leonard Swidler proclaimed 'Dialogue, the Way Forward'¹ when the word had already become a little old-fashioned. The most prominent exercise in interreligious dialogue was the series of conferences around Masao Abe, which did not do much to open paths of understanding into Buddhism; the whole venture stalled.² The strangely titled book *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious*

1. Leonard J. Swidler, *Dialogue: The Way Forward* (Orbis, 1990).

2. John D. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives, ed., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist Jewish Christian Conversation*

Dialogue by Catherine Cornille perhaps sounded the knell of one style and the rise to prominence of another, namely, that of comparative theology, represented by her own symposia and her series, 'Christian Commentaries on Non-Religious Texts,' and also by the work of Francis Clooney and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (though the latter keeps up the aim of a 'theology of religions,' something that has been rather out of favor).³ Meanwhile, Western interaction with Buddhism is thriving in philosophical circles (unfortunately dominated by Anglo-American rationalism, thanks largely to the surrender of European Buddhologists to English monolingualism) much more than in the theological world.

Notice that in referring to 'the great Afro-Asiatic religions' Paul VI opens a window onto a religious world extending in space and time far beyond the frontiers of the major world religions. The Church's amazing turn to all the religions of the earth owes much to a small number of missionary pioneers, such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), João Rodriguez (1562–1634), Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656), Ippolito Desiderio (1684–1733), all Jesuits. Another batch of prophetic figures, on whom I focus here, were the scholars of primitive religion, who drafted various theories of the origins and evolution of religion in the long millennia preceding biblical times, such as Max Müller (1823–1900), Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917), Andrew Lang (1844–1912), William Robertson Smith (1846–1894), Jane Harrison (1850–1928), James G. Frazer (1854–1941), and Wilhelm Schmidt, SVD (1868–1954). The incredible industry and mental breadth of these legendary figures lies in the background of Vatican II's vision of the religions as sharing the light of the divine Word, which 'enlightens every one coming into the world' (Jn 1:9).⁴

Friedrich Max Müller

Max Müller was born at the heart of German Romanticism. Wilhelm Müller, the Byronic poet of Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Die Winterreise*, was his father; Carl Maria von Weber was his mother's godfather and his name Max comes from *Der Freischütz*; he was a friend of Felix Mendelssohn. He authored an English translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. An heir of the Oriental Renaissance represented by August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), and Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852), he spent the last fifty years of his life in Oxford, where he was not always fully

(Orbis, 1990); Christopher Ives, ed., *Divine Emptiness and Historical Fullness: A Buddhist Jewish Christian Conversation with Masao Abe* (Trinity Press International, 1995).

3. Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (Crossroad, 2008).

4. See Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860–1915* (University of Virginia Press, 2010).

appreciated, and where he launched the fifty-volume *Sacred Books of the East*.⁵ When he spoke to his patron the Prussian diplomat and philologist Baron Christian von Bunsen about 'the great revelations of the world,' Bunsen warned: 'Don't say that at Oxford!'⁶ Recalling his years in Oxford, Müller deplored the narrowness of the debates pursued there in the wake of the Tractarian Movement and in which he could see no genuine religion. He deplored the tortured nature of Newman's apologetic handling of historical argument, and his damaging effect on individuals and their families; he was close to Charles Kingsley and James Anthony Froude, critics of Newman.⁷

Müller, in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), which Eric Sharpe calls 'the foundation document of comparative religion,'⁸ claimed that belief in a divine being was universal, and that however childish or primitive a religion might appear, it still served to place the human soul in the presence of God. Müller predicted that the truths present in all religions would one day give rise to 'a new form of religion, which might still be called Christianity, that would preserve the best of each revelation of the divine.'⁹ He found the conviction of God, immortality, and a future reward firmly lodged in primitive religion. Followers of Newman attacked him, but he could riposte with a quote from Newman: 'the unaided reason, when correctly exercised, leads to a belief in God, in the immortality of the soul, and in a future retribution.'¹⁰ (This would be contested by Wilhelm Schmidt who ascribed the belief in God in primitive religions not to natural unaided reason but to an originary divine Revelation.) Müller mischievously quoted Bishop Frederick Temple's Bampton Lectures of 1884: 'It is quite possible that our Lord's resurrection may be found hereafter to be no miracle at all in the scientific sense,' such a discovery 'would not affect the place which our Lord's Resurrection holds in the record of revelation. It is not the purpose of revelation to interfere with the course of nature.'¹¹ Temple is talking of an eschatological perspective, not saying that the physical resurrection we currently perceive as miraculous never occurred.

5. N. J. Girardot, 'Max Müller's *Sacred Books* and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religions,' *History of Religions* 41.3 (February 2002): 213–50.

6. F. Max Müller, *My Autobiography: A Fragment* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 277–8.

7. Müller, *My Autobiography*, 279–96.

8. Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (Duckworth, 1975), 35.

9. Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion* (Blackwell, 2000), 22. While missionaries in Japan used comparative religion to uphold the superiority of Christianity, it is wrong to saddle Müller with responsibility for this, as Natto R. Thelle seems to do, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan: From Conflict to Dialogue, 1854–1899* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 215–16.

10. Max Müller, *Anthropological Religion* (1892, repr. Routledge, 1997), vi. The quotation, from the last chapter of the *Apologia* (1864) indicates some acquaintance on Newman's part with Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. See John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua and Six Sermons*, ed. Frank M. Turner (Yale University Press, 2008).

11. Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 11.

Buddhism emerged for Müller (as later for Eliade) on the wider landscape of the general history of religion. Intensive religious thought characterized Indian culture. ‘India is swarming with innumerable sects, and has always been a very hotbed of religious ideas,’ and it is deplorable that Western philosophers write ‘as if Kapila and Kanâda had never existed’ and that theologians write ‘as if the Vedas, the Pitakas, the Angas, the Purânas, and Tantras had never existed.’¹² He finds three strata in the Veda: ‘the most transparent natural polytheism,’ ‘the most minute and unmeaning ritualism,’ and ‘the most subtle theosophy’ (in the Upanishads).¹³ Buddhism was ‘originally a Brâhmanic sect.’¹⁴ Müller saw these religions as models of tolerance and the cure for what we would call fundamentalism. ‘When one sees the struggles through which mankind has to pass in order to establish the few fundamental principles of religion, and to gain recognition for the simplest rules of morality, one learns to be very grateful to the founders of every religion for what they have achieved.’ Ashoka found that all the sects of India exemplify ‘the fundamentals or the sap of religion—control of the senses, purity of mind, gratitude, and loyalty’; ‘in these essentials all religions are really one’; despite ‘great differences’ ‘there is a unity which ought to comprehend them all—the unity of toleration, the unity of love.’¹⁵ Pope Francis struck a similar note, as of course does the Dalai Lama: ‘I maintain that every major religion of the world... has similar ideas of love, the same goal of benefiting through spiritual practice.... Differences of dogma may be ascribed to differences of time and circumstance as well as cultural influences.’¹⁶

In his Gifford Lectures held in Westminster Abbey in 1878, Müller expounded Indian religious thought luminously and with contemporary relevance. Buddhism is ‘the frontier between ancient and modern literature in India’ and is ‘only intelligible as a development of, and a reaction against, Brahmanism.’¹⁷ Müller’s friendship with Nanjō Bun’yū is a link with living East Asian Buddhism beyond the range of his Sanskrit studies. Müller was an ardent admirer of the British Empire so his comparative religion project comes in for postcolonial critique. However the words ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ did not then sound as derogatory as now.¹⁸ The broad

12. Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 36.

13. Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 36.

14. Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 35.

15. Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 59–60.

16. Quoted, John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (The Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 34.

17. Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (1898, repr. Routledge, 1997), 138, 140.

18. See David Chidester, “‘Classify and Conquer’: Friedrich Max Müller, indigenous religious traditions, and imperial comparative religion,” in: Jacob. K. Olupona, ed., *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous religious traditions and modernity* (Routledge, 2004), 71–88.

vision of the religions that was built up in the nineteenth century owes much to the structures of empire.

James George Frazer

James Frazer was an extraordinary man of letters, the editor of Ovid's *Fasti* and of Pausanias, in six volumes each, and an excellent prose stylist. In Cambridge his collection of books was so huge that it caused the floor to collapse. He was one of the very few historians of religion who carried their discipline across the threshold of mainstream literary culture, with impact on poets such as Yeats and T. S. Eliot (notably in *The Waste Land*, 1922). He has been disparaged as 'unscientific,' dismissed for his 'scissors and paste method.'¹⁹ Fortunately the new discipline of digital humanities opens the possibility of sorting, sifting, cross-referencing, and fact-checking the materials he accumulated.

Though thoroughly steeped in the skepticism of Hume and the irony of Gibbon, his tone in recording the chronicle of human superstitions is often sympathetic, for instance when he describes the magical or religious practices surrounding the killing of a bear among the Ainu.²⁰ Like so many global accounts of the evolution of religion, Frazer's version of the process has three stages, like Auguste Comte's *loi des trois états* (theological, mythical, positive). The ingenuity of human wishful thinking begins with fruitless recourse to magic, then to projection of religious presences, only finally to find a secure refuge in science. Frazer supplied Christianity with its wider mythological background – the dying gods, Adonis, Attis, Osiris, Herakles, Dionysus for the paschal mystery, Isis for devotion to the Blessed Virgin, Mithra for the birth of Christ – which could be interpreted negatively or positively. The material and his literary treatment of it often touches readers in ways he did not envisage. The pervasive influence of *The Golden Bough* helped Christianity to place itself in a new way in the history of religion, and in this sense built a resource for Vatican II's dialogal turn.

Another major work of Frazer's, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*,²¹ is probably underused, since it summons biblical scholars out of their comfort zone into the great spaces of comparative study. The New Testament would offer a similar range of comparative parallels, for instance in tales of miracles. Even an apparently

19. In the entry on him in James Bowker, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. The entire paragraph on Frazer is dripping with derision. A brilliant essay by Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017), 'When the Bough Break,' in his *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), dismantled the impressive story which gives Frazer's masterpiece its frame and its title and showed it to be a poetic fantasy making unscrupulous use of its classical sources.

20. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A new abridgement*, ed. Robert Fraser (Oxford University Press, 1994), 524–32.

21. *Studies in Comparative Religion Legend and Law* (Macmillan, 1919).

insignificant topic, such as the ‘custom of boring the ear of a purchased slave who refused to go free after serving his master for six years’²² (Deut 15:12-17), wakes a host of parallels. Here Frazer’s purpose is not to deflate religion, but simply to look at the anthropological information stored up in the biblical text. The higher its cultural density, the more credible its religious vibrations. The parallels are rather remote, however, in this case: a mother may have her child’s ear bored to keep it from being carried off by evil spirits; to deceive the spirits a child may be given an unflattering name or made to look ugly or subjected to a mock sale. Via the cutting of ears of animals in sacrifice, and various other kinds of mutilation, and severed hair or nails for use as fetishes to prevent a prisoner or slave escaping, the conclusion is reached that the Hebrew custom was ‘perhaps intended to give the master complete magical control over his servant by means of the blood on the doorpost.’²³

Wilhelm Schmidt

Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt, SVD, was another astonishing figure, as the entry on him in the encyclopedia *Religion Past & Present* shows:

Schmidt considered himself a scientist, a pastor, and a politically committed individual. During World War I, as an army chaplain he introduced field hospitals.... During World War II, he maintained many relationships with refugees and emigrants.... Like almost no one else, he winnowed the ethnographic material while also looking for synthesis.... Inspired by Andrew Lang, in 1906 he began his monumental *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (cf. E. Brandewie, *Wilhelm Schmidt and the Origin of the Idea of God*, 1983) in which he presented his views on primeval religion and primitive monotheism (vol. XII, published posthumously, 1955). As a linguist and ethnologist, he made central contributions to the discussion of what it means to be human. (Vol. XI [2012], 498)

In the first volume of his magnum opus *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*²⁴ Schmidt discusses at great length the views of Andrew Lang, man of letters and storyteller, who ‘made no major contribution to the development of knowledge,’²⁵ but whose lectures on *The Making of Religion* had a great impact (enhanced by Schmidt’s reception of them). Both Lang and Schmidt aimed to overcome the secularizing

22. 3.165. The topic is discussed for 105 pages.

23. 3.264.

24. *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee: Eine historisch-kritische und positive Studie*, 12 vols (Aschendorff, 1912–1955).

25. Benjamin C. Ray, art, ‘Lang, Andrew,’ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed.

approach of Tylor, 'often considered the founding father of anthropology,' who wrote as a 'militant atheist.'²⁶ Lang pointed out that 'the idea of a creative god who is moral, fatherly, omnipotent, and omniscient' is found among primitive peoples.²⁷

Schmidt sought to elucidate 'the development and origin of religion. This problem has now been abandoned by scholars, because it is not possible to provide an adequate scientific response.'²⁸ However, speculative constructions based on biblical dogma or on philosophical insight are not forbidden. Schmidt felt compelled by his faith to find the God of the Bible more clearly present in the earliest known religions than could be convincingly demonstrated. Yet no ancient society lacked a religion. All have known the sense of human limits that raise the question of religion, all have known the sense of gracious and numinous presences and forces which leads to adoration, and many cultures have erected powerful and beautiful religions which awe us even when they are considered dead.²⁹ It is an understatement to say that many enigmas remain, but let us hope that the Church (as well as the scholarly world) resumes its enthusiasm for these great questions, so as to let the light of the Epiphany shine out anew on believers and the world at large.

Also a broadly humanistic and literary approach to the history of religions may construct visions of religious origins by extrapolating from what we know about human nature. Panikkar says: 'It seems fair to say that the most universal, primordial human experience is neither monotheistic, nor atheistic, nor polytheistic but rather a deep-rooted belief in a divine world, a world populated by different kinds of superhuman beings or forces.... These beliefs express a human experience that says that man is not alone in the universe and that the sensible world is not all there is to reality.'³⁰ If Schmidt were right about the origin of monotheism this might devalue 'the research conducted by historians who have sought to reconstruct accurately the course and historical contexts (Mesopotamia, Egypt, ancient Israel) in which... the monotheism that characterizes modern Western civilization emerged.'³¹ Benedict XVI takes up this assertion of a monotheistic revolution in recent millennia. But can monotheistic revelation be confined to such explicit

26. Rane Willerslev, 'Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps not too Seriously?,' in *Indigenous Religions*, ed. Graham Harvey and Amy Whitehead (Routledge, 2019), 20–41; 22, 23.

27. Willerslev, 'Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps not too Seriously?,' 22, 23.

28. Joseph Henninger and Alessandra Ciattini, art., 'Schmidt, Wilhelm,' in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., 8168. See Sylwester Pajak, *Urrigion und Uroffenbarung bei P. W. Schmidt* (Steyley, 1978).

29. See James W. Heisig, 'The Icon as a Movable Bridge: With Reference to Jaspers and Tanabe,' in: Piergiacomo Severini, ed., *Jaspers in Dialogue: Views from Europe and Japan* (Chisokudo, 2025), 63–88.

30. Art., 'Deity,' *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed.

31. Art., 'Deity,' 8170, referring to Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde: Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris, 1985), *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton University Press, 1999). This book enjoyed undue influence, especially in France, in its schematic and rather old-fashioned recital of the history of religions as an ineluctable process of secularization, Christianity starring as 'the religion of the exit from religion,' leading to the present era of 'the death of God.'

movements if there is indeed a single God presiding over evolution and human history? Can monotheistic intuitions be kept from emerging in less articulate forms at all points in human development?

Noting that Henri de Lubac was skeptical that the religion of primitive humanity could be scientifically explored, Georg Siegmund (1903–1989) notes the temporal chasm: 99% of dark prehistory for 1% of history. The scholars have given us ‘a row of hypotheses,’ often presented as definitive results. He comes close to Schmidt in his conclusion: ‘the fact of a primordial belief in a heavenly father-god, who is symbolized by the sun.’³² In connecting our often too rigid images of monotheism with the flux of a wider history (including recognition of the religious dignity of the Greco-Roman world), we can unseal blocked sources of religious and anthropological insight. The origins may elude ‘scientific’ exploration, but they may be accessed by the power of rational speculation, even from ‘armchair ethnographers.’ Considering that Immanuel Kant was able to construct the history of the entire cosmos while sitting in his armchair, with success in generating fruitful hypotheses,³³ why must we be condemned to defeatism where the phenomenon of religion is concerned?

Mircea Eliade

The history of religions has been recounted comprehensively by Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), but no longer with the firm purpose of tracing the origins of religion and its evolutionary backbone, supposing it to have such. He aimed simply to apprehend the phenomenon of religion in its full weight and depth, thus becoming, as Lawrence Sullivan says, ‘the single most important individual in introducing the world to what religion means.’³⁴ The exiguity of information about pre-history and the great variety of interpretations the data give rise to, not to mention the impossibility of imposing a theological schema, can make the study of religion a discouraging pursuit. Eliade believed that religion was an autonomous entity, developing independently of sociological factors. But since Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), the tendency has been to study religions as social institutions. As an instance of this social reduction, one may cite: ‘The totemic principle can... be nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem.’³⁵ Stretching

32. Georg Siegmund, *Der Glaube des Urmenschen* (Francke, 1962), 9, 10, 101.

33. Immanuel Kant, ‘Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels,’ in *Vorkritische Schriften bis 1768*, 1 (Suhrkamp, 1968), 219–396. See Hartmut Böhme and Gernot Böhme, *Das Andere der Vernunft: Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kants* (Suhrkamp, 1983), 83–99.

34. Quoted, Douglas Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (Garland, 1998), xi.

35. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1976 [1912]), 206, cited Willerslev, 27.

the anthropological imagination to embrace alien perspectives, sometimes with decolonial purpose, may have become more central to the study of religions than any concern with God. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) set the tone in 1922: 'To grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world.'³⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009)'s structuralist analysis of primitive cultures created a complex language for dealing with religious and social elements that seems to have little theological resonance. He showed that totemism is 'simply one aspect of a universal human activity, that of classification.'³⁷ Illuminating, but rather deflationary for those seeking religion or theology. 'This structuralist formalization,' it is alleged, 'brackets off the entire ethnographic substance by focusing on the form.'³⁸

Religion for Eliade is what the *homo religiosus* lives and experiences and it can only be grasped from within,³⁹ just as, say, literature is what the literary person experiences and grasps from within. The emic perspective must prevail over the etic. To reverse this priority would be to give religion the status of an illusion or a mental illness to be handled objectively by experts. There is a sense in which religion, like literature, is *sui generis*,⁴⁰ and the affinities between the two allow their mutual support against the great bugbear of Eliade: reductionism. Of any literature and of any religion one may ask is it really literature or religion and even when accepted as such there will be ongoing debate about the quality and authenticity of a given example of the literary or the religious. The Aum Shinrikyo incident of March 1995 'caused immense damage to the standing of scholars of religion in Japan,'⁴¹ where the pullulation of new religions had not been subjected to adequate critical scrutiny. It is a mistake to think that a phenomenological approach to religion demands an *epoché* that suspends all judgment, even moral judgment. Indeed, a study that refused to differentiate good from bad, or living from dead, religion would be as blind to the phenomena as a study that refused to discriminate between good and bad literature would miss the essence of literature.

Cultures of death in Latin American religions were explored by Lawrence Sullivan in *Icancu's Drum*, who unveiled a vast forest of cultures that honors the brilliance of the human imagination, with little to say about God.⁴² 'Questions about

36. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Kegan Paul, 1922), 25, cited Willerslev, 21.

37. Willerslev, 28.

38. Willerslev, 29.

39. See John A. Saliba, 'Homo Religiosus' in *Mircea Eliade: An Anthropological Evaluation* (Brill, 1976).

40. For a glimpse of the debate here, see Ilkka Pyysiäinen, 'Religion—Sui Generis—But in What Sense,?' In: Christoph Kleine, et al., eds., *Unterwegs: New Paths in the Study of Religions*, Festschrift for Michael Pye (Biblion, 2004), 97–108.

41. Ian Reader, 'Coping with Aum: Violence and the Study of Religion,' in Kleine, et al., 329–38; 331.

42. Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Icancu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions* (Macmillan, 1990).

the origins of religion and the evolutionary framework have long ceased to interest mainstream social anthropology,⁴³ and it may be that departments of Religious Studies are now persuaded that ‘the proper study of mankind is man’ and not the transcendent or even the numinous. Founded to shake of the shackles of Theology in the study of religious cultures, they may end up shaking off religion itself in whatever form.

Shunning the rigorous methodological bracketing of theological stances that marked the origin of the discipline of Religious Studies, and deploring the positivistic scientism that prevails in it, Eliade embraces a capacious idea of *Wissenschaft* inspired by Goethe, combining history and a morphological phenomenology and giving both a broad and warm humanistic sweep. The history is a genetic account of what *homo religiosus* has lived and created across the millennia, the phenomenology apprehends and interprets the living forms religion has displayed, and it brings to them a hermeneutics, which is not the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ of the powerful critics of religion, such as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, but rather a warmly sympathetic readiness to bring out the meaning of religious phenomena, with a central focus on the Sacred.

Eliade upholds the autonomy and irreducibility of the religious. This has a suspicious resemblance to the status that Revelation had in much twentieth-century theology. Indeed, Karl Barth scanned the entirety of Scripture and its church reception as a phenomenon of Revelation, holding at bay historical and skeptical criticism. Critics of Eliade can sound just like critics of Barth: ‘The conception of religion as *sui generis*, i.e. as a primary datum, which can be understood in its own terms, has generally been accompanied in theological circles by its natural corollary: reductionistic explanations of religion are entirely incorrect.’⁴⁴ Empathy can be blocked not only by secularist reductionism, but also by one’s own religious sensibility which may be quite alien to that of the religion studied.

Hominization is closely connected with the hunting culture, in which ‘to kill the hunted beast, or, later, the domestic animal is equivalent to a “sacrifice” in which the victims are interchangeable.’⁴⁵ Lascaux throbs with an artistic-religious vision of existence in that culture. ‘The theory of the nonreligiosity of the Paleanthropians was conceived and generally accepted during the heyday of evolutionism.... But if today there is agreement on the fact that the Paleanthropians had a religion, in practice it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what its content was.’⁴⁶ For

43. Willerslev, 24.

44. John Y. Fenton, ‘Reductionism in the Study of Religions,’ *Soundings* 53 (1970): 61–76; 62, cited, Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, 28.

45. Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas: 1. From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 1.5.

46. Eliade, *A History*, 1.5.

the theologian, the change of view is a reassuring indication that the march of science is not always in the direction of secularism or materialism. '*Homo faber* was at the same time *Homo ludens*, *sapiens*, and *religiosus*.'⁴⁷ 'Belief in a survival after death seems to be demonstrated, from the earliest times, by the use of red ocher as a ritual substitute for blood, hence as a symbol of life.'⁴⁸ 'The apparent import of the images seems not to have varied from 30,000 B.C. to 9000 B.C. and remains the same in Asturias and on the Don.'⁴⁹ The recent discovery in Indonesia of wall paintings dating back 40–50,000 years (in 2108, 2019, and 2021) contradicts the previous perception of a 'comparatively restricted territory, between the Urals and the Atlantic.'⁵⁰ But the testimony of the caves still reaches back only a little way into the two million years (Eliade) or 300,000 years (current estimate for *homo sapiens*) in which humanity lived by hunting, fishing, and gathering. The caves are 'a sort of sanctuary.'⁵¹ Claiming that it is 'impossible to imagine a period in which man did not have dreams and waking reveries and did not enter into "trance,"' Eliade concludes that 'the ecstatic experience as such, as an original phenomenon, is a constitutive element of the human condition.'⁵²

The philosophical science which is most serviceable for a deeper grasp of art, literature, and religion is phenomenology, which in some of its fundamental moves shows a homology with religion. Phenomenology steps back to a transcendental awareness, that is, it moves from our knowledge and experience to a self-conscious grasp of the conditions and deep structure of our knowledge and experience. Kant calls '*transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori*.'⁵³ Husserl tracked structures of awareness, such as 'intentionality,' whereby consciousness is directed to its object. Heidegger stepped back from experience of beings to awareness of being as such. The historical texture of religious formations such as myths seems to disqualify any general statements about the religious mode of knowledge. But faced with any given religious phenomenon, one can at least attempt to apprehend what gives it its religious character, and to 'reduce' it to its 'essence,' to the *Sache selbst*. The lore accumulated by historians of religion should be subjected to sedulous phenomenological interrogation in order to save it from insignificance. This is a bulwark against sociological, psychoanalytical,

47. Eliade, *A History*, 8.

48. Eliade, *A History*, 9.

49. André Leroi-Gourhan, *Les religions de la préhistoire (Paléolithique)* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), 83; cited, Eliade, *A History*, 1.16.

