

THE PRESENT SITUATION REGARDING INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND COMMUNICATION IN JAPAN

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The aim of this article is to give a general description of the present situation regarding interreligious dialogue in Japan from a Christian-Catholic perspective¹. To do this we will need, first, to have a general idea of the present religious situation in Japan, and to consider some very peculiar aspect of it, which may bear on the question of interreligious dialogue.

1. The Religious Situation in Japan Today and Interreligious Dialogue

The 1995 'Religious Yearbook' (*Shukyo Nenkan*) published by the 'Agency for Cultural Affairs' of the Ministry of Education² gives the following statistics concerning the religious situation in Japan:

- *Shinto* (the original Religion of Japan): 117,378,185
- Buddhism (including all denominations): 89,828,502
- Christianity (including all denominations): 1,519,396
- Other Religions: 11,112,595

The simple addition of these figures would give a total of 219,838,678. However, at the end of 1994, the total population of Japan was estimated to be 125,034,000. Now, that means an excess of 94,804,678 people with some religious affiliation as compared with the civil population. This strange fact can be explained quite easily in Japan, as there are many people who belong, at the same time, to different 'religions', especially to '*Shinto*', the original religion of Japan, and to some of the various Buddhist denominations... It is

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²Quoted by Religion in Japanese Culture, Edited by Noriyoshi Tamaru and David Reid, Kodansha International, Tokyo/New York/London, 1996, p.222-223.

common, for example, to find in Japanese homes both the *kamidana* (*Shinto* altar) and the *butsudan* (Buddhist altar in which the tablets with the names of the deceased members of the family are kept).

This situation, however, is all the more surprising, if we consider the fact that many people in Japan, especially young people, if asked what their religion is, would not be able to give an answer, at least not before consulting with other family members to find out what (Buddhist) Temple they refer to in case of funerals or other services connected with the dead³.

The reason for this paradoxical situation is that, with the exception probably of Christianity and the 'new religions', religion in Japan is not usually thought to be so much a matter of 'personal choice' or of individual affiliation, as rather a matter of family- or social-tradition. This explains why most people would think of themselves as belonging to the original Japanese religion (*Shinto*), though they may not even know what that precisely means; or would refer to a certain Buddhist Temple for funerals and services concerning the dead, without ever having any other contact with it, only because the family has been registered there sometime in the past.

Thus for many Japanese it would not be strange to consider themselves as 'belonging' at the same time to two (or even more) different 'religions'. Many people, for example, may consider themselves as 'belonging' both to *Shinto* and to Buddhism because they would visit a *Shinto* Temple (*Jinja*) on some occasions (connected with 'life': like the birth of a child, or when the child turns 3, 5 or 7 years old, marriage, 'difficult years' in one's life..) but would refer to a Buddhist Temple (*Otera*) for whatever has to do with death.

This quite standard pattern has been further complicated recently by the tendency shown by many young people to prefer a 'Christian Church' for the celebration of their marriage. Just to limit ourselves to the Catholic Church the statistics for the years 1996 and 1997 gave the following results⁴:

³Cf. Shimazono Susumu, "Aspects of rebirth of religion", in *Religion in Japanese Culture*, pp. 171-172.

⁴Cf. "Statistics of the Catholic Church in Japan", in *The Japan Mission Journal*, Winter 1996 (Vol.50, n.4) p. 285, and Winter 1997 (Vol. 51, n.4) p.269.

	(1996)	(1997)
- Marriages between two Catholics:	612	592
- Marriages with other Christians:	60	72
- Marriages with a non Christian partner:	2,928	2,906
- Marriages between non Christian partners:	7,337	6,703

Even though we may now be witnessing a turn downwards in this trend, this has been sufficiently consistent up to the present as to cause serious concern among *Shinto* Temples, where otherwise most of the marriages in Japan are held⁵. But, once again, to complete the picture of this sort of 'interreligious practice' in Japan, many so called 'christian marriages' are actually not performed in Christian churches at all, but rather in a sort of commercial imitations of Christian chapels (often even without any participation on the part of a Christian minister!) built by hotels for the 'marriage business' offering to young couples an 'all services included' marriage celebration programme!...

