Sāmarasya

Studies in
Indian Arts, Philosophy, and Interreligious Dialogue
— in Honour of Bettina Bäumer —

edited by
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Ernst Fürlinger

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Trans-Religious Studies
and Existential Interpretation

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Trans-religious processes form a promising area of research, which in the future will be subject to more attention, treatment, and reflection than is applied today. In the present article, I want to first exemplify the importance of this part of religious life by means of the history of Christianity, thereafter giving some thought to the category of the trans-religious and the definition of trans-religious studies. The second main part treats the adaptation of existential interpretation on the part of Buddhist thinkers of the Kyôto School, which made Bultmann's hermeneutics into one of the most important contemporary trans-religious methods.

Trans-religious Communication in the History of Christianity

In 1904, Josef Weiß wrote an article defending the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* against those misunderstandings that had arisen concerning its method.[1] In this context, he stressed that "*comparative* religious history is able and bound to display the migration of religious ideas from one religion into another."[2] In fact, Weiß and his colleagues were already going beyond the comparison of single religious phenomena, to which present-day comparative theology is often limited. They also stressed research and theological interpretation of the religious change brought about by communication between ancient Christianity and its religious surroundings. Historians of religion and many generations of exegetes have since convincingly elaborated the trans-religious character of both the First and the Second Testament. In the face of the considerable amount of influence originating from other religions, one might almost follow 1 Cor 4, 7, asking: "What have

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1. The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* whose most important contributors included Wilhelm Bousset, Albert Eichhorn, Johannes Weiß and William Wrede was formed towards the end of the nineteenth century from a circle of Bible scholars and church historians at Göttingen. Its main focus was a historic comprehension of Christianity, especially of its originating from contemporary hellenistic sources.

2. Josef Weiß, review of 'W. Heitmüller, Im Namen Jesu,' *ThR* 7 (1904), p. 187, quoted by Elisabeth Hamacher, *Gershom Scholem und die vergleichende Religionswissenschaft*, Berlin/New York, 1999, p. 75 [stressing in the original].

you got that was not given to you?"[3] The communicative processes between different religions, underlying not only Christianity, but all three Abrahamitic religions and their Sacred Scriptures, find a continuation in their respective theologies. On a macro-historic level, the so-called Hellenization of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theology is to be considered a model of trans-religious studies-formation.

With all due respect for the achievements of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, a noticeable tendency remains: that of treating Christianity and its theology as a finished entity, completely stabilized after its period of inter-religious formation. Thus Christianity seemed to be no longer open to relevant influence from other religions. There are many reasons for this. Most important of all appears to be the fact that from after antiquity until the twentieth century, there have not been any truly influential creative encounters of Christianity with other highly developed religions.[4] The influence of Germanic and Slavic religions especially during the period of migration meant no enrichment but a loss of standard, with the elaborate religious contents and forms of late antiquity now being interpreted following the archaic religiousness of these tribal societies.[5] In the Medieval Ages, no religious exchange was perceived as such, with the exception of the multi-religious societies of Spain and Sicily. Although the influence of Muslim theology was noteworthy even beyond Spain and other border areas, it was not resolved in a theological discourse, but only received in the context of the mediation and discussion of Greek philosophy. If not outright anathemized, the teachings of other religions were belittled to the level of "natural theology," inferior to Christianity as the only religion based on revelation (with the exception of Judaism, that already had occupied a precarious special status). The age of discoveries brought contact to evacuate non-European religions, yet modern euro-centrism, as well as the strife of Reformation and counter-reformation, have rather served to provincialize actual Christianity and its theology while spreading across the world. In defence against outside influence, certain European forms of Christianity were enforced as globally obligatory. Whatever did not fit the desired image was marginalized or extinguished.

As usual, with the loss of trans-religious inspiration, in the long run the quality of religious practice and theological reflection began to suffer. One can, following Hans Martin Barth, suppose that the exchange with other religions is a characteristic of religious strength. Religions that isolate themselves cut-off their own source of life in the attempt to preserve it untainted.[6] If the life of a religion flows without hindrance, transfers from

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3. The same could count for Buddhism. See the pointed wording in Thich Nath Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, London, 1996, p. 11: "Just as a flower is made only of non-flower elements, Buddhism is made only of non-Buddhist elements."

4. I hereby refer mainly to the history of Western Christianity. For the Christian East, however, there seems to be little difference.

5. See Arnold Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt, 1997, pp. 34-38.

6. Cf. Hans-Martin Barth, *Dogmatik. Evangelischer Glaube im Kontext der Weltreligionen. Ein Lehrbuch*, Gütersloh, 2001, p. 162.

other religions are simply taken for granted. Defence against outside influence is built up, especially when the future of a religious community is considered endangered on the part of its members, when paranoic or megalomaniac fantasies avoid seeing the positive elements of other religions, or when religious exchange is made impossible for mere reasons of political power strategies. It is thus generally a sign of weak religiosity. The strength of a religion, in fact, is not to be a closed entity, but rather to be able to receive influence from other religions, creatively processing them. Habitual defensiveness against trans-religious changes flattens and stiffens religious life.

Starting from the twentieth century, one can no longer by any means claim that the trans-religious development of Christianity is concluded. In the age of post-colonial discourse and globalization, the knowledge of the religions about one another is spread across the globe and has irreversibly seeped into the various religious communities. These are themselves often spread internationally and thus coexist with other religious groups and movements, in societies, which in many parts of the world now provide religious freedom. The hybridization of religion in the life and thought of those, whose spirituality is based on more than only one tradition, is spreading worldwide. On an academic level, comparative or intercultural philosophy and theology are being established as independent fields. For the Catholic Church, the opening towards non-Christian religions in *Vaticanum* II brought about the birth of complex inter-religious dialogues and diverse regional theologies consciously integrating non-Christian approaches of the respective geographical area. All these developments make indispensable a scientific approach researching on, and respectively contributing to, the shared history of religions in past and present times.

The wording Weiß used in the quote above, "migration of religious ideas from one religion into another" has certain weaknesses. The limitation to religious "ideas" is unsatisfying and furthermore it suggests the misunderstanding that the aforesaid ideas were rolling about like balls. Certainly though, in the concrete research of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, it was already known that immigration of religious phenomena normally changes the immigrating element and the religion of arrival. Trans-religious processes, especially when touching important experiences, topics, and practices, lead to a transformation of the recipients. Their religious identity is more or less newly constituted by a changing horizon of understanding. Trans-religious studies can contribute to a better understanding of such processes of change, allowing to approach them with less fear and hate, which often hinder the development of a peaceful and communicative coexistence.

What does "Trans-religious" Mean?