50. Eliade, *A History*, 1.16.

51. Eliade, *A History*, 17.

52. Eliade, *A History*, 19.

53. *Critique of Pure Reason* A 12, quoted in Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary* (Blackwell, 1995), 399.

or Feuerbachian reductionism. Eliade himself needs to be retrieved in a more critical hermeneutics that will lend stability to his insights.

Karl Rahner

With the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984) I come back to the point of departure in the inclusivist theology of Vatican II. As my cousin Martin J. Murphy reminds me:

In *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner establishes that human experience of the transcendent God is not something extraordinary, but the hidden ‘undertow’ or background horizon of every daily act, choice, and question about meaning.⁵⁴ In essays such as ‘Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace’⁵⁵ and ‘Reflections on the Experience of Grace,’⁵⁶ Rahner specifically discusses how grace is omnipresent and shapes the consciousness of every person. In these works he often notes that human beings possess an ‘anonymous, unthematic, perhaps repressed, basic experience of being oriented to God.’⁵⁷

Rahner tends to be missing in discussions of the religions and even of interreligious dialogue (except for jaded references to the Anonymous Christian, not based on much reading of him and not going much beyond what was already established in the Vatican II years). Rahner revisited the topic of anonymous Christianity many times, but never with sustained concrete study of another religion. The universality he claims for a constitutive orientation of the human being to God and for the experience of Grace chimes with what Panikkar and Eliade say about the universality of *homo religiosus*, and with Pope Francis on all religions as paths to God. But his metaphysical picture of the human being is too abstract to lend itself to development and tends to get bogged down instead in squabbles in post-Kantian philosophical anthropology, further laming its capacity to impose itself as a governing framework in the world of the religions).⁵⁸ Rahner himself realized the gap between his universal anthropological structure and the historical pluralism (and prehistorical obscurity) of concrete religious phenomena. The problem

54. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*

55. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVI (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 35–51.

56. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. III (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 86–90.

57. Karl Rahner, *The Great Church Year: The Best of Karl Rahner's Homilies, Sermons, and Meditations*, ed. Albert Raffelt and Harvey D. Egan (Crossroad, 1995), 362.

58. Stephen J. Duffy, ‘Experience of grace,’ in Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 43–62; J. S. O’Leary, ‘Rahner and Metaphysics,’ in Pádraic Conway and Fáinche Ryan, eds., *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-first Century* (Peter Lang, 2010), 23–38.

was that an explanation of religion was proposed before the labor of interpretation was completed or even begun. A disciple of Martin Heidegger, who praised his insight, he filled out the picture of religion with boilerplate existential attitudes, summed up in a list by Klaus Riesenhuber, sj: 'the experience of infinite nostalgia, of unquenchable dissatisfaction; the torment arising from the insufficiency of all tangible things; the deeply felt protest against death; the experience of encountering an absolute love even when it appears in utter incomprehensibility and seems to shroud itself in silence; the sense of a radical guilt paired, nevertheless, with a firm hope, and so on.'⁵⁹

Conclusion

This inspection of the founding figures of Religious Studies leads me to a number of very tentative suggestions about how Religious Studies should proceed.

1. **From scientism to humane understanding.** Religious Studies needs to step back from a certain scientism in its obsession with methodology, and try to appreciate instead the warm, humanistic approach of the figures examined above. Philosophically, it should re-engage with phenomenology as opposed to a positivistic and reductive empiricism. The affinities between religion and art should be explored further, to resist the reductive sociological emphasis. It might even draw inspiration from literary criticism, in the sense of a critical response to literature that itself remains literary rather than succumbing to some imposed academic trend.
2. **Speculative daring in searching for the meaning of the history of religions.** The abandonment of speculation on the origins and evolution of religion is a form of defeatism, and different hypotheses about the coherence of religious history can be rehearsed in light of the fuller mastery of the data that Digital Humanities render possible. Astronomers observe only the visible universe, leaving vast reaches permanently unknowable; nevertheless they acquire insight into the texture of the observable universe, and form stimulating hypotheses about the ultimate structure of the whole. Likewise, historians of religions will never advance far into 'the dark backward and abysm of time,' but they can grasp ever more penetratingly the texture of religious life, and they can test what is promising and what is defunct in various speculative accounts of religion such as those of Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer.

59. Afterword in Anita Röper, *The Anonymous Christian* (Sheed and Ward, 1966), 163–4; quoted in J. S. O'Leary, 'Rahner and Religions,' *Japan Mission Journal* 64 (2010): 60–5; pp. 60–1.

3. Openness to the possibility of raising study of religion to a theological level. The theological vision of religions as reflecting the light of the divine Logos can add a deeper layer of speculation, as can similar fundamental visions in other sources, such as Vedanta. Each religion is pressed to give an account of its stance toward the other religions and its conception of the interreligious space in which the religions meet and interact. This is a rich account provided not by philosophy or anthropology but by concrete theological traditions. Historians of religion may wish to ignore this style of thought, and to exorcize it when it appears to intrude on their turf, as in Eliade's remarks on *homo religiosus*, but it might be salutary for historians of religion to reflect that ultimately it is theology—not philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology—that is the science best equipped to understand the religious.

4. Dialogal hermeneutic governing all study of religion. Conducting all research into religions in the spirit of dialogue, in a hermeneutic which allows the religions to challenge those who study them, calling on us to overcome a summary and unimaginative attitude, is the way forward. Such a practice of communicative sharing should characterize all humanistic disciplines, but they often fight against it out of a misplaced subscription to limited ideals of objectivity and verifiability.

5. Rational and moral critique as a way of taking religions seriously. Religions should not be immune to criticism, moral and intellectual, not only to fight against their oppressive legacy (and to avoid dangerous collusion with cultic distortions), but also to treat them with due seriousness as honorable products of human culture, but also as reflecting something of the divine light of the Logos. In the social media one observes bitter feuds between religious fundamentalism and enlightened skepticism, but perhaps we are seeing the emergence of a middle path in which religions are more accepting of stark criticism while the critics are more appreciative of the irreducible power and illumination that religions convey. If so, a sterile stand-off will yield to a new dialogical culture, encouraging subtler and more contemplative thought.

HIDDEN ALTARS

DIALOGUE AS LIVED INFRASTRUCTURE AMONG JAPAN'S KAKURE KIRISHITAN



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This article examines the ritual life of contemporary Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians) in Japan to reconsider how anthropology conceptualizes interreligious dialogue. Drawing on more than two decades of ethnographic engagement with Kakure Kirishitan communities, including focused research conducted between 2012 and 2025, it argues that religious plurality in this context is sustained less through discursive exchange or doctrinal negotiation than through embodied ritual coordination. Catholic-inflected prayers (orasho), Buddhist memorial practices, and local domestic and shrine-related spatial practices are brought together within a practical repertoire shaped by histories of persecution, concealment, and adaptation. Attending to ritual timing, bodily discipline, spatial arrangements, and material objects, the article shows how these practices are reproduced without requiring participants to reconcile their different religious histories or meanings. What may appear externally as hybridity or syncretism is approached ethnographically as a historically situated process of practical coordination. The article proposes “dialogue as lived infrastructure” to describe the repeated, embodied adjustments through which practitioners sustain relationships across religious difference, even when the meaning of those relationships remain partially articulated. Rather than replacing discursive approaches to dialogue, this concept draws attention to the practical and relational work through which plurality remains possible in everyday religious life.

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE is commonly understood as a discursive encounter between clearly bounded traditions, articulated through theological discussion, institutional representation, or reasoned exchange. Such approaches tend to privilege participants' ability to articulate beliefs and negotiate difference through speech (Swidler 1983; Cornille 2008; Knitter 2002). Even approaches attentive to lived religion may emphasize recognition, mutual understanding, or

the transformation of religious perspectives. These approaches raise a question for ethnographic inquiry: how should dialogue be understood when religious plurality is sustained less through explicit discussion than through repeated practices, spatial arrangements, and bodily responsiveness?

Among Japan's Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians), religious differences have often been negotiated in practice without formal dialogue or doctrinal reconciliation. These communities emerged under the prohibition on Christianity imposed during the Tokugawa period. Under surveillance, compulsory registration at Buddhist temples, and periodic religious inspections, Christian practices were maintained through concealment, adaptation, and ritual transformation. In areas including Sotome, Shimo-Kurosaki, Kami-Kurosaki, Shitsu, and the Gotō archipelago, practitioners transmitted prayers known as *orasho*, which preserve and transform elements of early modern Catholic liturgy, while maintaining domestic altars and ancestral rites (Minagawa 1981, 2004). These practices also developed in relation to Buddhist memorial observances and local shrine traditions. A domestic altar, for example, may bring together objects with different religious histories within an established setting for prayer and remembrance. Religious plurality in such settings is not necessarily declared or resolved; it is enacted through practice.

My engagement with Kakure Kirishitan communities began with intensive fieldwork in 2004. Following the publication of my 2012 study of Murakami Shigeru (Munsi 2012), my research increasingly focused on how religious differences are sustained through ritual practice, embodied coordination, and material arrangements. The present article draws primarily on this later research conducted between 2012 and 2025, while building on ethnographic knowledge accumulated since 2004.

Drawing on this longitudinal engagement, I examine domestic altars, memorial practices, and ritual events such as *Ohatsuhoage* お初穂上げ (a ritualized communal meal in the Murakami community of Shimo-Kurosaki) to investigate how religious relationships are maintained through bodily practice, spatial arrangements, repetition, and material engagement without depending primarily on explicit theological articulation. Bringing theories of embodiment (Csordas 1990, 1994), performance (Turner 1969; Schechner 2002), and habitus (Bourdieu 1977) into conversation with ethnographic analysis, I propose dialogue as *lived infrastructure* as a way of understanding how historically differentiated practices are coordinated and reproduced through relations among people, objects, gestures, and shared spaces. The term does not imply that practitioners themselves describe their activities as dialogue, nor that their practices are necessarily symmetrical or consciously reconciled. Instead, it directs attention to the practical responsiveness through which religious differences remain livable under changing historical conditions.

The article proceeds in five analytical sections. Section 1 establishes the historical and ethnographic background, including the ways concealment shaped religious transmission. Section 2 develops an approach to dialogue beyond discourse through embodiment, performance, and habitus. Section 3 examines domestic altars and ancestral veneration as related material and intergenerational practices. Section 4 analyzes *Ohatsuhoage* and the coordination, affect, and continuity generated through ritual participation. Section 5 draws findings together to develop the argument of dialogue as lived infrastructure. The conclusion considers the article's contribution and limits of its claims. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of Japanese-language conversations and interviews are by the author.

Historical and Ethnographic Background

Contemporary Kakure Kirishitan ritual practices must be understood in relation to historical conditions under which Christian practices were transmitted without regular clerical oversight, secure institutional support, or consistent access to religious texts. Following the Tokugawa shogunate's prohibition of Christianity in the early seventeenth century, temple-registration systems (*terauke* 寺請制度) and religious inspections (*shūmon aratame* 宗門改め) subjected households to institutionalized surveillance. Families had to demonstrate Buddhist affiliation through registration and other practices that publicly established their non-Christian status.

With clergy absent and access to canonical texts restricted, communities developed ways of transmitting Christian knowledge while remaining outwardly compatible with the surrounding religious environment (Tagita 1978; Kataoka 1997; Turnbull 1998; Mullins 2003; Paramore 2009). Concealment did not entail complete separation from dominant religious institutions. Rather, continuity depended on forms of accommodation through which practices and objects were selectively adapted to prevailing social conditions (Filus 2003; Williams 1996; Rowe 2011).

Today, Kakure Kirishitan communities remain in several parts of Nagasaki Prefecture, including Hirado, Ikitsuki, Shimo-Kurosaki and Shitsu, and Wakamatsu in the Gotō Islands. Fieldwork and available information indicate a substantial decline in the number of practitioners, from approximately 1,500 around 2000 to fewer than 1,000 by 2025 (Munsi 2026, 164). These figures are indicative rather than census counts. The UNESCO-listed *Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region* also draw attention to the historical formation of these communities and the material and symbolic legacies through which their histories continue to be represented (UNESCO 2018).

Over generations, prayers were memorized rather than written down, religious images were concealed or interpreted, and domestic spaces became settings for hidden ritual observance. Maria Kannon figures, which resemble the bodhisattva

Kannon but may be venerated as representations of the Virgin Mary, exemplify this layered visibility. Their significance depended on familiarity with the practices surrounding them, rather than on public identification alone. Continuity thus rested partly on the repeated performance of prayers, gestures, and spatial arrangements. In the absence of regular priestly mediation, ritual competence was demonstrated through the cadence of *orasho* recitation and the timing of gestures, as well as through explanations of religious meaning (Turnbull 1998).

The lifting of the prohibition on Christianity in 1873 did not lead all communities to join or return to institutional Catholicism. Following the encounter between missionaries and hidden Christians in Nagasaki in 1865, some communities entered or returned to the Roman Catholic Church, while others continued to maintain inherited practices outside ecclesiastical oversight and came to be known as Kakure Kirishitan (Mullins 1998; Filus 1997; Miyazaki 1996; 2001; 2003; 2014; 2018; Nakazono 2018). Among those who maintained distinct Kakure Kirishitan traditions, religious life continued through a ritual repertoire centered on domestic altars, ancestral veneration, and ceremonies such as *Ohatsuhoage*. This persistence should not be understood simply as resistance to Catholic reintegration. Rather, it reflects the continuity of religious life through practices whose authority and significance had developed under specific historical conditions (Munsi 2019a).

These historical developments provide the context for the contemporary practices examined here. The important point is not that current ritual arrangements reproduce an unchanged past, but that historically transmitted practices continue to provide resources for responding to changing social and religious circumstances. To understand how this continuity is achieved, we must examine how religious knowledge is learned, embodied, and coordinated in practice.

Dialogue Beyond Discourse

In contemporary Kakure Kirishitan settings, religious knowledge is often transmitted through participation and demonstration rather than extended verbal explanation. During my fieldwork, questions about belief, orthodoxy, or religious affiliation sometimes elicited brief, practice-oriented responses. Rather than treating these replies as evidence of silence or resistance, it is more useful to consider how they locate religious knowledge in established ways of doing things. A Kakure Kirishitan leader (*chōkata*) in Wakamatsu explained, “This is how it has always been done” (personal communication, 2015). Such statements grounded ritual authority in inherited practice rather than explicit doctrinal justification. Instruction also occurred through gestures: a hand tracing the arc of a bow, fingers tapping the altar surface to indicate sequence, or a slight nod from an elder correcting a younger participant’s posture.

One evening after *Ohatsuhoage*, I asked a *chōkata* about a prayer containing elements of Latin, Portuguese, and Japanese. He smiled, shook his head, and replied, “Meaning comes when we do it together” (personal communication, 2018). As he spoke, participants rearranged cushions in a tatami room, and extinguishing candles in accordance to the household’s familiar sequence. No further explanation followed; the gathering gradually returned to ordinary domestic activity. The exchange suggested that understanding was sustained not only through interpretation but also through shared participation and attentiveness to the ritual sequence. His response did not necessarily imply that the prayer had no interpretable meaning; rather, it directed attention to the understanding that participants developed and expressed through doing the ritual together.

Goffman’s (2017) account of face-work and deference offers one way to understand the interpersonal restraint evident in this encounter. The leader’s response allowed the ritual to continue without turning a request for clarification into an obligation to articulate its meaning. Yet restraint should not be reduced to the management of social appearances; it must also be understood in relation to the religious histories and inherited practices through which discretion acquired religious and social significance.

This distinction matters for the study of interreligious dialogue. Barnes (2012) approaches dialogue as learning through encounter, emphasizing attentiveness to difference and the possibility of transformations. The Kakure Kirishitan case draws attention to another dimension of learning: ritual competence can develop through repeated participation even when meanings are not fully articulated. Asad’s (1993) account of religious traditions likewise directs attention to the role of discipline and practice in shaping religious life. Among Kakure Kirishitan communities, practices associated with Catholic, Buddhist, and Shinto may coexist within the same ritual environment without necessarily being formulated as competing doctrinal positions.

Tacit practice, however, should not be equated with a lack of awareness. Some interlocutors recognized that outsiders perceived their practices as “mixed” or “unclear,” yet this awareness did not necessarily lead them to reorganize ritual life around such classifications. When I introduced the term “Christian” in one conversation, a participant paused and responded, “That is your word. We follow the way of our righteous ancestors in faith” (personal communication, 2014). The remark did not deny the tradition’s Christian genealogy. Instead, it located religious authority in inherited practice rather than in a classification introduced from outside.

These encounters suggest that religious difference need not be explicitly debated for relationships across traditions to be sustained. In this case, such relationships are shaped by histories of concealment, accommodation, and continuity, and

maintained through ordinary ritual practices (Nakazono 2018; Miyazaki 2014; 2018). Dialogue therefore need not be limited to explicit exchange: it can also be examined through the embodied practices by which people learn to act in relation to others. Three related concepts—embodiment, performance, and habitus—help clarify how such practices are acquired and reproduced.

Embodiment directs attention to bodily knowledge; performance to the relationships renewed through ritual action; and habitus to the dispositions formed through repeated participation. Together, these concepts shift the analysis from belief as an abstract mental state toward religion as an enacted mode of being in the world. This perspective also challenges approaches to dialogue that privilege verbal articulation and assume that participants can step outside their practices to explain them discursively. Csordas (1990; 1994) treats embodiment as a methodological starting point for understanding religious experience through the lived body, while Bell (1992) shows how ritualization establishes practical distinctions and disciplined forms of action without requiring explicit conceptualization. Religious knowledge may be expressed through posture, timing, gesture, sensory attention, and the ability to respond appropriately within a ritual sequence, even when participants cannot or do not explain these actions verbally.

Among Kakure Kirishitan communities, religious learning often takes place through bodily participation: bowing before the altar, adopting appropriate postures during ritual, chanting *orasho* in an established rhythm, handling ritual objects, and observing elders' comportment. In the absence of formal catechesis, children learn through imitation, correction, and participation. They learn when to bow, how to hold the ritual cup, and when silence is expected, often before they can fully articulate the significance of these actions. During one memorial observance, a young boy began reciting the opening syllables of an *orasho* too quickly. An elder corrected him not through verbal instruction but by slowing her own cadence until his breathing synchronized with hers. Her adjustment conveyed the appropriate rhythm through bodily attunement, making the practical force of embodied knowledge visible in the interaction. This example illustrates how religious learning can occur through participation and correction without requiring every aspect of practice to be verbally explained. It also resonates with lived-religion approaches that examine religion as enacted in everyday life rather than measured against institutionally defined systems of belief (McGuire 2008).

Performance theory further clarifies how ritual does more than represent an inherited past: it brings relationships and memories into the present. Following Turner (1969), ceremonies such as *Ohatsuhoage* can be understood as occasions when ordinary social relations are temporarily reconfigured and intensified. As Section 4 examines in greater detail, the arrangement of the room, the positioning of participants, and the coordination of voices and gestures contribute to this

process. Schechner's (2002) concept of "restored behavior" highlights how repeated actions carry earlier forms into new circumstances. Repetition, however, does not entail exact reproduction. Adjustments in sequence, emphasis, or bodily coordination allow practices to respond to changing conditions while retaining recognizable continuity.

Bourdieu's (1977; 1990) concept of *habitus* helps explain how such practices acquire durability. Through repeated ritual participation, ways of responding to people, objects, and ritual expectations become incorporated as practical dispositions rather than necessarily explicit propositions about religious plurality. Catholic prayer forms, Buddhist memorial sensibilities, and local domestic and shrine-related practices may become elements of an established ritual repertoire without being consciously synthesized. What appears to an observer as spontaneous coordination may depend on dispositions acquired through observation, repetition, and correction.

Together, these concepts direct attention to the three connected processes: bodily participation transmits knowledge, performance renews relationships in the present, and repetition develops a durable capacity for practical adjustment. The following sections examine how these processes operate through domestic altars, ancestral remembrance, and collective ritual performance. Taken together, they help explain how religious relationships and inherited practices can be sustained without depending exclusively on explicit verbal exchange or doctrinal agreement. The following sections examine how these processes operate through domestic altars, ancestral remembrance, and collective ritual performance. They also consider the historical conditions under which discretion and the management of visibility became integral to the transmission of religious practice.

Hidden Altars, Ancestral Veneration, and Embodied Transmission

Concealment and the practice of continuity

Oral histories collected in Shimo-Kurosaki, Shitsu, Hirado, Ikitsuki, and the Gotō archipelago emphasize secrecy, adaptation, and continuity through practice rather than doctrine. In interviews conducted between 2012 and 2019, older practitioners recalled childhoods shaped by participation in ritual routines whose meanings were rarely explained. One woman in her late seventies described learning prayers from her grandmother by repeating them each night before sleep, without ever seeing them written or asking what the words meant. "You don't ask," she explained quietly, tapping her chest. "The body remembers" (personal communication, 2012). Similar patterns of transmission appeared in contemporary gatherings, where elders corrected deviations in chanting, posture, and timing through gesture rather

than extended instruction. Concealment thus shaped not only what practitioners could express openly but also the circumstances under which religious knowledge was acquired and transmitted.

Under conditions of surveillance and uncertain visibility, continuity depended on knowing not only what to do but when, where, and how to do it. Religious learning therefore involved spatial awareness, temporal discipline, bodily comportment, and sensitivity to the presence of others. Maintaining a ritual required managing its visibility as well as performing its actions correctly. A Foucauldian perspective on discipline and surveillance (Foucault 1977) helps illuminate how prohibition reorganized the conditions under which Christian practice could continue. These unequal conditions of visibility encouraged forms of discretion and bodily discipline, although contemporary practices should not automatically be interpreted as direct survivals of persecution-era strategies.

Historical accounts and oral testimonies illustrate how these disciplines took material form. Ritual objects were disguised as ordinary household items: rosaries embedded within cords, crosses concealed within statues resembling Buddhist figures, and altars hidden behind sliding panels or inside cabinets. In several homes on Ikitsuki, small wooden cabinets resembling Buddhist household altars contained objects recognizable to practitioners as Christian in their inner compartments. Their outward appearance was compatible with Buddhist ancestor veneration, while access to the concealed objects required a familiar sequence of movements. Opening the cabinet, arranging its contents, and closing it again were not simply practical tasks: they were learned actions through which knowledge of concealment was transmitted across generations.

Over time, such practices contributed to a disposition toward calibrated visibility: the capacity to manage what could be seen, by whom, and under what circumstances. Rather than treating these arrangements simply as syncretism or religious dilution, they can understand as practical accommodations through which distinct religious forms remained viable without requiring their conceptual reconciliation. As Stewart and Shaw (1994) argue more broadly, religious synthesis must be considered in relation to historical asymmetries and the politics of religious classification. The question is therefore not merely whether traditions were mixed, but how practices with different histories became workable within the same social and ritual settings.

Concealment also shaped religious authority. In the absence of regular priestly supervision and formal ecclesiastical hierarchies, ritual leadership often rested with elders whose legitimacy derived from practical competence. They knew when to begin a chant, how to arrange an altar, when to speak or remain silent, and how to recognize deviations in a ritual sequence. Errors were often corrected gently and without explanation. Authority was exercised through demonstrating and

maintaining appropriate practice, with experience providing the basis for guiding others.

