

## INTERRELIGIOUS AFFINITIES



# Interreligious Affinities

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Encounters with the Kyoto School  
and the Religions of Japan

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Jan Van Bragt

*edited by*

James W. Heisig  
&  
Seung Chul Kim



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## Editors' Introduction

Entitling this collection of essays by Jan Van Bragt *Inter-religious Affinities* was a natural choice. Here was a man who devoted over forty years to dialogue with Japanese Buddhists and philosophers, always in search of connections with the intellectual traditions of Europe in which he had been educated. Even a cursory glance at the concluding bibliography of his writings shows both the range of his thinking and the single-minded purpose he brought to that search. That said, the words he left behind in print are only the surface of his achievement. During the many years he spent at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture as researcher, director, and lecturer in the philosophy and theology of religion, Jan was the embodiment of the spirit of dialogue.

Those of us fortunate enough to have lived and worked with him know firsthand the detachment with which he viewed his own pioneering efforts. For example, in 1978 he inaugurated an East-West Spiritual Exchange, arranging for leading Buddhist monks to spend time in European monasteries and then for their Christian counterparts to live in Japanese monasteries. No sooner had the exchange begun than he withdrew into the background and allowed those directly engaged to carry the adventure ahead, offering whatever help he could from the wings.

The same may be said of his efforts to make Kyoto School philosophy better known to the West. He never clung to the close personal relationships he had built up with the philosophical and religious worlds in Japan as a private privilege but always left the way open to whoever wanted to participate. His name is not always in the forefront of the many translations, conferences, and collaborations that

took shape over the years in the Nanzan Institute, but for those of us involved, the warm breeze of his guidance was always at our backs. The list of other projects of which the same can be said is simply too long to enumerate here, but they are the backdrop for everything to be found in these pages.

We have divided this book into two sections, Dialogue with Buddhism and Dialogue with Japanese Philosophy, but the division is somewhat arbitrary and the overlaps will be obvious to the reader. The selection of material posed special problems of its own. In general, our aim in this volume, and the companion collection of his Japanese essays, has been to provide a representative picture of the kinds of questions he wrestled with.

At the same time, we have taken a light editorial hand, touching up minor infelicities here and there but, in general, letting stand the tentative, often chatty, and slightly Flemish-accented prose for which Jan is remembered.

The editors wish to express their thanks to the staff of the Nanzan Institute, and to Peter Bernard, who assisted us in checking the texts against their original published sources.

James W. Heisig  
Seung Chul Kim

*Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture*

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# The Pontifical Thought of Jan Van Bragt

James W. Heisig

Rereading Jan Van Bragt's essays over the past weeks has been a special pleasure. Not only did it give me a chance to savor, if only through the written word, the nearly thirty years of memories I have of him; it also helped me to appreciate better the overall orientation of his thinking. As a philosopher, Jan was a highly systematic thinker but never attempted a comprehensive system of his own. He was more concerned with finding just the right place to plant his own two feet, look at the things of life, and then try to organize what he saw. The special sense of balance one feels in his writings, as in his person, was due in large part to the fact that he was not contentious: he did not define his ideas in reaction to the thoughts of others. When he criticized, he rarely did so in order to strengthen his own position. His aim was rather to unclutter thinking that had become congealed, stuck, knotted, and self-important.

In trying to lay out his philosophy of religion, I am reconstructing as much from a feel I have from years of discussion as from his actual writings and lectures. In that sense, it is more a personal appropriation than an objective account. At the same time, by omitting the fine

A talk presented on 10 September 2007 to a special meeting of the Japan Society for Buddhist Christian Studies devoted to the thought of Jan Van Bragt and subsequently published in the Society's journal 『東西宗教研究』. The English translation reproduced here appeared first in the *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 32 (2009): 9–27.

points of his argumentation and focusing on his conclusions, I hope to give at least some feel for the way he approached what he called “religious reality.”

If I had to choose a single word to characterize Jan Van Bragt’s thought it would be *pontifical*. Setting to one side the connotations of dogmatism and paternalism that have accrued to that word by its association with the Roman papacy, I mean to retreat to its original sense of “bridge-building.” In what follows, I will try to highlight this aspect of his understanding of what he called “religious thought,” using as far as possible his own words and phrasing.

### THE BRIDGE BETWEEN RELIGIONS

As the founding director of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Van Bragt clearly saw its role, and the role of all Christian centers aimed at dialogue, not only to create a forum in which distinct religions can “talk through” their differences but also to build “bridges for two-way traffic” between the spiritual past of Christianity in the West and its very different context in the East. In the case of post-war Japan, he further saw it as the role of dialogue to take over from the state and the political-economic sphere the responsibility of negotiating relations among religious traditions and to redefine it more in line with the fundamental inspiration of the religions themselves.<sup>1</sup>

The dialogue he had in mind was first and foremost a dialogue of ideas, a dialogue that took place not between formal representatives of distinct religions but between individuals whose worldviews have been radically informed by particular religious traditions. In this sense, he distinguished it from the *institutionally attached* defense of one particular cache of texts, doctrines, and practices against others. His own image here is clear:

When the inhabitants of two impregnable castles, each on its

1. “New Dialogue with Buddhism in Japan,” *Concilium* 161 (1983), 70, 73.

mountain on either side of a river, want to have contact with each other, they must at least lower a drawbridge or a couple of ladders. Or, better still, both may leave their fortresses and come together, at a shouting distance, on neutral ground by the river.<sup>2</sup>

This means that one does not give precedence to the benefits of the dialogue for one's own affiliated religion but rather tries instead to shift the focus to what will be profitable for the religious dimension of humanity in the future.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, as early as 1971 Van Bragt had voiced his sympathy for Nishitani Keiji's remark that during Tillich's dialogue with a group of Buddhists in Kyoto he felt that, because of his refusal to side with either religion against the other he was participating as a kind of "third party."<sup>4</sup>

For this same reason, Van Bragt also considered the abstract and *detached comparison* of religious phenomena as equally perilous to real dialogue. When the encounter of religious-minded individuals is absorbed into purely scholarly pursuit and the rules of current academic respectability, it falls into the same pit as the undisciplined, romantic pursuit of novelty and personal enhancement. Both of these have their place, but it is not at the center of interreligious dialogue. From his own Christian, European background, he confesses:

I honestly believe—viewing the dialogue for a moment in its broadest cultural sense—that Western interest in Eastern culture will only become serious and universal enough to be promising for the future when it is motivated by a perceived existential need.... It will remain severely limited as long as it only hinges on

2. "The Interfaith Dialogue and Philosophy," *Japanese Religions* 10/4 (1979), 35 [317]. Van Bragt was also fond of Simone Weil's complaint to her Catholic confidant, J.-M. Perin, that his "attachment to the Church as an earthly home-country" constituted a "serious imperfection" (31 [313]).