The category "trans-religious" is presently hardly used within or outside the scientific

disciplines.[7] Considering the rapid growth in publications on trans-cultural topics, it must be presumed that a more common use of the concept in the field of religious studies is soon to come. The term came into my mind when I was discussing the purpose of comparative and intercultural theology with my colleague and friend Roland Faber. Faber has by now published a first draft of trans-religious theology.[8] He especially stresses the category of transformation therein as the basis and aim of inter-religious dialogue by researching the mutability of religious traditions.[9] "Trans-religious" is for him applied to all processes of auto-transcendence of a religious tradition, be it by internal disputes or by encountering other traditions.

My main focus, also, is on creative reception, as emphasized by Faber. Yet, I believe that the other dimensions of trans-religious processes, such as the primary appropriation of external elements predating the creative insertion into the context of one's own religion (secondary appropriation), should also be taken into account. Since all 'small' borrowings, even if not leading to any far-reaching changes, can become important under certain circumstances, I would not elevate the momentum of transformation into the status of a norm. For trans-religious theology, a clear division from so-called syncretism is important, because syncretism still functions as a kind of four-letter word in theology. In the larger field of trans-religious studies, though, it would be a waste to exclude that broad and highly interesting area (however one may choose to define it) from research. Furthermore, I pledge for the limitation of the term to inter-religious phenomena, though conceiving the concept of the trans-religious in this field as amply as possible in order to live up to the abundance of empiric evidence.

The category then is not only applied to religious exchange on a highly theoretical level, but to any transfer of thought, outlook, norms, practices, rites, institutions, theological methods, etc., from one religion into another. Trans-religious processes begin with first contacts awakening the interest upon reception on the part of individuals or groups. After the initial phase, decontextualizations, translations and learning processes take place, introducing creative reception and integration into the new context

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7.   Presently one can find the term used mainly in three meanings: (1) for a way of thought or spirituality claiming to go beyond the existing religions ('trans' as 'transcendent'), as in the sense of a super-historic mystical experience considered the unique root of all religions; (2) for common threads going through all religions ('trans' as 'transsiberian'); (3) in the meaning I use, 'trans-' refers simply to the transfer between one religious tradition and one or more others. More detail to be found in the text.

8.   Cf. Roland Faber, 'Der transreligiöse Diskurs. Zu einer Theologie transformativer Prozesse,' *Polylog* 9 (2003), pp. 65-94.

9.   Faber's profiling of trans-religious discourse in the face of comparative theology reminds of the criticism of some representatives of cultural transfer research in reference to comparatistics. See the articles by Michel Espagne, 'Transferanalyse statt Vergleich. Interkulturalität in der sächsischen Regionalgeschichte,' and Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Transferanalyse und Vergleich im Fernverhältnis,' in: Hartmut Kaelble/Jürgen Schrieter (eds.), *Vergleich und Transfer. Komparatistik in den Sozial-, Geschichts-, und Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt/M., 2003, pp. 419-38, resp., pp. 439-66.

(recontextualization). The reception, possibly along with failed and denied transfers, causes changes in the religion of arrival, respectively sometimes also in the religion of origin, and a rearrangement of what is received. Sometimes, trans-religious exchange is mutual and takes place in the form of dialogues or polylogues, often connected with conflicts. Finally, also the transfer's history of reception is part of the trans-religious field. Trans-religious processes thus form, all together, the kind of religious change achieved through exchange with other religions.

This change is a universal phenomenon linked to defence mechanisms. These are a topic of trans-religious studies as well as the various motives founding a positive interest in religious transfer. The defence mechanisms not only clearly show that religious transfers do not take place in un-ruled space, but also that they are rooted in a socio-political dynamic of forces, a fact which should be taken into consideration when conducting research on them.

Such research is undertaken by trans-religious studies as a form of interdisciplinary communication making trans-religious processes topic of a scientific discussion. This can be seen from different perspectives, depending on whether research is on the trans-religious field (perspective 1) and/or takes place within it, contributing to it (perspective 2). I propose to call studies from perspective 1 'religion transfer analysis,' following the more recent discipline of research on culture transfer.[10] It includes all scientific conceptualizations of trans-religious processes being made from a perspective of observation. Perspective 2, which could be called 'trans-religious theology' (in the wider sense, including, e.g., Buddhist theory developing in exchange with other religions), includes all theoretical attempts that are immediately part of trans-religious processes. Trans-religious theology is concerned with the truth of these processes and not just with sociological, psychological and historical dimensions of religious life. It further is marked by a commitment to certain religious traditions as well as to the consideration of other traditions.

From an observation perspective one can, for example, show how indigenous ancestral worship influences faith and theology of African churches, which problems arise therein, what can be learned thereby with regard to basic structures and possible laws of trans-religious processes (religion transfer analysis). Or one is immersed in the encounter, and

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10. See Peter Burke, *Kultureller Austausch*, Frankfurt/M., 2000; Friedrich H. Tenbruck, 'Was war der Kulturvergleich, ehe es den Kulturvergleich gab?' in: Joachim Matthes (ed.), *Zwischen den Kulturen? Die Sozialwissenschaften vor dem Problem des Kulturvergleichs*, Göttingen, 1992, pp. 75-99. Research on cultural transfer stresses the changing effect of receptive processes, like the trans-religious studies treated in this article. For a definition see Christiane Eisenberg, 'Kulturtransfer als historischer Prozess. Ein Beitrag zur Komparatistik,' in: H. Kaelble/J. Schrieter (eds.), *Vergleich und Transfer, op. cit.*, pp. 399-417, here p. 399: "Research on cultural transfer scrutinizes exchange of cultures from different geographical and social groups, as well as their mutual penetration. In the centre of interest, there are not the expansion or the filters of the spreading, but the reception of the receiving party, considered as a creative act."

works, for example, at outlining an African Christology (trans-religious theology). Both forms of research are part of trans-religious studies and are founded, at different levels, on basic trans-religious experiences and learning processes.