These conditions continued to matter after the prohibition of Christianity was lifted in 1873. Some practitioners entered or returned to institutional Catholicism, while others maintained distinct Kakure Kirishitan traditions. Several interlocutors expressed ambivalence toward Catholic missionaries whose emphasis on doctrine and sacramental conformity could be experienced as disruptive rather than restorative. One elder in Shitsu remarked that the missionaries “wanted words,” whereas what had been preserved were “ways.” This contrast should not be taken to mean that institutional Catholicism was uniformly doctrinal or that Kakure Kirishitan practitioners rejected explanation as such. Rather, it highlights a difference in the grounds of religious authority: explicit doctrinal instruction on the one hand, and historically transmitted ritual competence on the other.

Concealment was therefore neither a period of interruption nor an unchanging cultural preference. It was a historically imposed condition that shaped how religious knowledge was learned, objects were arranged, and practices were carried forward. The significance of silence and discretion must be understood in relation to this history, while recognizing that contemporary practitioners adapt inherited practices to circumstances different from those in which they first developed.

Domestic altars as the organization of ritual space

Hidden table-set altars occupy a central place in Kakure Kirishitan ritual life, yet their significance is not exhausted by what their objects represent. During fieldwork, access to these altars was often carefully staged. In many households, an altar remained concealed during ordinary visits and was revealed only on particular ritual occasions. Casual conversation might continue until a pause, after which sliding doors were closed, voices lowered, and an elder retrieved a cloth-wrapped bundle from a cabinet. The altar then emerged within the domestic setting. Disclosure was itself part of the ritual: a familiar sequence of actions transformed the room into a setting for prayer and remembrance without requiring a formal announcement.

The material arrangement of the altar supports a sequence of opening, arranging, approaching, attending, praying, and eventually returning the objects to concealment. Scholarship on material religion emphasizes that religious meaning emerges through engagement with objects and spaces rather than through abstract interpretation alone (Meyer et al. 2010; Morgan 2010). Kakure Kirishitan altars illustrate this process. Their arrangements may juxtapose elements that appear religiously heterogeneous from an external perspective: a figure resembling Kannon but associated with the Virgin Mary, Buddhist mortuary tablets, candles, bowls of rice, *sake*, and water. Practitioners do not necessarily articulate the religious distinctions

associated with each object. Instead, the objects are incorporated into ritual sequences involving prayer, offerings, and silence. Their significance emerges not solely from their symbolic meanings or religious classifications, but also from the relationships and actions organized around them.

During one household visit in Shimo-Kurosaki, I encountered this arrangement in particularly clear form. A small table-set altar concealed behind sliding doors contained a Marian statue resembling Kannon, a Buddhist mortuary tablet, and a ritual cup used exclusively during *Ohatsuhoage*. The altar was opened only on specific memorial days; otherwise, it remained indistinguishable from ordinary domestic furniture. When the doors were opened, participants lowered their voices, slowed their gestures, and concentrated their attention. No formal announcement was made, yet everyone appeared to recognize that the room had entered a different mode of activity. When I asked whether the objects represented different religions, an elderly practitioner gently corrected my question: “They are not different. This is simply how we pray.” The response does not establish that the objects lack distinct histories or meanings. Rather, it suggests that distinguishing them by religious category was unnecessary for the ritual to proceed. What might appear externally as a juxtaposition of Catholic, Buddhist, and local religious forms was, within this household, an established arrangement of practice.

Participants’ familiarity with this arrangement was evident in their practical knowledge: they knew where objects belonged, when they should be uncovered, how they should be approached, and what bodily comportment was appropriate. The same practical orientation appeared in smaller acts of adjustment. During another gathering in Shimo-Kurosaki, I observed a practitioner pause midway through a chant to adjust a candle that had burned unevenly. The chanting resumed without comment. When I later asked whether the adjustment had symbolic significance, my host replied, “It must feel right.” A Kakure Kirishitan leader in Shimo-Kurosaki conveyed a similar emphasis on practice when he explained the table-set altar by demonstrating its use rather than describing what it represented. He unfolded a cloth, lit a candle, adjusted the objects, and began a chant. Asked about the meaning of a particular figure, he replied, “It is for praying.” These responses direct attention from symbolic representation to practical engagement. The altar functions not simply as a collection of religious symbols but as a material configuration through which practices with different histories are brought into relation. This emphasis resonates with Csordas’s (1990) account of somatic modes of attention: the altar helped orient participants’ attention, bodily positions, and coordinated actions. Its significance lay partly in how it organizes participation, not simply in what its individual objects symbolized.

The altar also transforms domestic space. Sliding doors close, lighting changes, and family members reposition themselves, temporarily reconfiguring a *tatami*

room as a ritual environment. Turner's (1969) concept of liminality offers one point of comparison, although the transition takes place within an ordinary domestic setting rather than across a clearly separated ceremonial threshold. Lefebvre's (1991) account of the production of space is also instructive: the altar does not necessarily occupy a permanently designated sacred zone. Instead, the room becomes a setting for prayer and remembrance through the actions that reorganize it and the relationships enacted within it.

The sequence of concealment, revelation, arrangement, prayer, and closure brings together the historical management of visibility discussed earlier in this Section and the practical competence through which ritual is sustained. What is transmitted is not simply knowledge about particular objects, but the capacity to manage their use and visibility: knowing when to reveal the altar, how to arrange it, where to position the body, and when an adjustment is needed. The domestic altar is therefore both a material focus of remembrance and a setting in which inherited practices are made practicable.

Ancestral veneration and intergenerational transmission

The veneration of righteous ancestors in faith—including local martyrs and patron figures such as San Jiwan—occupies a central place in Kakure Kirishitan religious life. Rather than constituting a separate ritual domain, it provides an enduring orientation toward the past, sustained through everyday conduct and embodied practice. San Jiwan, remembered in local accounts as a steadfast Catholic missionary priest during the period of prohibition, is invoked as a relational presence even when detailed narratives of his life are absent. Righteous ancestors in faith are made present through repeated acts: names uttered in prayer, offerings placed before the altar, gestures performed with care, and silences collectively observed. Remembering thus involves not only recalling the past but also renewing the practices through which relationships with it are maintained.

During fieldwork in the Shimo-Kurosaki and Gotō archipelago, practitioners frequently resisted requests to explain who ancestral figures were or what precisely they had done. When asked about San Jiwan, a Kakure Kirishitan leader replied, “He is someone we pray to,” before demonstrating the correct order of offerings (personal communication, 2013). Rather than elaborating a biography, he redirected attention to the relationship enacted through the ritual. A similar emphasis on practice was evident during a memorial observance, when the ancestral names were invoked in a low, steady cadence. Each name was followed by a slight bow and a synchronized inhalation. At certain invocations, the room grew perceptibly still, and pauses extended just beyond the rhythm of the chant. No explanation marked these moments, yet their affective intensity was apparent. The past became

perceptible through changes in breathing, tempo, and bodily attention, even when participants did not articulate what particular names or pauses meant to them.

This mode of remembering aligns with Connerton's (1989) distinction between inscribed memory and incorporated forms of memory. People may preserve knowledge of the past through the capacity to perform learned movements, even when they cannot or do not recount the historical origins of those actions. Among Kakure Kirishitan communities, *orasho* are memorized through recitation, gestures through imitation, and ritual timing through attentive observation. Memory is thus sustained not only through what practitioners can recount but also through their ability to perform and renew learned forms.

The importance of such embodied learning became particularly clear in an inter-generational encounter. In one household, a grandmother guided her granddaughter through the motions of a memorial prayer. She gently corrected the child's posture, adjusted the placement of her hands, and nodded approvingly when the rhythm of chanting aligned with the group. She did not explain the historical significance of the prayer or the identity of the ancestors invoked. As she later remarked, "She will understand later. First, she must learn how to do it" (personal communication, 2014). Through imitation and correction, the child learned not only how to perform the ritual but also how to coordinate her actions with those of others. What passed between generations was therefore not simply information about ancestors, but the practical capacity to sustain the rituals through which ancestral relationships were acknowledged.

Conversations with families in Shimo-Kurosaki, Shitsu, and Wakamatsu similarly indicated that some practitioners continue to transmit religious memories, values, and practices to younger generations through oral accounts and everyday participation. Such transmission does not depend on storytelling alone. It also occurs through what might be called *silent transmission*: knowledge conveyed through older practitioners' presence, conduct, and ritual activities. As Climo and Cattell (2002, 163) suggest, history is conveyed not only through "stories that are told but also through what is silenced or forgotten." Silence need not interrupt transmission; it may itself form part of how inherited commitments are carried forward.

This mode of transmission also gives ancestral veneration a relational dimension. Participants often describe feeling "accompanied" or "watched over" during rituals, particularly memorial observances. These descriptions should be understood as accounts of practitioners' experiences, not as claims independently verified by the researcher. The dead remain not merely objects of contemplation but figures within an ongoing relational field of obligation, remembrance, and care. This orientation resonates with Orsi's (2016) account of lived religion as a relational field involving humans, nonhumans, and the dead. Within this field, ancestors may act as moral

interlocutors whose remembered presence informs endurance, responsibility, and communal ties without requiring their role to be formulated as doctrine.

Ancestral veneration also provides a setting for the convergence of religious practices with different historical genealogies. Care for the dead draws on Buddhist memorial sensibilities, while remaining embedded in a Christian-inflected ritual repertoire. Practitioners do not necessarily describe this arrangement in terms of religious synthesis; it is often part of the ordinary organization of ritual life. A similar practical orientation appeared when a younger member questioned the continued recitation of certain *Orasho* phrases. The elder responded by resuming the accompanying gestures and continuing the sequence. A slight change in tempo, a firmer bow helped restore the familiar cadence, allowing the ritual to proceed without turning the question into a prolonged discussion. The episode does not establish that the question or any underlying disagreement was resolved; it shows how participants continued the ritual despite uncertainty. Such practices sustain inherited relationships within a broader Japanese religious world without requiring participants to reconcile their different histories explicitly.

As Bloch (2005) helps us understand, transmission involves more than preserving explicit accounts of the past. In Kakure Kirishitan practice, it involves both remembering particular righteous ancestors in faith and passing on ways of inhabiting a religiously plural environment. Faith is transmitted not simply as a set of propositions but also as a capacity to participate in a ritual world shaped by multiple religious histories. The altar and ancestral practices considered together thus reveal how material arrangements, bodily memory, and intergenerational responsibility help sustain religious relationships without requiring a fully articulated account of their shared meaning.

Ritual Performance: *Ohatsuhoage*

I turn now to *Ohatsuhoage*, the term used by the Murakami community in Shimo-Kurosaki for a ritualized communal meal that occupies a central place in its religious life. Comparable practices involving prayer, offerings, and the sharing of food and drink are also documented among other Kakure Kirishitan communities, although their ritual arrangements and terminology vary by region (Turnbull 1998; Miyazaki 1995, Whelan 1992; Munsu 2019a).

The name *Ohatsuhoage* evokes the Japanese practice of *hatsuho* 初穂, or the offering of the first fruits, traditionally associated with expressions of gratitude to the *kami* for the produce of the land. The element *age* is related to the Japanese verb *ageru* 上げる, meaning “to offer” or “to give,” while the prefix *O-* is an honorific marker that can convey respect or reverence. These linguistic elements foreground the act of offering, although their precise significance within Kakure Kirishitan

usage requires attention to practitioners' own understandings of the term. This linguistic resonance can be understood in the broader historical context in which Kakure Kirishitan communities incorporated and adapted elements of Buddhist, Shinto, and local practices to conceal and sustain their religious traditions. Such adaptations were not simply temporary disguises; they also became part of the ritual forms transmitted across generations. The precise historical relationship between *Ohatsuhoage* and Shinto offering practices, however, cannot be established from the name alone.

In the Kakure Kirishitan setting, offering takes shape within a religious tradition marked by a Christian inheritance and Japanese cultural forms. Its significance lies not simply in the act of offering but in how offerings are prepared, presented, and shared through an established sequence of practices. Conducted in domestic or semi-private communal settings, the ritual brings participants together through the preparation and presentation of offerings, followed by the shared consumption of rice, *sake*, *nishime*, and sashimi. Without ordained clergy or institutional liturgical supervision, participants sustain the ceremony through an established sequence of actions and close attention to one another.

During fieldwork, I observed how the ceremony unfolded through preparation of the space, collective chanting, moments of silence, and ritual offerings. Minor misalignments—a cushion slightly askew or a hand raised too early—are corrected silently through subtle nudges or repositioning. Participants monitored one another's movements, making small adjustments that preserve the sequence without interrupting it for verbal instruction. This coordination was also evident in prescribed seating positions, often arranged by age, gender, and ritual role, and in the careful timing of gestures. Chanting in unison produced a rhythm that helped organize breathing, posture, and attention. The *Orasho*, often archaic and partially opaque, were sustained through cadence, sequence, and repetition. As one participant observed, "Even if you don't understand the words, your body knows when to breathe" (personal communication, 2015). Through this shared rhythm, participants anticipate when to breathe, move, and join their voices with others, even when the words remained only partially understood. Although the ceremonies I observed followed a recognizable sequence, their performance varied according to the occasion and the participants involved.

The ritual's recognizable sequence did not require mechanical repetition. Variations in pacing, tone, and affect accompanied differences in occasion and atmosphere. Drawing on Schechner's (2002) concept of "restored behavior," *Ohatsuhoage* can be understood as a rehearsed sequence through which inherited forms are enacted anew. Participants neither reproduce every action mechanically nor improvise without constraint. They maintain a recognizable order while adjusting their performance to one another and to the circumstances of the occasion. Sound,

silence, posture, and shared attention contribute to an atmosphere that participants describe in terms of calm, intimacy, and connection. Pink's (2009) work on sensory ethnography helps illuminate how such embodied and sensory experiences contribute to religious meaning. Belonging is expressed not only through what is said or offered but also through the shared rhythm and atmosphere of ritual action.

The communal meal also connects participants with those remembered as the community's righteous ancestors in faith. Through preparing and sharing food, praying, and observing inherited practices, participants bring the past into the present without requiring a uniform theological explanation. Buddhist-or Shinto associate elements incorporated into the ritual are not necessarily treated as requiring explicit mediation. Instead, participants coordinate their actions within a familiar sequence, guided by inherited expectations and responsiveness to others. The ritual thus brings different religious histories into relation through shared practice, without requiring participants to formulate an explicit account of how those histories fit together.

The performance can also be examined through four interconnected dimensions of ritual space identified in my earlier analysis (Munsi 2019a). The *imaginative* dimension takes shape as participants prepare for the ceremony and orient themselves toward its inherited meanings. The *physical* dimension is established through the arrangement of the ritual setting, food, and objects. The *gestural* dimension emerges through coordinated movements, posture, chanting, and silence. For practitioners, these visible and embodied activities also open onto a *spiritual* or *communion* dimension in which prayer and offering establish a relationship with God and the community's righteous ancestors in faith. These dimensions are interdependent, rather than separate stages in a fixed sequence. Together, they offer complementary perspectives on the same performance: its anticipated meaning, material organization, embodied enactment, and spiritual significance as understood by practitioners.

The overall structure of *Ohatsuhoage* closely parallels aspects of Catholic Eucharistic liturgy, particularly in the place of prayer, the preparation and offering of food, and the sharing of a communal meal. As discussed in my earlier study (Munsi 2019a), the ritual is understood in relation to the historical absence of Catholic priests and the Eucharistic celebration among Kakure Kirishitan communities. The preface preceding the ritual's principal actions provides a further point of comparison with Catholic Eucharistic prayers. These parallels are significant not only for understanding the ritual's form but also for considering its historical formation and religious meaning. Accounts discussed in my earlier work, including Miura's (1980, 96–97) interpretation and oral traditions preserved in the Murakami community, associate *Ohatsuhoage* with the absence of priests and describe it as a ritual substitute for the Eucharist (Munsi 2019a). These accounts are important

for understanding how the ritual's origins and relationship to Catholicism have been interpreted and remembered, although they do not establish every detail of its historical development.

Nor should these parallels imply that the ritual's elements necessarily carry meanings identical to those of the Catholic Eucharist. Rice and *sake*, for example, occupy positions within a sacralized sequence that can be compared with bread and wine, but this resemblance does not establish doctrinal equivalence. Rather than treating *Ohatsuhoage* simply as a substitute for the Eucharist, I approach it as a historically situated ritual through which inherited religious forms are sustained and reworked in practice. Through prayer, offerings, and the communal meal, practitioners renew their relationship with God, remember their righteous ancestors in faith, and reaffirm their bonds with one another. Its significance lies not only in its relationship to Catholic liturgical forms but also in how these practices are enacted collectively. In this sense, *Ohatsuhoage* illustrates dialogue as lived infrastructure: continuity is sustained through shared arrangements, bodily responsiveness, remembrance, and repeated acts of participation, without requiring participants to articulate a uniform theological explanation or explicitly reconcile different religious histories.

Ritual coordination, affect, and continuity

Ritual participation has social and affective consequences within Kakure Kirishitan communities. Following ceremonies such as *Ohatsuhoage*, participants describe an atmosphere of intimacy, shared attention, and emotional composure. This intimacy is expressed less through overt emotional display than through synchronized movement, collective silence, careful pacing, and subtle mutual adjustment. Several interlocutors described feeling “settled” or “light” after rituals, using bodily metaphors to convey emotional states. These accounts suggest that the effects of ritual are experienced both individually and through the atmosphere created by collective participation (Munsi 2019b).

This affective dimension is significant given the histories of persecution, concealment, and social vulnerability that continue to inform Kakure Kirishitan identity. Ritual does not resolve these historical conditions, but it provides recurrent occasions for relationships to be renewed and inherited practices to continue. A familiar sequence offers temporary stability by making expectations recognizable and participation possible. Such stability should not be confused with the absence of tension or difference; it describes the restoration of a workable relational order through shared activity.

The consequences of ritual participation also extend beyond the ceremony itself. Shared observances bring elders, younger members, and other participants into a common social setting, where relationships are maintained through repeated

encounters. What is sustained is not merely knowledge of ritual procedures but participation in a community whose relationships depend, in part, on the continued practice of those procedures. Older practitioners remain important to this process, while younger participants acquire familiarity through involvement rather than formal instruction alone.

Continuity should not, however, be romanticized as evidence of an unbroken or self-sustaining tradition. Kakure Kirishitan communities face demographic decline, the pressures of heritage representation, and uncertainty about intergenerational transmission. Continuity remains contingent on the willingness and capacity of successive generations to participate and on the availability of settings in which participation can continue. Ritual coordination may help sustain the social relationships and the visibility of the tradition, but it cannot guarantee its future or reverse demographic and institutional pressures. Nor does ritual necessarily eliminate difference, conflict, or uncertainty, or produce agreement about religious identity. Its contribution is more modest but consequential: it provides recurring occasions for people to renew relationships and inhabit a shared social world through familiar practices. Resilience, if the term is used here, should therefore be understood as contingent rather than triumphant—as the continuing work of participation, repetition, and adjustment, not as evidence that the tradition is secure.

Discussion: Dialogue as Lived Infrastructure

This article has proposed a reconceptualization of dialogue as more than communicative exchange: it is a form of relational infrastructure through which differences are coordinated and relationships sustained over time. The Kakure Kirishitan case suggests that speech, doctrinal clarification, and mutual recognition constitute only one configuration of relational practice. Catholic-inflected *Orasho* sequences unfold alongside Buddhist mortuary rites, while local domestic and shrine-related practices coexist with concealed Christian devotions. Participants do not necessarily reconcile theological implications or seek conceptual synthesis. Instead, coordination takes place through timing, posture, spatial arrangement, and ritual sequence. Dialogue is thus enacted not only between people but also through their bodily engagement with ritual spaces, objects, and inherited practices.

This reframing challenges the assumption that dialogue presupposes subjects who articulate their beliefs and negotiate differences through discourse. Such models privilege speech, transparency, and recognition as primary forms of relational engagement. Barnes (2012), however, approaches interreligious dialogue as a process of learning through encounter, emphasizing attentiveness to difference and the transformation of religious understanding. The Kakure Kirishitan case extends

this perspective by showing that learning through relation may also be incorporated into bodily and ritual competencies rather than expressed through verbal exchange. Relational knowledge can be acquired through observing, repeating, and adjusting actions alongside others, even when participants do not explicitly articulate the meanings of their practices.

This opacity is historically situated. Under regimes of persecution, surveillance, and marginalization, overt expressions of religious difference could carry risk, shaping the circumstances in which religious practices were maintained and transmitted (Turnbull 1998). Yet the development of Kakure Kirishitan practice cannot be reduced to concealment alone. Research by Nakazono (2018) and Miyazaki (2014) points to the complexity of the tradition's formation, continuity, and relationship to the wider Japanese religious environment. The coordination visible today should therefore not be treated as a direct survival of persecution-era strategies, but as a historically conditioned mode of religious life shaped by inherited practices, later adaptations, and changing social circumstances.

The reinvention of religious material culture provides a particularly clear example of how continuity may be sustained through change. During fieldwork in Shimo-Kurosaki in November 2014, Murakami Shigenori showed me three newly made *Maria Kannon* figures, each with a Japanese woman's face and a distinct color. According to Murakami, the figures had distinct ritual functions: the gray figure was used during *Ohatsuhoage*, the blue figure served to protect households, and the white figure was used for funerals (Munsi 2015). These images did not simply reproduce an inherited religious object; they introduced new material forms and differentiated ritual uses into the community's religious life. Continuity need not depend on the unchanged preservation of sacred objects. It may also be sustained through the creation of new objects whose significance emerges through use in established ritual settings. As Riis and Woodhead (2012, 8) observe, sacred objects may become "the focus of collective sentiments" through their consecration by a group. Here, the figures' significance lies not only in their appearance but also in the differentiated occasions and relationships through which they acquire meaning.

Retaining the term "dialogue" is deliberate, but it requires a distinction between dialogical relation and mere coexistence. Traditions may reproduce themselves independently while occupying the same social space, without becoming responsive to one another. The dialogical dimension of lived infrastructure lies not in proximity alone, but in patterned adjustment: ritual timing may be modified, spatial arrangements calibrated, and bodily restraint exercised so that shared practices can continue despite unresolved differences. Material objects participate in this process by organizing repeated actions and providing a focus for relationships without requiring participants to articulate a shared interpretation.

This argument extends anthropological critiques of dialogical idealism (Asad 1993; Beyer 2013) by shifting attention from recognition to practical coordination. Drawing on theories of habitus and ritualization (Bourdieu 1977; Bell 1992), I do not equate habitus with dialogue. Rather, I examine how embodied dispositions acquire a relational dimension when practices are repeatedly adjusted in response to others. The infrastructure at stake is neither purely internalized nor simply external; it is reproduced through interactions among bodies, objects, spaces, and inherited expectations. Practitioners move across partially overlapping religious grammars without necessarily naming, ranking, or reconciling them. Their relations acquire durability because familiar practices can be repeated and adjusted without requiring their meanings to be continually renegotiated at the level of explicit belief.

The four dimensions of ritual space identified through *Ohatsuhoage* further clarify this argument. The imaginative dimension orients participants toward the ritual and its inherited meanings; the physical and gestural dimensions organize the setting and coordinate embodied action; and the spiritual dimension concerns the relationship with God and the righteous ancestors in faith as understood by practitioners. These dimensions are interdependent rather than discrete stages. The first three can be examined through participants' preparation, arrangements, movements, and interactions, while the fourth concerns the spiritual relationships that these actions express and sustain for practitioners. The ritual therefore extends beyond dialogue among those physically present: prayer, offering, and remembrance enact an embodied relationship with the dead, as understood by participants. This does not imply that all participants experience ancestral presence identically, or that the relationship takes the form of a literal verbal exchange. Rather, *Ohatsuhoage* provides a shared ritual framework through which relationships across generations can be acknowledged and renewed.