3. In an early essay, Van Bragt argues forcefully that the religious dimension cannot be absorbed into a simple humanism. "Faith and Human Development," *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* 31 (1977): 404-14.

4. "Nishitani on Japanese Religiosity," Joseph J. Spac, *Japanese Religiosity* (Tokyo: Oriens Institute, 1971), 279. The original remark by Nishitani appeared in Kuyama Yasushi 久山康, ed., 『現代日本のキリスト教』 [Japanese Christianity today] (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1961), 208.

the frivolous, the thrill of the exotic, or the lofty, unbiased, and benevolent search for the truth.<sup>5</sup>

Behind these words lie the conviction that when religion is inextricably interwoven and confused with any particular culture, it submits to “bigotry,”<sup>6</sup> but that the liberation from culture serves no purpose if it does not lead to a more reflective pursuit of deeper and more pluralist alignment with culture. They also help explain Van Bragt’s insistence that the dialogue is a “sacred adventure” that is compromised when it is given concrete goals, used to solve particular problems, or measured in terms of its fruits for those who participate in it.

The aim of dialogue, he said again and again, is to be “aimless.”<sup>7</sup> In a twist of irony, the “detachment” that keeps scholarly endeavors from dialogue is actually an “attachment” to the aims of academic propriety. What keeps one aimless, conversely, is not the allegiance to a set of rules or conventions, but rather the belief that the service dialogue performs is not tied to any particular tradition, nor to the creation of a new amalgam of traditions, but to a locus at which doctrine and praxis are obliged to take their “other” into account. In his words, “purely *intrareligious* problems—themes that are relevant for one religion only—have ceased to exist.”<sup>8</sup>

The adventure is the creation of a vision cogent for all of humanity that each religious tradition must fashion by itself and that can only be done when it has left the dialogue for its own particular locus in history.<sup>9</sup>

5. “The Interfaith Dialogue and Philosophy,” 30 [312].

6. “Religion and Culture,” *Inter-Religio* 2 (Autumn 1982): 30.

7. 「諸宗教対話の諸問題」 [Problems in interreligious dialogue], 『宗教と文化——諸宗教の対話』 [Religion and culture: The dialogue among religions] (Kyoto: Jinbun Shoin, 1994), 45.

8. “Christian Theology Learning from Buddhism,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 21 (1997), 8.

9. Van Bragt’s booklet, *Toward a Theology of Religions*. *Oriens Studies* 17 (Tokyo: Oriens Institute for Religious Research, 1984), 19–20 [167–8]. This position, it should be noted, marks a sharp move away from his description of the missionary crisis of Christianity in an earlier essay, where the presence of other religions is simply omitted entirely. See “Our Missionary Ideal: Some Perspectives,” *The Japan Missionary Journal* 26 (1972): 133–9. This may be contrasted with a late essay that lays out his mature views succinctly: “Interreligious

It is not something religions choose to do, he insists. It is a case of *non possumus non*.<sup>10</sup>

For this to come about, he was convinced, as he wrote as early as 1983, “the time has come for the birth of a new spirituality, an inter-faith spirituality”<sup>11</sup> based on “a new consciousness” that our allegiance to a particular religion by itself cannot constitute our final identity because “our religious belonging is at the same time a deprivation.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, what was clearly *not* needed was a full-blown theology of religions to direct the dialogue. He roundly criticizes this as:

putting the cart before the horse.... That is, in order to enable a positive attitude towards and honest dialogue with other religions, they feel the need to rush to solve the theological problems first. Experience in the dialogue refutes such thinking.<sup>13</sup>

Although Van Bragt recognized the need for a theology of religions, he seems to have preferred that it not be a specialization but something that “permeates all of theology.” The problem with theology of religions in the strict sense, he claims, is that it has not been able to shake free of the theology of Vatican II which sees all other religions not as equals to Christianity but as mere “pedagogical tools” preparatory to the acceptance of the one true faith.<sup>14</sup>

For all these reasons he clearly rejects the insertion of a theological agenda into the heart of the dialogue in his radical insistence that it be aimless. For him—and this is something he seems to owe to Nishitani—“the dialogue among religions cannot be restricted to the world

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Dialogue and Evangelization,” *Japanese Religions* 25/1–2 (2000): 121–33.

10. “The Buddhist Challenge to Christian Theology,” *Asian Religions and Christianity* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 1983), 26.

11. “New York Conference on World Spirituality,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 7 (1983): 29.

12. “Religion and Violence,” *The Japan Mission Journal* 56 (2002): 15.

13. 「諸宗教神学の諸問題」 [Various problems in the theology of religions] 『出会い』 [Encounter] 13 (1999): 24–5.

14. 「諸宗教の神学の一考察」 [A thought on the theology of religions] 『日本カトリック神学会誌』 [Journal of the Japan Association of Catholic Theology], Inaugural issue (1990): 37–41.

of the religions themselves but belongs first and foremost to society at large.”<sup>15</sup>

#### THE BRIDGE BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

In attempting to define the space on the bridge between religions, Van Bragt talked of it as a *tertium quid*, a position that transcends the traditions of its participants but embraces them to the full. Far from forsaking rationality and systematic thinking, the locus of dialogue requires clear conceptual expression of a particular religion’s self-understanding as an essential ingredient to that religion’s identity. It needs to be both “theological” and “philosophical.” By 1979 he was asserting in print that the philosophy of the Kyoto school offered such a locus, an “Archimedean point,”<sup>16</sup> as he once called it, lacking in Western Christianity.

The failure of Western religious thought to bridge the dialogue to the religious thought of the East is due, as much as anything, to an inherent problem in the history of Christian ideas: faith and reason, theology and philosophy, have classically stood as mutually exclusive centers for speaking of religious truth. That is to say, philosophy has tried to absorb theological thought without remainder into its own circle, just as theology has set itself at the center and embraced philosophical thought, but they cannot both stand at the center of the same circle or feel true to themselves being embraced by a circle drawn about some other center. Van Bragt suggests that the terms of the antagonism are a distinctively Western problem, brought about by the kind of phi-

15. 「西谷先生と私」 [Professor Nishitani and I], 『西谷啓治著作集 月報五』(第六卷) [Supplementary leaflet 5 to volume 6 of the *Collected Writings of Nishitani Keiji*] (1987), 4.