This quite general phenomenon of over the border 'interreligious practice' has to be understood within the general framework of Japanese popular religiosity which is more concerned with 'religious feeling', or 'esthetic experience', than with 'creeds' or 'moral precepts' connected with religious affiliation. On the one hand, this general attitude could favour an attitude of openness and mutual respect among people belonging to various religious traditions, but, on the other hand, this very same attitude would make real dialogue insignificant, or irrelevant, as it reduces religious commitment and religious experience to a very superficial level both in private and in social life, and would be rather conducive to syncretism and relativism.

This situation, which is quite common nowadays in Japan, should not make us forget, however, the fact that both *Shinto* and Buddhism, just to name the two main religious traditions of Japan, are deeply rooted in the culture of the country, command the respect of large numbers of Japanese, and indeed constitute the strongest organized forms of religious life in Japan.

⁵Cf. Michel Christiaens, "Church Weddings. Observations on an Asahi Article of Nov.] 11, 1996", in *The Japan Mission Journal*, Winter 1996 (Vol.50, n.4) P. 263.

Shinto, after the role it played before and during the war, has been disestablished as a state religion. However, it is still in many ways deeply connected with the social and, to a certain extent, also with the political life of the country. Its roots sink so deep in the national culture and indeed in the religious experience of the Japanese people as to remain its strongest and most pervasive element.

Buddhism, in its various branches (the principal forms of it being Tendai, Shingon, Pure Land, Zen and Nichiren) is certainly still the source of the greatest spiritual inspiration for the Japanese people. Its hold on the Japanese heart and on the spiritual life and practice of many people is as strong and even greater in some aspects than the traditional *Shinto* spirituality.

Certainly both *Shinto* and *Buddhism* can be said to constitute the main religious traditions of Japan, and even though both suffer of the modern process of 'secularization' and loss of religious interest, especially among the young generation, they still remain the most important and representative forms of religious life in this country. They reach out also into the political arena, when both *Shinto* (to which a form of nationalistic extreme right refers for inspiration and support) and Buddhism (especially through the political wing of *Soka Gakkai* a lay branch of Nichiren Buddhism) are present and active.

Alongside these main religious traditions, we find in Japan also a significant presence of Christianity which spread there since the arrival of St. Francis Xavier on August 15, 1549, was almost entirely wiped out by persecution during the 17th century, and reappeared there again starting from the 'discovery' of the hidden Christians in 1865.

According to the above quoted 'Religious Yearbook', in 1995 there were in Japan 1,519,396 Christians, of which 447,639 were Catholics⁶, 527,408 belonged to some other Christian denomination, and 544,349-(that is, the largest group!)-were listed as...'undifferentiated' Christians, this fact too is to be understood and explained in the light of what was said above about the Japanese way of understanding 'religious affiliation'.

⁶Cf. Religion in Japanese Culture p.223. Here again, the number is about 10,000 units above the one given by the official statistics of the Catholic Church for the same year!

As for Christians in Japan, the general attitude towards the other religions which accompanied the new spreading of Christianity in the late 19th century and up to the war, was necessarily that of a small group intended mostly to protect and defend itself. Interreligious dialogue is a new challenge for Christians in Japan, which, on the one hand, finds the Japanese Christians predisposed to it by the general attitude towards religion described above, but, on the other hand, meets with some specific difficulties.

As for Catholics in Japan, one should remember that almost half of them (known as the 'Nagasaki Christians') are descendants of the 16th and 17th centuries' martyrs and the heroic faithful who were able to preserve their faith for two and a half centuries notwithstanding an extremely severe and uninterrupted persecution which ended only in 1873. One can well understand how, for these Christians, 'interreligious dialogue' might not be so immediately and easily appealing. Most of the other half have been baptized as adults, coming often from Buddhist families. For them also it is not always easy to engage in dialogue with a tradition they 'broke away from'. However, usually, when they are properly led and duly instructed, they are very happy to be able to value positively their Buddhist (or *Shinto*) heritage and to be able to see their Christian life more as a continuation of, than a break with it.