The same dynamics of embodied coordination and religious coexistence are visible in the annual shrine festivals documented in Nagasaki Prefecture. The Kurematsu Shrine festival, held on 3 November in Shimo-Kurosaki, has brought together Kakure Kirishitan practitioners, Catholics, and Buddhists in a shared commemorative setting. At Kuwahime Shrine, located within the grounds of Fuchi Shinto Shrine in Nagasaki City, the 7 August festival commemorates Otomo Maxência, remembered as the Mulberry Princess. At the Yamanokami Shrine festival in Wakamatsu on 23 September, a Shinto priest is sometimes invited by Kakure Kirishitan participants to perform a ritual before they continue with their own ceremony. These occasions bring religious traditions into practical relation without necessarily requiring participants to reconcile their differences through formal theological dialogue (Munsi 2015; 2021). Although these festivals take place within historically situated religious settings, they bring participants into shared

ritual spaces without requiring a common theological position. Hardacre's (2017) account of shrine festivals and their changing place in public life provides broader historical context for considering such settings. Together, these examples extend the argument developed through *Ohatsuhoage* by showing how religious coexistence is enacted through participation in shared settings and the coordination of particular actions, rather than secured by shared theological commitments. The specific character of these relations nevertheless depends on each festival's history and local organization.

Foregrounding embodiment also reorients the ethics of pluralism. Ethics does not appear primarily as articulated tolerance or principled deliberation, but as disciplined disposition (Lambek 2010). It may be expressed through affective restraint, spatial discipline, and temporal patience—the cultivated capacity to sustain proximity without demanding resolution. Such restraint is neither simply passive nor reducible to strategic calculation; it reflects dispositions shaped by vulnerability and marginalization. Ethical life and dialogical infrastructure therefore intersect without being identical: the former concerns practical judgment and conduct more broadly, while the latter identifies the patterned coordination through which particular relations are maintained.

These perspectives may also illuminate settings beyond interreligious encounter, including multiethnic neighborhoods, postcolonial formations, and institutions marked by asymmetrical power. Such comparisons remain propositions for further inquiry rather than conclusions established by this case. Discursive models of dialogue remain indispensable where recognition, negotiation, and public deliberation are central. The infrastructural model is most useful where relationships are sustained through repeated practical adjustment under conditions of risk, marginality, or historically constrained visibility.

The concept of “lived infrastructure” is not intended to replace dialogical or lived-religion approaches, but to bring their concerns into closer ethnographic relation. Barnes's (2012) emphasis on learning through interreligious encounter highlights the transformative potential of relations across difference, while McGuire's (2008) account of lived religion directs attention to the everyday practices through which religious life exceeds institutional boundaries. Lived infrastructure adds a focus on how such relations become durable through repeated, embodied coordination. It identifies practical work through which relationships are learned, repeated, and adjusted in particular settings, even when their meanings remain only partially articulated.

Conclusion

This article has examined contemporary Kakure Kirishitan ritual life to reconsider how anthropology conceptualizes religious plurality. Across household altars, memorial observances, and *Ohatsuhoage*, religious differences are sustained not primarily through theological clarification or doctrinal reconciliation, but through timing, spatial organization, bodily discipline, and repetition. Catholic-inflected *Orasho*, Buddhist memorial practices, and local domestic and shrine-related practices remain operative within shared arrangements without requiring formal synthesis. Religious continuity is thus sustained through practical coordination even when participants do not explicitly reconcile the different histories and meanings involved.

This capacity is historically situated. It bears the imprint of persecution, surveillance, concealment, and later encounters with institutional Catholicism. The coordination visible in contemporary practice should neither be romanticized as harmonious coexistence nor treated as a universal model of interreligious relations. It is a historically formed way of maintaining religious relationships under conditions in which explicit articulation was not always possible, desirable, or safe. Its persistence, moreover, does not mean that the tradition is free from demographic decline or uncertainty about intergenerational transmission.

For anthropology, the broader implication is methodological: statements of belief need to be considered alongside the embodied, material, and temporal practices through which religious worlds are reproduced. “Dialogue as lived infrastructure” names the relational work performed through repeated adjustments of bodies, objects, spaces, and rhythms through which relationships are sustained across religious difference. The concept does not displace discursive models of dialogue; it extends their analytic reach to forms of relationality that may remain only partially articulated. Its contribution is to show how religious plurality is lived and reproduced not only through what people say about difference, but also through how they learn to act with others, engage material objects, and sustain shared practices in the presence of difference.

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ON THE “MOSS” IN THE DRY LANDSCAPE GARDEN OF RYŌAN TEMPLE



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In “The Aesthetics of ‘Cutting,’” second chapter and core section of my earlier work The Structure of “Kire” (Ōhashi 1986), published forty years ago, I attempted an analysis of the dry landscape garden at Ryōan Temple 龍安寺. Forty years later, while I still essentially stand by that analysis, I also believe there was room to take it a step further. The examination of “moss” that I attempt in this paper is that very step. To offer a bit of an explanation: not only was an examination of moss in Ryōan Temple’s dry landscape garden absent from my earlier work, but it was also uniformly absent from the vast body of literature on the garden that has accumulated since then. The moss in the dry landscape garden had remained completely “forgotten” from the very beginning. And there was a reason for this.

IN JAPAN, there is a book titled *Sakuteiki* 作庭記 (Records of Garden Making), considered the country’s first theoretical guide to landscape architecture. While there have long been various theories regarding its date of composition and author, the prevailing view today is that it was written in the mid-twelfth century by a man named Tachibana Toshitsuna 橘俊綱.¹ To offer a few comments from a comparative cultural-historical perspective, the well-known manuals on artistic creation in Renaissance Europe include Leon Battista Alberti’s *On Painting* (1435/6), *On Sculpture* (c. 1443), and *On Architecture* (1452). Since all of these were written in the mid-fifteenth century, *Sakuteiki* predates them by three hundred years (Aikawa 2003, 85).

It is true that in Europe, there is *De Architectura Libri decem* (Ten Books on Architecture) by the ancient Roman Vitruvius (Marcus Vitruvius Pollio), which

1. Regarding research on the history of the compilation of the *Sakuteiki*, no major objections have been raised from the time Tsuyoshi Tamura’s *Sakuteiki* (Tamura 1964) synthesized the arguments of various scholars up to the present day.

dates back even further.² However, from that time onward, until the appearance of Alberti's works, there was no theory of landscape architecture, let alone any general theory of the visual arts. This is somewhat puzzling, given that gardens themselves did exist. For example, the "*peristylum*," a Roman-style garden consisting of a courtyard surrounded by columns (*stylos*), is one such example.

In European thought and artistic perspectives, aesthetic interest in "nature" was not treated as a central theme until the early modern period. Intellectual interest in "nature" began with Kant's aesthetics, which sought to find the archetype of "artistic beauty" in "natural beauty."³ However, even in Kant's case, the "garden" was not a subject of consideration. Nor did the "garden" merit its own chapter—on par with architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and so on—in Hegel's subsequent five-volume, voluminous *Lectures on Aesthetics*.⁴ If we explore the background of this intellectual history, we find a teleological ontology dating back to Aristotle. According to Aristotle's view—that "heavy things are naturally drawn downward, and light things are naturally drawn upward; therefore, stones and earth are drawn to the very bottom, and soil, being slightly lighter, is drawn above them"⁵—gardens made of stones and soil did not occupy a high artistic position.

In the East, there was no ontology or theology with such a hierarchical structure; rather, the prevailing view was one that took the way of "nature" as a model for human life. Against the backdrop of this intellectual climate, treatises on garden design appeared in Japan as early as the twelfth century. It should also be noted that references to gardens can already be found in the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 from the Nara period in eighth century.⁶ It is also worth noting that China possesses the *Book of Rites* by Confucius, predating even Vitruvius. While details are omitted here, the chapter "Monthly Ordinances" within it mentions terms like "garden" (苑) and "enclosure" (囿) in relation to court rituals and ceremonies. However, as the character 令 (*rei*) indicates, here 苑 (*en*) signifies nothing more than a place for observing monthly rituals and principles, not a garden for aesthetic appreciation.

2. There are several Japanese translations, beginning with Keiichi Morita's *De Architectura by Vitruvius* (Morita 1969); it is widely recognized as the oldest treatise on architecture in the field. Vitruvius's view that architecture should consist of the three elements of "firmness (*firmitas*)," "utility (*utilitas*)," and "beauty (*venustas*)" has essentially been carried forward into today's architectural philosophy. Alberti's *On Architecture* is also often referred to by the same title; this is because Alberti, while offering harsh criticism of Vitruvius's views, essentially followed his basic framework and structured his work into ten chapters as well.

3. See my essay 'Die Naturschönheit als Schein. Zur Ästhetik bei Kant, Hegel und Adorno aus fernöstlicher Sicht des "Kunstwegs"' (Ohashi 2013, 69–81) I have elaborated on this there, so I will limit myself here to the conclusion.

4. See the four-volume collected works (Hegel 2015) published by Meiner since 2015, vol. 28/1, 2, 3, 4.

5. Aristotle, *Physics*, 214b 10 f.

6. In the entry for "Empress Suiko" (推古天皇) in the *Nihon shoki*, there is the following passage: "In this year, she created the Tea Garden south of Ikaruga Palace, and there she constructed a pond, planted trees, and sowed seeds of flowers and vegetables."

On the other hand, Japan's treatise on formative theory, *Sakuteiki*, though influenced by Chinese thought like Yin-Yang and the Five Elements theory, is essentially a guidebook for garden design as an aesthetic art form.

Even today, there are no shortage of authoritative studies on *karesansui* 枯山水 (dry landscape garden). If one were to ask whether the subject has been thoroughly discussed, there remains the “moss” in dry landscape gardens unexamined. Moss is so commonplace in Japanese gardens that it could be said to be self-evident. So it is a “secret” why this self-evident “moss” remained unexamined.⁷

“Stones” and “Moss” in Japanese Gardens

Let us begin by quoting the very first sentence of *Sakuteiki*.

In places where there is neither a pond nor a watercourse, stones are sometimes placed. This is called *karesansui*. (*Sakuteiki* 1973, 226)

This oldest treatise on garden design is devoted entirely to instructions on how to arrange and position stones. While I will discuss this in more detail later, let us first focus on the term *karesansui* in this quotation. Generally, *karesansui* is often associated with the image of Higashiyama culture during the Muromachi period (fourteenth–sixteenth centuries), particularly after the Ōnin War (1467–1477). For this reason, the theory that *Sakuteiki*—attributed to Tachibana Toshitsuna of the late Heian period (eleventh century)—was a forgery from the Muromachi period was once put forward. However, it has now been confirmed that the forgery theory is incorrect (See note 1). In the context of this paper's line of inquiry, this means that the term *karesansui* dates back to the Heian period.

This also calls for caution regarding discourses that immediately link the aesthetic sensibility of *karesansui* to the concept of *wabi-sabi* わび・さび. This concept represents the aesthetic sensibility of medieval Japan, epitomized by Zeami, the master of Nō theater (fourteenth–fifteenth centuries), and had not yet taken shape during the Heian period. One often encounters arguments that, by applying this concept too readily, give the impression that these arguments have explained the beauty of *karesansui*; however, such arguments often merely use the elusiveness of *wabi-sabi* as a smokescreen. Mirei Shigemori, a contemporary practitioner and theorist, emphasized the concept of *yūgen* 幽玄—which dates back to the Heian period—as a description of *karesansui* in his acclaimed book *Karesansui*

7. For a detailed examination of the dry landscape garden and the rocks within it from a broad perspective spanning literature from all eras and regions, see Graham Parkes's essay “The Role of Rock in the Japanese Dry Landscape Garden: A Philosophical Essay” (Berthier 2000, 85–155). A discussion of the rocks in the Ryōan Temple dry landscape garden is presented on pp. 133 ff. of the same work. The views of Keiji Nishitani and Shin'ichi Hisamatsu are also cited.

(Shigemori 2008).⁸ Given the date of the term *karesansui*, this approach seems more legitimate.

However, even when used to describe *karesansui*, the concept of *yūgen* still leaves room for further scrutiny. This is because when Zeami made extensive use of this concept in his *Fūshikaden* 風姿花伝 during the medieval period, he discussed *yūgen* with a variety of nuances. These include the “*yūgen* of waka poetry,” which is understood through the written word and heard with the ear; the “*yūgen* of Nō plays,” which is appreciated with the eye; furthermore, the *yūgen* of human figures such as “imperial consorts, court ladies, courtesans, lovers, and handsome men”; and the “*yūgen* of flowers” in plants and trees, and so on.⁹ The nuances of *yūgen* cited by Zeami possess a more vibrant brightness than the *yūgen* in the literature in Heian-period.¹⁰ This raises the question: if we were to apply this concept, what kind of *yūgen* would be found in *karesansui*?

In addition, when the Zen master Musō Soseki 夢窓疎石 (1275–1351) and other Kamakura-period Zen masters—who created *karesansui* gardens in various locations—referred to *karesansui* as *karisansui* 仮山水 (Shigemori also points this out in Shigemori 2008, 57, among other places), the term “*kari*” (provisional) must also be kept in mind. Here, “*kari*” can be described as a composite state of “emptiness” and “form,” as expressed in the Heart Sutra’s phrase “emptiness is form.” The spread of Zen Buddhism lies behind the shift from the concept of *karesansui*—already in use during the Heian period—to its designation as *karisansui* in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods. Furthermore, if Zen practitioners of the Muromachi period used the expression *karisansui*, it is necessary to examine how the two concepts of “*kari*” and “*yūgen*” were related at that time. However, this paper will not delve into these aesthetic concepts. Instead of it, I would like to focus on the formal structure of *karesansui* and attempt to interpret the meaning of “moss” through structural analysis.

8. In Chapter 2, “The Formal and Substantive Beauty of Karesansui,” Mirei Shigemori interprets *yūgen*—a concept dating back to the *Kokin wakashū* 古今和歌集—as the aesthetic sensibility of *karesansui*.

9. See my book *The Establishment of ‘Geidō’: Zeami and Rikyū* (Ōhashi 2021, 93 ff). In conceptual examinations of *yūgen*, Yoshinori Ōnishi’s *Yūgen and Aware* (Ōnishi 1939) continues to hold a definitive position as the standard work. Ōnishi states that Zeami’s concept of *yūgen* “seems to be limited to a beauty that is far too gentle and soft” (see Ōhashi 2021, note 132); the “limitation” he refers to takes on a positive rather than a negative connotation when examining the secret of “moss” in dry landscape gardens, as will be seen below.

10. Yoshinori Ōnishi is the leading scholar to have discussed the concept of *yūgen* alongside *aware*, but how might his theory of *yūgen* be received abroad? Anna Zschauer’s recent publication, *Ästhetik und japanische Moderne. Interkulturelle Fallstudien* (Zschauer 2025), examines Ōnishi’s concept of *yūgen* in detail. Her magnum opus was a doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Hildesheim; it received the highest grade of *summa cum laude*, was awarded the Karl Alber Prize, and was published by Alber in 2025. Incidentally, she notes that the “central part” (der zentrale Teil) of this work is formed by three case studies. Namely, “three case studies that constitute an inseparable connection between aesthetics and hermeneutics: *mono no aware*, *iki*, and *kire*” (Zschauer 2025, 17).

As mentioned above, *Sakuteiki* is devoted to the question of what kind of stones to use and how to arrange them, and what the stones are meant to represent. I would like to first draw attention to the fact that the “stones” referred to here are not stones quarried from a quarry, but they are all “natural stones.” In French-style gardens, all stones are cut into geometric shapes to serve as components of a geometric composition, and none retain their natural form. Here, one can discern the influence of Descartes’s idea of humanity as the “master and owner of nature,”¹¹ as well as the ideology of absolute monarchy embodied by Louis XIV, the Sun King, known for the phrase “The State is I” (*L’État, c’est moi*). Let us recall that the French-style garden Hegel refers to is the garden of the Palace of Sans-Souci. There, the trees are neatly trimmed and lined up along the garden paths, visualizing the perspective that nature is made to submit to the spirit.¹² In contrast, in English-style gardens, at least the trees are allowed to grow in their natural state, as if to recreate the natural landscape of the outside world. However, underlying this garden style is a historical consciousness that involves the construction of Roman-ruin-style architecture or Greek-temple-style pavilions, using reminiscences of the classical world as a motif. From this, we can see that English-style gardens are not merely a celebration or a reproduction of nature, but they are underpinned by a historical consciousness. There are neither locations nor motifs involving the selection and arrangement of natural stones. The sensibility of Japanese gardens—selecting natural stones and arranging them aesthetically—may seem ordinary to those who live in Japan and are accustomed to seeing them, but from the perspective of Western aesthetics, it is extremely unorthodox.

What about “moss,” then? In Western gardens—better, in Western aesthetics in general—moss is not only rarely mentioned but is not even regarded as an aesthetic element in the first place. In fact, the same is true of Japan’s *Sakuteiki*. Although moss is so ubiquitous in Japanese gardens as to be self-evident, there is virtually no conscious awareness of it. To be precise, there are two very brief mentions of it in *Sakuteiki*. One reads as follows:

On a hill in a field, create intersecting ridges,... and from time to time, place moss and the like. (*Sakuteiki* 1973, 224)

In the context of the entire treatise on garden design, this passage carries almost no weight. The other passage reads as follows:

11. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, in *Œuvres de Descartes*, Edition Adam et Tannery, Tome VI, p. 62.

12. In Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art*, delivered at the University of Berlin from 1818 to 1828, the student notes from the *Lectures on Aesthetics* of 1820–21 (Hegel 1995) contain a very brief appendix on “gardens.” (Hegel 2015, vol. 28, pp. 1, 33) However, this is not a thematic discussion. Furthermore, Greek vases—which are highly regarded today—are never mentioned in Hegel’s theories of art and aesthetics.

When stones from mountains or riverbanks collapse... and, as the years pass, moss begins to grow, this is not the work of human hands.
(*Sakuteki* 1973, 241)

This second passage, though it has never previously attracted much attention, offers a suggestion of utmost importance for this paper. Namely, that moss is “not the work of human hands.” In other words, moss is not a “formative element.”

Moss is never discussed as a formative element in the history of gardens in both the East and West, nor in the history of studies on Japanese dry landscape gardens. This is only natural. Moss grows naturally, covering the ground, and presents an aesthetic scene—particularly in Japanese gardens—but it is not an element that defines the “form.” This is somewhat surprising when one considers that moss has long been a familiar part of people’s lives in Japan, has been celebrated in poetry, and even appears in the Japanese national anthem. The line in the national anthem, “May your reign continue for a thousand, eight thousand generations, until the tiny pebbles grow into mighty rocks, covered in lush moss” is based on an anonymous poem from volume seven of the *Kokin wakashū*, compiled in the early Heian period. Furthermore, if we go back even further to the *Man’yōshū* 万葉集 of the Nara period, numerous poems about moss emerge.¹³ Moss has been a plant deeply cherished by the Japanese people since ancient times. I would like to make special mention of Miho Tanaka’s truly vivid essay, *Walking with Moss* (Tanaka 2007), which I recently discovered. I came across this essay because it was cited in *Louange des Mousses* (Brindeau 2012), another exquisitely sensitive and excellent work by Véronique Brindeau, a French scholar of Japanese studies. Brindeau’s book is also a beautiful essay in which she, moved by the green moss covering the ground of Japanese gardens, describes it through the lens of her delicate sensibility.

Moss is, so to speak, a foundational element of Japanese gardens, but it is not a formative element. To reiterate the reason: it is “not the work of human hands.” It is simply too self-evident. However, therein lies the paradox of the self-evident. Namely, precisely because it is self-evident, the meaning of its existence is forgotten. This is similar to how everyone breathes air, yet this fact rarely comes to mind in daily life. Philosophically speaking, the fact that something exists and is not nothing—something so self-evident—has, paradoxically, become the “wonder” (the Greek “*thaumazein*”) that runs through the history of philosophy and has shaped the history of ontology. The same is true of “time”—the concept that everything that exists comes into being and ceases to exist within the flow of time. Because something is self-evident, it remains hidden from our field of attention and is forgotten. This paradox of self-evidence also applies to “moss.”

13. In Shōkichi Harigaya’s *Dictionary of Plant Tanka* (Harigaya 1960, 159–160), thirteen poems about moss by ancient poets were included.

The “Moss” in Ryōan Temple’s *karesansui*

The *karesansui* described in *Sakuteiki* is a representation of mountains and rivers in which the water has dried up and the vegetation has been removed. Zen master Musō referred to this as *kari-sansui* (provisional landscapes).¹⁴ The stones and sand placed in the garden bring this “provisional” landscape into being. Here, “provisional” does not mean that there is a “real” landscape somewhere else; rather, it means that the landscape itself—or indeed, all phenomena in the universe—is “provisional,” and that “form is emptiness.” What expresses this as an artistic creation, and thus symbolically, is “provisional landscape.” By placing only stones and sand, this artistic composition temporarily sets aside the landscapes of the external world—which are ordinarily perceived as real—allows organic life to wither, and then revives it within a space composed of inorganic stones and sand. Having temporarily parted ways with the external natural world, it is revived and “continues” (*tsuzuki*) through that “cut (break)” (*kire*). The “cutting syllable” in haiku, or the “cut and continuation” in *waka*, manifests visibly within the tradition of Japanese visual arts, and *karesansui* is a quintessential example of this.¹⁵

There are few examples of *karesansui* gardens—commonly found in the tradition of Zen temples—that strictly embody this “temporary” nature. In fact, there is only one: the dry landscape garden at Ryōan Temple.

Ryōan Temple’s rectangular garden is separated from the surrounding natural landscape by an oil-clay wall and features fifteen stones (FIGURE 1). It is a sculptural space composed of stones and sand, severed from natural life. The fifteen stones form five small groups; each group creates a self-contained microcosm while, together with the other groups, forming a rhythmic, interconnected whole. Even the individual stones within each group possess forms that never grow tiresome to behold; while each creates its own independent world, it is also part of the whole. This structure mirrors that of an organic world formed by living beings. Within it, individual parts are independent yet interconnected with others; at times they stand in opposition to one another, forming a single group, an environment, and ultimately, a world. Diverse manifestations of “discontinuity and continuity” emerge there.

However, when surveying the individual stones and the entire group of stones in this way, there is usually a part that slips out of view. It is a part that, because it

14. I will attempt a literal translation of Musō’s *Poem on the Rhythm of Imaginary Mountains and Waters*, while taking care not to compromise the poem’s elegance: “Not even a speck of dust remains as the mountain peaks rise; not a single drop of water remains as the valley waterfall flows; on nights when the moon shines brightly and the wind occasionally blows, the person within this realm finds joy within it” (National Translation of the Great Compendium of Zen Studies 1930, vol. 23, 166).

15. The author attempted to understand traditional Japanese art in general using the concepts of “*kire*” and “*tsuzuki*” as keywords in *The Structure of “Kire”* (Ôhashi 1986).



FIGURE 1: CC BY-SA 2. Kinkakuji and Ryōanji. Photo by Kimon Berlin. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/kimon/11079963295/>



FIGURE 2: “Ryōan Temple” as depicted in the *Miyako rinsen meishō zue*. Courtesy of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies Collection.

acts so subtly in bringing the whole into being, tends to slip out of view—namely, “moss.” The presence of moss recedes and remains hidden in and of itself. Yet, once you become aware of it, a world begins to open up that is different from the one seen when looking merely at the group of stones.

In my reflections from forty years ago, I wrote that moss is “that which offers salvation in a dry landscape garden devoid of any foothold”—namely, the “color” of the moss surrounding the stones and the oil-clay wall. I also pointed out that “color” “separates the external natural world, where organic life thrives, from the internal world of form, which is severed from that organic life, thereby forming the ‘space’ between the two.” I also pointed out that the deep color of this oil-clay wall, matured over the years, creates a sense of atmosphere by enveloping the stones and sand—which remain unchanged by the passage of time—that the green of the moss resonates with this atmosphere and imparts emotion, and that it is a realm of “ma” (間, between) that both connects and separates the tangible and the intangible, among other things. I still stand by those observations today. However, the existence of moss itself has receded into the background within these observations, overshadowed by the perspective of “color.”

