

May 12, 1967

My Dear Masao Abe:

Just after I had sent you my last letter, the copies of "Japanese Religion" arrived here I read your articles with the greatest interest, and I ought to have written my comments when everything was fresh in my mind, but I was not able to do so at that time. Now I suppose that, ironically, this may cross with a letter from you. But in any case I would like to jot down a few impressions.

1) In discussing Christianity you take Barth as more or less normative. That is not unreasonable, since Barth is an uncompromisingly Biblical theologian and certainly takes a characteristically "Christian" stand upon the revealed Christian message of salvation. In other words Barth is clear cut: indeed uncompromising. But precisely because he is so clear cut, it seems to me that he makes dialogue between Christianity and non-Christian religions very difficult, since he himself is hostile to such dialogue. Or at any rate his teaching sharply divides the Christian revelation against any other form of religion. You are perhaps right in tackling the problem of communication at its difficult point, and not where it is easy. But I feel that at this precise point there is not much hope of real progress. One remains blocked.

2) I agree with those who suggested an approach that would favor a consideration of Christian mystical experience as a meeting ground. Obviously, since Daisetz Suzuki studied Eckhart in this light and understood him so well, and since the other Rhenish mystics, the Flemish mystics, St John of the Cross etc offer rich material, the dialogue here would be worth while. However it is true that the mystics are not regarded as characteristically Christian, and the dialogue would be held ambiguous by "the Churches" except perhaps the Catholic Church, which is friendly to mysticism, and certain scholars among Protestants.

3) I think that one ought also to consider the level of Christian ontology (though some would hold there is no such thing). I think the dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism will be most fruitful on the plane not of abstract metaphysical systems but on the plane of what I would call metaphysical experience, that is to say the basic intuition of being, the direct grasp of the ground of reality, which is essential to a true and lived metaphysic. I repeat that I am not concerned with purely abstract metaphysical systems. The basic metaphysical intuition is close to the kind of religious intuition which opens out into mysticism. On this level I think we come very close to what Buddhism is saying. On this level Zen seems to me something very close to home, very alive, very helpful, indeed necessary. In Christian metaphysical-and-mystical experience there is something very close to Zen.

4) Furthermore, I believe that exploration of this area would also open up a possibility of understanding with those modern atomic physicists who seem to be developing quite new insights into the structure of matter: men like Bohr and Heisenberg. I am not a scientist, so I am not qualified to judge in this area, but I find it most challenging.

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5) Finally, there is another area that would be very interesting to investigate, namely the Islamic mysticism and metaphysics of the Sufis, as a bridge between east and west. I am at present reading a most ~~interesting~~ revealing book by a Japanese Scholar, Toshihiko Izutsu, comparing the Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi with the Taoists. The first volume only, on Ibn Arabi, is available I believe. Others will follow which will show the resemblances. This is very important. If you do not know it already I recommend it to you, and it is easily accessible to you, being published by Keio University.

By now you may have received my new book, "Mystics and Zen Masters". It is very sketchy and imperfect, but it may perhaps have some useful material in it. If you do not know the treatise on the "Cloud of Unknowing" I think the remarks in my book will indicate that it would interest you. A friend of mine has written a study of it with some reference to Zen. It ought to appear soon. I wrote a preface to it. I will send you a copy of the book if and when I get one.

I cannot prolong this letter, though there are many more things I would like to share with you. I hope your health is better, and I look forward to hearing from you when you have a moment. I wish it were possible for me to travel. I would dearly love to come to Japan and meet those who are keeping alive the best traditions of Zen in its most serious and basic aspect. I am unable to be enthusiastic about the superficial and "popular" Zen craze which passes for Zen in this country.

With cordial good wishes,