Protestant denominations have been established in Japan only from the middle of the 19th century. The 'missionary' spirit of the beginnings is obviously still strong, and in some particular cases, one can meet with an 'evangelistic' attitude that would not particularly care for 'interreligious dialogue'. This is, however, true only in a general way and does not mean that there are not cases and areas of great openness and interest in dialogue with other religious traditions.

Finally, an important religious phenomenon in Japan is that of the 'new-religions, or even the more recent 'new new-religions', which are very numerous, well organized and very active. Their tendency, of course, is rather that of a strong affirmation of their peculiarity and of their particular message. It will not surprise any one to find in them less interest or less attention being given to the 'spirit' of 'interreligious dialogue', even though one finds them often very willing to participate in events involving the presence of different religions. Among these new religious organizations, one which is particularly involved in interreligious dialogue is that of the lay Buddhist organization *Risshokoseikai*.

This phenomenon of the 'new new-religions' in Japan has attracted a very special attention in the case of the 'sarin gas' incident which occurred in the Tokyo subway on March 20th, 1995. The religious group 'Aum Shinrikyo' has been accused of being responsible for the deadly attack, and its leaders are now being tried for the crime. This fact has spurred social concern about the many new religious groups being born almost every day in Japan.

It is within this general religious framework that 'interreligious dialogue' occurs in Japan. It is within this context that we will consider now the situation and activities regarding interreligious dialogue on the part of the Catholic Church in Japan.

2. The Catholic Church's Involvement in Interreligious Dialogue in Japan at Present.

At The National Level

During the last years there has been a 'Committee for Interreligious Dialogue' working within the frame of the 'Episcopal Committee for Social Questions'. The Bishop responsible for this Committee has been, up to 1997, Bishop Raymond Tanaka Ken-ichi, of Kyoto. But in the general assembly of the Episcopal Conference of Japan held in February 1998 it was decided that interreligious dialogue, from now on, should become the common responsibility of the entire Episcopal Conference acting through its 'Permanent Council' or 'Standing Committee'. With this change the 'Committee for Interreligious Dialogue' mentioned above has ceased to exist. Actually this committee did not have a definite programme or an ordinary activity of its own, but served especially to meet requests or to provide assistance on special occasions. The new situation, however, does not seem so far to have been a real improvement in this respect. Moreover, it has become more difficult to identify the concrete person who actually has to be referred to for information, suggestions, consultation dealing with this very important area of the life and mission of the Church in this country. The general impression is that the Bishops in Japan, though approving of, and also positively favoring, interreligious dialogue, do not themselves take the initiative in this field.

This situation might, however, be the result of an intentional choice on the part of the Bishops of Japan. If it is to be interpreted this way, the meaning of the Bishops' decision may be that, at the present stage, they

prefer to leave the whole issue of interreligious dialogue to the local or individual initiative of persons or groups who are actually involved in it, leaving the field open to research and experimentation.

To the credit of the Episcopal Conference of Japan, however, one must remember the publication, back in 1985, of some very useful and practical 'Guidelines for Catholics regarding the deceased and ancestors', where various problems related to interreligious dialogue and practice are dealt with. That these guidelines were timely and well received can be seen by the simple fact that between the year 1985 and the year 1993 the 31 pages pamphlet has been reprinted ten times!

Moreover, some individual Bishops have in various ways been involved in activities of interreligious dialogue. Among them special mention can be made of Bishop Tanaka, who up to his retirement in 1997, both as President of the former 'Committee for Interreligious Dialogue' and also because of his special position as Bishop of Kyoto, has actually often been involved both in Japan and abroad in activities of interreligious dialogue; and Card. Shirayanagi Seiichi, Archbishop of Tokyo, who, among other signs and gestures of involvement in the field of interreligious dialogue, has been for many years the President of the Japan branch of the WCRP.