I initially wrote “the moss surrounding each of the fifteen stones,” but some of the stones are significantly smaller and lack moss around them. For example, in the group of three stones at the western end, two are significantly smaller and are not surrounded by moss. In the case of large stones, if they were not surrounded by moss and instead came into direct contact with the sandy ground, the homogeneity and continuity shared by the “stones” and the “sand” would come to the fore, diminishing the uniqueness of the stones’ forms. As a result, the vitality of the entire garden—jointly formed by the stones and groups of stones—would also become flat and uninspiring. On the other hand, in the case of small stones not surrounded by moss, if they were encircled by moss, they might risk being buried within the ring of moss. Large stones, by contrast, stand out from the sandy ground precisely because of the small amount of moss surrounding them. Conversely, for small stones not surrounded by moss, the moss exists in a sense of “non-presence.”

This moss is not something which Ryōan Temple planted in modern times out of aesthetic preference. Moss is also depicted in the illustration of “Ryōan Temple” in *Miyako rinsen meisshō zue* 都林泉名勝図会 (Illustrated Guide to Famous Mountains and Springs in the Capital, 1709), a bestseller in the late Edo period. Just as it is today, the moss surrounds the large stones in an unobtrusive manner, much like a stubble beard (FIGURE 2). It is interesting to note that, because persons are depicted standing in the garden, this dry landscape garden was not merely a garden to be viewed from a distance back then. However, in the context of our current discussion, let us note that even there, the moss serves as an inconspicuous element that makes almost no claim to its own *raison d'être*.

Going back even further than the Edo period, to the time of the Ryōan Temple dry landscape garden's creation, what was the situation like? The creator of Ryōan Temple's dry landscape garden is unknown. Tourist guidebooks and popular literature attribute its creation to Hosokawa Katsumoto 細川勝元 and Sōami 相阿弥, but their source is the aforementioned *Miyako rinsen meishō zue*. However, this book was written three hundred years after Ryōan Temple's founding by an Edo-period *haikai* poet who compiled the prevailing theories of the time regarding famous gardens and springs throughout Edo; it contains no primary sources. It merely records the prevailing views of the time as they were. To begin with, primary historical sources regarding Ryōan Temple do not exist, as they were destroyed along with the temple during the Ōnin War. However, it is stated with a certain degree of documentary evidence that the gardens of Saihō Temple 西方寺—known by the nickname “Moss Temple”—and Tenryū Temple 天龍寺 were, at least in their conceptual design, the work of Musō; this fact is worth considering when examining the Ryōan Temple dry landscape garden. So, in that case, was moss the central theme at Saihō Temple, as suggested by its nickname “Moss Temple”? In fact, this is not the case at all. There are historical studies indicating that when Musō first designed the garden, “cherry blossoms” were the main attraction (Varā 2012), and, as with the *Sakuteiki*, the core of Musō's garden design lay entirely in the artful arrangement of “stones.” Even there, the moss was “not the work of human hands”; it simply came to cover the garden of Saihō Temple over the passage of time—likely especially during the period of devastation caused by the Ōnin War.

Chronologically, since Ryōan Temple's architecture dates back to the Heian period (its founding was in 1455), it is reasonable to assume that the garden also has some sort of prehistory. This prehistory overlaps with the era when Musō's concept of “artificial landscape” influenced Saihō and Tenryū Temples. If that is the case, although there is no direct historical evidence to prove it, it is entirely plausible—and indeed more natural—to assume that Musō's ideas also extended to Ryōan Temple's dry landscape garden. To reiterate, in that scenario, the core of Musō's garden design lay in the arrangement of “stones,” and “moss” was outside the scope of his considerations.

“Nature Loves to Hide”

The moss in the dry landscape garden at Ryōan Temple is, so to speak, hidden in the shadows of the fifteen “stones” arranged in five groups, yet it brings these stones to the forefront. The expression that best captures this phenomenon is likely Heraclitus's statement: “Nature (*physis*) loves to hide” (*physis kryptesthai philei*).¹⁶

16. Let us also cite Heidegger's perspective. In his *Lectures on Heraclitus* delivered in 1943, he attempted

Natural phenomena before our eyes usually appear right in front of us, leaving no room for doubt. Mountains, rivers, trees, stones, and animals all certainly exist there, showing no sign of “preferring to hide.” What, then, does it mean to say that nature is actually hiding? And if that is the case, what exactly are the mountains and rivers of nature that appear before our eyes?

However, even if nature is present before our eyes, there is actually no guarantee that the landscape we see is nature “as it is.” The nature before us—mountains and rivers alike—is colored by the observer’s state of mind at that moment, their life circumstances, and factors such as changing eyesight, emotions, and values that come with age. Even when nature is represented as an “object” in the natural sciences—no, precisely at that moment—it is objectified and thus hidden “in itself.”

Let us also recall the “*jinen* 自然 (naturalness)” of which Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263) speaks. Our daily way of life is, for the most part, characterized by simply “living as we please” from day to day. While this, too, is “natural,” people do not usually possess the conviction that this is sufficient. Consequently, since ancient times, a fair number of people have sought the true nature of “*jinen*.”

Zen Master Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253), for example, is a prime example of such an individual. In the chapter “Stream Sounds and the Mountain Colors” (谿声山色) of his *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏, Dōgen writes: “We must not overlook the fact that there are sounds and colors hidden within the mountains and rivers”. The mountains and rivers that appear right before our eyes, which we take for granted without a hint of doubt, contain a “hidden” aspect. Following these words, he also writes, “We should also rejoice that there are causes and conditions for revealing the mountains and rivers” (Ōkubo 1969, 216). These causes and conditions are also those that ripen through spiritual practice. Therefore, “the time when one gazes upon a mountain from the secular world” and “the time when one encounters a mountain within the mountains” (“The Sutra of Mountains and Waters” (山水經), Ōkubo 1969, 265) are vastly different.

Let us also invoke Zeami’s famous words: “To know the hidden flower. If it is hidden, it is a flower; if it is not hidden, it cannot be a flower.”¹⁷ For Zeami, it is through “concealment” (or hiding) that the art of Nō blossoms. In other words, the “flower” appears. Through concealment, the flower of art comes to bloom.

to interpret Heraclitus’s aphorisms. At the core of his interpretation lies the meaning of the Greek term “nature” (*physis*). Its verb form, “*phyō*,” means “to emerge (*aufgehen*).” The way in which nature emerges and openly reveals its existence is the meaning of the Greek word for “truth” (*aleteia*). Furthermore, since the prefix “a-” in the word “*aleteia*” is a negation, “*a-leteia*” literally means “non-concealment.” Alternatively, it could be understood as “a way of being that has emerged from a concealed state (*leteia*).” When Heidegger, in his later years, spoke of the “Phenomenology of the Inconspicuous” (*Phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren*), the thought of Heraclitus was likely revived within him.

17. See Chapter 7 of Zeami’s *Fūshikaden*, “Besshi kuden” 別紙口伝.

The moss in the dry landscape garden of Ryōan Temple is the moss that, through “concealment” brings forth the appearance of the five groups of fifteen (exactly: thirteen) stones as a “flower.” Depending on the species of moss and the rocks on which it grows, their compatibility varies greatly; sometimes the moss seems to completely cover the rocks, while at other times it does not grow on them at all. However, when it grows in soil, leaving it untended allows weeds to appear, and in some cases, the weeds may even displace the moss. The moss in the Ryōan Temple dry landscape garden grows on the small patches of soil surrounding the stones, situated between the stones and the sandy ground. Therefore, it requires maintenance. The essence of “maintenance” is not an artificial intervention imposed by humans from outside the moss. Rather, it is the work of putting oneself in the moss’s place to support its vitality. Garden masters assist the manifestation of the moss’s true nature in accordance with that nature. Heraclitus’s maxim, “Nature loves to hide,” comes alive here.

The moss in Ryōan Temple’s dry landscape garden has remained hidden for three hundred years. Once I have finished writing this humble essay, it will likely hide away once more.

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ESSENCES AND TRANSLATIONS

ON BUDDHIST TEXTS

AND INSTRUMENTALISM



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This article examines the concept of, what Lawrence Venuti describes as, “instrumentalism” in the translation of Buddhist texts. This refers to the assumption that translation transfers or reproduces an underlying invariant meaning in a source text. By exploring the origins of this tendency in Western and Sinitic translation discourse, it assesses the extent to which it appears in popular Buddhist studies discourse on so-called “Buddhist Hybrid English,” and proposes a humanistic and hermeneutical alternative. It presents this alternative based on two arguments: Venuti’s suggestion that translation is a creative and interpretative act that constructs value in the target language, and the Buddhist philosophical argument, drawing on the apoha theory of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, which indicates that words do not possess fixed essences as instrumentalism assumes. The article concludes by proposing a vision for “radical translatability” and reflects on machine translation as a kind of reductio ad absurdum of the instrumentalist model.

MOST SCHOLARS involved in Buddhist studies are or have been involved in translation in some capacity. Consequently, most scholars of Buddhism are likely to understand what is meant when one says that translation is commentary, analytical interpretation, and a form of original work that takes serious thought and consideration, not mere derivation or conversion of one text into another. Consequently, it is lamentable that translation has largely been devalued in academic advancement, under-supported in publishing, and under-theorized in Buddhist studies. Translation, as the act that shapes which texts circulate, in whose rendering, and with what authority, should be taken more seriously as a discipline, both practically and theoretically.

Nascent steps have been initiated towards the development of a subfield of Buddhist translation studies; notably, the volume edited by Alice Collett, *Translating Buddhism: Historical and Contextual Perspectives*, represents a significant stride in

this direction.¹ Natalie Gummer’s contribution to that volume, “Translating the Buddha’s Body,” contends that Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the *Suvarṇaprabhāṣottama* (*Sūtra of Utmost Golden Radiance*), challenge or surpass the conventional characterization of Buddhist scriptures as “repositories of doctrinal teachings,” owing to their elaborate self-referentiality and compelling performative elements.² Rather, they are words with a materiality—sonorous and rhythmic, in a way that defies the expectations of contemporary readers who balk at their repetition—that can transform beings who hear them. Gummer advocates for a translation approach that prioritizes these performative and formal strategies, aiming to provoke “aesthetic shock” (*saṃvega*) in contemporary readers, rather than viewing these texts as static historical relics. By maintaining the rhythmic repetitions of the Sanskrit, she suggests we should endeavor to give readers the impression that the Buddha’s “body of words” is present in the current moment of reading or recitation.³

In this manner, I contend that Gummer advocates for a humanistic and creative methodology of translation that refrains from perceiving the source text as merely a vessel of meaning to be mechanically transposed into another language. The latter approach is precisely what translation theorist Lawrence Venuti has identified as “instrumentalism”: the conceptual framework positing that an “invariant” (such as a fixed form, meaning, or effect) can be directly conveyed from the source text to the target text.⁴ In this article, I concur with Venuti in contending that instrumentalism—across its theological (or Buddhological), literary-canonical, and philological manifestations—is methodologically unsound and pragmatically detrimental. Conversely, a humanistic, hermeneutically self-aware approach to translation, integrated with emic resources from Buddhist philosophy, would establish a more robust foundation for Buddhist translation, while offering a warm counterbalance to the mechanization and automation of translation.

Instrumentalism and its Variants

It will be useful, before proceeding, to clarify what is meant by instrumentalism, since the term is doing considerable work in the argument that follows. Venuti,

1. Alice Collett, ed., *Translating Buddhism: Historical and Contextual Perspective* (SUNY Press, 2021).

2. Natalie Gummer, “Translating the Buddha’s Body,” in *Translating Buddhism: Historical and Contextual Perspectives*, 49.

3. Gummer, “Translating the Buddha’s Body,” 54–56.

4. Which Venuti argues against most strongly in Lawrence Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019). I am grateful to Dominik Wujastyk (University of Alberta) for introducing me to the work of Lawrence Venuti and its potential application to Indology and Buddhist Studies. In addition, my interest in translation theory was fostered by my doctoral supervisor at the University of Toronto, Christoph Emmrich, whose frequent translation group meetings always kept us thinking about new ways to think about the art of translation.

in *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic*, defines instrumentalism as the view that translation “reproduce[s] or transfer[s] an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text,” whether that invariant is conceived as a meaning, a form, or an effect on the reader.⁵ The instrumentalist translator is, on this account, a conduit; the translation is a vessel; and the invariant passes through unchanged, or ought to. Venuti’s critique, developed across his earlier works and crystallized in *Contra Instrumentalism* and a related 2023 essay, is that this model has dominated translation theory and practice for some two millennia, and that it grossly oversimplifies what translation actually is and does.⁶

I take instrumentalism, following Venuti’s analysis, to be a family of positions rather than a single doctrine. Its members share a core assumption, namely that there is *something* prior to the translation, *something* contained in or caused by the source, which the translation must preserve and may fail to do so. However, this *something* varies across different cases. Three variants are particularly relevant to the current discussion.

The first is theological instrumentalism. Here, the invariant is divinely or canonically authorised meaning, and mistranslation is a form of sacrilege. Jerome’s famous phrase, *non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu*, “not word for word, but sense for sense,” is its locus classicus in the Western tradition.⁷ In prioritizing sense over word, Jerome assumes that content can be cleanly separated from lexical and grammatical structure, that the kernel can be extracted from the shell and transferred from the *Hebraica veritas* into Latin. The fear that animates translators in this register is the fear of mistranslating an invariant whose stakes are eschatological. As I shall argue below, Buddhist translation discourse in China, while differing from Christian translation discourse in significant ways, exhibits comparable anxieties about the integrity of the *buddhavacana* (the word of the Buddha).

The second variant is literary-canonical instrumentalism. Here, the invariant is the aesthetic or cultural essence of a canonical work, and the translation is at best an imperfect vehicle for accessing it. Venuti’s preferred example is John Keats’ sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” in which Keats reports breathing the “pure serene” of Homer for the first time upon reading Chapman’s Elizabethan English rendering.⁸ What Keats perceives as access to Homer is, Venuti argues, actually access to Chapman’s creative work, which has reconstructed Homer from

5. Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism*, 1.

6. Lawrence Venuti, “On a Universal Tendency to Debase Retranslations; or, The Instrumentalism of a Translation Fixation,” *PMLA* 138, no. 3 (2023): 598–615.

7. Jerome, *Epistula 57, Ad Pammachium de optimo genere interpretandi*, 5. This, and the next five examples of instrumentalism in this paper, are examples frequently used in Venuti’s works.

8. Venuti, “On a Universal Tendency to Debase Retranslations,” 599–602.

scratch for an English audience using the metrical and lexical resources of Elizabethan poetry. The instrumentalist reading debases this creative achievement by viewing it as a transparent window onto a pre-existing Homeric essence. I shall suggest that analogous moves operate in Buddhist studies whenever an English translation is regarded as the definitive bearer of an original Sanskrit or Chinese essence.

The third variant, and the one most directly relevant to Buddhist studies as an academic discipline, is philological instrumentalism. Here, the invariant is the meaning recoverable by scholarly methods from a critically established text, and the translation is faithful insofar as it adheres to that recovered meaning. Philological instrumentalism is often presented as a rigorous alternative to the literary and theological variants, since it bases its claims about meaning on the apparatus of textual criticism rather than on revelation or aesthetic intuition. Yet, as I shall argue in due course, it shares the same fundamental assumption: that there is an invariant prior to the translation, awaiting recovery and transfer, whose existence the philologist's methods presuppose and whose authority underpins the translation's claim to correctness.

The aim of distinguishing these variants is not to suggest that they are identical in motivation, history, or institutional context. They clearly are not. Instead, the point is that they share a common fundamental assumption that translation is the transfer of something that exists prior to translation, and this shared assumption is what makes them part of a single family of positions, which Venuti refers to as instrumentalism.

The Untranslatability Trap

Before turning to Buddhist materials, it is worth examining two influential positions that may seem to provide escapes from instrumentalism but actually reinforce its core assumption. Both are discussed by Venuti, and a brief overview here serves to clarify what an actual departure from instrumentalism would entail.

Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables* presents itself as a counter-history of philosophy, organized around the claim that the history of philosophy is a history of mistranslation due to the "untranslatability" of most of philosophy's key terms.⁹ One could argue, however, that what Cassin's dictionary actually documents is not untranslatability but ongoing retranslation: the same philosophical concepts being rendered, re-rendered, and debated across linguistic and historical contexts, resulting in not a uniform mistranslation but a productive diversity of

9. Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. Steven Rendall et al. (Princeton University Press, 2014).

interpretive responses. Framing these responses as failed translations of an inaccessible original assumes that an original exists to which they are failing, which is to say it presupposes the very invariant whose existence one might have hoped a dictionary of untranslatables would challenge. Emily Apter's *Against World Literature* makes this assumption more explicit, arguing that certain terms are characterized by genuine incommensurability and, in some cases, ought not to be translated at all.¹⁰ But this, too, identifies an invariant; it simply renders it inaccessible. The position is structurally instrumentalist, differing from the dominant view only in its conclusions about what translation can accomplish.

A more radical departure is found in Willard Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, which argues that, because it is impossible to separate words or phrases from their social and behavioral contexts, there are no objectively valid translations.¹¹ This does not mean that translation is impossible; rather, according to Quine's view, it is multiply possible, since the impossibility lies not in the lack of correct translations but in the absence of any uniquely correct one. I invoke Quine here heuristically rather than as a foundational commitment, because the full philosophical weight of his behaviorist ontology would, if taken seriously, threaten the scholarly pursuit of philological interpretation itself, which is not my aim. What Quine usefully establishes for the present argument is that the instrumentalist ideal of a uniquely correct rendering is not a failed aspiration but a confused one. The impossibility of perfect transfer is not a limitation to be regretted; it is a revelation of what translation actually is.

Instrumentalism in Sinitic Buddhist Translation Theory

We shall now consider the historical body of evidence most directly relevant to the present argument, namely the discourse on translation that developed within the Chinese Buddhist tradition between the fourth and seventh centuries CE. The main source for this material in English is Martha P. Y. Cheung's *An Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation*, the first volume of which covers the period from earliest times through the Buddhist sūtra translation project and introduces into English a substantial body of Chinese reflection on translation that was previously inaccessible to non-readers of Chinese.¹² What this material shows is that anxieties about loss, fidelity, and the faithful conveyance of source meaning were recurrent concerns of Chinese Buddhist translators, and that these concerns have a recognizably

10. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (Verso, 2013).

11. W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (MIT Press, 1960), chapter 2.

12. Martha P. Y. Cheung, ed., *An Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation*, vol. 1, From Earliest Times to the Buddhist Project (St. Jerome Publishing, 2006).

instrumentalist structure, although the picture is more nuanced than a simple opposition between instrumentalist and non-instrumentalist positions.

A useful entry point is Zhi Qian (支謙, fl. 233–253 CE), whose preface to his translation of the *Dharmapāda* is often cited as containing the first piece of theoretical reflection on translation in the Chinese tradition. Zhi Qian articulates what would become a dominant theme in Chinese discourse on translation: the difficulty of the activity itself, given that the “terms used to denote things” differ markedly between source and target languages. The preface also records the famous exchange in which the presiding translator Vighna, citing the Buddha’s own words, insists that “one should follow the sense in all its plainness, dispense with embellishment (飾), and transmit the truth without being too strict (嚴) with the means and method,” a position which the assembly affirms by appeal to Laozi’s dictum that “beautiful (美) words are not trustworthy (信) and trustworthy words are not beautiful.”¹³ The exchange is significant because the very framing of the disagreement, namely, whether a translation should preserve “the sense” of the source faithfully or render it in elegant Chinese style, presupposes that there is a sense in the source that can be transferred more or less faithfully. The terms of the debate are instrumentalist, even when participants disagree about the appropriate translational strategy.

Dao An (道安, 312/314–385 CE) is the figure to whom the most influential early formulation belongs, namely the “five instances of losing the source” (五失本) and “three difficulties” (三不易), articulated in his preface to *A Collation of Extracts from the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* of around 382 CE.¹⁴ The five instances catalogue the ways in which translation from “Hu-language” (which denotes Central Asian languages and Prakrits) into Chinese inevitably loses some of the source: by reversing word order to conform to Chinese syntax, by transforming unhewn (質) style into refined (文) Chinese to suit the tastes of literate Chinese readers, by trimming and modifying the elaborate repetitive chants of the Hu-language sūtras, by erasing the verse *gāthās* that recapitulate prose passages, and by removing digressions that complete and return to a narrative theme. The three difficulties concern the unavoidable need to adapt antiquated material for contemporary readers, the gap between the wisdom of the enlightened and the understanding of ordinary readers, and the recklessness of modern editors in comparison with the meticulous care of the early arhats who compiled the canon. As Cheung notes in her commentary, Dao An’s remarks are best read not as a systematic theoretical statement but as observations whose value lies in his thorough study of existing sūtra translations.¹⁵ What is striking for the present argument, however, is the structure of the formulation.

13. Cheung, *Anthology*, 59.

14. Cheung, *Anthology*, 79–82.

15. Cheung, *Anthology*, 81–83.

To speak of losing the source is to presuppose that there is something in the source that translation is obligated to preserve and capable of failing to preserve. Loss is intelligible only against the assumption of an invariant whose features the translation is meant to reproduce. Dao An's framework is, in this respect, recognizably instrumentalist.

Sengrui (僧叡, 353?–420? CE), who served as Kumārajīva's principal disciple and the recorder of his Translation Assembly, took up Dao An's framework and applied it in his prefaces to Kumārajīva's translations. In his preface to the translation of the larger *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* of around 404 CE, Sengrui records that, as he took up his pen to record Kumārajīva's oral translation, he could not forget his "late teacher's exhortations about the Five Losses and the Three Difficulties," and was "always fearful and under stress, making every step of the way with the utmost care."¹⁶ What Cheung's anthology shows is that Dao An's framework rapidly became a kind of nodal point around which subsequent discourse on translation revolved, with later translators either using it to inform their own practice (as Sengrui did) or appropriating it to defend their own translational choices. In either case, the assumption of a source whose features can be more or less preserved is taken for granted, and the disagreement concerns only the proper means of preservation.

Hui Yuan (慧遠, 334–416 CE) occupies a slightly different position. In his preface to a collation of extracts from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* of 411 CE, Hui Yuan reflects on the difficulty of mediating between unhewn (質) and refined (文) styles of translation, observing that "to render a sūtra that is unhewn into a translation that is refined is to provoke doubt and scepticism; and to render a sūtra that is refined into a translation that is unhewn is to invoke the displeasure of most readers."¹⁷ His position is that translation must be appropriate to the source, to the readership, and to the purpose for which the translation is intended. This is, in some respects, a more sophisticated and pragmatically attentive view than Dao An's, anticipating much later debates about formal and dynamic equivalence. Yet the underlying assumption remains instrumentalist, since the very notion that one might render the source faithfully or unfaithfully presupposes that there is something in the source whose faithfulness can be assessed.

The most intriguing figure in this tradition is Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什, 344–409/413 CE). Records of Kumārajīva's views on translation are notably limited, despite his status as one of the most influential translators in the tradition's history, but one passage stands out. In his biography within Sengyou's *A Collection of Records on the Emanation of the Chinese Tripiṭaka*, Kumārajīva reflects on the loss of aesthetic and musical qualities when Indic sūtras are translated into Chinese, especially the

16. Cheung, *Anthology*, 96.

17. Cheung, *Anthology*, 108.

loss of the harmonies between words and music that characterise the *gāthās* of the source. He states: “But when the *Fàn* [Sanskrit] sūtras are translated into Chinese, the beauty of form and the colour and verve are lost. The meaning can generally be conveyed, but in a form very different from the original. It is like giving someone rice that you have chewed; he will find it not just tasteless, but downright disgusting.” Cheung notes that the deliberately emotive language Kumārajīva uses suggests that his concern is specifically with the aesthetic dimensions of the sūtras, particularly the *gāthās* that were customarily set to music, rather than with translation as such.¹⁸ What Kumārajīva registers, with unusual clarity for this tradition, is that form and meaning are not cleanly separable, and that a translation that captures only the propositional content while losing the aesthetic and performative dimensions produces something fundamentally different from its source. This, I would argue, is a practical anticipation of the position I have been defending in this paper, even though Kumārajīva does not develop it into an explicit theory. His translational practice tells a similar story. Despite his commitment to idiomatic rendering, he retains a great many Sanskrit transcriptions, and his texts remain unmistakably foreign even as they become accessible to Chinese readers. They become Chinese without ceasing to be foreign. This, I shall argue below, is a practical anticipation of what Venuti, working with very different sources, would later call foreignization.