Trans-religious studies finally turn to trans-religious discourse when its representatives engage in this form of research in a reflexive manner, that is, when they scrutinize its foundations, results, and problems in method and description, and when these are discussed critically. Trans-religious discourse thus forms the meta-level of trans-religious studies.[11]

The above-named perspectives of trans-religious studies can certainly also be executed by a single person, who would then be involved in a situation of trans-religious exchange, though at the same time reflecting scientifically on that situation as such, and who furthermore is grappling with general methodical questions. It does not seem very useful to play off these different aspects against one another. Just as useless is the attempt of constructing an opposition between trans-religious studies and religious comparatistics. Both procedures, comparison and transfer analysis, lead to meaningful results and can furthermore correct and enrich each other. In practised research they are often connected anyway.[12]

Religious Media in Trans-religious Use

A dimension of religion playing an important role in the trans-religious field is religious media, i.e. the various means used to represent and communicate religious messages and experience. These media are forms of oral or textual communication, practices such as meditation, prayer and cult performances, forms of religious art, but also processes of theoretical representation like styles of argumentation, methods of theological analysis and hermeneutics of sacred texts, and the like. Many of these media that arose within one religion can also become relevant for others, and they come into use after being adapted to the respective inner-religious situation. Hence, they become media with the ability of mediating between the religions. A practical trans-religious medium can be, for example, Zen meditation, introduced in Christianity in the twentieth century. This example shows well that media in the trans-religious field do not only serve as passive bearers of arbitrary messages. The question needs to be addressed, however, whether they are to be understood as part of the message, or whether, for example, certain forms of meditation *per se* transport Buddhist meanings, thereby perhaps being incompatible with Christian practise.

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11. See R. Faber, 'Der transreligiöse Diskurs,' *op. cit.*, especially, p. 69.
12. For example, no religious transfer can be researched on without eventually comparing. On the other hand, comparative research must also take into account the possible transfers between the compared religions. See Helmut Kaelble, 'Die interdisziplinären Debatten über Vergleich und Transfer,' in: H. Kaelble/J. Schrieter (eds.), *Vergleich und Transfer, op. cit.*, pp. 469-93, especially pp. 471-80.

In this article, I would like to treat existential interpretation as an example of a trans-religious theoretical method of the twentieth century. It was originally not conceived to be trans-religious, but became so after being received and refounded by the philosophers of the Kyôto School. Methodically, my approach remains in the line of transfer analysis, as defined above. Yet, while writing, I seek to keep the trans-religious theologian in me from falling asleep, and I hope that a similar reaction can also be avoided among my readers.

Existential Interpretation

The disputes on Bultmann's programme of de-mythification were a predominant topic in the 1950s and 1960s.[13] The strengths and weaknesses of existential interpretation have by now been discussed in their completeness, and Bultmann has publicly found approval as a classic of modern theology.[14] His work is considered a successful attempt to unite exegesis, systematic theology, and philosophy. Not in its details, but as a principle of interpretation, existential interpretation has become part of the standard repertoire of Biblical hermeneutics, and has thus found its place in related manuals.[15] Before entering into the topic of its reception in Buddhism, I first want to make note of a few of its basic characteristics.

Bultmann's thought concerns the tradition of modern hermeneutics (Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and especially Heidegger), which goes beyond traditional hermeneutics and its canonized rules of interpretation.[16] To understand a text, this method of interpretation holds necessary an existential relationship of the interpreting party with what is being

13. Interreligious problems hardly played any role in this context. The few non-Western contributions, such as that of Raimon Panikkar, referring also to religions other than Christianity, failed to generate a separate discussion. The contribution of the Kyôto School, too, was hardly recognized. That is, among other factors, rooted in the fact that the relevant works were only published partially in German, and often only after the discussion had been finished. Relatively late, the first German monograph concerning the Kyôto school appears from the hand of a former follower of Bultmann: Fritz Buri, *Der Buddha-Christus als der Herr des wahren Selbst. Die Religionsphilosophie der Kyôto-Schule und das Christentum*, Bern/Stuttgart, 1982. Buri of course did observe the Bultmann reception by Kyôto School.

14. Literature on Bultmann is vast. For a good bibliographic overview, see *www.bautz.de/bbkl/b/bultmann_r.shtml*. Concerning the theology of Bultmann, see Günther Bornkamm, 'Die Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns in der neueren Diskussion,' *ThR* 29, (1963), pp. 33-141; G. Schmitthals, *Die Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns*, Tübingen ²1967; Bernd Jaspert, *Sackgassen im Streit um Rudolf Bultmann*, St. Ottilien, 1985; E. Gräßer, 'Notwendigkeit und Möglichkeiten heutiger Bultmannrezeption,' *ZThK* 91 (1994), pp. 272-84.

15. Thus, Manfred Oeming writes, "All in all, we believe the existential interpretation to be a highly useful instrument in linking differentiated historic analysis to a theological understanding that relates to the present time." Differently in Klaus Berger, *Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments*, Tübingen/Basel, 1999, who considers existential analysis dispensable and tries to rehabilitate the mythical contents of the New Testament as such.

16. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, 'Das Problem der Hermeneutik' (1950), in: *id.*, *Glauben und Verstehen. Gesammelte Aufsätze, Zweiter Band*, 5th edn., Tübingen, 1968, pp. 211-35.

communicated in the text. That counts, as Bultmann stresses, also for the Bible, predominantly treating the revelation of God and requesting a personal pre-understanding in this regard, which exists in question form prior to the explicit faith in God. "In human existence, an existential knowledge of God is alive as the question about 'contentment,' about 'happiness,' about the meaning and sense of world and history, as the question of the very truth of one's own being."[17] Since scientific exegesis must be aware of its leading preconceptions, first of all the question of authentic self-being (nowadays one may call it identity) must be proven by philosophical analysis to be a human trait. The aim of interpretation, and thus an understanding of the Bible, is reached when the understanding of being contained in it is clarified as an answer to the question about authentic existence.

This form of interpretation, besides the named hermeneutical reasons, mainly became necessary for Bultmann because the New Testament is filled with mythical images (good and evil spirits, miracles, expectation of the imminent end of the world, the Saviour descending from heaven, etc.) dating from ancient cosmology which is in his opinion, now no longer acceptable for modern mankind. They can no longer be taken literally in their substantial content, but must be questioned about the understanding of human existence, which they describe.

In philosophically analysing the meaning of being human, he stresses the use of adequate concepts, which should not be taken from the field of non-human being.[18] Thus, Bultmann attaches himself to a central theme of Heidegger's "Time and Being," which he generally follows in his anthropology.[19] Unlike all objective being, human existence is a being that is concerned with its own being and therefore "is to be responsible for itself and has to take hold of itself."[20] On the one hand this constitutes human freedom. On the other hand, it includes an openness towards the future, fate, and death, which means a profound loss of security. The plans for life — and life itself — can at any time be disturbed or ended, which is why being unavailable is a central characteristic of human existence. The inaccessibility of human existence evokes the basic mood of fear, and at the same time the tendency to flee the insecure by holding on to what is present and available.

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17. Cf. R. Bultmann, 'Das Problem der Hermeneutik' *op. cit.*, p. 232.