At The Local Level

a) *Dioceses.* No Catholic Diocese in Japan seems to have yet a 'diocesan committee' or a 'diocesan office' for interreligious dialogue, and only a few Dioceses have a person in charge of this field of activity. One (the Diocese of Oita) has engaged regularly in dialogue by joining a local interreligious organization (*Nippo Shukyo Konwakai*) which holds eight meetings a year and carries out various activities. The Dioceses of Hiroshima and Nagasaki traditionally have had interreligious activities connected with the annual observance of the anniversary of the dropping of the atom bomb, on August 6 and 9. The Dioceses of Tokyo and Nagoya refer to the respective 'Centres for the study of religion and the related activities of interreligious dialogue: the *Jochi* (Sophia) and the *Nanzan* Universities. The Diocese of Fukuoka refers to the '*Seimeizan*: Centre for Prayer and Interreligious Encounter' in Kumamoto Prefecture.

b) Religious Orders. Not even within Religious Orders and Congregations, there seems to exist any organized activity, or any 'organization' acting regularly in the field of interreligious dialogue. There are, however, certainly, various individuals, or even groups acting in this field like, for example, the group of Missionaries, belonging mostly to the Xaverians and to the P.I.M.E., which has been meeting regularly once or twice a year since 1981, with the aim of promoting interreligious dialogue through the study of Japanese religiosity and the encounter with representatives of other Religions.

Since the pioneer experience of Fr. Enomiya-Lasalle (1898-1990) several Religious, especially among the Jesuits, have given special attention to the practice of Zazen, and have even become regularly recognized masters of this practice. In turn they have been guiding others in this spiritual experience, promoting contacts, exchanges, interaction between this Buddhist tradition and Christianity. Among them, we can recall, for example, Frs. Kadowaki Kakichi S.J. (who also has written extensively on the subject), Oka Toshiro S.J., Klaus Riesenhuber, S.J. and others. Other members of Religious Orders work extensively and professionally also in various other ways in the field of interreligious dialogue, like Fr. William Johnston S.J., an expert and true master of mystical experience both in the Christian and the non-Christian traditions, Fr. Okumura Ichiro O.C.D., a long time Consultor of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, a well read author and guide in the spiritual life, particularly attentive to interreligious dialogue, Fr. Jan Van Bragt C.I.C.M., former Director of the 'Nanzan Centre for Religion and Culture', one of the best authorities on Japanese Religions and one of the most active experts in interreligious dialogue in Japan today, and so many others...

c) Seminaries. In the four 'Major Seminaries' forming most of the Priests, both diocesan and religious, in Japan (Tokyo, Fukuoka, Franciscans in Tokyo, and Divine Word Missionaries in Nagoya) there are no special courses about, or special training for, interreligious dialogue. But the Religions of Japan are somehow taken up within the study of Japanese Culture (Tokyo), or in a general course on Religions (Fukuoka and Nagoya). There are, moreover, occasional activities (study meetings, seminars, visits to Buddhist Temples, etc.) intended to give seminarians a chance to meet with persons of other religions and to prepare them for interreligious dialogue.

Centres of Interreligious Activity.

Special mention must be made, of some organizations which are engaged in interreligious dialogue 'full time', so to say, or which give interreligious dialogue a strong priority in their activity.