16. 「オリエンテーション」 [Orientation], 『絶対無と神——西田・田辺哲学の伝統とキリスト教』 [Absolute nothingness and God: The Nishida-Tanabe tradition and Christianity] (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1981), 11. See also “The Interfaith Dialogue and Philosophy,” 35 [317]; “Absolute Nothingness and God: The Nishida-Tanabe Tradition and Christianity,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 5 (1981), 30. See also his earlier essay, 「世界的思想家としての西田先生」 [Professor Nishida as a world-class thinker] 『西田幾多郎全集 付録十三』(第十三卷) [Supplementary leaflet to vol. 13 of the *Collected Works of Nishida Kitarō*], 1979, 5–10.

losophy Christianity has identified itself with through most of its history. In short,

Christianity never worked out its own philosophy, but contented itself with adopting Greek philosophy. Thus philosophy in the West, firmly rooted as it is in Greek civilization, is not geared to an explanation of the Christian religious experience, but rather to the foundation of the “natural phenomena” of everyday consciousness.

Hence Greek philosophy has served Christianity for the clarification and support of its doctrines as a kind of constant companion, but in many cases ended up “more of a betrayer than a translator of the Christian idea,”<sup>17</sup> and constitutes a source of “defects and errors” in Christian theology.<sup>18</sup> Along this same line, we should note that, despite Van Bragt’s obvious affection for the thought of Nishitani, he recognized from very early on Nishitani’s “faulty perspective” on

17. “The Interfaith Dialogue and Philosophy,” 41–3. The same point is repeated in his “Translator’s Introduction” to Nishitani Keiji’s *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), xxvii; “Christian Theology Learning from Buddhism,” 10–11 [40]; “The Challenge to Christian Theology from Kyoto-School Buddhist Philosophy,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 1 (1991): 48 [262]; “Contributions of Buddhism to Christianity,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 23 (1999): 16–17 [34]. In one place, he states explicitly that the liberation from Greek philosophy is something for which Christianity should elicit the help of Buddhism: 「真宗に期待するもの——諸宗教との対話を通して」 [Expectations from Pure Land Buddhism in dialogue] 『伝統と創造』 [Tradition and creation] 10 (1989): 174–5. See also “Begegnung von Ost und West: Buddhismus und Christentum,” Hans Waldenfels and Thomas Immoos, eds., *Fernöstliche Weisheit und christlicher Glaube: Festgabe für Heinrich Dumoulin SJ zur Vollendung des 80. Lebensjahres* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 1985), 277–8. In this same essay he entertains, but immediately rejects, the idea that Hegel’s philosophy might serve as a foundation for Christian thought (276). As is well known, Van Bragt wrote a doctoral thesis on Hegel and published a lengthy research article as a research student at Kyoto University on the notion of the “struggle” in Hegel and its role in the fullness of self-consciousness. 「ヘーゲルの精神現象学、及びそれ以前の諸書に於ける《生と死の戦い》の思想について」 [On the life-death struggle in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and earlier writings] 『哲学研究』 43 (1966–1967): 19–43, 1171–89.

18. 「神への欲望と大乘の論理と欲生」 [The desire for God, Mahāyāna logic, and the desire for birth] 『親鸞教学』 [Shinran’s doctrine] 72 (1998): 77. 「私の見た仏教と京都学派」 [My views on Buddhism and the Kyoto school] 『駒澤大学佛教学部論集』 [Collected essays of the Komazawa University Department of Buddhist Studies] 32 (2001): 3–6.

Christianity brought about by “the tendency to judge Christianity by the writings of modern Western philosophy.”<sup>19</sup> To this we should add the tendency, inherited from Nishida, to formalize religion and remove it from the concreteness of modern life:

To be sure, Nishida, had a better grasp of Christianity than most of his generation.... But as Nishida’s thought gradually became more logical and systematic, while his understanding of Christianity deepened, one has the sense that somehow it became more formalized and narrowed....<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, he is not faulting philosophy as such or asking philosophy to give up its commitment to reason. On the contrary, as we read in a memorial lecture on Tanabe Hajime:

Ultimately, I would say the most impressive thing about Tanabe was his courage to believe in “human dignity.” This belief is fundamentally of religious feeling, but in Tanabe’s case it took the form principally of absolute trust in the unlimited possibilities of human reason. Whether immediate or... mediated through Other-power, his aim was absolute knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

For Van Bragt, the properly philosophical aspect of the dialogue does not stop at theoretical comparisons but includes a religious dimension. In the context of dialogue, philosophy

will have to hearken back incessantly to a religious doctrine, and ultimately to a religious consciousness and praxis. Thus... comparative philosophy might content itself with an investigation of the logical possibility of the concept of nothingness over against that

19. “Notulae on Emptiness: Reading Professor Nishitani’s *What is Religion?*” *Japanese Religions* 4/4 (1966): 54. See also “Nishitani the Prophet,” *The Eastern Buddhism* 25 (1992): 38–9 [298].

20. 「西田哲学とキリスト教」 [Nishida and Christianity], Ōmine Akira 大峯顯, ed., 『西田哲学を学ぶ人のために』 [For students of Nishida’s philosophy] (Kyoto: Sekai-shisōsha, 1996), 207.

21. 「田辺と宗教と哲学」 [Tanabe, religion, and philosophy] 『宗教哲学研究』 [Studies in religious philosophy] 18 (1991): 4.



of being, but the dialogue can never forget the ethical-religious element of “selflessness” embedded in the Eastern spiritual tradition.<sup>22</sup>

In this regard, he did not hesitate to take up the question against the wedding of Christian theology to scholastic philosophy and take sides with those who argued for its irrelevance to our times. Although he had a high respect for medieval thought, and even went so far as to say that there are many similarities to be found there with Japanese ways of thinking,<sup>23</sup> he was well aware of the limitations it faced when posing as “foundational” to Christian philosophy. To this we must add his constant reiteration that “religion forfeits its *raison d'être* when it ceases to enter into the life of people today.”<sup>24</sup> Arguing from the standpoint of Japan in an essay written in 1969, he went still further to make a claim so bold it is hard to imagine it coming from Van Bragt’s own pen:

I really think that we ought to examine our traditional doctrines very carefully to see whether we should not throw overboard part of them... in strict justice to our listeners, the Japanese. If a doctrine, no matter how “traditional,” instead of conveying the Gospel of Christ to the Japanese, hides it from them, it is our strict obligation to throw it out.<sup>25</sup>

There are three concrete cases in Van Bragt’s writing that come to mind as applications of this idea. First, there is a hint in one late essay

22. “The Interfaith Dialogue and Philosophy,” 40 [322].