18. Philosophical existential analysis is for Bultmann a science, "which talks about existence without objectivizing existence into worldly being." (R. Bultmann, 'Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung,' in: Hans Werner Bartsch [ed.], *Kerygma und Mythos. Ein theologisches Gespräch*, II. Band, Hamburg, 1965, pp. 179-208, p. 187)

19. The problematic of hypostatizing is found throughout the whole book, at the end of which once more is said: "Why does this hypostatizing so often gain power?" See Martin Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit*, 15th edn. Tübingen, 1979, p. 437. See Claude Ozankom: *Gott und Gegenstand. Martin Heideggers Objektivierungsverdikt und seine theologische Rezeption bei Rudolf Bultmann und Heinrich Ott*, Paderborn, 1994. Regarding Bultmann and Heidegger see among others Klaus Berger: *Exegese und Philosophie*, Stuttgart, 1986, pp. 127-76; Matthias Jung, *Das Denken des Seins und der Glaube an Gott. Zum Verhältnis von Philosophie und Theologie bei Martin Heidegger*, Würzburg, 1990, pp. 150-80.

20. R. Bultmann, *Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung, op. cit.*, p. 193.

The longing for security is also, for Bultmann, the basis of objectivizing thought in science, myth, and Christian dogmatics.[21] Science successfully conceptualizes the world as a flawlessly-ordered context of events by way of fixed laws, and makes the potentially available *actually* calculable. Thus, it represents a temptation of wanting to completely master the world and human existence. Myth knows about the unavailable and accepts that human life has its foundation in an incalculable, transcendent power; yet it projects that power into the field of the available. Myth "speaks of the unworldly in a worldly way and of the Gods in a human way."[22] Theology, too, is in danger of objectivizing the unavailable, in so far as it uses the language of affirming propositions, the truth of which seems to be independent of the existential relation to its content. Bultmann objects: "The affirmations of faith are no universal truths."[23] As dogmas, merely known and recognized in their being handed down, without relation to the concrete existential situation concerning man here and now, they lose their sense.[24]

Existential interpretation reads the Bible with the sketched anthropologic background and is thereby able to find the impulse it holds also for modern man. "The impulse consists in the word of God calling man from all his fear and self-made security to Him, and thus to his true existence — and thus also to freedom from the world, which he subdues by objectivizing thought in science, that in a way as to give it power over himself."[25] What Bultmann variably calls true existence, faith, Christian understanding of being, or freedom from the world, stands for a basic trust, for being able to open freely and without fear towards an insecure future. "Such a life becomes possible for the human being out of faith in God's 'mercy,' i.e. out of the trust that it is exactly that invisible, unknown, unavailable, which comes to man as love, brings him his future, which does not mean death for him, but life."[26] The ease arising from that implies an eschatological life as a new creature which is able to live in loving human togetherness.[27] It is a freedom from the world with trust in God, which at the same time is a new freedom towards the world.

Following a saying of his teacher Wilhelm Herrmann, which Bultmann repeatedly quotes, one cannot speak about how God is as such, but only what He does with regard

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21. I thus pledge to not establish myth as the only adversary of existential interpretation, thus seeing it in the first place as a de-mythologizing, even if interpretation of myth is treated most widely in Bultmann.
22. Rudolf Bultmann, 'Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung' (1941), in: H.W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma und Mythos. Ein theologisches Gespräch*, vol. I, 5th ext. edn. Hamburg-Bergstedt, 1965, p. 22.
23. R. Bultmann, *Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung*, op. cit., p. 197.
24. Regarding the existential interpretation of dogma, see especially Gotthold Hasenhüttl, *Glaube ohne Mythos*, vol. 1, Mainz, ²2001, especially pp. 85-88.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
26. R. Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie*, op. cit., p. 29.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

to us.[28] That is why the activity of God, i.e. his being present as approaching, questioning, judging and blessing, forms the centre of his theology. Again, Bultmann puts the existential understanding of God's deeds in contrast with the mythical one. Myth displays them as objectively detectable events "interfering with the context of natural, historic, or psychological life, and bursting it, as a 'miracle.'"[29] For Bultmann, though, the beyondness of Divine action is safeguarded exactly by its not happening somewhere in between worldly events, but within them without touching their natural connection. It can be said that God is encountered always and everywhere, though being only discernible for the receptibility of faith. "I can understand an event concerning me in a perspective of faith as a gift or judgement of God, but I can also see it in its natural or historical context."[30] Such faith is an existential process of encounter, which can only remain alive if one sees oneself always anew as personally addressed by God, and if one consequently asks what God wants to tell her/him here and now.

An existence in faith is for Bultmann strictly dependent on the Christ event, whereas he himself feels this to be a delicate point, which does not easily fit into the general framework of his thought.

> Faith as obedient submission to God and as inner freedom from the world is only possible as faith in Christ. This is now the decisive question, whether this affirmation is a mythological remnant to be eliminated or demythologized by critical interpretation. It is to be questioned whether *the Christian understanding of being can be executed without Christ*.[31]

The human nature shown in the New Testament is, on the one hand, not meant to be something mysterious or supernatural. Bultmann considers the Christian understanding of being as one that can very well be attained philosophically.[32] If it is so universally human, then the exclusive tie of this conception of being with Jesus Christ becomes questionable. Bultmann saves himself by moving the focus of the Christian message from the demonstration of the possibility of true existence to its realization. The core of the message of the NT was not the revelation of true human life, but the proclamation that man cannot free himself by his own power, instead having to rely on the liberating act of God. The Christ event functions as "the revelation of the love of God, which frees man from himself for himself by freeing him for a life of devotion in faith and love."[33]

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28. See, e.g., R. Bultmann, *Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung, op. cit.*, p. 185.
29. See, e.g., R. Bultmann, *Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung, op. cit.*, p. 196.
30. See, e.g., *ibid.*, p. 197.
31. R. Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie, op. cit.*, p. 31 [stressing in the original].
32. Bultmann sees in the philosophy of Jaspers, Heidegger, and Kamlah successful attempts to elaborate the conception of man of the New Testament in a considerate and more consequent way (because without mythical remnants), without having to make recourse to revelation. See *ibid.*, pp. 32-34.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Bultmann then again exclusively links the presence of God's love in strict expressions to Jesus Christ. The New Testament was holding the knowledge that "man as such, man before and outside Christ, is not in his free being, not in life, but in death."[34] Without the mercy of Christ, the only adequate attitude towards life would be to despair over the possibility of true being.

Existential Interpretation within the Kyôto School

The conditions for a Buddhist reception of Bultmann among the representatives of the Kyôto School were favourable.[35] Since the Japanese Meiji Era universities of Western style were introduced as a result of the politics of opening towards the West. Philosophy existed as an academic discipline, at the beginning of which Western philosophy was more or less copied. The Kyôto School counts as the first truly autonomous modern school of Japanese philosophy, developing, against the backdrop of Japanese nationalism, the ambition of wanting to excel Western philosophy.[36] The respectively most recent developments in Europe were adopted, and a high interest developed in German philosophy, especially in Heidegger. Also, Protestant theology of the twentieth century was followed attentively, and reactions towards new trends and discussions therein took place swiftly.