a) The most important of these Centres is the *Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture*, attached to the Nanzan University of Nagoya, run by the Missionaries of the Divine Word. Director of the Institute is Fr. James Heisig S.V.D. a well known scholar in the field of scientific research on, and the encounter among, the religions. The activities of the Centre are of the highest scientific level. Among these are the publication of *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* as well as of several series of books and the organization of study meetings between Christian scholars and scholars of other Religions. Reports on the activity of the Centre can be found in the annual Bulletin of the Institute⁷. Among the most remarkable activities of the last years, we can surely count a detailed study of the *Sokagakkai*, and unprecedented concrete moments of dialogue with this powerful Buddhist organization "formally a stranger to interreligious dialogue" (Bulletin 18/1994,p.2); and an accurate investigation of the *Aum Shinrikyo*, the new new-religion of Japan, involved in the Sarin nerve gas attack of 1995

b) Even though the perspective of this article is to consider the present situation regarding interreligious dialogue and the Catholic Church in Japan, mention must be made here of *The National Christian Council (NCC) Centre for the Study of Japanese Religions*, in Kyoto, a Protestant Research Centre deeply involved in interreligious dialogue, with a rich programme of study meetings, courses, contacts with other religious institutions and two important reviews: "Japanese Religions" (in English) and *Deai* (in Japanese). As an example of the various initiatives taken by the NCC in the field of interreligious dialogue, mention can be made of the annual seminar on *Japanese Religions* (in 1998 it was the 21st) in which Christian scholars, pastors, missionaries, or other persons interested in interreligious contacts are guided in the concrete encounter with other religious traditions by visiting some of the most significant and representative institutions of the same.

⁷Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Nanzan University, Nagoya, with a Japanese edition

c) *The Institute of Christian Culture/Oriental Religions* was established on April 1, 1997, as a result of the fusion of the 'Institute of Oriental Religions' and the 'Institute of Christian Culture' of the Sophia University, run by the Jesuits in Tokyo. "The new institute will be mainly concerned with the Christian religion and with other religions in dialogue with it"⁸.

d) Among the Centres; particularly involved in interreligious dialogue at the level of spiritual experience, we can mention:

- *Shinmeikutsu*, a 'Christian-Zen' meditation Centre near Tokyo founded by Fr. Enomiya Lasalle, which continues to be a place of encounter between the Christian tradition of prayer and the Zen tradition;

- *Takamori Soan*, a place of spiritual life deeply rooted in Japanese culture, founded by Fr. Oshida Shigeto O.P., on the mountains of Nagano Prefecture, is also a very significant place of interreligious encounter at the level of life and of spiritual experience;

- *Seimeizan*, the 'Catholic branch' of a Buddhist Temple, on the hills near Tamana in Kumamoto Prefecture, a place of prayer and interreligious encounter, treasuring the spiritual heritage of Japanese traditions, and also - like Takamori Soan - closely connected with the daily life of the village it belongs to.

Among the various ways interreligious dialogue is carried on today in Japan these places deserve special mention, because they ensure a certain public dimension and continuity in the effort to promote the encounter and mutual understanding among different religious traditions.

Private Associations and Individual Involvement

This sector is perhaps the one with the largest number of initiatives and activities actually going on today in Japan in the field of interreligious encounter. Here again we will only deal with participation by Catholics in such activities. Even restricting the field in this way, it is not possible, of

⁸Cf. Inter-religio. A network of Christian Organizations for Interreligious Encounter in East Asia. Hong Kong, n. 31/1997, p.39.

course, to map all that is being done or even only to attempt a 'summary' of it. Only some examples of such activities are given.

- *The Zen-Ki Kondankai* is a friendly association of Buddhists and Christians, to which lately also representatives of *Shinto* have been admitted.. There is a good number of Catholics among its fifty or so members.

- Catholics are present and active in the Japanese chapter of the USA based *Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies* participating also in the activities of the association in the U.S.A., and are involved in such organizations as the *WCRP* or the *Sekai Renpo Zenkoku Koen* (an organization with strong religious foundations aiming at a world wide political order, or 'world charter' for international unity), or the 'Ecumenical Group for Interreligious Dialogue, etc.