Xuanzang (玄奘, 600–664 CE) provides the final figure in this overview, and one whose framework merits careful reinterpretation. Cheung records his “Five Guidelines for Not-translating a Term” (五不翻), not as a doctrine of untranslatability but as a set of conditions under which the appropriate translational response is transliteration rather than semantic rendering. The five categories are: terms that partake of the occult (such as *dhāraṇīs* and mantras); terms with multiple meanings (such as *bhagavat* 薄伽梵); terms for objects that do not exist in the receiving culture (such as the *jambu*-tree 閻浮樹); terms whose past rendering has become established (such as *anubodhi* 阿耨菩提); and terms whose source-language form elicits positive associations and gravity that a semantic translation would lose (such as *prajñā* 般若, which carries an “authority and weight” that the indigenous Chinese 智慧 for wisdom does not). Cheung’s commentary is particularly illuminating on this point. She notes that the character 翻 means not only “translate” but also “to turn (something upside down),” and asks whether, in the light of these guidelines, “translation, in order to be translation, must conceal even as it reveals,” that “it must remain, as it were, ‘unturned,’ ‘not-translated’ in some parts.”¹⁹ What Cheung suggests, and what I want to endorse, is that Xuanzang’s framework

18. Cheung, *Anthology*, 94.

19. Cheung, *Anthology*, 156–158.

documents not the existence of genuinely untranslatable items but the assimilation of foreign terms into the receiving language. Bodhi is not untranslated; it has become a Chinese word, 菩提 (in modern Mandarin, *pútí*), which a literate reader recognizes as Buddhist technical vocabulary, and which has subsequently entered the Japanese (*bodai*), Korean (*bori*), and Vietnamese (*bồ đề*) lexicons through the East Asian diffusion of Buddhism. The terms have been translated, but through foreignizing assimilation rather than domesticating substitution.

What this survey suggests is that the dominant theoretical voices of the Chinese Buddhist translation tradition operated within a framework whose structure is recognizably instrumentalist. Dao An's "five instances of losing the source" presupposes a source whose features can be preserved or lost; Sengrui inherits and amplifies the framework; Hui Yuan's more pragmatic position remains within its terms. Yet the tradition is not monolithic. Kumārajīva's brief but suggestive remarks about the loss of musical and formal qualities in translation register an awareness that form and meaning are not separable, and his practice exhibits a foreignizing tendency that resists the instrumentalist reduction of translation to the transfer of propositional content. Xuanzang's framework, read against the conventional grain, documents the productive assimilation of foreign terms into the receiving language. The tradition contains, in other words, resources for thinking beyond the instrumentalist framework, even where its dominant theoretical articulations operate within it. An anti-instrumentalist approach to Buddhist translation, of the kind I am proposing here, will find in Kumārajīva and Xuanzang precedents to be developed rather than departures from a tradition that must be wholly rejected.

What Kind of Object is a Mahāyāna Sūtra?

Turning from theoretical statements about translation to a prior question that bears directly on what translation of Buddhist texts can mean: what kind of object is a Mahāyāna sūtra in the first place? My contention is that an instrumentalist approach to Mahāyāna sūtra translation rests on a particular and contestable answer to this question, namely that sūtras are repositories of doctrinal content, and that recent scholarship, including my own prior work, has provided strong grounds for rejecting that answer.

Masahiro Shimoda's recent methodological work on the study of Mahāyāna sūtras offers a useful frame.²⁰ Shimoda distinguishes, following the linguistic turn in historiography articulated by Gareth Stedman Jones and others, between the *internal history* of a text, which concerns the elucidation of the discourses

20. Masahiro Shimoda, "Reconsidering the Methodologies for the Study of Mahāyāna Sūtras," in *The Buddha's Words and Their Interpretations* (The Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute, 2021), 1–18.

operating within it, and the *external history* of a text, which refers to the social and institutional milieu in which it emerged.²¹ Shimoda's diagnostic claim is that scholars of Mahāyāna Buddhism have systematically conflated this distinction, interpreting textual discourses as transparent reflections of external social realities, when in fact, as he argues with reference to Derrida and semiotic theories of written language, the sūtras construct their own internal world of legitimacy that is significantly autonomous from any external referent.²² The Mahāyāna sūtras, on Shimoda's account, leave "almost no historical traces left within their discourses," and the attempt to extract from them an account of the institutional or social settings of early Mahāyāna communities is methodologically compromised from the outset.²³ The sūtra came to be understood as the Buddha himself, present in the written text, accessible through copying, reciting, and venerating the scripture, and capable of being "encountered" inside the discourse in a manner that Shimoda likens, following Alan Cole, to the long-deferred reunion of a son with his father.²⁴ This is not a metaphor about doctrine; it is a description of what the sūtras claim to do, and what their compilers structured them to accomplish.

Shimoda's argument is primarily methodological, addressed to the question of how one ought to study Mahāyāna sūtras as historical objects. But it has, I would suggest, direct implications for translation. If the sūtras are objects whose textuality is constitutive of their religious efficacy, whose internal architecture, including their self-referential passages, repetitive entrustment formulae, and elaborate performative structures, is the locus of what they do as scriptures, then an instrumentalist translation that extracts doctrinal content and renders it in idiomatic target-language prose has produced something fundamentally different from the object it claims to translate. The same methodological error that Shimoda diagnoses in historical scholarship, namely the refusal to take the text's internal logic seriously and the tendency to read texts as transparent windows onto something external to them, is repeated at the level of translation practice when sūtras are rendered as if their content were separable from their discursive form.

Gummer's contribution to the Collett volume, to which I have already referred, develops this point with particular force in relation to translation.²⁵ Drawing on her broader argument that some Mahāyāna sūtras figure their own performance as a form of aesthetic and sacrificial ritual, Gummer suggests that the elaborate

21. Shimoda, "Reconsidering," 1–2; Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s," in *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, ed. Gabrielle M. Spiegel (Routledge, 2005), 63.

22. Shimoda, "Reconsidering," 3–4.

23. Shimoda, "Reconsidering," 12.

24. Shimoda, "Reconsidering," 13; Alan Cole, *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature* (University of California Press, 2005).

25. Gummer, "Translating the Buddha's Body," 49–68.

repetitions, the catalogues of beings, the formulaic descriptions of cosmic settings, and the sustained self-referential passages are not packaging around a doctrinal core but constitute the very means by which the sūtra effects its claims.²⁶ To render such a text in a streamlined, doctrinally lucid English that trims the repetitions and condenses the formulae is not to produce a more readable translation of the same text; it is to produce a different kind of object, one that describes Buddhist ideas rather than enacting Buddhist scriptural performance.

My prior work on self-referential passages in Mahāyāna sūtra literature has argued that these passages, in which the text speaks of itself and prescribes its own use, are a structural feature of early Mahāyāna sūtra literature rather than an idiosyncrasy of a few outlying texts.²⁷ The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (*Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*), the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (*Lotus Sūtra*), the *Vajracchedikā* (*Diamond Sūtra*), and the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama*, among others, contain substantial passages in which the text identifies itself with the Buddha, prescribes its own veneration, and articulates the merits of its copying, reciting, and propagation. These passages are not decorative; they are constitutive of how the sūtras position themselves vis-à-vis their readers and the wider Buddhist tradition. An instrumentalist translation that treats these passages as repetitive or formulaic material to be condensed or paraphrased has, in effect, severed the sūtra from the textuality through which it does its religious work.

The convergence of Shimoda's methodological argument, Gummer's translation-theoretical argument, and the textual evidence of self-referential passages points towards a single conclusion: an instrumentalist approach to Mahāyāna sūtra translation is not merely theoretically inadequate, but is at odds with what the sūtras themselves present themselves as doing. This is, in my view, the strongest case against instrumentalism in the specific domain of Mahāyāna sūtra translation, and it is a case that does not rely on the broader translation-theoretical or Buddhist-philosophical arguments to which I shall now turn. The texts themselves resist the instrumentalist reading; a translator attentive to what the texts claim about themselves cannot honor those claims while operating within an instrumentalist framework.

Philological Instrumentalism: The Case of “Buddhist Hybrid English”

Perhaps the most fully articulated example of philological instrumentalism in Buddhist studies as an academic discipline is Paul Griffiths' 1981 essay “Buddhist

26. Gummer, “Translating the Buddha's Body,” 56–62.

27. Alexander James O'Neill, “Self-Referential Passages in Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature,” *Pacific World Journal* 4, no. 1 (2020): 41–57.

Hybrid English: Some Notes on Philology and Hermeneutics for Buddhologists.”²⁸ Griffiths’ essay is worth engaging at length because it is unusually candid in stating the methodological commitments that, I would argue, inform a great deal of philologically oriented Buddhist studies, which continue to refer to it as canon, even where those commitments are not made as explicit as Griffiths makes them.

Let me begin by acknowledging the genuine problem that Griffiths’ essay identifies. There is, beyond reasonable dispute, a recognizable register of English in which a substantial body of Buddhist translation has been produced, and which functions as a kind of dialect comprehensible only to initiates. Griffiths coins the term “Buddhist Hybrid English” by analogy with Edgerton’s “Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit” to describe this register, and his diagnosis that such translations often serve neither scholars nor practitioners adequately and that they circulate as authoritative, despite their opacity, captures something real. The problem of inaccessible scholarly translations of Buddhist texts is genuine, and any anti-instrumentalist account of Buddhist translation that hopes to take Griffiths’ diagnosis seriously must address it. The difficulty is not with Griffiths’ diagnosis but with his prescriptions. These rest on a cluster of philologically instrumentalist assumptions.

Griffiths argues, in the first place, that Buddhist thought has had a “deplorable” effect on the languages it has touched, producing “barbaric” bastardizations of Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and now English.²⁹ The rhetorical extremity of this claim presupposes that languages possess inherent natures or essences that can be corrupted by foreign intrusions, a thoroughgoing linguistic essentialism that, I would argue, runs precisely counter to the central commitments of the Buddhist philosophical traditions that Griffiths professed to study. Every natural language is, in fact, a hybrid; English itself is a creole of Germanic and Romance elements augmented by extensive borrowings from Latin, Greek, French, and dozens of other languages, and the suggestion that it has an essence that could be polluted by Buddhist technical vocabulary is, on inspection, a curious one. More to the present point, the Sinitic Buddhist lexicon, with its eventual transmission into Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese, became a generative cultural vocabulary across East Asia precisely through what Griffiths would presumably consider a “deplorable” process of productive contamination. *Bodhi* (菩提), *dhyāna* (禪), *kalpa* (劫), *karma* (業), and many other terms are no longer foreign intrusions but core vocabulary, and the cultural achievements they have made possible across East Asian intellectual and religious history do not seem to be diminished by their hybrid etymology.

28. Paul J. Griffiths, “Buddhist Hybrid English: Some Notes on Philology and Hermeneutics for Buddhologists,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4, no. 2 (1981): 17–32.

29. Griffiths, “Buddhist Hybrid English,” 17 and 24.

Griffiths argues, in the second place, that the appropriate response to the inadequacy of Buddhist Hybrid English is not to translate better but, rather, not to translate at all.³⁰ As he suggests regarding Conze's translation of the *Perfection of Wisdom* scriptures, the problem is not (as many contemporary scholars frequently hold) that "his fault... lies in a bad rendering of the text, but in that he decided to translate it at all."³¹ Scholars, in his view, should summarize anew rather than render, work only from critical editions, prefer Sanskrit when available over Chinese or Tibetan, and engage in scholarship without religious motivation, treating Buddhist texts as objects for objective hermeneutic analysis.³² Each of these prescriptions warrants examination.

The argument against translation in favor of summary assumes a hard distinction between the work the translation does (which Griffiths regards as unreliable) and the work summary does (which he regards as relatively reliable). But a summary is, of course, a kind of translation; it is an interpretive rendering of a source into a target language, accountable to the same hermeneutical demands and subject to the same possibilities of misrepresentation (it would seem an obvious point). The notion that summary somehow bypasses the problems Griffiths identifies in translation is, on closer inspection, not sustainable. What Griffiths' position amounts to is a preference for one kind of interpretive intervention (summary) over another (translation), on grounds that are not made fully explicit.

The argument against using Chinese or Tibetan recensions when Sanskrit is available rests on the assumption that Sanskrit, as the "original," carries an *invariant* that the secondary recensions *distort*, and that scholarly access to that invariant is therefore best achieved by working from the Sanskrit. This is philological instrumentalism in a particularly clear form. The problems with it are several. Many important Mahāyāna texts survive only in Chinese or Tibetan, the Sanskrit having been lost; if Griffiths' prescription were followed in such cases, large bodies of Buddhist literature would simply be inaccessible to scholarship. More importantly, the Chinese and Tibetan recensions are not merely defective copies of a lost Sanskrit original; they are themselves primary documents of the interpretive traditions that shaped Buddhism's development in East Asia and Tibet. Often, they are the only records of much earlier recensions of texts originating in Prakrits like Gāndhārī, which fossilized into very different forms after their Sanskritization. Viewing them as secondary witnesses to a stable Sanskrit text minimizes the significance of cross-cultural transmission, which is central to most accounts of Buddhism's history. Furthermore, this view assumes that "Sanskrit" is the original, when it is

30. Griffiths, "Buddhist Hybrid English," 26–30.

31. Griffiths, "Buddhist Hybrid English," 29.

32. Griffiths, "Buddhist Hybrid English," 30.

evident that Sanskrit recensions of sūtras were translations from Prakrits—whose ambiguities, well known to those who read Prakrits such as Gāndhārī, are just as susceptible to distortion from Sanskritization as from translation into Chinese.³³

The argument for working only from critical editions rests on a related assumption, namely that the philological process of establishing a critical text recovers, or at least approximates, an original invariant whose features can then ground a faithful translation. This is, in fact, the deepest form of philological instrumentalism, and it is the one most directly at odds with contemporary developments in manuscript studies. Collett Cox's contribution to the Collett volume, "Translation in Search of a Text: The Craving for Stability," argues that the very drive to establish a stable critical text is itself a cultural and interpretive act, not a neutral scholarly procedure that recovers something pre-existing.³⁴ The instability of manuscript traditions, the productive value of variant readings, and the scholarly importance of peripheral and non-canonical versions of texts have become increasingly recognized in the discipline. To translate only from critical editions is, in this light, to translate from a particular kind of artefact, the modern critical text, while declining to engage with the textual situations in which most Buddhist literature actually exists.

The argument against religious motivation in scholarship is perhaps the most loaded of Griffiths' prescriptions. It presupposes a hard distinction between the practitioner, whose engagement with Buddhist texts is religiously motivated and therefore epistemically unreliable, and the scholar, whose engagement is disinterested and therefore reliable. This distinction is, in my view, neither sustainable in principle nor reflective of the actual conditions under which Buddhist studies is conducted, particularly in the present moment. The career of Luis O. Gómez, a committed Rinzai Zen practitioner whose various scholarly, yet accessible and *creative*, translations (such as his work on the *Sukhāvativyūha* sūtras)³⁵ demonstrate clearly that practitioner-scholarship is compatible with the highest standards of philological rigor. In his remarks at the 2017 Translation and Transmission Conference, given shortly before his death, Gómez observed that "words seldom mean one thing; they are naturally elastic" and characterized translation as a multi-layered social communication act that integrates philological analysis with attention to meaning, audience, and context.³⁶ The idea of disinterested scholarship

33. Simply by way of example for one, central, Mahāyāna text, see Seishi Karashima, "Was the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* Compiled in Gandhāra in Gāndhārī?" *ARIRIAB* XVI (March 2013), 171–188.

34. Collett Cox, "Translation in Search of a Text: The Craving for Stability," in *Translating Buddhism*, 19–47.

35. Luis O. Gómez, *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light. Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the Sukhāvativyūha Sūtras* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1996).

36. Luis O. Gómez, remarks at the plenary session "Approaches to Translation and Transmission," Translation and Transmission Conference, Boulder, CO, June 2017, recording archived by the Tsadra Foundation.

is, in any case, itself a normatively loaded position, one that imports a particular epistemology, broadly positivist, broadly secular, into a domain where it has no automatic claim to authority. Translation, as Venuti argues throughout his work, is always a social act embedded in the translator's institutional and cultural position; the claim to disinterestedness does not eliminate that embeddedness, it merely obscures it.

The cumulative effect of Griffiths' prescriptions, then, is to install philological instrumentalism as the methodological default for Buddhist studies, while presenting this installation as a return to scholarly rigor rather than as the imposition of a particular and contestable theoretical framework. I would distinguish, in concluding this engagement with Griffiths, between his diagnosis (poor translations circulate as authoritative; opaque jargon serves neither scholars nor practitioners) and his prescription (therefore *don't translate*, and if you do, do so *only* from critical editions, *only* from Sanskrit, *only* without religious motivation). The diagnosis is largely sound. The prescription does not follow from it. A humanistic alternative, to which I shall now turn, would respond to the same diagnosis by calling for translation that is more transparent about its interpretive choices, more open to plurality, more attentive to the secondary traditions, and more willing to engage the contemplative and performative dimensions of the texts. The goal is not the elimination of translation, but the elimination of canonical translation that brooks no challenge.

Buddhist Perspectives on Language as a Resource for Translation Theory

I now wish to construct a second argument against instrumentalism, drawing not from western translation theory but from resources intrinsic to Buddhist philosophy of language. The argument is presented as a convergence rather than a conclusive demonstration; I do not assert that Buddhist philosophical sources necessarily endorse an anti-instrumentalist theory of translation, but rather that certain strands of Buddhist thought regarding language are notably aligned with the anti-instrumentalist position elaborated in the previous sections. Furthermore, this alignment holds significant intellectual value for Buddhist translators.

The relevant body of Buddhist thought is the *apoha* theory of meaning, developed by Dignāga (c. 480–540 CE) in the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* and substantially extended by Dharmakīrti (c. 600–660 CE) in the *Pramāṇavārttika* and related works.³⁷ The *apoha* theory holds that words do not denote their objects by referring to positive universals, essential properties, or shared essences; instead, words signify by means

37. For an accessible overview, see Tom J. F. Tillemans, "Dharmakīrti," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, first published 2011; substantive revision 2023.

of the *exclusion of what is other* (*anyāpoha*). To borrow the standard example, the word “cow” does not pick out a positive cowness inhering in all cows; it signifies by excluding everything that is not a cow. The theory is, in its broader philosophical setting, part of the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti school’s nominalist response to the realist theories of universals advanced by their Brahmanical interlocutors in the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā traditions.³⁸

The implications of the *apoha* theory for the question of linguistic meaning are far-reaching, and they have been developed in considerable technical detail in the substantial secondary literature on the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti school, to which I cannot do justice in the present paper.³⁹ What I wish to extract from the theory, for this argument, is a single point: on the *apoha* view, words do not attach to fixed essences in the world that could serve as an invariant for transfer between languages. Meaning, on this view, is contextual, relational, and functions through differentiation rather than through designation. If words signify by exclusion rather than by reference to shared essences, then the instrumentalist’s invariant, the fixed meaning core that translation aims to preserve, has no clear counterpart in the structure of language as the *apoha* theorists describe it.

The *apoha* theory was developed in the context of Sanskrit grammatical philosophy and Buddhist anti-realist metaphysics; it was not formulated as a theory of translation, and to apply it to translation theory is an act of philosophical extrapolation. I would maintain that the extrapolation is intellectually productive, however, for two reasons. First, it shows that an anti-instrumentalist position on translation is not foreign to Buddhist intellectual resources; one strand of the Buddhist philosophy of language is, in fact, strikingly congruent with the position I am defending. Second, it adds a measure of irony to the historical observation made in the preceding sections, namely that Buddhist translators have, by and large, operated within instrumentalist frameworks. Buddhist translators inherited and often endorsed an account of language that the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti tradition gave them the philosophical resources to question, which I would argue is also present in the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition of non-apprehension and seeing words as “mere designations” to which a bodhisattva must not be attached.

It is worth noting, in candor, that not all strands of Buddhist thought about language would support this convergence. One of the Shingon school’s foundational texts, Kūkai’s *Shōji Jissōgi* (聲字實相義; *The Meanings of Sound, Letter, and Reality*), articulates a position in which letters and words possess inherent ontological

38. Mark Siderits, Tom Tillemans, and Arindam Chakrabarti, eds., *Apoha: Buddhist Nominalism and Human Cognition* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 1–4.

39. For technical developments, see in particular Tom J. F. Tillemans, *Scripture, Logic, Language: Essays on Dharmakīrti and His Tibetan Successors* (Wisdom Publications, 1999), and the essays collected in Siderits, Tillemans, and Chakrabarti, *Apoha*.

reality as manifestations of Mahāvairocana's Dharma-body.⁴⁰ This is a Buddhist instrumentalism of a distinctive kind, in which letters do carry essential meanings, and the work of translation would presumably take on a sacramental character quite different from the hermeneutical alternative I am proposing. A full Buddhist philosophy of translation would have to engage with the diversity of Buddhist positions on language, and the *apoha* tradition is only one resource among several. For present purposes, what I want to claim is the more modest point: there exists, within the Buddhist philosophical tradition, a substantial and influential account of language on which the instrumentalist assumption of transferable invariants is unfounded, and Buddhist translators have resources within their own tradition for thinking against the dominant instrumentalist framework.

Towards Radical Translatability

I have argued, to this point, that instrumentalism in Buddhist translation is methodologically unsound on translation-theoretical grounds (following Venuti), at odds with the nature of Mahāyāna sūtras as scriptural objects (following Shimoda, Gummer, and my own prior work), philologically problematic in the form Griffiths gives it, and questionable from within Buddhist philosophy of language itself (following the *apoha* tradition). What I have not yet done is to articulate the positive alternative. I should like to close by sketching what I shall call radical translatability, in deliberate inversion of the Cassin-Apter discourse of untranslatability, as a program for Buddhist translation practice. Radical translatability has, I would suggest, four interlocking commitments.

The first is transparency and plurality over authority. The appropriate response to the genuine problem that poor translations circulate as canonical is not restriction but proliferation. Multiple translations of the same text are, on this view, a scholarly resource rather than a redundancy, since each is an interpretive argument about the text, and the field advances through the multiplication of such arguments rather than the imposition of any one of them. This is particularly true of Mahāyāna sūtras, whose recension histories and discursive structures make them unusually amenable to diverse translational approaches, and whose performative dimensions, as Gummer has shown, are responded to differently by different translators. Far from being a problem to be solved, the plurality of translations is, on the radical translatability view, the condition of intellectual life in Buddhist translation studies.

40. For an accessible English translation, see Rolf W. Giebel trans., "The Meanings of Sound, Sign, and Reality," in *Shingon Texts* (Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004), 83–104.

The second commitment is foreignization as a default orientation. Following Venuti, and following the practical model of Kumārajīva, translations of Buddhist texts should tend to retain the productive strangeness of source-culture concepts, resisting the temptation to naturalize Sanskrit or Classical Chinese vocabulary and concepts into familiar idioms that efface their origins. This does not require producing impenetrable prose; Kumārajīva's example shows that accessibility and foreignization are not mutually exclusive commitments. It also requires being alert to the domesticating impulse and making conscious choices about when and why to resist it. Xuanzang's "five untranslatables," read against their instrumentalist grain, offer a usable framework: there are categories of terms, including technical Buddhist vocabulary, polysemic terms, and terms whose preservation in their source form conduces to respect for the tradition, for which foreignizing transcription is the appropriate translational response.