23. See his remarks in his review of Doi Masatoshi’s *Search for Meaning Through Interfaith Dialogue* in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 3/2–3 (1976): 252. One should also note that Van Bragt cites Thomas Aquinas in defense of his view that the idea of “being” that Kyoto school philosophers use to contrast to their idea of “nothingness” is much richer than they give it credit for. “Tanabe, Religion, and Philosophy,” 12–14.

24. 「科学と宗教——我われは何を考えるべきか」 [Religion and science: What are we to think?] 『願海』 9/7–8 (1982): 33.

25. “The Future of Belief Revisited,” *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* 23 (1969): 529–30. It goes without saying, Van Bragt felt that, *mutatis mutandis*, the same held true for Zen in the West, which “will have to undergo a rather deep transformation in order to remain a humanly sane movement and to have a beneficial influence on Western individuals and on Western society as a whole.” “Reflections on Zen and Ethics,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 12 (2002): 145 [230].

that the Christian idea of a “personal Trinity” could be rethought to incorporate the Buddhist idea of the non-ego.<sup>26</sup> Second, there is a bold suggestion that we apply the deconstructive Buddhist notion of “emptiness” (or Christianity’s own negative theology) to our “reifications” of the afterlife in the form of the fear of hell, the receipt of rewards in the life to come on the basis of merits accumulated in this life, the survival of the individual personality after death, and the projection of profane desires.<sup>27</sup> And third, the purification of our image of God of its violent aspects. I cite only his words on the latter:

We have to permit the all-loving God of Jesus to take possession of our minds and ban from our hearts all traces of the jealous and vindictive god of the early Bible texts, a god who is intent on showing his power by annihilating his rivals and enemies.... It appears to follow that... we have to ban these early texts from our meditations and liturgy.<sup>28</sup>

In the main, however, he softened his initial expression about “throwing doctrines overboard,” suggesting that we hunt through Christian tradition for alternative but peripheral ways of explaining the faith that might be brought to the center in Japanese Christiani-

26. “Contributions of Buddhism to Christianity,” 15 [31–2].

27. 「死と空と神」 [Death, emptiness, and God] 『大乘禪』 [Mahāyāna Zen] 848 (1995): 74–5. Concerning the importance of the “personal” in Christianity, Van Bragt explains his position in contrast to Pure Land Buddhism in an essay entitled 「イエスの名と人格」 [The name and person of Jesus] 『真宗教学研究』 [Studies in Pure Land doctrine] 15 (1991): 22–4. However, in sharp contrast to his academic essays, he also delivered lectures on Christian views of death to Buddhist audiences in which all these criticisms are left aside, for example 「キリスト教における終末観」 [Christian eschatology] 『真宗教学研究』 [Studies in Pure Land doctrine] 13 (1989): 1–17. In a similar talk to a group of Pure Land believers he speaks of his own father’s death and spells out in some detail how he himself would like to die. See especially 「キリスト教神学から見た生と死」 [Life and death as seen in Christian theology] 『現代人の生死観』 [Modern people’s view of life and death] (Kyoto: Dōbōsha, 1994), 39–47. We see him taking the same position of expounding Christian doctrine popularly while leaving out the critical concerns that occupied his attention in a 1979 discussion with a Pure Land Buddhist monk, Saeki Kesshō, 『親と子について——釈尊とキリストの対話』 [Parents and children: A dialogue between the Buddha and the Christ] (Tokyo: Ryūdō Shuppansha, 1979).

28. “Religion and Violence,” 81.

ty.<sup>29</sup> He was persuaded that as much as Christianity “needs the unique sensibility of the Japanese people,” Japan needs Christianity—“a Japanese Christianity not over against Buddhism but... in a mutually transforming symbiosis.”<sup>30</sup>

In spite of this, or rather because of it, he never backed down from his insistence that his Christian faith be liberated from its arranged marriage with Western philosophy. In fact, in his orientation to the Sixth Nanzan Symposium which brought Tendai Buddhists and Christians into dialogue, he proposed the following theses:

1. The religious exigency or quest differs from the intentionality of pure reason. Religious truth demands that the processes of reason be continually checked by the lived experience of human life and by religious practice.
2. No religious doctrinal system can be entirely without presuppositions. A religion can be rationally systematized only on the basis of a previously accepted framework and problematic.<sup>31</sup>

What is important about these two statements is that he sees it as one of the functions of dialogue to make them real and to insure that they have practical consequences. It is one thing to lay out epistemological theory; it is another to apply it to doctrinal tradition.

#### THE BRIDGE BETWEEN DOCTRINE AND RELIGIOUS REALITY

There can be no doubt from texts cited above that Van Bragt considered religious doctrine secondary to “religious consciousness and praxis”—or “religious reality,” as he liked to call it. Doctrine

29. “Christ and Japanese Buddhism” *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* 34 (1979): 181–2. “My views on Buddhism and the Kyoto School,” 6.

30. “Inculturation of the Gospel Values in Buddhist Countries,” *The Japan Mission Journal* 52 (1998): 239, 241. See also “The Buddhist Challenge to Christian Theology,” 28.

31. “Tendai Buddhism and Christianity: Theory and Practice in Religion,” in Imelda Abbt and Alfred Jäger, eds., *Weltoffenheit des christlichen Glaubens: Fritz Buri zu ehren* (Bern: Verlag Paul Haupt), 174.

may provide a matrix for religious experience, a language to talk of it, a set of tools to locate it in a wider historical context, but it remains second-level and self-reflective. This may be something obvious to the majority of theologians writing in the latter half of the twentieth century, and indeed I do not know of anywhere in his writing that he spent time bothering to argue the point. He was more concerned with applying it concretely to the kinds of problems he met in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Unlike many of his colleagues, who have seen Christianity as an easy target when it comes to putting doctrine ahead of religious experience, Jan took up the riskier task of highlighting the tendency in living Japanese Buddhism to let *traditional teachings* lord it over *present religious reality*.