Another reason for studying Bultmann was his claim to yield an interpretation of Christianity for the modern, technicized world. The cultural and religious crisis of identity brought about in Japan by modernization was one of the main problems of the Kyôto School. For its attempts to reformulate the Japanese (especially Buddhist) tradition in a language to be understood by modern Japan and the West, Bultmann was an interesting interlocutor, working on a similar problem of mediation on the Christian side.

Not lastly, there were also convergences regarding the way of thinking. With the founder Nishida, we thus find thoughts which favour the later reception of Bultmann. In his last great essay, "The Logic of place and a religious world view" (*Bashoteki ronri to shukyoteki sekaikan*, 1945), the "viewpoint on the 'I' from a perspective of objective logics or objectivization" is considered as the root of all error and as the foundation of the

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34. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

35. The history of the influence of Bultmann in Japan is not confined to the Kyôto School. I will in the following not treat Japanese Christian theology (which in turn is partially influenced by the Kyôto school) nor the interesting attempt of the historian of religion Anesaki to transfer the difference of the historic Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ to Gautama Śākyamuni, that last in order to explain the *trikāya* doctrine. See Michael von Brück/Whalen Lai, *Buddhismus und Christentum. Geschichte, Konfrontation, Dialog*, München 1997, pp. 306-07.

36. For an introduction to the Kyôto school, see Thomas P. Kasulis, 'The Kyôto-School and the West. Review and Evaluation,' *The Eastern Buddhist*, New Series 15: 2 (1982); Ryôsuke Ohashi (ed.), *Die Philosophie der Kyôto-Schule. Texte und Eirführung*, Freiburg/München, 1990; Lydia Brüll, *Die japanische Philosophie. Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt, 1993, pp. 155-79. The state of research is presented by Rolf Elberfeld: *Kitarô Nishida (1870-1945). Moderne japanische Philosophie und die Frage nach der Interkulturalität*, Amsterdam/Atlanta, 1999, pp. 61-73.

original sin.[37] All errors concerning the relationship of God and man are to be founded in objectivizing, respectively object-logical thought.[38] This is already similar to the verdict of objectivization in Heidegger and Bultmann. It is unknown to me whether Nishida himself would have treated the writings of the early Bultmann. His reference to dialectic theology, however, has prepared the reception of the German theologian.

Moreover, parallels to Buddhist tradition were found in the elementary experiences of finitude which in Buddhism have always played a central role (keyword: suffering) and which just seemed to have been waiting to be treated through existential interpretation. The phenomenology of the nothing, to be found in Heidegger, could be critically continued using their own basic concept of the absolute nothing (*zettai mu*), which already is a result of the encounter between Buddhist and Western philosophy.

Nishitani Keiji

When the discussion on de-mythification had become the great topic of theology received in the entire world, Nishitani Keiji, who was the successor of Tanabe at the chair of philosophy in Kyôto, gave his respective views in an extensive article and in various parts of his main work.[39] Nishitani sees de-mythification as a fundamental problem of Christianity, which according to him was present therein from the very beginning. Already before Christianity, Greek philosophy would have tried to free itself from the mythological cosmology. Through contact with philosophy, a conflict would have arisen in early Christianity between faith, dominated by myth, and "reason awoken to self-confidence;" thus, the further history of faith and theology remained a history of that conflict.[40] "We may say that up to today, Christian theology is involved in this dilemma."[41] Bultmann

37. Cf. Kitarô Nishida, *Logik des Ortes. Der Anfang der modernen Philosophie in Japan*, tr. and ed. Rolf Elberfeld, Darmstadt, 1999, p. 238.

38. Cf. Kitarô Nishida, *Logik des Ortes. Der Anfang der modernen Philosophie in Japan*, tr. and ed. Rolf Elberfeld, Darmstadt, 1999, p. 242.

39. Cf. Keiji Nishitani, 'Eine buddhistische Stimme zur Entmythologisierung' (1961): *Zeitschrift für Religions-und Geistesgeschichte* 8 (1961) 244-62; 345-56; it appeared first under the title 'Der Buddhismus und das Christentum,' *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur-und Völkerkunde Ostasiens Hamburg*, Wiesbaden, 1960, 5-32; *id.,: Shukyô to wa nanika* (written 1954-61, published 1961), in English published as *Religion and Nothingness* (Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture). Transl. Jan van Bragt, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1982. My quotations refer to the English translation of Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*. Translated with an Introduction by Jan van Bragt, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983. Other works by Nishitani relating to existential interpretation which I do not refer here, are, by the same author, 'The "Problem of Myth",' *Religious Studies in Japan*, Tôkyô, 1959, pp. 50-61; by the same author, 'Die religiös-philosophische Existenz im Buddhismus,' in: *Sinn und Sein*, ed. Richard Wisser, Tübingen, 1960, pp. 381-89; 'Science and Zen,' *The Eastern Buddhist* 1: 1 (1965), pp. 79-108. Regarding the philosophy of Nishitani, see Taitetsu Unno (ed.), *The Religious Philosophy of Nishitani Keiji*, Berkeley, 1989; regarding Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Nishitani is further treated by Hans Waldenfels, *Absolutes Nichts. Zur Grundlegung des Dialogs zwischen Buddhismus und Christentum*, Freiburg, 1980.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

41. *Ibid.*

was to have referred to the de-mythificating tendency of liberal theology, simultaneously projecting a way to revive the tradition of the Reformation.

Nishitani is impressed by the vitality of modern Christianity, shown in the intensity of the discussion on de-mythification. Contemporary Buddhism is in his opinion not vivid enough to hold such a debate. And yet he believes that Buddhist tradition can contribute something to it. "Where this active and extensive debate enters our field of vision, the presently lukewarm and ineffective Buddhism comes to memory as a kind of geological remnant from far-away times."[42] For Buddhism was to have already overcome the problem of de-mythification in its early days, thus opening a horizon distinguishing it from all other religions.

While thoroughly going through the criticism directed at Bultmann so far, he elaborates that the point is not the vagueness of his concept of myth, but the circumstance that by his critics "with all emphasis on the necessity of overcoming the mythological imagery, the use of mythological language is retained as inevitable."[43] A certain conservativism remains, the dilemma of which Bultmann had already pointed out in his counter-criticism. If myth were to be overcome by an interpretation bringing to light a new sense, then that sense could not be again expressed in mythical language, since that process would bring about the absurd consequence of de-mythification *ad infinitum*. Instead, Bultmann insists on the intention of myth having to be expressed in an entirely non-mythological way.