- A common occasion for interreligious dialogue and encounter are the various *Sei to shi kangareu kai* (or associations to reflect together on the meaning of life and of death) which are quite numerous now in Japan. Such associations, which hold regular meetings to deepen social awareness of the problems connected with these issues, are often also connected with the practical assistance to terminally ill patients. This existential aspect of the reflection and study going on in these groups often brings them to search for concrete ways of cooperation among the various religions for mutual help in facing the most important event of our life, that is death.

- Many groups or small associations, or individual initiatives go on, of course, at a very local level. Just a couple of examples: Seinan University, a Protestant institution in the city of Fukuoka, is the meeting place of a 'study group' called *Nishinihon Hikakushiso Kenkyukai* ('Study group of Western Japan on Comparative Culture'). Actually it is a group of interreligious exchange. The members, among whom are several professors of Seinan University, include both Buddhists and Christians. They meet six times a year and the subject chosen for consideration is usually a Buddhist, or Christian, or a *Shinto* classical text, or some recent publication or event having a bearing on interreligious dialogue.

Prof. Honda Masaaki, a Catholic scholar President emeritus of Notre Dame University of Kyoto, deeply interested in interreligious dialogue, especially in the field of philosophical thought, in 1996 has established a

Study Centre (*Sogoningengaku Kenkyujo*) near the city of Kitakyushu to foster such research.

In Yokohama, since 1998, Fr. Ogasawara Masaru, former Secretary of the Committee for Interreligious Dialogue of the Episcopal Conference of Japan, has taken the initiative of starting regular meetings, called once every two months, and open to public participation, in which both he and the popular Buddhist scholar Hiro Sachiya take up together various religious topics, dealing with them from the Buddhist and from the Christian point of view.

Occasional Events

Another Important context of interreligious encounter is provided by particular events, when representatives of different religions or ordinary faithful belonging to them, come together to celebrate some special event of common significance, or to join in prayers for peace, or to give common religious expression in a moment of public concern. These occasions are becoming more and more frequent. One can say they are now 'habitual' or 'customary' part of social religious life.

Again, here we can only give some recent examples of this widening custom.

Thus, also representatives of the Catholic Church, both from Japan and from abroad, were present at the solemn religious gathering held on Mt. Hiei (Kyoto) in 1987, the year after the epoch-making meeting of Assisi, and again in 1997 for the tenth anniversary of the previous event.

During the World Conference on Environment, held in Kyoto on 1-11 December 1997, a common prayer service was held with the participation of representatives from various religions (Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims and *Shinto*). Among the many NGO present at the event, not a few were inspired by Christian ideals, among them the Catholic 'Franciscan International'

Catholics participate in all major conventions and meetings involving interreligious dialogue in Japan, or in international gatherings like, for example, the *Third International Conference on the Lotus Sutra* held in Bondaiso, on July 10-15, 1997.

The *East-West Spiritual Exchange* programme, sponsored by the DIM/MID monastic dialogue group, in which Japan is directly involved, continued also during the last years, with the fifth round taking place in 1997, involving seven Zen Japanese monks welcomed for six weeks in European monasteries. This 'spiritual exchange' between Christian monks from Europe and Buddhist monks from Japan began back in 1979, when a group of Japanese monks visited European Christian monasteries and spent about a month there. In 1983 the visit was returned and a group of Christian monks from Europe came to visit Japanese Buddhist monasteries and spent a month there⁹.

On 4-8 March 1998, in Tokyo, a preparatory session for the 7th International Meeting of the WCRP was held with the participation of representatives from different religions. On this occasion special attention was given to the encounter of the delegations representing four religious traditions present in Bosnia Erzegovina and to their experience of a difficult journey towards peace in their land. This 7th International Meeting of WCRP will be held on 25-29 November 1999, in Amman, Jordan. Among the 300 participants from 60 Countries, the Japanese delegation was composed by 16 members, of whom six representing Buddhism, three: *Shinto*, two: the Catholic Church, two: other Christian denominations, and three: other religious organizations.