I see this in two concrete critiques, each of them aimed at faulting the religious establishment—scholars included—for letting certain ideas or texts obscure their vision of what happens to Buddhism when it becomes “liveable.”<sup>32</sup> Behind both of them lies the same conviction that like all world religions, Buddhism is a “secondary entity” whose first allegiance belongs to the “basic, primitive needs” of the religious heart that gave it birth.<sup>33</sup>

In 1994 Van Bragt published a lengthy essay on the question of desire in order to clarify what an innate paradox he saw in the Buddhist standpoint: on the one hand, desire is the root of all suffering; on the other, without the desire entailed in earnest striving, desire cannot be uprooted. Without reiterating his argument, I extract only the outline of his conclusion:

Buddhism tends to situate the paradox of desire between its *theory* of emptiness, for which desire is absolutely taboo, and its *practice*

32. *Toward a Theology of Religions*, 10–16 [155–63].

33. “World Religion: Its Conditions and Tasks,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 18 (1994): 20. Elsewhere he applies this concretely to the case of Pure Land Buddhism to argue that seeking its “essence” is erroneous, and that, as in Christianity, the religiosity of the “ordinary person” is primary to theological doctrine. 「浄土真宗とは何か——私の真宗観」 [What is Pure Land Buddhism? A personal view] 『同朋佛教』 23 (1988): 9–10, 17.

for which desire is absolutely necessary.... The Buddhist theory of desire by itself does not explain its own religious reality;... the logic of emptiness gives us a view of the top without accounting either for the ladder that brings one there (the path) or for the bottom whereon that ladder rests (the original secular situation).... For Buddhism itself and also for the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, the crucial “consequence” of the superiority of the cognitive in Buddhism is the consequent difficulty Buddhist theory has in giving a proper place to mercy or love.... We need only remind ourselves of... the presentation of the bodhisattva as the one who knows how to combine in one’s person two contradictory things: a wisdom that does not recognize the real existence of others, and a mercy that recognizes others as real and actually takes care of them. Nevertheless, the fact is that in the logic of emptiness, mercy tends to be reduced to wisdom, to become insight into the non-duality of self and other.<sup>34</sup>

This is more than an academic question about an ambiguous concept. It is also more than a simple criticism of an insufficiently cultivated moral conscience. Insofar as it touches on a failure of doctrinal theory to take into account the fullness of the “religious reality,” it points to a problem endemic to all religious establishments. To put it in Christian categories, it signals a failure of “orthopraxis,” not in the literal sense of “right action” but in the applied sense of a practical critique of doctrine. The canon of authoritative texts or the ordination of an authoritative body of experts are not enough to authenticate teaching as correct. The practical consequences of the teaching are also a critical gauge of its truth. As noble and time-honored as a particular doctrine may be in the abstract, if it promotes or even camouflages deviation from the fundamental inspiration of the tradition, it qualifies as heterodox. Thus, teachings can cross a critical threshold of distance from the living religiosity of believers, beyond which they cease to be authoritative. Van Bragt’s point is that this hap-

34. “Some Comparative Reflections on the Uses of Desire in Buddhism, Christianity, and Jōdo Shinshū,” *The Pure Land* 10–11 (1994): 86–8 [126–8].

pens in the tendency of Japanese Zen and Pure Land philosophies to absorb the mandate to Mercy into the ideals of Wisdom.<sup>35</sup>

A simple increase of effort in social action does not resolve the problem Van Bragt is pointing at. If anything, it only aggravates it. His words are not aimed at those who lack the stamina to carry their beliefs out in practice, but to some more fundamental lack in the beliefs themselves that actually impedes their realization. What is called for is a realignment of the very meaning of an ideal to accommodate the reality of those who live it out despite the inconsistency this would entail at a theoretical level. It would require nothing less than a shift in the way doctrine is interpreted. The dialogue with Christianity only provides the catalyst, as his concluding words state in clear and bold language:

The deepest ground of difference in the evaluation of desire is evidently the difference in conception of the Absolute. On the one hand, we have being as an acting, desiring, loving personhood that actively attracts the human by means of the very desire at the heart of the human. On the other, we have being as emptiness, where all desiring, acting, loving has been neutralized in a totally transparent wisdom, a pure consciousness not limited by any object, project, or aim, which cannot attract but can only be “realized” by a total *Abgeschiedenheit* from all action and desire.<sup>36</sup>

Rudolph Otto was fond of citing the words of his teacher, Friedrich Heiler, that there is no greater error in the encounter of religious traditions than to compare one religion’s theory with another’s prac-

35. This is, of course, not restricted to philosophical views, but reflects his expressed desire that compassion be restored to the central place in the Buddhist worldview, edging out ideas like “emptiness” and “nothingness.” “Expectations from Pure Land Buddhism,” 176, 179, 182–4.

36. “Reflections on the Uses of Desire,” 92 [128]. This position is elaborated further with particular reference to the Pure Land “desire for rebirth in the Pure Land” in contrast to the Christian desire for union with God, in a late lecture cited earlier, “The Desire for God, Mahāyāna Logic, and the Desire for Birth, 76–87. See also 「空の思想と東西の対話」 [The idea of emptiness and the East-West dialogue] 『禅文化』 55: 59–70.

tice.<sup>37</sup> In using the Christian understanding of “desire” as a counterfoil to Buddhism, Van Bragt is comparing a relationship between practice and theory. He was not given to dwelling on the follies of establishment religion as much as the rest of us. Rarely, in writing or in conversation, did he wave a finger at religious institutions for not sufficiently consulting their own insight or being inspired by their own preaching to reform their practice.<sup>38</sup> And yet even when he is stretching to compare the most abstract and ethereal of notions, he is never far from a consideration of the seeds of these ideas in everyday life and the fruits they bear there.<sup>39</sup> To use his own image, without keeping in mind the ladder from our religious reality to our religious ideals, no theory or doctrine can be authentic.