Nishitani tries to show the lack of completeness of that attempt, with Bultmann himself, judged by his very own conception of myth, falling back to mythical speech in relation to Jesus Christ. Though he was not thinking of him naïvely as a supernatural oracle, Bultmann would yet view him as a Divine event of salvation still having mythical structure as a historically unique *Verweltlichung* of the unworldly.[44] Thereby we return to the position of the critics of Bultmann claiming the inevitable character of myth. "Thus, it seems as though, in the area of Christian theology, a *dead end* is reached between the two opposed parties circling the problem of myth."[45]

Nishitani tries to confront this with a position from the Buddhist side, by which the "detachment from the form of myth in the religious field," up to now impossible in Christianity, "is to be executed completely."[46] He displays this form of radicalized de-

42.   Cf. K. Nishitani, 'Eine buddhistische Stimme zur Entmythologisierung' *op. cit.*, p. 247.

43.   *Ibid.*, p. 249.

44.   On the other hand, R. Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie, op. cit.*, p. 48: "The beyondness of God is not made worldly as in the myth; but the paradox of the presence of the not-worldly God in history is claimed: 'The word became flesh.'" [stressing in the original] Bultmanns general treatment of the paradoxic presence of the transcendent in history is in harmony with the thought of Nishitani. Yet the historic unicity of that presence in Jesus Christ, which Bultmann claims, is for him reason enough to put Bultmann's Christology among the mythological imageries.

45.   *Ibid.*, p. 253 [stressing in the original].

46.   *Ibid.*

mythificating process using the interpretation of the doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus Christ. The virginity of Mary was to refer to an unconditional, ultimate reality of each human, transcendent and at the same time united to concrete existence. "The invariable immaculateness (of man) transcends the immaculate or maculate psycho-physical being completely, yet it is not removed from that being in any way."[47] Both are truly two and truly one, or, as Nishitani also says in reference to the terminology of Nishida: They form an absolutely paradoxical (contradictory) self-identity.[48] In the words of Zen master Bankei, quoted by Nishitani: "We are unborn especially as bodily existing, especially in our being born by our parents."[49] At the background of such Zen-statements would be the Buddhist doctrine saying that all beings are originally of Buddha-nature. They are unmythical, because they do not make the Divine enter into the everyday world in an extraordinary event; rather, worldly everyday life is but the other side of transcendent purity. The breakthrough to the dimension of human being thus mentioned, and the self-understanding deriving from it, was to be an existential self-knowledge, running through all of human history like a vast river and manifesting especially in Buddhism. Attempts at that were also to be found in European history.[50]

In Christianity, birth from a virgin was to be limited to Jesus and considered a special case rooted in his Divinity. A consequent de-mythification was to only be possible when birth from a virgin and Divinity are expressions not linked to any distinct individual, but counting for everyone. In order to achieve that, transcendent reality would have to be thought not as crossing nature vertically, but as horizontal transcendence, being absolute negation (as complete otherness) and affirmation (as non-duality) of nature at the same time. Nishitani finds this not-nature as nature in the Mahāyāna Buddhist principle of formless void (*śūnyatā*, also translated as emptiness, nothingness), as an intangible last reality, being one with the formed being. "I believe that a fundamental and thorough de-mythification of all myths and an 'existential' interpretation of mythological imagery can only be possible in the breakthrough to the horizon of the absolute 'void' or the absolute 'nothing.'"[51]

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47. On the other hand, R. Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie, op. cit.*, p. 257.

48. Jap. *zettai mujunteki jikodōitsu*. Rolf Elberfeld comments this fundamental concept of the Kyôto school, in K. Nishida, *Logik des Ortes, op. cit.*, p. 285: "Nishida uses this fixed formula since 1937. The absolutely contradictory self-identity of reality stands, for Nishida, in relation to the dialectic structure of the instant in a spatial and temporal way as the self-determination of the absolute nothing."

49. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

50. See *ibid.*, p. 260.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 350. Absolute nothing, in Japanese *zettai mu*, is a fundamental concept of the philosophy of Nishida. At the background, there is the Buddhist concept of emptiness or void, *śūnyatā*, but also the Platonic *chōra*. Absolute nothing represents the all-englobing, borderless place (*basho*), which transcends and gives space for the being and the relative nothing related to it, as well as all other polarities. Nishida already tried to build bridges to the Christian understanding of God from the thought of absolute nothing. See H. Waldenfels, *Absolutes Nichts, op. cit.*, pp. 55-64.

The conception of emptiness as absolute negation and affirmation of being at a first glance seems to be a metaphysical concept reminding of the christological two-nature doctrine, pictured here as absolutely contradictory self-identity of the absolute and finite, and extended to all humans, in fact to all being. But, trained with Bultmann, Nishitani displays the existential dimension of the absolute nothing much more clearly than Nishida. He thus thinks from emptiness as lived experience and not from a Hegelian idea of the absolute meant to imply *a priori* that the absolute were also to contain its own negation. The fundamental experience on which his interpretations are based is that of the movement into the foundationless nothing and out of it again. This is described as mystic dying and being reborn, in Zen Buddhist terms 'great death' and 'great enlightenment,' wherein are experienced the nihilation and the returning of all being. From this position, he develops an existential interpretation of Buddhism as well as of Christianity.

Despite the superiority of Buddhism concerning de-mythification, as postulated by Nishitani, he also sees mythical elements in it and demands a very central matter of Buddhist faith to be de-mythificated: the doctrine of rebirth. "The positive significance in myth will truly be revealed only through what Bultmann speaks of as *existentielle Entmythologisierung*. The same applies to the notion of transmigration."[52] He interprets the thought of reincarnation in a Bultmannian way, by taking from it the character of a doctrine describing objective facts, and showing the human self-understanding contained therein. The true meaning of this myth can "only be grasped when we interpret it so as to bring the content of that representation back to the home-ground of our existence in the present."[53] Existentially interpreted, *saṁsāra*, the cycle of rebirth, means for Nishitani an awareness of one's own being as "infinite finitude."[54] With this formula he intends finitude as a way of being which is caught within itself, wherein human existence is so tangled up as to never and in no place be capable of going beyond it. Where finitude, caught infinitely in itself, comes to be seen as such, a *nihilum*, a nothing, rises from the foundation of finite being and nihilates the being of man and with it the being of everything in the world. Nishitani sees the existential sense of the myth of reincarnation in this "nullification of all."[55] The experience of the *nihilum* (the nothing in the negative sense, an intermediate state on the way to the experience of emptiness), just like faithless existence in Bultmann, leads to despair. In Nishitani's view despair is understood as deepened awareness of existence, because in it, the abyss of the nothing emerges from the very source of being. Thus appears a depth, which normally we do not perceive. Despair is for him an issue of the dimension of transcendence, and shows the shape of being in the opening of nothingness.[56] *Nirvāṇa*, the liberation from the vain world, is a breaking out