The third commitment is the acceptance of practitioner-scholarship as a legitimate, perhaps in some cases indispensable, mode of Buddhist translation. The career of Gómez, as I have already discussed, makes the case for the compatibility of practice and rigor. I would add that, for certain genres of Buddhist text, particularly liturgical, contemplative, and devotional texts whose meaning is inseparable from their performance, a translator who has engaged with the tradition as a practitioner may be better placed to make the interpretive decisions that translation requires than one who approaches the texts purely as an external analyst. I do not claim that all Buddhist translators must be practitioners; I claim only that the categorical exclusion of practitioner-scholarship, as some have urged, is unwarranted and possibly ideologically motivated.

The fourth commitment is to the translation of marginalized, peripheral, and formally experimental texts. The instrumentalist tradition has tended to privilege the translation of canonical, philosophically dense, and well-edited texts, treating these as the appropriate site for serious academic work. A radical translatability programme would invert this preference, taking seriously the translation of rare and unusual texts, of texts surviving only in Chinese or Tibetan (and, even more so, of lesser-studied languages like Newar, Mongolian, Vietnamese, Burmese, and so forth), of performative texts whose claims exceed doctrinal characterization, and of texts whose situations preclude critical editions. Formal experimentation in translation, including the rendering of verse as verse rather than as prose lines, attention to register and tone, and the development of translational strategies adequate to the performative dimensions of the source texts, is endorsed as central to the work rather than peripheral to it.

A Coda on Machine Translation

I want to close with a brief reflection on the question of machine translation, which has become more pressing in the few years since the deployment of large language models capable of producing fluent target-language renderings of Buddhist source texts. My contention is that machine translation is the *reductio ad absurdum* of instrumentalism. It is what translation looks like when the assumption of mechanical substitution is implemented without remainder. Its products reveal, with unusual clarity, what is absent when the creative, interpretive, scholarly, and contemplative dimensions of translation are stripped from the practice.

This is not, I want to be clear, an argument against the use of computational tools in the work of human translators. Lexicographic databases such as Charles Muller's *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, optical character recognition, handwritten text recognition for manuscript materials, and other computational aids, like the variety of tools offered by the Dharmamitra project, have transformed the conditions under which human translation of Buddhist texts is undertaken, and the transformation is, on the whole, an enrichment. What I want to maintain is the distinction between translation as a tool, which is what machine translation aspires to be, and translation as a human interpretive act, which is what computational aids cannot replace but only support. The instrumentalist framework cannot mark this distinction because it lacks the resources to recognize the interpretive dimension of translation as constitutive rather than incidental. A humanistic framework, of the kind I have been defending, can mark it, and indeed must mark it if it is to make sense of what human translators do that machines, at present, cannot.

The wider stakes are, I think, considerable. If translation is reduced to the kind of activity that machine translation can in principle perform, then the human practice of translation is rendered economically and institutionally precarious,⁴¹ and the rich tradition of Buddhist translation as commentary, as deep reading, and as religious and contemplative practice is impoverished accordingly. The argument for human translation as a humanistic practice is not about inefficiency or sentiment. Instead, it emphasizes the unique kinds of meaning that only humans can create, which machines, limited by their instrumentalist design, cannot. This does not mean translators should avoid using machine translation as a helpful tool any more than they should forego digital dictionaries and return to paper ones; rather, it affirms that the human remains the foundation of the process and the final arbiter on how to interpret a text and how to present it in a humanistic and creative manner that generates *new meaning* in the target language.

41. Not that translators of Buddhist texts have ever expected it to be a source of reliable income.

Conclusion

I have argued, across the preceding sections that instrumentalism, the assumption that translation transfers an invariant from the source text into the target text, is methodologically unsound and pragmatically detrimental in the domain of Buddhist translation. The argument has proceeded along several converging lines. From translation theory, following Venuti, instrumentalism oversimplifies what translation actually is. From the historical evidence of Sinitic Buddhist translation theory, instrumentalism has been the dominant framework, but a humanistic alternative is visible in Kumārajīva's practice and, when read against its instrumentalist grain, in Xuanzang's foreignizing categories. From recent scholarship on Mahāyāna sūtras, particularly the work of Shimoda and Gummer, instrumentalism is at odds with what the sūtras themselves present themselves as doing, namely, *performative* scriptural acts whose textuality is *constitutive* of their religious efficacy. From the case of "Buddhist Hybrid English," we see that philological instrumentalism rests on a cluster of essentialist and ideologically motivated assumptions that do not survive close examination. Within Buddhist philosophy of language, the *apoha* tradition of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti provides resources for thinking against the instrumentalist assumption of transferable invariants.

The positive alternative I have called radical translatability and have sketched in terms of four commitments: to transparency and plurality, to foreignization, to the legitimacy of practitioner-scholarship, and to the translation of marginalized and formally experimental texts. The program is offered as a contribution to the nascent subfield of Buddhist translation studies, and as a response to the practical and institutional pressures that machine translation, in particular, is placing on the human practice of Buddhist translation.

Several topics have been deliberately reserved for future work. The Tibetan translation tradition, with its sophisticated theoretical apparatus and the institutional infrastructure of the *lo tsā ba* tradition, would repay sustained engagement, as would the approaches taken in the lesser-studied languages like Newar and others; I have not had space to address these here. The reception of Buddhist translation debates in Japanese Buddhist intellectual history, particularly in the esoteric traditions that maintain that there remains a kind of speech at the level of ultimate reality, raises further questions about the diversity of Buddhist philosophical positions on language and their implications for translation. The contrast between *apoha*-based and Esoteric-based Buddhist philosophies of language, which I have only gestured towards, would itself merit a separate study. What I hope to have established here is a starting point: that instrumentalism in Buddhist translation is neither inevitable nor unchallenged, and that resources for an alternative are available both in contemporary translation theory and within the Buddhist tradition itself.

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EXPLAINING ISE

THE SHIKINEN SENGŪ

IN JAPANESE–ENGLISH PUBLIC MEDIA



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This essay draws on intercultural communication and translation studies to examine how Japanese–English outreach materials explain the shikinen sengū of Ise Jingū to audiences with no prior knowledge of it. Across three case studies, translation overlaps with editorial intervention through selection, restructuring, simplification, visual design, and adaptation to different media. The essay borrows the term “transediting” from translation studies to name that combined labor and to keep attention on the finished materials rather than on the presumed intentions of translators the sources do not identify. It shows that outreach materials consistently foreground themes that provide portable frames for explaining the sengū in public settings, while ritual efficacy, institutional authority, and other shrine-specific dimensions receive comparatively less explanatory weight. The paired Japanese materials show a second direction of mediation, preparing domestic intermediaries to explain Shinto in English, so that the audience for this work includes Japanese readers as well. These materials do not so much translate the sengū as produce a public form of it, shaped by medium, genre, and institutional priority.

A VISIT TO a Shinto shrine quickly reveals that much of what matters remains unstated. Shrine etiquette (when to bow or where to perform ablutions) is only one part of it. More difficult to put into words are how the space should feel, how one should move through it, and why particular actions matter. These things are learned gradually, through observation, repetition, and participation rather than explicit instruction. The problem becomes even more pronounced in the case of the *shikinen sengū* 式年遷宮, commonly glossed as the periodic rebuilding of the Ise Jingū shrine complex, which is not one single ritual but a complex sequence of events extending over nearly eight years, involving the rebuilding of sanctuary buildings, the refashioning of ritual objects, and the ceremonial transfer of the deities. Its significance depends upon ritual practices, institutional authority, embodied participation, and assumptions

that must, to some extent, be explained anew even to Japanese audiences each time the *sengū* occurs. Explaining such an event across languages and media is therefore more than a matter of translation. It requires institutions to decide what to explain, what to simplify, what to leave untranslated, and what kinds of stories can carry an intricate religious event to audiences who do not already share its assumptions.

Because the *sengū* unfolds over nearly eight years and draws together architecture, ritual, craftsmanship, pilgrimage, and community participation, it resists concise explanation.¹ One outreach text solves that problem by handing it to Dorae-mon, the manga character, who explains that people build “a new Jingu every 20 years so the gods will always have a nice, new place to live!”² When the *sengū* is presented this way, what is brought forward as its essential story, and what recedes as too particular, too complex, or too difficult to communicate? To explore that question, this essay examines three case studies that carry institutional authority: the English-language website of the Jingū Administration Office (Jingūshichō 神宮司庁), the Association of Shinto Shrines’ (Jinja Honchō 神社本庁) booklet *Soul of Japan: An Introduction to Shinto and Ise Jingū* together with its companion teaching guide, and the Japan Pavilion display at Expo 2025, where the *sengū* was presented as a model of cyclical renewal.

This essay examines how Japanese-English outreach materials explain the *sengū* to audiences with little prior knowledge of Shinto. The biggest problem may be the nature of the event itself. Its significance depends on ritual practice and institutional knowledge that participants may possess or enact, but do not always put into words. Once those assumptions can no longer be taken for granted, explanation becomes an editorial task as much as a linguistic one. Across the three case studies, translation repeatedly merges with restructuring and adaptation to a new medium. These materials make the *sengū* easier to follow, but they also shape what comes forward as its meaning and what remains less visible.

The analysis that follows treats these materials as institutional acts of explanation. Its concern is less with whether a particular translation is correct than with how religious institutions present a highly situated event to audiences who do not share the background needed to interpret it. Considering these materials as a mix of translation and editing provides a way of describing that work because it directs attention to the editorial decisions that accompany translation: deciding

1. For a *longue-durée* backdrop of this essay’s focus on recent bilingual explanations of Ise Jingū and its *shikinen sengū*, Teeuwen’s research provides a provocative explanation of how the term “Shinto” (treated in the sources within this essay as a reified, stable idea) emerged as a historically contingent concept, showing how efforts were made to systematize and make kami practices intelligible through naming, conceptual framing, and doctrinal synthesis. See Mark Teeuwen, “From Jindō to Shinto: A Concept Takes Shape,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 29 (2002): 233–63.

2. Japan Pavilion, Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, “Shikinen Sengu” display, observed by the author, October 2025.

what needs explanation, what can remain implicit, which Japanese terms should be retained, and how an explanation changes when it becomes a website, a handbook, a manga, or an exhibition panel. Those decisions are never incidental. They determine the form in which the *sengū* becomes publicly intelligible. “Intelligibility,” as the term is used here, does not mean complete understanding or transparent access to the event. It refers to the editorial work through which institutions make the *sengū* recognizable and interpretable to audiences who cannot be assumed to share the ritual knowledge on which its significance depends.

Intercultural communication studies provide a useful way of thinking about this process. Shrine practice depends heavily on knowledge acquired through participation, making dictionary definitions only a small part of explanation. The materials examined here occupy what intercultural communication theorists describe as a contact zone, where a high-context ritual environment encounters readers who cannot be assumed to share the same background knowledge. Shrines and religious organizations speak with institutional authority, yet they do so through genres that reward brevity. English introduces another layer of expectation because it remains the principal language through which these materials circulate internationally. The resulting explanations emerge from the interaction of institutional priorities, genre conventions, and linguistic expectations. They are products of negotiation as much as translation.

That negotiation can be seen in small editorial choices as well as larger interpretive ones. Key terms are sometimes defined, sometimes left in Japanese, and sometimes explained through analogy. Narrative sequences are reordered and certain themes become more prominent than others. Heritage, craftsmanship, visitor experience, and, more recently, sustainability provide familiar points of entry for readers encountering the *sengū* for the first time. References to sustainability often draw upon concepts articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—the UN’s framework of seventeen goals addressing environmental, economic, and social development.³ The language of the SDGs, particularly about environmental issues, gives the *sengū* an immediate contemporary relevance,

3. While the SDGs articulate an integrated policy agenda in which “sustainable development” is foundational, “circularity” (especially as developed in circular-economy discourse) is better understood as an SDG-adjacent framework that is often invoked to advance progress across multiple goals, rather than as a formal SDG tenet in itself. See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “The 17 Goals,” *Sustainable Development Goals*, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. See also Patrick Schröder and Jack Barrie, “Can the circular economy revive the SDGs?,” SDG Action, 13 November 2024. At first glance, the *sengū* might appear to run counter to SDG logics because it involves repeated rebuilding; however, both the *Soul of Japan* booklet and the Expo display anticipate this concern by foregrounding the managed reuse of materials as an account of continuity. Explicit SDG branding was comparatively muted in Expo guide materials, but SDG-adjacent idioms and event framing were nevertheless evident in Expo programming and in the Expo’s closing declaration: Japan Association for the 2025 World Exposition, “Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai Declaration Announced,” 13 October 2025, www.expo2025.or.jp/en/news/news-20251013-01/.

particularly in public and international settings. At the same time, it encourages readers to understand the event through categories that originate outside shrine practice. In the process, questions of divine presence, ritual efficacy, institutional authority, and doctrinal plurality can recede from view—not because they are deliberately omitted, but because public-facing genres reward different kinds of explanation.⁴

Transediting, Contexts, and Contact Zones

Much of the work performed by these outreach materials remains invisible if translation is understood merely as the transfer of words between languages. The materials examined here do more than translate, because they shorten some explanations, expand others, rearrange material, and adapt it to new audiences and media: whether a website, an introductory booklet, a manga, or an exhibition panel. Translation studies has used the term “transediting” to describe this merging of translation with editorial intervention.⁵ Transediting includes such practices as condensation, expansion, restructuring, omission, glossing, and adaptation when a text is prepared for a new readership, institutional setting, or medium. The term is useful here because several of the materials examined below do not reproduce a stable Japanese source text. They construct new explanations from existing language, images, institutional conventions, and assumptions about their intended audiences. The focus in this essay is on the recurring editorial decisions through which institutions make the *sengū* intelligible to readers who do not already share its assumptions. Transediting is not used here to imply that every editorial change can be attributed to an individual translator. The materials are institutional productions, and the available sources do not always identify who wrote, translated, revised, approved, or designed them. The term instead directs attention to the combined linguistic and editorial work visible in the finished materials.

4. Earlier in the symposium, Professor Mushi's talk touched on the risks and rewards of transforming “ways” of interacting with the sacred into “words” that describe it. Perhaps, like the Kakure Kirishitan communities that he discussed, a lot of Shinto and the *shikinen sengu* is poorly conveyed in this manner. And, with modern media such as VR, some of this can be alleviated, even without having the opportunity to visit a shrine. At any rate, the sources examined here are reaching out to readers with a purposefully limited and edited representation of a much fuller dialogic tradition.

5. Stetting's 1989 term, “transediting,” originally described the “grey area” between translating and editing in news or journalistic contexts, but it is used in this essay to draw attention to one aspect of translation, rather than to suggest using it as an analytical category. For more on the issues associated with the term, see Christina Schäffner, “Rethinking Transediting,” *Meta: Journal des traducteurs* 57 (2012): 866–883 and “Transfer in news translation,” in *Transfer Thinking in Translation Studies: Playing with the Black Box of Cultural Transfer*, edited by Maud Gonne, Klaartje Merrigan, Reine Meylaerts, and Heleen van Gerwen, (Leuven University Press, 2025).

Shrine practice depends heavily on forms of knowledge acquired through participation. This kind of problem becomes easier to understand when viewed through work on intercultural communication. Knowing when to bow is relatively easy to explain, because you can “see” it. Knowing why a particular place feels sacred, or why one ritual follows another, is much harder because such knowledge is usually “unseen” and learned rather than stated. The materials discussed here therefore occupy what intercultural communication theorists describe as a contact zone, where a high-context ritual environment encounters readers who cannot be assumed to possess the same background knowledge. “High context,” as the term is used here, does not describe Japan as a whole. It refers specifically to ritual settings in which meaning is sustained through repetition, shared practice, and institutional memory. In such settings, shared histories and embodied repetition allow “simple messages with deep meaning” to circulate without extensive explanation.⁶ Much of that meaning becomes visible only when institutions attempt to explain it.

A kind of asymmetry emerges out of having the authority to define. Shrines, religious organizations, and state-supported cultural institutions occupy privileged positions as interpreters of Shinto for domestic and international audiences alike. Shinto’s idioms may saturate everyday life, yet much of their cultural logic becomes visible only when institutions render them teachable for audiences who do not already know how to read them. Shrines, booklets, and expo displays therefore do more than “share information.” They build bridges across unequal conditions of knowledge and authority. As such, they resemble what has been described as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”⁷ In the present cases, this asymmetry appears not primarily through coercion but through institutional authority, genre constraints, and the politics involved in public representation. Websites, introductory booklets, teaching materials, museum displays, and exhibition panels reward brevity and immediate comprehension. English adds another layer of pressure so that institutional authority, genre, and language work together in shaping what becomes publicly recognizable as Shinto.

Recent outreach increasingly explains the *sengū* through the language of sustainability. References to SDGs allow the *sengū* to be connected with a vocabulary already familiar in public institutions. Christian-derived analogies serve a similar purpose for Anglophone readers by providing familiar points of reference. Questions of ritual efficacy, divine presence, institutional authority, and doctrinal

6. Although now more than fifty years old, Edward T. Hall’s insights about context and culture as well as warnings about technology and its impact on cultures are as relevant today as they were before the widespread use of computers. Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Anchor Press and Doubleday, 1976), 46.

7. Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33–40, 34.

plurality consequently receive less attention than themes such as heritage, craftsmanship, continuity, or environmental stewardship.⁸ This essay is concerned with those shifts in emphasis. They are not translation errors. They are consequences of explaining a highly situated religious event within public genres designed to communicate quickly across cultural boundaries.

A note on the selection of sources is needed here. While many explanations of the *sengū* exist in English, the three resources selected here demand particular attention because they carry institutional authority, are widely accessible, assign special interpretive weight to the *sengū*, and are aimed at non-specialists.⁹ The most enduring of these three projects is the official Jingū website, whose English-language pages have been produced and maintained for over two decades by the Jingu Administration Office in Ise City, Mie Prefecture. Digital media invites revision, and that revisability allows us to track not only how and what the organization chooses to say in English, but how translation choices have both shifted and remained stable over time. The second project examined in this essay comprises a matched set of texts tied to the sixty-second *sengū* (2013): *Soul of Japan*, an English-language introductory booklet on Shinto and Ise Jingū published by the Association of Shinto Shrines—the religious administrative body that oversees most shrines nationwide—and a 2017 companion handbook that re-frames the booklet in a bilingual format. Neither now circulates in physical form, but the booklet persists as a high-resolution downloadable PDF. The third case study moves from page to panel as an English-Japanese display about Jingū that was shown in the Japan Pavilion at Expo 2025 in Osaka between April and October.¹⁰ Paradoxically, the object made of the most durable material may prove the most fleeting as a source, apparently disappearing from public view once the Expo closed.

8. On how Shinto has been recast as an ancient “nature religion” through the idiom of *chinju no mori* and shrine-based conservation projects, see Aike P. Rots, “Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation: The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and the Rediscovery of Chinju no Mori,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 42 (2015): 205–233. For a more lengthy and skeptical perspective on how ritual practices connected to the *Shikinen sengū* have been reframed to align with contemporary values in other genres, see Rots, *Forests of the Gods: Shinto, Nature, and Sacred Space in Contemporary Japan* (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2013), 339–43.

9. The author edited and translated a book on the subject, but because it has not circulated as widely as some of the others and is no longer in print, it has not been included in the present study. See Kōgakkan Daigaku Kikakubu 皇學館大学企画部, ed., *Sengū Roman: A Two-Person Journey to Ise, English–Japanese Edition* 遷宮浪漫—伊勢ふたり旅: 英語・日本語版 (Kōgakkan Sābisu 皇學館サービス, 2016). The argument made in this essay about the risks and benefits of religious “transediting” holds true for this work, including its limitations as an effort to make the *shikinen sengū* and other aspects of Ise Jingū legible to non-specialists.

10. Out of the more than 25 million visitors to the Expo, it is unclear how many people went to the Japan Pavilion, but it was considered one of the top attractions at the event. Yomiuri Shimbun 読売新聞, “Sūji de miru Ōsaka, Kansai banpaku” 数字で見る大阪・関西万博, November 23, 2025, www.yomiuri.co.jp/pluralphoto/20251123-OYT150030/.

The Ise Jingū Website

The Jingū Administration Office website has served as one of the principal English-language introductions to Ise Jingū for more than two decades. During that time, it has been revised repeatedly, and there is no single version of the “Jingū website” under discussion here. This section distinguishes between the current website, which provides a point of comparison, and an earlier version preserved through archived captures and contemporaneous downloads, which forms the primary object of analysis. Unless otherwise indicated, references to the website in the discussion below refer to this earlier version. The current site is identified explicitly when it is being discussed.¹¹

The current English site is compact and organized around a short menu of visitor-facing pages, including “About Ise Jingu,” “Rituals and Ceremonies,” “Pray,” “Precinct Map,” and “Access,” together with a small PDF archive that includes the *Soul of Japan* booklet.¹² The current Japanese site extends well beyond this frame. It organizes the visitor’s encounter through headings such as “Know,” “Pray,” and “Feel,” and places the next *sengū* prominently in view through a banner at the top of the page. The Japanese and English versions are therefore no longer closely synchronized, and the present English site says comparatively little about the *sengū* itself. Although the divergence remains significant, but the earlier site makes the editorial choices involved in explaining the *sengū* easier to see. The discussion that follows concentrates on those earlier Japanese and English pages, referring to the current site where later revisions reveal a change in emphasis. Viewed across roughly twenty years, the English-language explanation appears to have narrowed even as its framing has become more universal.

One feature shared by the earlier Japanese and English sites makes some of their initial priorities visible. Both included a flash-era digital presentation that introduced Jingū through four mascot characters rather than through doctrine. The English site labeled it “manga,” although it was not a printed comic. It combined sequential comic-style framing with limited animation and sound, placing it somewhere between manga and anime. The Japanese site called it “anime,” emphasizing its movement, while the English label directed attention toward graphic narrative. Even the name of the medium helped tell viewers how to approach what followed.

11. The earliest extant version of the Jingū site online is dated 12 October 2000 according to the web archive Wayback Machine. The earliest English version of the site that remains available is dated December 17, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20011217195017/http://www.isejingu.or.jp/index.htm>. For the present-day site, Jingu Administration Office, “Ise Jingu,” <https://www.isejingu.or.jp/en/> was used. For the earlier sites, all of the available archived sites dating back to 2000 were viewed, but the main focus is on Ise Jingū, “O-Ise-san” (Flash animation), archived 23 October 2007, Wayback Machine (Internet Archive), https://web.archive.org/web/20071023052402fw_/http://www.isejingu.or.jp/shosai/english/anime2/index.htm.

12. Jingu Administration Office, “Ise Jingu,” <https://www.isejingu.or.jp/en/>.

Each character carried a different part of the explanation. Navi, whose name suggested “navigator,” guided viewers through shrine protocol and gave the presentation its step-by-step movement. Isuzu, a high-school girl whose name recalled the Isuzu River, connected Jingū with landscape and nature. Through her, the premise that “kami (deities) live in nature” became something that could be seen while moving through the grounds. Yamato, a high-school boy, spoke in the language of national belonging, his name (a synonym for ancient Japan) reinforcing the description of Jingū as a “spiritual home.” Mai appeared in *miko* (a shrine priestess who assists with sacred dances, sales of amulets, and other ritual support) attire, and her name evoked ceremonial performance (“*mai*” being a word for “dance”), allowing *matsuri* to register through movement and atmosphere as well as explanation. The presentation began with nature as cosmology and then guided viewers through space, past *torii* and Ujibashi Bridge toward the carp-filled Isuzugawa. Jingū itself became the lesson. The intended audience was not stated, although the addition of readings even for simple compounds such as *jinja* 神社 suggests that it included children and other non-specialists. The original illustrated characters later disappeared, but the same child-facing graphic logic returned two decades later, as we will see in the last section of this essay, when Doraemon was used to explain the *sengū* at Expo 2025.

The digital presentation stated that “[i]n *jinja* (Shinto sanctuaries), people express their wishes, prayers and thanksgivings to the kami through all kinds of Shinto ceremonies and festivals called ‘*Matsuri*,’” yet it did not mention the *sengū*.¹³ The omission reveals how sequencing works as a form of explanation. The presentation first established Jingū through nature, etiquette, movement, and affect. Its most institutionally complex event was deferred to a separate page. Before readers encountered the *sengū*, they were given a more easily grasped account of shrine practice and a route through the physical site.