There are always numerous Japanese participants, among them also Catholics led usually by Bishop Tanaka, in the annual *International Meeting of Peoples and Religions*, sponsored by the Rome-based Community of St. Egidio, and held every year in different European cities, after 1986, as a continuation of the great interreligious event of Assisi. In 1998 this annual meeting of prayer and commitment on the part of all religions for the cause of peace in the world, was held in Bucarest, Rumania, from August 30th to September 1st. From Japan about 80 delegates participated, representing Christians, various Buddhist traditions *Shinto*, Omoto, Tenrikyo, and Risshokoseikai.

⁹Cf. Benott Billot, *Voyage dans les monasteres Zen*, Desclee-c de Brouwer, Paris 1987.

A very detailed report of them is always given, for example, by the Buddhist magazine *Gankai* which is very committed to dialogue between the Buddhist and the Christian traditions

Besides actively taking part in these 'major events' of interreligious dialogue, Catholics in Japan are often involved in many ways in cooperating with groups representing various religious traditions planning to visit Christian places or organizations abroad, especially the Holy Father or the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome, or to introduce Christian visitors from other countries to religious organizations in Japan.

Interest in 'interreligious relations' has been growing steadily in Japan in recent times. There is no doubt that the Catholic Church, after the II Vatican Council (1962-1965) and especially after the meeting held in Assisi in 1986 with representatives of all the world religions to pray for, and commit themselves to peace, has played a great role in this process.

A considerable number of representatives of the various Buddhist traditions, as well as of *Shinto*, and also of many 'new religions', go abroad in order to meet there with local ancient Christian traditions. Some are invited to participate in interreligious events, others to give courses (especially on the Zen tradition with practical guidance for the practice of *Zazen*). But also the participation in interreligious exchanges and encounters at home, that is, here in Japan, between the various religious traditions and the local Church, seems to be on the increase.

Dialogue among the religions is becoming more and more the topic also of religious periodical publications. On the Catholic side this has been noticeable, besides specialized and scientific reviews, also in the press intended for a more general audience like, for example, the Catholic national weekly *Katorikku Shinbun*, or the quarterly *Japan Mission Journal* (Tokyo). Among Buddhist publications particularly interested in interreligious dialogue, besides scientific magazines like the *Eastern Buddhist* of Otani University in Kyoto, one should mention in a special way *Dharma* of the Risshokoseikai (in English), and *Gankai* published in Nagoya.

Also the non religious press, usually not very much interested in purely religious events, is more likely to pay attention to facts or celebrations connected with the encounter among different religions. Here again, just to give an example, a local daily newspaper in the Saga Prefecture (*Saga*

Shinbun), since 1993, has run for two years a weekly column of a local Buddhist Priest (Ide Satoshi, of *Sainen* Temple) and a local Catholic Missionary (Allegrino Allegrini, P.I.M.E.), under the title *Silk Road of the Heart* (*Kokoro no sirku rodo*) and then published the series of articles as a book in 1995. Both the column and the book were so well received that the newspaper continued for another couple of years the correspondence publishing a second volume in 1998.

Some Concluding Remarks-

It seems that interreligious dialogue and encounter, as a conscious attitude and a normal part of the life and activity of the Church, though not yet widespread and not certainly general, is, however, gaining momentum.

On the one hand, one has the feeling that it is still looked upon as the task of someone with a 'special mission'. Likewise it seems that the fundamental principles and general guidelines about interreligious dialogue as laid out, for instance, in *Dialogue and Proclamation*¹⁰ have not yet been sufficiently explained and proposed to the faithful.

On the other hand, one finds that, when properly explained and well carried out, activities of interreligious dialogue encounter the approval, and receive a heartfelt cooperation on the part of most of the faithful. I wish to emphasize here the term 'cooperation'. In fact, I think that, except for the case of some (few) people, mostly priests, who are well at ease in this area, most of the faithful do not feel able to act on their own, and need (actually, ask for) guidance and assistance. This brings me to a first conclusion. I think that, generally, not enough has yet been done to instruct and prepare the ordinary Catholic to carry out a competent and active role in the field of interreligious dialogue. This should not surprise anyone. Also in Japan, as in most other countries, the Church is still at the beginning in her awareness of, and in her commitment to, the task of interreligious dialogue as an integral part of her mission to the world.