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52.   K. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness, op. cit.*, p. 174.
53.   *Ibid.*, p. 243.
54.   *Ibid.*, p. 172.
55.   See *ibid.*, p. 175.
56.   See *ibid.*, p. 176.

of this being-toward-death and a turning to the true infinity as revealed in the innermost core of every existing human. For this liberation, the self must give up all high-handedness and become a place of receiving. "To take possession of infinity is for infinity to become reality as life; for it to be *really* lived. The 'Existenz' that connotes such a new life is nothing other than *nirvāṇa*, and such true infinity is *śūnyatā*."[57] Emptiness is not only the negation of *saṁsāra*, but at the same time affirms it, for it is the place where true finitude happens, no longer caught in itself, but open towards the infinite.

> *Śūnyatā* is the point at which we become manifest in our own suchness as concrete human beings, as individuals with both body and personality. And at the same time, it is the point at which everything around us becomes manifest in its own suchness. As noted before, it can also be spoken of as the point at which the words 'In the Great Death heaven and earth become new' can be simultaneously signify a rebirth of the self.[58]

The first chapter of Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness* contains, in a nutshell, a coherent theological overall design of Christianity, from the starting point of the existentially interpreted *śūnyatā*, respecting practically every basic Christian doctrine. Here, I can only consider Nishitani's theology of Creation and his Christology. He again treats the conception of *creatio ex nihilo* not only as an expression of "metaphysical and theoretical reflection," but moreover as something concerning the truth of real things and the existence of everyone. The dogmatic expression becomes a question questioning the questioner her/himself, and that in the tough way of a Zen-Koan. He reaches this connection to the existential situation by referring the topic of creation to that of the presence of God, again not as a concept within one's mind, but as a presence by which "one is pressed from all sides for a decision, whether one faces a single atom, a grain of sand, or an earthworm."[59] In this respect Nishitani draws on the well-known passage in Augustine, according to which all things are declaring to be created by God.[60] Therein is included that they are not themselves God. We can, from this perspective, not encounter God anywhere in the world. Instead, everywhere we encounter the *nihilum*, a nothingness like an iron wall dividing everything from God. Therein, one meets simultaneously the vanity of all created being and the absolute negativity of God, his entire otherness, absence and transcendence. At the same time, creative divine force is found in everything, for He gives it being despite nothingness. The vanity of things and the absence of God in them is yet the place of His omnipresence, which bereaves us of any place, where we could live as independent self-existing beings. If we see the omnipresence of the absolutely transcendent God in this way, we immediately stand in front of the iron wall of God.

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57.   K. Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness, op. cit.*, p. 177.
58.   *Ibid.*, p. 90-91.
59.   *Ibid.*, p. 38.
60.   Augustine, *Confessions*, book 10, 6, 9 ff.

"One who has been able to come to faith may face it and walk through it."[61] The omnipresence of God then manifests as the overturning from absolute negativity to absolute positivity. "To entrust oneself to this *motif*, to let oneself be driven by it so as to die to the self and live in God, is what constitutes faith."[62]

Nishitani interprets the life of Jesus Christ as bodily revelation of that turnover from absolute negativity to absolute positivity, founded in God himself and forming the sense of creation.[63] Again, he composes the experience with Jesus by way of the existential "being-cornered," practised in Zen with the aim of the breakthrough to the void.

> The gospel proclamation that the Kingdom of God is at hand presses man to the decision to die and be born anew. The fact that the gospel of the Kingdom of God has an eschatological dimension signifies, from the existential standpoint, that the *motif* of conversion for man implied in divine omnipresence confronts man with an urgency that presses him to a decision on the spot: either eternal life or eternal death.[64]

Yet, not only Zen spirit underlies this passage. Down to the wording, parallels to Bultmann can be found. The fundamental difference between the latter and Nishitani consists in the fact that the call to conversion for Nishitani is already to be found in the omnipresence of God, as explained above, and the part of Jesus Christ only consists in manifesting this call with greater emphasis. As is to be expected, he does not speak of the passage from the old way of existing to the new as being possible through a love of God revealed only and exclusively in Jesus Christ. For Nishitani, Jesus does not have the character of being the last and final one to reveal God, and the only incarnation of the Logos in this world. For the appeal coming from Jesus Christ with his call for conversion and the revelation of the forgiving love of God are for him alive also in Zen Buddhism, respectively in Shin-Buddhism, and correspond to the fundamental structure of reality, which human existence is at all times subjected to.

Takeuchi Yoshinori

Also from the end of the 1950s onwards, Takeuchi Yoshinori, a student of Tanabe and confessing Shin-Buddhist, wrote a number of works in which he develops his Buddhist existentialism, using also existential interpretation in the style of Heidegger and

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61. Augustine, *Confessions*, book 10, 6, 9 ff, p. 38.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
63. Nishitani's Christology is closely connected to his kenotic trinitarian theology. See A. Münch, *Dimensionen der Leere. Gott als Nichts und Nichts als Gott im christlich-buddhistischen Dialog*, Münster, 1998, also Karl Baier, *Knōsis und Śūnyatā. Gott und Nichts im buddhistisch-christlichen Dialog*: Religionen unterwegs 1 (2003) pp. 4-9.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Bultmann.[65] From the part of the existentialist philosophers and theologians, Takeuchi sees a great help with the attempt to present original Buddhism in a new way, suitable for the Western way of thought.[66] He knew Bultmann personally and reports a conversation with him, in the course of which Bultmann praised the Zen classic "The ox and its herdsman" as a marvellous book coinciding with the Christian truth of man who has to forget the self to gain her/his true self. Takeuchi saw differences in the dialogue with Bultmann only concerning the relationship of truth and history in regard to salvation, and therefore, in effect, again concerning Christology.[67]

Gestures of superiority in the face of Christianity are absent with Takeuchi, just as he generally renounces to the reversed orientalism of his colleagues from Kyôto. With him, de-mythification becomes in the first line a pronouncedly critical treatment of his Buddhist tradition, sometimes consciously turning against authorized doctrines. He uses the existential interpretation as a skilful means to gain an existential understanding of the original teaching of the Buddha through relatively detailed analysis of the Pāli-canon, by which he can criticize later developments as aberrations.