When the *sengū* appeared on the linked explanatory page, redirecting the digital presentation viewers to a regular web page, the Japanese and English versions shared a basic narrative but differed in the significance they attached to it. Both described the cycle of rebuilding and transfer, and both connected its origins with Emperor Tenmu and Empress Jitō. The Japanese text placed the event within a national and imperial frame by calling the *sengū* “one of the most important festivals in our country” (*wagakuni de mottomo jūyō na omatsuri no hitotsu* 我が国で最も重要なお祭りのひとつ), a claim omitted from the English version. The English makes cosmological reference points explicit for outsiders, naming the deity Amaterasu (the Japanese

13. Ise Jingū, “O-Ise-san” (Flash animation), archived 23 October 2007, Wayback Machine (Internet Archive), https://web.archive.org/web/20071023052402fw_/http://www.isejingu.or.jp/shosai/english/anime2/index.htm.

does not), and it presented the transfer in terms of a “symbol” of the kami rather than the deity itself (*goshintai* 御神体). It emphasized “the renewal of buildings,” “the renewal of the treasures,” and “the offering of first fruits,” then added that “peace will prevail in Japan and the world,” and that “traditional technologies are preserved.” It also retained institutional specificity, describing the reconstruction of “the fenced enclosure, beginning with the main sanctuary” (*shōden o hajime mikakiuchi* 正殿を始め御垣内). In the Japanese, readings were supplied for compounds such as *mikakiuchi* (fenced enclosure), which many Japanese readers would not necessarily have known. The closing lines became explicitly imperial, describing the *sengū* as “the foremost important affair of the Imperial House, and Jingū’s unparalleled great enterprise” (*kōka daiichi no jūji, Jingū musō no daiei* 皇家第一の重事、神宮無双の大営). In the Japanese version, the endurance of Jingū was thus tied to imperial authority and to the continued performance of this particular institutional undertaking.

The Soul of Japan

Soul of Japan: An Introduction to Shinto and Ise Jingū presents a more systematic form of outreach than the earlier Jingū website. Published by the Association of Shinto Shrines in connection with the 62nd *sengū*, the booklet provides a compact, authoritative account of Shinto, Jingū, and the meaning of periodic rebuilding. Its organization moves gradually from general definitions of Shinto, kami, *matsuri*, and *jinja* through mythic narratives and the institutional history of Jingū before arriving at the *sengū*. By the time readers encounter periodic rebuilding, they have already been given a vocabulary of divine presence, ritual transfer, priestly mediation, imperial connection, and sacred history through which to interpret it.

The title, *Soul of Japan*, recalls the language of Nitobe Inazō’s *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, although the relationship should not be pressed too far.¹⁴ The phrase belongs to a longer history of attempts to explain Japanese traditions through a civilizational vocabulary intended for readers outside Japan. Here it signals the scale of the booklet’s claim. Shinto is introduced as something woven into Japanese life as a whole, not as one religious tradition among others.

The opening chapter, “What is Shinto?,” begins by calling Shinto “the indigenous faith of the Japanese.” It then describes it as “a way of life and a way of thinking,” “an integral part” of Japan “since ancient times,” and “the foundation for the yearly

14. As its title suggests, the booklet appears to position itself as a rearticulation of “the soul of Japan,” in implicit dialogue with Nitobe Inazō’s classic *Nitobe Inazō, Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (The Leeds and Biddle Company, 1900). Like Nitobe’s work, it often relies on Western, including Christian-derived, conceptual scaffolding to render Japanese tradition legible outside the Japanese cultural context, a strategy that can reduce friction for some readers while also courting familiar risks of distortion and misreading.

life-cycles.” The New Year shrine visit appears as an ordinary example of this continuity. The cumulative effect is to position Shinto as the largely unspoken cultural background of Japanese life. This claim brings the booklet close to the problem described at the beginning of this essay: what is treated as implicit within practice must be made explicit for readers encountering it from outside.

The vocabulary chosen to carry that explanation is immediately recognizable in English. The booklet uses terms such as “faith,” “worship,” and “deity,” while also retaining selected Japanese words. Kami is introduced as “a word that corresponds to ‘deity’ in English.” Shinto sanctuaries are first identified as “Shinto shrines” and then as *jinja*, after which the Japanese term can circulate without repeated explanation. The method neither replaces Japanese terminology entirely nor leaves it to stand without support. English categories provide an initial foothold, while retained terms mark the point at which equivalence remains incomplete.¹⁵ The booklet is also engaged in terminological boundary maintenance, though we do not learn that until later with the companion volume.

The 2017 companion volume, *Eigo de tsutaeru Nihon no kokoro: Soul of Japan kōshiki gaidobukku* 英語で伝える日本のこころ Basic Guide: SOUL of JAPAN 公式ガイドブック, is a kind of handbook that makes the institutional labor behind this method visible. Organized as an English-learning and explanatory guide, it reproduces passages from the English booklet and supplements them with vocabulary lists, grammatical notes, relatively literal Japanese translations, fuller Japanese renderings, and explanations of expressions. It does not appear to present a Japanese source text from which the English booklet was translated, if such a text existed. Instead, it prepares Japanese readers to use the English booklet as an institutionally produced explanatory resource.

This changes the direction of mediation. The original booklet addresses readers who may know little about Shinto. The handbook addresses domestic intermediaries who may understand shrine practice but lack the language, or the interpretive frame, expected in international encounters. Its task is to anticipate where explanation may falter and to prepare speakers to respond. Translation becomes a form of institutional preparation: readers are taught not only what an English phrase means but what assumptions an Anglophone listener may bring to it. It identifies cases in which fluent English may produce the wrong institutional image. Its discussion of Naikū and Gekū, for example, rejects “Inner Shrine” and “Outer Shrine”

15. There has been considerable debate in Japan about the definition of kami and the term’s origin, and translations such as “god” and “deity” have long been recognized as insufficient without explanation for an Anglophone audience. See, for example, Timothy J. Vance, “The Etymology of Kami,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 10 (1983): 277–88. Needless to say, this kind of a debate risks being glossed over in public-facing materials when it is more or less “hidden” behind non-translations that simply use the Japanese term without a clear English equivalent.

as potentially misleading, since those terms may suggest a spatial or hierarchical relationship unlike that of Jingū's two principal sanctuaries. Retaining Japanese terminology thus serves not only authenticity but institutional precision.

The handbook's treatment of "guardians of the family" provides a revealing example of cultural mediation. Its commentary invokes "angel" and "saint" as possible points of reference. The handbook alternates between analogy and explicit warnings against equivalence, so these analogies coexist with passages that explicitly distinguish kami from a singular, omnipotent Creator, making the handbook's strategy a managed movement between comparison and differentiation. The strategy may lower an initial barrier for readers familiar with Christian vocabulary, but it also reveals the cultural specificity of what presents itself as accessible English. "Angel" and "saint" are not neutral explanatory categories, and they may clarify little for readers who do not share the religious background they assume. Here the handbook treats translation of the original English less as lexical substitution than as framing. It assumes that the greatest barriers lie not in words but in expectation. It has been argued that effective mediation requires "bilateral cultural adaptation," or a sensitivity to the values and expectations of both source and target communities, together with explicit strategies for handling lexical gaps, pragmatic friction, and non-verbal cues.¹⁶

The booklet and handbook repeatedly work within this tension. They make Shinto easier to discuss by attaching its vocabulary to categories already available in English, yet they also preserve terms such as kami and *jinja* rather than allowing those categories to replace them. The reader is held in an intermediate position: close enough to proceed, but repeatedly reminded that the English word does not exhaust the Japanese one. The handbook extends that position to its Japanese users, teaching them how to reproduce the accessible frame while retaining the distinctions on which the institution insists.

The chapter on the *sengū* brings these editorial strategies together. Within the *sengū* chapter, the efficacy of the rites and the authority governing their performance receive less sustained explanation than architectural renewal, technical transmission, and intergenerational continuity, although earlier chapters provide a broader account of kami, *matsuri*, priestly mediation, and ritual transfer. The chapter's explanation begins with the statement that "Wood is central to Japanese civilization." From there, the *sengū* is organized around the renewal of wooden structures, the reuse of materials, and the preservation of technical knowledge. The English text emphasizes "sustainability," "reutilization," and the "maintenance of know-how and skills," presenting these as more important to Jingū's continuity

16. Zixi Ye, "Language Barriers in Intercultural Communication and Their Translation Strategies," *Modern Management Science & Engineering* 6 (2024): 178–189.

than the “actual physical existence” of any single building. Rebuilding the wooden “dwellings for the kami” is contrasted with constructing “permanent structures of stone.” Continuity resides in repeated making rather than in the survival of an original object.

The passage does not reduce the *sengū* entirely to craftsmanship. It retains the kami, identifies the buildings as their dwellings, and describes the renewal as “the essence of ‘eternity’ as it is expressed at Jingū.” Its final language, however, moves toward a broadly accessible account of inheritance, declaring that the *sengū* “resonates in the souls of our ancestors, and is a gift to the future.” The event becomes intelligible through a combination of sacred residence, cultural memory, technical transmission, and an ethical obligation to future generations.

The Japanese rendering supplied by the companion volume subtly redirects the account. “Wood is central to Japanese civilization” becomes “wood has been central to Japanese culture” (*ki wa Nihon bunka no chūshin o nashite kimashita* 木は日本文化の中心をなしてきました). “Sustainability” is rendered as *jizokusei* 持続性, a term suggesting persistence or continuity without the more explicitly policy-oriented resonance of *jizoku kanōsei* 持続可能性. The “maintenance of know-how and skills” becomes the “transmission of knowledge and techniques” (*chishiki ya gijutsu no denshō* 知識や技術の伝承). Where the English speaks of a “gift to the future,” the Japanese says that the *sengū* will be “inherited into the future” (*mirai e to keishō sarete yuku* 未来へと継承されてゆく).

These are small differences, but they show that the handbook is doing more than carrying a finished English explanation back into Japanese. The English booklet presents the *sengū* through concepts likely to circulate widely: sustainability, reuse, expertise, eternity, ancestors, and the future. The Japanese commentary reattaches those concepts to a vocabulary of continuity, transmission, and inheritance. It explains the English script while preserving distinctions that the English formulation partially loosens.

The booklet and handbook therefore form a single outreach project with two audiences. One gives non-specialist English readers an ordered introduction to Shinto and the *sengū*. The other prepares Japanese intermediaries to communicate that introduction and explains the choices on which it depends. Together they show transediting as institutional labor. Definitions, analogies, retained Japanese terms, back-translations, and commentary are coordinated to produce an account that can circulate across cultural boundaries without appearing either wholly foreign or wholly familiar.

That account is necessarily selective. The *sengū* emerges as a means of renewing sacred buildings and treasures, re-enshrining Amaterasu, transmitting craftsmanship, sustaining cultural memory, and joining past generations to the future. The chapter explicitly identifies the transfer of the sacred mirror and describes the



FIGURE 1. “Shikinen Sengu” at Ise Jingū, as displayed in the Japan Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka-Kansai (photograph by the author).

cycle as a temporal and spatial return to origins. Even so, its extended explanation gives particular weight to the preservation of skills, the reuse of timber, and the transmission of architectural and artistic traditions.

The 2025 Osaka Expo Ise Jingū Display

The Ise Jingū display in the Japan Pavilion at Expo 2025 differs from the previous case studies because it is experienced while physically moving through an exhibition rather than reading a website or booklet. Visitors encounter a sequence of bilingual manga panels, large graphic slogans, and explanatory text distributed unevenly throughout the exhibit (FIGURE 1). That physical arrangement is itself editorial. The largest elements—the slogan and manga—are impossible to miss, while the explanatory panels appear later in comparatively small print at a point where stopping to read them interrupts the flow of visitors through the pavilion. Unlike a booklet, which presents a fixed linear sequence, the exhibition organizes explanation spatially. Scale, placement, and movement determine what visitors are

most likely to notice, making exhibition design part of the process through which the *sengū* becomes intelligible.

The exhibit opens not with an explanation of Jingū or the *sengū*, which an academic essay like this is prone to do, but with the slogan “Built soft means TRANSMITTABLE.” Only afterwards do visitors encounter Doraemon’s manga explanation, with the historical and explanatory panels placed at the end of the display. Those concluding panels contain the only explicit explanation that “Jingu” is the official term for the 125 shrines, including Naikū, which enshrines the deity Amaterasu, and Gekū, which enshrines Toyouke (unfortunately, the names of the deities are misspelled as Ameterasu and Toyoke). They also explain that someone named Yamatohime-no-Mikoto received a revelation from Amaterasu and established the Inner Shrine, while the Outer Shrine was later founded for the deity responsible for preparing Amaterasu’s meals. Interestingly, the display does not avoid religious claims. Divine agency is explicit in its account of origins. Yet those claims occupy relatively little visual space and appear only after visitors have already encountered a much larger narrative centered on rebuilding, craftsmanship, and renewal.

The manga might appear at first glance to trivialize a religion and a sacred object of worship, but from a transediting point of view, it stages misunderstanding itself. Doraemon functions as a surrogate visitor whose confusion authorizes that of the audience. Arriving at Jingū, he sees an identical shrine complex under construction beside the existing one and asks why they are “building the exact same thing right next to it.” When the old buildings are dismantled, he concludes, “This doesn’t make any sense...” His confusion depends upon a familiar assumption that continuity means preserving an original structure. The manga then takes him backward through time, where he witnesses repeated rebuilding and the transmission of carpentry techniques across generations. By the end of the sequence he announces, “I get it!” The visitor is invited to undergo the same progression. Rather than assuming understanding, the exhibit dramatizes the failure of first-contact understanding and then guides viewers toward an institutionally authorized explanation of continuity through renewal.

This narrative also compresses the *sengū* into an immediately graspable story. Doraemon concludes that Jingū builds “a new Jingu every 20 years so the gods will always have a nice, new place to live!” The sentence gains clarity by glossing over distinctions supplied only later in the explanatory panels. Those panels define Jingū as the collective name for 125 shrines, whereas the manga uses Jingū as though it were a single building replaced during each cycle. The Japanese is more precise, explaining that the sanctuary buildings are reconstructed alternately so that the deity may always reside in a renewed place. The English instead makes Jingū itself the object being built and domesticates divine residence into the image of providing “the gods” with “a nice, new place to live.” This produces an immediately

intelligible narrative while blurring the relationship among Jingū as an institution, the sanctuary buildings reconstructed during the *sengū*, and the ceremonial transfer that gives those buildings their ritual significance.

The movement through time across the Asuka, Edo, and modern periods in one part of the manga likewise teaches continuity through narrative rather than explanation. The figure of a “Master Carpenter” embodies the transmission of specialized knowledge. A senior craftsperson praises a younger worker, while Doraemon observes that “the techniques are passed down with care from generation to generation.” Continuity resides not in preserving a physical object but in maintaining the skills required to recreate it. The same logic appeared in *Soul of Japan*, where Jingū’s endurance depended on preserving the techniques, forms, and institutional knowledge through which they could be rebuilt.

That logic is condensed into the opening slogan, “Built soft means TRANSMITTABLE.” The Japanese, *yawarakaku tsukuru koto de, uketsugu* (やわらかく作ることで、受け継ぐ), links a manner of building with the act of passing something on. The English turns that relationship into a generalized design principle: what is “built soft” becomes “transmittable.” The slogan deliberately leaves unanswered what is transmitted and by whom. It can equally describe architecture, craftsmanship, knowledge, culture, or values. In this sense, it functions as a kind of branding. It transforms the rebuilding cycle into a portable principle suitable for an international exposition concerned with innovation, sustainability, and future design. At the same time, the social and institutional processes that make transmission possible largely disappear. In the manga, transmission occurs through repeated work between senior and junior craftspeople. In the slogan, transmissibility appears almost as an inherent property of the wooden structure itself.

The two explanatory panels at the end of the exhibition on forestry and material reuse extend this idea of transmission across much longer temporal and material scales. A simple diagram places the twenty-year rebuilding cycle beside the approximately two hundred years required to cultivate the shrine forest. The juxtaposition expands the visitor’s temporal horizon. The regularity of the *sengū* depends upon planning that extends across many future rebuilding cycles, linking ritual repetition with forestry whose results will only be realized by later generations. The heading “Forest Self-Sufficiency” translates this long institutional commitment into a phrase readily legible within contemporary environmental discourse. The next panel on reuse makes a similar argument through the circulation of building materials. It explains that timbers removed during dismantling continue to move through structures associated with Jingū and other shrines. The Japanese describes a precise sequence in which the load-bearing pillars of Naikū and Gekū become *torii* at Uji Bridge and, twenty years later, are transferred again to *torii* on the approaches to shrines in the surrounding region. Other materials

are then distributed to shrines throughout Japan. The English preserves the broad outline but diffuses this institutional sequence, stating that the pillars are reused in “structures such as the Uji Bridge and *torii* gates” before later serving “regional shrines.” The distinction is subtle but significant. The Japanese presents reuse as a controlled movement through successive shrine contexts, allowing the materials to retain their religious association with Jingū. The English makes the process resemble a more general program of recycling and environmental stewardship. It does not invent a sustainability narrative, but it makes that narrative easier to separate from the shrine-specific ritual order through which the materials actually circulate.

The exhibit therefore moves among several explanatory registers, so that divine revelation, Amaterasu, and Toyouke appear in the historical introduction. The manga focuses attention on rebuilding, craftsmanship, and continuity. The concluding explanatory panels frame the *sengū* through forestry, material reuse, and long-term stewardship. The result is the redistribution of religion, with religious claims becoming concentrated in the explanation of origins, while the continuing significance of the *sengū* is explained primarily through architecture, craftsmanship, environmental planning, and intergenerational transmission.

The Expo display is consequently the most compressed of the three case studies, but also the clearest demonstration of transediting as institutional mediation. It translates Japanese into English while also constructing an exhibition in which language, image, physical movement, graphic hierarchy, and narrative sequence work together to produce understanding. Doraemon first models conceptual confusion and then recognition. Historical time becomes a succession of rebuildings. Craftsmanship becomes inherited skill. Forests become long-term planning. Reused timbers become visible signs of continuity. Even the physical organization of the exhibit reinforces this editorial process: visitors encounter emotionally compelling images and memorable slogans before they reach the smaller explanatory panels containing the display’s most explicitly religious and historical information.

Across the three case studies, the medium increasingly shapes the explanation. The website separates introductory orientation from institutional detail. *Soul of Japan* develops a carefully sequenced textual account supported by a companion handbook that trains intermediaries to reproduce it. The Expo display must communicate through movement, image, slogan, and brief text before visitors move on. In every case, the *sengū* becomes publicly intelligible through editorial decisions that extend well beyond translation. What changes is not only the language but the medium through which explanation is organized. The Expo display foregrounds renewal, craftsmanship, stewardship, and transmission because those are the aspects that can be communicated most effectively within the spatial and temporal constraints of a world exposition. Ritual efficacy, the transfer of the deities, imperial authority, and the institutional complexity of the eight-year cycle remain

present but comparatively difficult to perceive. Those dimensions can be inferred by a visitor with sufficient background knowledge. However, the display itself gives greater explanatory weight to what can be seen, followed, and remembered after only a few minutes standing in front of it, before snapping photos and being pulled away from the exhibition by the crowds.

Curiously, by the end of the exhibition, one might be forgiven for thinking that the *sengū* is an almost entirely male undertaking. This is one point at which the compression of the event into a public outreach format reveals a limitation of the transeditorial process this time rather than of transediting as a practice or the exhibition medium itself. In modern understandings of the tradition, Amaterasu and Toyouke are female deities, while Yamatohime was an imperial princess and was later enshrined as the deity Yamatohime-no-Mikoto. The exhibition also leaves unmentioned that the institution of periodic rebuilding is traditionally associated with Emperor Tenmu and Empress Jitō, and the first *sengū* was carried out under Jitō. Women therefore occupy central positions in the sacred history of Jingū and in the performance of the *sengū* itself. Their omission is especially striking when the display instead gives visual prominence to two imagined male carpenters and a robot cat. At best, this was a missed opportunity; it also sits uneasily beside the SDG-inflected language used elsewhere in the exhibition, because gender equality is one of the development goals.

Conclusion

The central challenge of presenting the *sengū* across languages and media is explaining a centuries-old sequence of events whose significance depends upon accumulated ritual knowledge, institutional authority, embodied participation, and assumptions that are rarely made explicit, even for Japanese audiences.

Each medium organizes that work differently. Translation merges with editing, sequencing, simplification, and genre design to produce versions of the *sengū* that can circulate across different media and among audiences with very different levels of background knowledge. The Jingū website treats intelligibility as an ongoing administrative practice. Its early manga or anime-style pedagogy stabilizes an introductory understanding of Shinto centered on nature, etiquette, and affect, while the *sengū* enters later through a separate page where English and Japanese share basic facts but not the same frame. *Soul of Japan* and its companion handbook intensify this labor by standardizing an exportable script and training domestic intermediaries to speak within it. They tether key terms to familiar religious categories and recruit cues that present themselves as universal, although in practice they remain culturally particular. The Expo display compresses explanation still further. Its manga, slogans, graphic scale, and spatial arrangement guide

visitors from Doraemon's incomprehension to an account of continuity grounded in rebuilding, inherited skill, forestry, and material reuse.

These materials keep divine presence, sacred residence, revelation, and shrine terminology visible, though they are unevenly distributed. What changes is the explanatory weight assigned to them. Heritage, craftsmanship, continuity, visitor experience, environmental stewardship, and transmission provide relatively portable frames because they can be understood quickly within websites, introductory booklets, and exhibition spaces. Ritual efficacy, imperial and institutional authority, the ceremonial transfer of the deities, and the full complexity of the eight-year sequence are harder to communicate within those forms. They recede not necessarily because institutions reject them, but because public genres privilege what can be recognized, followed, and remembered without extensive preparation.

This selectivity recalls an older problem in the English presentation of Japanese tradition. Projects such as *Soul of Japan* are, in one sense, Nitobe-style projects. Like Nitobe's early twentieth-century effort to render Bushido intelligible and respectable through a Christian, Buddhist, Shinto, and Confucian amalgam, they try to make a tradition recognizable in a register outsiders are presumed to already know. That work accomplishes a great deal. It provides footholds, offers an authorized script and gives domestic intermediaries a way to speak into an Anglophone public sphere that may have little interest in religious particularity. At the same time, it can become a bottleneck. A great deal of academic insight about Shinto concepts, internal plurality, practice, efficacy, authority, and presence seems to remain uncirculated in public-facing materials.

The concept of transediting helps describe this process without reducing it to either successful translation or cultural loss. It directs attention to the combined linguistic and editorial labor visible in the finished materials: the choice to retain kami while glossing it through "deity," to invoke "angel" or "saint" as provisional analogies, to organize the *sengū* around sustainability and transmission, or to place detailed religious explanations after a large slogan and a manga narrative. Such choices create access, but they also establish the terms on which access is possible. Intelligibility is therefore not the transparent transfer of an already complete meaning. It is the production of a public form in which some relationships become easier to see and others become more difficult to recover.

The three cases also show that this work cannot be understood through English alone. The paired Japanese materials explain unfamiliar terminology, reshape English formulations, and prepare Japanese readers to participate in international mediation. The contact zone therefore includes domestic as well as foreign audiences. Institutions are not only translating Shinto outward; they are also teaching Japanese intermediaries how Shinto should be explained when its assumptions can no longer remain implicit.

These materials belong to a polyphonic discourse produced within a rapidly changing social environment in which ancient religious institutions seek to remain legible to modern publics. As public pedagogy, they attempt to define what Japanese culture can mean when it is communicated across media, languages, and audiences. Outreach media actively negotiate an exceptionally difficult cultural barrier, and the materials examined here deserve recognition for the sophistication of that negotiation, even as the process inevitably privileges certain understandings of the *sengū* over others. The case studies suggest not a single process of simplification but the simultaneous production and circulation of multiple Shintos, each shaped by medium, audience, and institutional purpose.

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