The second example has to do with his insistence, following Wilfred Cantwell Smith, that when all is said and done, religion is a kind of *life*. It is the kind of thing that flows and overflows, that flourishes and sickens, and that along the way is full of the same paradox and contradiction that characterizes all of life. Insofar as the *logic* of a particular religion attempts to resolve paradox and recon-

37. R. Otto, *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted* (London: SCM Press, 1930).

38. Aside from a quick swipe at the “autocratic” ways of Pope John Paul II (“Expectations from Pure Land Buddhism,” 170), one of the clearest exceptions is an essay on the battle between the Sōka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shōshū, in the course of which he lays out, with apparent sympathy, the criticisms of “clericalism” leveled against institutional Buddhism at large. “An Uneven Battle: Sōka Gakkai vs. Nichiren Shōshū,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 17 (1993): 24–6. The following year he clarified his own idea of the role of the clergy in “World Religion,” 24–7. It is more common, however, to see him insist in general terms on the need to soften the attachment to orthodoxy and strengthen the need for “constant” reform. See, for example, 「キリスト教における教会論」 [The Christian idea of church] 『真宗教学研究』 [Studies in Pure Land doctrine] 14 (1990): 31–2; 「既成宗教は現代人に貢献できるのか」 [Does organized religion have a contribution to make for people today?] 『壊乱——現代宗教の危機』 [Confusion: The crisis in religion today] (Tokyo: Suzusawa Shobō, 1996), 25–6; 「ローマ・カトリック教会」 [The Roman Catholic Church], Mutō Kazuo 武藤一雄, Hiraishi Yoshimori 平石善司, ed., 『キリスト教を学ぶ人のために』 [For students of Christianity] (Kyoto: Sekaishisōsha, 1985), 154.

39. This was a trait he singled as what he most admired about his former teacher in Japan, Takeuchi Yoshinori. See his “In Memoriam Takeuchi Yoshinori (1913–2002),” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 26 (2002): 62.

cile contradiction, it is faithful to the demands of reason, which are themselves part of the life of religion. If logic is simply descriptive of religious reality, it is lame. If it is normative and critical, it risks coming loose of its foundations and choking the life out of religious reality.

Van Bragt applies this to the Pure Land School and its way of dealing with “superstition.” While admitting that the faith-reason dichotomy so real in Christian tradition is absent in Buddhist logic, he finds that Pure Land and Christianity are very much alike in terms of the relationship between authorized doctrine and actual practice:

The tension present in Shinshū could be described as a tug of war between the legitimate desire for logical consistency with the principles of rationality recognized in the Mahāyāna world (and also to eliminate all superstitious forms of the “Amida cult”) and, on the other hand, a real recognition, also in the doctrine, of the religious impulses of the heart, which appear in their rawest state among the “little people,” as having their own rights and validity.<sup>40</sup>

He makes it clear that he does not see this as a pejorative judgment but as a constitutive component of living religion, for which reason he proposes that insofar as Pure Land Buddhism grapples with this problem between its life and its logic, it can “form a bridge between Buddhism and Christianity.” Unperturbed by objections among Pure Land schol-

40. “Buddhismus, Jōdo Shinshū, Christentum: Schlägt Jōdo Shinshū eine Brüche zwischen Buddhismus und Christentum?” E. Grössman, G. Zobel, eds. *Das Gold im Wachs* (München: Iudicium 1988), 460. This can also be found in a later English version of the same essay, “Buddhism–Jōdo Shinshū–Christianity: Does Jōdo Shinshū form a Bridge between Buddhism and Christianity?,” *Japanese Religions* 18 (1993): 57 [96]. Similar comments appear in a Japan essay bearing almost the same title: 「真宗は仏教とキリスト教との橋わたしたとなりうるか」『親鸞教学』 [Shinran’s doctrine] 52 (1988): 49–52. Van Bragt’s interest in overcoming the “elitism” of institutional religion vis-à-vis the mass of believers is reflected in his resume of the Second Nanzan Symposium, “Mass and Elite in Religion,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 2 (1978): 4–14, though at the time his ideas had not come to grips with the underlying doctrinal questions treated in the essay cited here. The same may be said of the symposia that followed on “historical religion and folk religion” (1985) and “theory and practice” (1987), both of which spurred him to clarify his own thinking.



ars about the foreignness of their doctrine for Christians and foreigners, Van Bragt spent a great many years trying to show just that.<sup>41</sup>

Finding inspiration in the writings of Soga Ryōjin, which he was translating up to the end of his life, he lays out an opposition between the non-duality postulated by the idea of Buddhist emptiness and the “dualism” required by Pure Land piety, “wherein unity with Amida implies the actual overcoming (by Amida’s merciful activity) of a real duality or abyss.” In other words, without that dualism, there is no religious reality; with it, religious life is inconsistent with religious logic. This non-dualism is not to be simply rejected for its inconsistency with devotion, but accepted because “it adds a new, positive, and complementary dimension.”<sup>42</sup>

He carries his questioning a step further to ask the delicate question, *Does Amida Buddha exist?* Noting that the Biblical idea of an I-Thou relationship between God and human beings has clear parallels in devotional Pure Land texts, nevertheless, if one is to be consistent with Buddhist logic, Amida Buddha is deconstructed into a superstition, and as a result devotion collapses. Soga posed the same question and concluded that “the real existence of the Tathāgata is demanded by our affectivity, over against the critique of reason.” Van Bragt agrees that

A “passage” through the Buddhist logic of emptiness—this in contradistinction to sticking to it as the last word—is very salutary, and

41. This is the whole feeling behind his popular piece on Hōnen, 「現代世界における法然の意義」[The significance of Hōnen for today’s world] 『法然の原風景——その歴史と思想を考える』[Hōnen’s basic landscape: Rethinking his history and ideas] (Kyoto: Shionsha, 1993), 138–49.

42. “The Way of Devotion: Pure Land Buddhism,” *The Japan Mission Journal* 47 (1993): 283. He argues much the same in the case of Christianity, distinguishing between the paradoxical dualism of the scriptures and the philosophical dualism that Christian doctrine inherited from Greek philosophy. See his discussion with Kokubu Keiji, 「この時代に我われは如何に生くべきか」[How are we to live in these times?] 『願海』6/1 (1979): 22–4. Around the same period, he states that this dualism is due to the fact that Christianity is a “prophetic” religion and not, like Zen, simply a “mystical” one. 『禪とキリスト教』[Zen and Christianity] 『禪文化』[Zen culture] 108 (1970): 26–7.

even necessary, for all our thinking about the “Transcendent,” be it Amida or God.<sup>43</sup>

His fuller argument, again based on Soga, I will not go into here. Lest there be any doubt, we should be clear on one point: Van Bragt rejects the primacy of the logic of emptiness over the religious reality that is the lifeblood of those who believe and practice. He argues that it “does not provide a sufficient foundation for Buddhism as a religion” and that “it does not provide a backing and motivation for social action.”<sup>44</sup> And this is a critique from which he does not exempt the Kyoto School’s philosophy of absolute nothingness in general<sup>45</sup> and Nishitani’s in particular.<sup>46</sup> This also underpins his cautious conclusion concerning the war-time complicity of the Kyoto-school philosophers that insofar as emptiness or absolute nothingness rejects all multiplicity and otherness as inauthentic and finally disputable, “What we end up with is an ontological monism or totalism, which in turn readily leaves itself open to the support of state absolutism.”<sup>47</sup>

Following along the same line of argument, Van Bragt argues elsewhere that, beginning with Christianity, the idea of assigning any entity or doctrine the quality of “absoluteness”—an idea that is not

43. “Buddhism–Jōdo Shinshū–Christianity,” 63, 69 [100, 106].