¹⁰ "Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflections and guidelines on interreligious dialogue and the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ", by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, 19 May 1991.

I borrow the second concluding remark from Fr. Ogasawara, the former Secretary of the Committee for Interreligious Dialogue of the Episcopal Conference of Japan. In a private interview he remarked that, while at the official level the initiatives are few, at the local or individual level they seem to be much more numerous, and that something has to be done in order to gather all the wealth of experience these can provide, and to promote mutual exchange and common reflection on the work being done in this field.

I wish to briefly point out here some of the areas where work should be done with a certain priority to promote interreligious communication and dialogue within Japanese society, and where also the Church can and should bring its cooperation.

a) The family. As seen above in the statistics given for marriages celebrated in the Catholic Church (i.e., by Catholics) during the last few years, by far the largest number of them (almost 80% of them!) are between a Catholic and a non Christian partner. These couples have to be helped in a suitable way to live harmoniously and fruitfully their particular situation, in which dialogue implies witness of one's faith, and, at the same time, witness to one's faith finds its right approach in 'dialogue'.

b) The school. Unfortunately, public schools in Japan, after the war, because of a misunderstood idea of 'separation between an organized *Shinto* religion and the State', have been deprived of all religious education. This has caused and is causing a terrible void in the spiritual education of Japanese youth. On the contrary, most private schools, especially those affiliated with a particular religion, feel bound to present their own religious tradition, but are scarcely interested in giving a sufficient religious education according to the religious tradition of each student. Even though the question is a difficult one, it cannot be avoided if we really care for both the spiritual welfare of the students, and for religious harmony within society. The school, which in Japan takes up practically the whole life of the students, has to be also a place of spiritual growth and, therefore, also of religious education. This can be attained by *both* giving the necessary time to each student to attend diversified classes according to his/her religious tradition, and by, at the same time, introducing in all the various programmes a sufficient amount of study also of other religions, and, above all a practical guidance to interreligious dialogue.

c) Burial rites and graves. In Japan, rites and practices surrounding the dead are still the most important moment of 'religious expression'. Given the emotional and social importance of this moment, also its 'religious' dimension is strongly emphasized. That brings often to an 'over-emphasizing' of the 'religious affiliation' of the deceased (who, ironically, perhaps did not even care too much about religion during his or her life time!). This concern, for example, goes so far as to make it difficult, usually, for the ashes of a Christian to be buried in the grave of a Buddhist family. This situation, in turn, has induced Christians, most of the times, to have their own cemeteries. The issue is a very delicate and difficult one, as it touches upon ancient beliefs and customs, unconscious prejudices and fears, social and religious traditions. But it remains nonetheless a social and religious problem, even though indeed a minor one, which can be solved only in the 'spirit and practice' of interreligious dialogue.

d) Social issues. There are some social problems, in Japan as elsewhere, that are deeply rooted in human history, or, even deeper, in human weakness. The safeguard of article 9 of the Constitution renouncing war; a greater awareness of Japan's responsibility during the war; a stronger willingness to overcome discrimination vis-à-vis of certain social groups; are some examples of these. In this field religions, with the powerful influence they have both in shaping human conscience and in inspiring human behaviour, have a great role to play. Interreligious dialogue and cooperation should make it possible for all religions to join forces in finding the right solution for these problems and overcoming obstacles on the way to solve them.

It seems to me that, by its history and character and by the importance given to harmony (*wa*) in its tradition, Japan has a special role to play in promoting communication among, and the peaceful encounter of, different cultural and religious traditions. Within this rich spiritual tradition of their country, Christians, though numerically a very small minority, find in their own faith new strong reasons and inspiration to be deeply and confidently involved in interreligious dialogue and harmony.