At the beginning of the Buddhist path of salvation, there was to have been an existential internalization of finitude, which he, similar to Nishitani, explains by the experience of fear in the face of threatening non-being, by senselessness driving to despair, as by guilt and sin. Buddha would show the way to overcoming the attachment to the transient, leading on to the experience of the absolute and to mercy in relation to all mortal beings. But very early, this message was to have been forged by the objectivizing approach of early Buddhist schools. As examples for that, he refers to the doctrine of *anattā*, in so far as it replaces the originally intended experience of the nothingness of man with the conception of the self-being only a conglomerate of various psycho-physical functions; *kṣaṇikavāda*, the Abhidharma doctrine according to which all being consists of instantaneous events following one another in an ordered way; and finally the objectivizing view on the body in the *satipatthāna* meditation. *Pratītyasamutpāda*, the chain of caused formation, should also not be misunderstood as a chain of causes in an

65.   Cf. Yoshinori Takeuchi, 'Buddhism and Existentialism. The Dialogue between Oriental and Occidental Thought,' in: W. Leibrecht (ed.), *Religion and Culture*, New York, 1959, pp. 291-318; *id.*, 'Das Problem der Eschatologie bei der Jôdo-Schule des japanischen Buddhismus und ihrer Beziehung zu seiner Heilslehre,' *Oriens Extremus* 8: 1 (1961), pp. 84-94; *id.*, 'Die Idee der Freiheit von und durch Kausalität im Ur-Buddhismus,' in: *Akten des XIV. Internationalen Kongresses für Philosophie in Wien, 2.-8. September 1968*, pp. 145-57; *id. Probleme der Versenkung im Ur-Buddhismus* (Beihefte der Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte; 16), Leiden, 1972; *id.*, 'Shinran and Contemporary Thought,' *The Eastern Buddhist* 13: 2 (1980), pp. 26-45. A good overview on the work of Takeuchi is given by Buri, F., *Der Buddha-Christus, op. cit.*, pp. 255-83.

66.   See Y. Takeuchi, *Probleme der Versenkung im Ur-Buddhismus, op. cit.*, p. 32.

67.   Cf. Y. Takeuchi, *Shinran and Contemporary Thought, op. cit.*, pp. 40ff. For the Takeuchi/Bultmann conversation, see F. Buri, *Der Buddha-Christus, op. cit.*, pp. 277-80.

objectivized fashion.[68] "All of these ideas are products of objectivizing thought, entirely removed from the elucidation of existence by the interior force of transience, and thus taints the true sense of the transient and the 'not-I' up to the quantitative determination of discriminating thought."[69]

With Takeuchi, an influence of existentially interpreted Buddhism can be shown in Christian reception of Buddhism, and thus, the existential viewpoint serves as an interreligious medium also in backwards transfer. Heinrich Dumoulin, in his book *Encounter with Buddhism*, refers repeatedly to Takeuchi's *Problems of meditation in original Buddhism*. He entirely agrees with the criticism of the latter concerning the objectivizing position of some Abhidharma theories and Buddhist forms of meditation. "It is of decisive importance to keep the experience of transience an existential one, and not to draw it to the level of objectivizing thought."[70] For Dumoulin, the fundamental Buddhist experiences of suffering and liberation from it are an experience also made by Christians, which can be shared by all religious people.

> Both moments, ruin as well as the possibility of salvation, are connected in religious experience. Between the two, there is no relationship of cause and effect, [. . .], but they are the poles of the religious understanding of existence, present in the major world religions.[71]

The existential viewpoint, coming from Christian theology, returns to Christian theology by an existential understanding of Buddhism, developed in Japan. Dumoulin can, based on this trans-religious exchange, undertake the regress to existential understanding as medium of the encounter of the world religions.

Summary

The creative reception of existential interpretation at first directly influenced the way of thought of the Kyôto School. The reference to existential experience was in Nishida not methodically fundamental, though already present. Under the influence of Bultmann, dialectic patterns of thought are placed in the background. Nishitani and Takeuchi develop a form of existentialist mysticism which for them becomes the key of a new interpretation of Buddhism and Christianity. The Bultmann 'Rezeption' further allows the Japanese thinkers to connect to the present philosophical and theological discussion in the West and further to contribute the heritage of Buddhist tradition to this discourse. Buddhism, which according to the modernized Japanese intellectual mind of Nishitani at first appears fossilized, thus gains new life and is, with a lead in de-mythologizing, even positioned as a more modern form of religion in reference to Christianity. Nishitani as well as Takeuchi

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68. Takeuchi interprets *pratītyasamutpāda* existentially as a "theory of conversion," leading to freedom from anguish and desires. See F. Buri, *Der Buddha-Christus, op. cit.*, pp. 261-62.

69. Y. Takeuchi, *Probleme der Versenkung im Urbuddhismus, op. cit.*, p. 28.

70. Heinrich Dumoulin, *Begegnung mit dem Buddhismus. Eine Einführung*, Freiburg, 1978, p. 34.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

de-mythologize not against the anthropological horizon of Heideggerian analytics of being, but with the philosophy of the absolute nothing now conceived in a decisively existential way. This philosophy is linked to Heidegger, Bultmann, and Sartre through the *nihilum* as an intermediate phase, while aiming at deepening their analysis of being and nothingness.

Viewpoints on both religions are created, which simultaneously are at home in these traditions and beyond their borders. In Nishitani, the existential approach is mainly in the service of philosophical reflection on the human reality in its existential relation to transcendence. By the existential method he can take impulses from Buddhism and Christianity. On the other hand, he reinterprets them using his philosophy of *śūnyatā*. Takeuchi, rather, writes as a Buddhist "theologian" taking up the criticism of objectivizing thought to elaborate a new existential understanding of Buddhism, following the model of a "reform from the origin," and thus orienting it towards the most ancient Buddhism, though without denial of his own Shin-Buddhist roots.

Concerning Christology, in the portrayed religious dialogue no unity could be achieved between Bultmann and the Japanese interpreters on the basis of an existential interpretation. As for other points, an existentially interpreted Buddhism allows difficult areas in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, such as the doctrine of rebirth and *anattā*, to appear in a new light, consistent with Christian positions. Bultmann's positive statement regarding Zen Buddhism shows him as someone having been able to approach Buddhism on the basis of his own understanding of the (selfless) self-being. On the Buddhist side, on the other hand, new approaches to Christianity were opened. Related hermeneutics (in our case interdependent by transfer) obviously bring religions closer together.

As an interpretational key bringing common basic experiences to light, the existential interpretation has not yet fully employed its potential regarding inter-religious communication. If one decides to start from common anthropological structures as basis of inter-religious understanding, existential interpretation offers itself as one of the elaborated and trans-religiously tested versions of this approach to further reflect upon.