44. 「空の思想と浄土教」[Pure Land Buddhism and the idea of emptiness] 『大乘禪』[Mahāyāna Zen] 815 (1992): 8–12. For a more detailed argument, see “My views on Buddhism and the Kyoto school,” 8–11.

45. For example, taking up Takeuchi Yoshinori’s doubts about whether, in a philosophy of nothingness like that of the Kyoto school, “the existential rawness of religious life does not evaporate,” he questions whether “emptiness” is capable of capturing the fullness of the Christian ideal of love and social commitment. “Absolute Nothingness and God,” 40–4.

46. “Nishitani the Prophet,” 32–3 [292–3]. See also his superb critique of Nishitani’s thought, “Nishitani Revisited.” *Zen Buddhism Today* 15 (1998): 77–95, in which many of the criticisms Van Bragt raises against Mahāyāna Buddhism are recapitulated.

47. “Kyoto Philosophy—Intrinsically Nationalistic?” James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1994), 252. It should be noted that Van Bragt’s views on the wartime position of Buddhist sects in general is much harsher. See his essay 「戦中経験——日本とヨーロッパ」[The war experience: Japan and Europe] 『社会問題としての宗教』[Religion as a social problem] 南山大学社会倫理研究所、1997), 28–9.

much older than Hegel—should be abandoned altogether as unjustified by the lived reality of religion.<sup>48</sup>

These are the sorts of ideas that give a solid foundation to a statement like the following, which might easily be overlooked as a broad generalization but which in fact touches on the very heart of Van Bragt's conviction that the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity is most true to itself when it keeps the religious reality of both in mind. Speaking of the idea that Buddhism is less a "religion" than a "spiritual philosophy," he writes:

Two things can be said about that Western image of Buddhism. One, it corresponds to one (important) aspect of the original Buddhist ideal, but it does not catch the reality of Buddhism as it has been living in history. Two, it presents Buddhism in the typical form of an "export article": a cut flower, nicely packed but already dead and missing all the life-giving soil that was originally sticking to it. In a sense, therefore, the disfigurement which Buddhism underwent on its way to Europe was a predestined one, one that could not be avoided. Christianity suffered the same fate on its way to the East: the image an average Japanese has of Christianity is that of a very cerebral (intellectually very demanding) and morally austere religion, without any of the folksy traits and foibles, any of the warmhearted figures, any of the joyful celebrations he appreciates so much in his own religion. And he will show a rather unbelieving reaction when he is told about the pilgrimages, the devotions to particular saints, the processions and *matsuri* on the feast day of the patron saint of the village, and the other folksy paraphernalia of a living Catholicism.<sup>49</sup>

48. *Toward a Theology of Religions*, 34–5 [187]. It should be noted that up until 1991, Van Bragt himself freely used the term "the Absolute" to refer to what he would later call simply "the Transcendent." See, for example, "The Challenge to Christian Theology from Kyoto-School Buddhist Philosophy," 49–50.

49. "What Jizō is Trying to Tell Us," in Clemens Schlüter, ed., *Volksbuddhistische Impressionen aus Japan* (Sankt Augustin, 1995), 8; see also "New Dialogue with Buddhism in Japan," *Concilium* 161 (1983): 69. This insistence on the importance of popular religion in Christianity also appears in his opening "Orientation" to the 1985 Nanzan Symposium on "Historical Religion and Folk Religion," where he lays it out in more organized fashion.

## THE BRIDGE FROM THE MYSTICAL TO THE EVERYDAY

As well known, Van Bragt was a key figure in the first East-West monastic exchange that took place in 1979, about which he composed a lengthy report. Although he was reassured to find Western monastics impressed with their Japanese counterparts, I had the feeling that he was more impressed to hear reactions from Zen monks and nuns like the following: “Ten days of this life brings me to the same kind of concentration and serenity as a *sesshin*.”<sup>50</sup> His enthusiasm was dampened by the second exchange of four years later, which brought the European monastics to Japan. Reflecting on the experience, he concluded that the Japanese Zen participants had no other expectation than to repay their European counterparts. “Expectation in its deepest sense—the hope of receiving or learning something—was, I fear, non-existing, except in a few individuals.”<sup>51</sup>

This view is reflected in the untypically harsh words of an essay written around this time:

I have the impression that Zen appears to turn to Christianity as a ratification of its own value or as a way of adapting to modern (western) trends, but does not seek another that could overcome the self-enclosure it has reached in its own religious system. Briefly put, Zen seems to me, across the representative spectrum of its protagonists, as a complete and static system—a perfect round circle.<sup>52</sup>

“Orientation” [「オリエンテーション」] 『密教とキリスト教——歴史宗教と民俗宗教』 (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1986), 11, 16–21. On the question of a Christian ethic for Japan, he works out his position carefully in “Christian Ethics in Japan,” *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* 36 (1982): 360–72.

50. “East-West Spiritual Exchange,” *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* 35 (1980): 173. This essay was later published in German as “Eine Begegnung zwischen östlicher und westlicher Spiritualität,” Hans Waldenfels, ed. *Begegnung mit dem Zen-Buddhismus* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1980), 86–100. Van Bragt did not hesitate to note, with a touch of self-deprecating humor, that the Western monastics were more eagerly listened to by Buddhists than people like himself “who were supposed to know more about Japan and Buddhism.” “Inter-Faith Dialogue in Japan,” *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* 30 (1976): 591.

51. “East-West Spiritual Exchange II,” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 8 (1984): 16.

52. “Tangenten an einen vollkommenen Kreis?” Günther Stachel, *Munen musō*:

Although Jan practiced Zen meditation on occasion, I do not know that he ever took on a Zen master or participated in a *sesshin* himself. I am not sure that this experience had something to do with it, but it surely would not have encouraged him to change his mind. He did keep a meditation cushion in the small meditation room we have in our house and I would periodically come on him seated there in silence. The details of his personal spiritual practice was something we never discussed, though I do know that he preferred simplicity in the celebration of the Mass and made every effort not to insert his own words or gestures into the rite. I suspect that what the Zen monk had intuited from a brief experience in a Western monastery, Jan himself believed. Indeed, in his life and thought in general, I would say that he shied away from the fashionable and the exotic alike. I now believe that he had found his own bridge between the truly spiritual and the everyday.

At his funeral service Jan Swyngedouw, a longtime colleague at the Nanzan Institute and fellow religious, announced that he had found scribbling in the margins of Van Bragt's copies of mystical literature indicating the deep affinity he felt for mystical thought in his own spirituality: "I gradually came to understand that mystical thought was really far more than an academic matter for him; it was a source of great strength that sustained him in life."<sup>53</sup> This is important for understanding the standpoint from which he carried on his dialogue with Buddhist thought. The same detachment from established doctrine and willingness to overstep the boundaries of logical discourse in search of what lies behind the doctrine is there, as is the impatience with reducing insight to intellection. His was the heart of a peasant, or perhaps I should say, of a country doctor like his father. He knew something of the wisdom of ordinary people and the ordinariness of true wisdom. At the same time, there are few if any direct allusions to mystical vocabulary or ideas in his essays.

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*Ungegenständliche Meditation* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1978), 379.

53. 「ヤン・ヴァン・ブラフト元所長を偲んで(一九二八年～二〇〇七年)」[In memory of former director, Jan Van Bragt] 『南山宗教文化研究所研究所報』17 (2007): 64-5.

The one exception is his 1995 book on the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, which he co-authored with Paul Mommaers. “Exception” is not quite the right word. In the attempt to locate Ruusbroec’s mystical path in the world of Buddhist ideas and practices, Van Bragt presents his own religious thought in a clearer, more systematic fashion than anywhere else in his body of writings. All the ideas indicated above could be cross-referenced here; all of them find their place in the matrix of “mystical” religion, so much so that one has the impression that everything else can be read as a commentary to this book. Most important of all, the focus on comparative mysticism allows Van Bragt to lay out his own religious worldview that is not quite Christian and not quite Buddhist. If it is a vision painted in the chiaroscuro of doubts that reach down to the essentials of both traditions, it is a vision that allows light to shine through the cracks he finds in the doctrines and practices of each.

By casting a critical eye on Christianity through the lens of Buddhism, and on Buddhism through the lens of Christianity, he seeks to answer the kōan he had set himself from his early years in Japan: *How can such a natural affinity in religiosity result in such an incurable disjunction in doctrine?*<sup>54</sup> His answer, if I may be allowed to read between the lines, is that the disjunction is not between Buddhism and Christianity, but between all religiosity and its expression. The Buddhist-Christian dialogue brings to the fore what is normally darkened within a particular tradition with its internal doctrinal developments and institutional struggles: namely, that, in the end, one must learn to accept the duality of experience and expression and to distrust all pretense to transcend it.<sup>55</sup>

54. *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 3.

55. Van Bragt’s attempts to apply Ruusbroec’s criticisms of false mysticism to Buddhism are particularly instructive here. In particular, he addresses the criticisms of quietism, self-centeredness, and moral paralysis. *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 268–86. These same criticisms, he insisted, remain unanswered with regard to the “social dimension” of Pure Land piety. See his essay “Liberative Elements in Pure Land Buddhism,” *Inter-Religio* 18 (Fall 1990): 61–2 [78].

For this reason, Van Bragt sees the turn to Eckhart for comparisons between Christianity and Buddhist as only a first step towards facing the full challenge of the dialogue. The greater challenge, greater because it does not take refuge at a level of abstraction too high for ordinary religious believers, is in a writer like Ruusbroec, where the similarities of religiosity clash dramatically at the level of doctrine.<sup>56</sup> Van Bragt is not above stating his own preferences on this clash, coming down now on the side of Christianity, now on the side of Buddhism. His aim is not to create some new amalgam of the best in both but only to illustrate how each tradition has a mixed record when it comes to facing up honestly to the ineluctable paradox at the heart of their respective traditions. For example, speaking of the Christian association of God with “being,” “love,” and “holiness,” he notes the Buddhist critique of the implied dichotomies (being/nothingness, love/hatred, holiness/profanity) as unsuited to the notion of real Transcendence. With his judgment on the matter I bring my remarks to a close:

Metaphysically speaking, I find Buddhism to have the stronger position on this score, but it is precisely at this point that I find myself more convinced than ever that no matter how far religion and reason walk together, in the end religion transcends metaphysics and the realm of the rational (“logic and all that”). Indeed, the idea of a God who does not stand above the fray in beatific indifference but is personally involved in the struggle of good against evil, is immensely valuable, humanly and religiously speaking, although it may make metaphysical eyebrows frown.<sup>57</sup>

In my description of the pontifical aspect of Van Bragt’s writings, I trust I have made it clear that although he shared deeply in “the desire to build a bridge to the Buddhism among which Japanese Christianity

<sup>56</sup> *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian*, 79. See also “Christian Theology Learning from Buddhism,” 15 [45].

is living as a tiny minority,”<sup>58</sup> he did not consider himself architect but only one of the masons. As a Catholic thinker in the latter half of the twentieth century, he experienced the liberation from rigid scholasticism and always felt a strong sympathy for the pioneering liberators like M.-D. Chenu, Yves Congar, Edward Schillebeeckx, and above all Romano Guardini and Henri DeLubac whom he cites with frequency in his writings.<sup>59</sup> Like the famous stone bridge of Jōshū,<sup>60</sup> Van Bragt’s bridges were not original, magnificent monuments to be admired in their own right but a set of stepping stones that “lets donkeys cross over and horses cross over.” It is only in the crossing back and forth that a bridge becomes a bridge.

Around the world, where ever there is talk of serious intellectual dialogue among religions, the name of Jan Van Bragt is known. He is a landmark in the history of an important change that has taken place within Christianity. Despite his importance, his writings and his personality show a humility towards dialogue that is admired more often than it is imitated among those who have made it into a specialization. You will understand why I say that when word reached us that this man, who for so many years was the life’s breath of our Institute, had breathed his last, we collectively gasped for air.

58. “Christian Theology Learning from Buddhism,” 10 [40].

59. For a first-rate account of this story, which coincided with Van Bragt’s own life, see Fergus Kerr’s recent book, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Chenu to Ratzinger* (Oxford University Press, 2006). The allusion is to case 52 of the *Hekiganroku*.

60. The allusion is to case 52 of the *Hekiganroku*.