

Contextual Theology: The Japanese Case

This paper does not intend to give an abstract view on contextual theology. It refers to what is happening concretely in Japan; it reflects on the self-realization of Japan's local Church, on the experiments that could grow simultaneously or through the initiatives of Christians and on obstacles to this self-realization. In this way an effort will be made to an evaluation based on the message of Christ and on what concretely takes place when this message encounters the Japanese context. Consequently, I will feel free to ask questions to theology as such. For example, what does theology think about non-traditional ways of becoming a Japanese Church, of social problems, of new ministries? In short, what does the realization of the Kingdom-of-God-for-man mean within the community around Christ and outside this community? What ways of being Church can be recommended for the future?

It is often said that Japan is a model country for Asia but that the Japanese Church is not a model Church; she is much too introverted and not courageous or dynamic enough.¹ Is Japan a special case as is often said? Does its present day position have to be understood in terms of circumstances that turn Japan into something very exceptional but hamper progress? I do not think so. The problem goes much deeper and boils down to this: namely, the encounter process of the message of Christ with the local situation of Japan. It is this encounter process that in itself is contextualization.

¹ Walbert Buhlmann, *Wo der Glaube lebt, Einblicke in die Lage der Weltkirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1975) p. 133.

*I. The Encounter Process of the Message of Christ and the
Local Situation of Japan*

I. 1. The message of Christ

Evangelization has to do with the proclamation of the message of Christ in whatever way. Its focus is the good news from God: the Kingdom of God is close at hand, repent and believe the good news (Mk. 1,15). The accent is on its coming and its being close at hand. This kingdom means that God's unconditional saving will opposes all kinds of evil, suffering and sin; it is God's radical reliability and self-gift to man for whom he definitely wills a meaningful future, notwithstanding all experiences to the contrary.² It is God's Kingdom. Christ's preoccupation with the Kingdom is the cause of God in this world. To say that Jesus is entirely concerned with man because he is first of all concerned with God,³ who is a God-of-man and God-for-man. God has irrevocably inaugurated this Kingdom through the incarnation of his Son in whom we see our prototype: we can become transformed people like Jesus, born, crucified, died and risen; in him we see what salvation means: to become lovingly and irrevocably accepted by God.

I. 2. The message of Christ is an encounter process with the situation.

I. 2. 1. The Kingdom is concrete for it realizes itself in the midst of this historical world which has roots in the past. It crystallizes itself in the present, and it unfolds itself towards the future. Thus, what has to come about is an encounter process between the message and the concrete context of the various local situations. The message has relevance only in relation to concrete Japan for it is the present day Japanese with their hopes and problems who are called to the Kingdom. It also goes without saying that the content of the message is mediated through the knowledge of those sciences that reveal the actual context.

I. 2. 2. The meaning of the term context should not be understood as *one* static moment because the proclamation of the

² Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus. Het verhaal van een levende* (Brugge: Emmaus, 1975) pp. 114-116.

³ Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1977) p. 214.

message is then in danger of becoming oriented to a traditional and lingering past whereas the real context is continually changing. Moreover, within a certain local situation there is not one context but a totality of contexts merging into a *complexity*. In this respect, Japan is certainly a baffling, multi-context reality. This will become clear in my analysis of Japan's present situation. It is within this multi-context reality that we have to see where and how the proclamation of the message is relevant and appealing for not every aspect of the context is important or equally important. For example, certain centuries-old elements of the Japanese Shinto and Buddhist tradition that are now dead fall outside the scope. Contextual theology gets its full meaning when we take up the totality of the *living* contexts which provide the environment for the proclamation of the message, because it is then that we are able to come to contextualization. The incarnation of Christ for example is thus contextualization at a certain historical time and place.⁴

I. 2. 3. When speaking of the encounter process of the message with the local situation of Japan, what do we mean by the term *local*? In his work on the particular Churches and the universal Church, de Lubac makes a meaningful distinction between particular and local Church; the former refers to a diocese and the latter to socio-cultural units. This distinction gives a deeper content to the term "Church incarnate".⁵ Applying this to the term "local situation" one can move beyond strict territorial boundaries and refer to a broader entity where more or less the same socio-cultural conditions prevail. And this local situation of course should never be seen in isolation but must be seen as part of a reality open to the wider world. Otherwise, the encounter process under discussion here misses the point: instead of bringing about an up-to-date and future-oriented contextualization, it would lead to stiffening, to a lack of dynamic movement and of progress, overlooking the fact that change is one of the main characteristics of the modern world. Thus a sound parti-

⁴ Shoki Coe, "Contextual Theology," *Mission Trends* No. 3, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1976) pp. 19-24.

⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Les Eglises particulieres et l'Eglise universelle* (Paris: Aubier, 1971); Jean Verinaud, "Locale? Particuliere? Mais au fond: quelle Eglise", *Spiritus* 65 (1976). 339-348.

cularism in combination with a sound universalism has to be envisaged. This is particularly important for Japan where a kind of narrow Japanese-ness is very much alive.⁶

I. 2. 4. Any local situation comprises the religious and/or ideological factor. That fact acts as a kind of ferment within the situation rather than as a fragment of it. This factor thus plays an important role in the encounter process. It is at this point that I want to make the distinction between religion and religiosity, a distinction I deem to be important for Japan in reference to contextualization. Simply put, we can understand religion as a structured entity embodied in a creed, doctrines, rituals, laws and organization and religiosity as a kind of deeper or basic layer that expresses itself or does not express itself in a religion. The same can be said with regard to an ideology; one can feel and act out of certain deep insights and convictions and make them explicit or not make them explicit in a system. In order to avoid any superficial contextualization, the encounter process between the message and the local situation has to take place not first of all on the level of Christianity as a structured religion on the one hand and Shinto, Buddhism and the New Japanese Religions on the other hand; but on the level of the message of Christ itself and the deeper basic layer from where the current Japanese religions emerge as religions. That is why I have avoided speaking of an encounter process between Christianity and the other religions. This could perhaps be a more useful starting point for formal meetings of representatives of different religions when they enter into interreligious dialogue with each other. It would be also much better to speak of the encounter process of the message of Christ and the message of the Buddha, of the Shintoist sages, etc.⁷ The same is valid of course for the total situation; its social, economic, political, ideological aspects are the expressions today of deeper and more basic attitudes upon which man shapes his individual and social life. To make only one application here, an encounter process with certain forms of structured Japanese Buddhism in as far as they do not appeal to present day life can easily lead to the adaptation of ele-

⁶ Ernest Piryns. "Proclaiming the Message of Christ in Present Day Japan," *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* XXX (1976), 227-229.

⁷ Ernest Piryns, "The Church and Multi-Religious Dialogue: Present and Future," *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* XXXII (1978) 173-179, 246-250.

ments taken over from Buddhism that are no longer relevant to modern life; in this case contextualization is not reached. In the worst case, the result could be disastrous for the coming about of the local Church incarnate. But an encounter process with the basic layer where traditional and modern Japanese structured religion originates and develops itself makes sense. The reason is that this basic layer is present in modern Japan though subject to modifications.

II. *Japan's Current Situation.*

Turning now to Japan's current situation I will try to go into an analysis that must of necessity be incomplete.

II. 1. *Tradition and modernity*

Tradition and modernity are two terms that apply to the Japanese context. The question is whether we are entitled to see them as two opposites or as two inclusive words. Is Japanese tradition really a lingering past with little influence on the present day science and certainly doomed to disappear completely very soon? Is modernity something like a massive attack, irresistibly knocking down tradition? I do not think so. On the level of religiosity a certain dynamic is alive which is comparable to the workings of the collective subconscious.⁸ Religious tradition is not always a dead-weight from the past blocking straightforward modern secular advance; it can contribute mightily to development in a very subtle way. Instead of seeing a strong bipolarization between Japanese tradition and modernity, I would like to see tradition in modernity and modernity in tradition, referring with these terms to Japan's basic in-depth layer moved by its own inner power and under outside impact. Tradition is not dead in Japan and modernity is not simply a foreign intruder. An example may clarify this. The Japanese see Ultimate Reality in terms of this world. This is the old Shinto-heritage that experiences and accepts the *kami* (deities, spirits, souls, etc.) as part of this world. This view has been reaffirmed continually by Buddhism with its

⁸ Heinrich Dumoulin, *Christianity Meets Buddhism* (La Salle, Ill: Open Court Publishing Co., 1974) p. 10; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) p. 62-63.

concept of the Buddha-nature inherent in everything. Consequently, the Japanese appreciate this world and are deeply interested in it; hence, their immense efforts to develop this their world. This is part of tradition, emerging from Japan's basic layer and is still very much alive today. Modern western technology is often considered to be a factor alienating man from religiosity and religion. I do not think that this strictly speaking is the case of Japan. Modern technology, introduced at the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, fitted fundamentally into Japan's subconscious; it did not destroy tradition as described above, but gave new possibilities to it. Traditional religiosity contributed to development.

II. 2. *The Japanese encompassing view of reality*

In Japan there is no splitting up of reality into many logical categories but a spontaneous refusal to accept strict dichotomies or dualism. This is true of the view of Ultimate Reality and in the domain of knowledge as well where strict rational thinking is avoided. Applying this to the category of the "Holy", the net result is that Ultimate Reality is anchored within this phenomenal world and that this worldliness is of the utmost importance as was just mentioned.⁹ This poses a difficult problem for contextual theology in relation to the transcendence of God. I will touch upon this point later in this paper.

A comparison of Japanese Shinto mythology with Buddhism and modern Japan shows that the basic layer of religiosity is at work here. Mythology refers to a stage of consciousness that renders reflective what was before only lived; this reflective character is not scientific or philosophical, for it does not fully objectify; rather it participates very actively in the lived reality so that things must be felt much more than understood.¹⁰ Japanese mythology, spontaneously eschewing strict rationality, shows few of the workings of a metaphysical reflection and gives a high priority to things of this world but not in the western sense to the exclusion of the presence of the divine within this world; there is no ontological separation of man, this world and the

⁹ Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet, Japan* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1968) p. 350-372.

¹⁰ Louis Dupre, *The Other Dimension: A Search for the Meaning of Religious Attitudes* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1972), 245.

Shinto *kami* into two fundamentally different categories, for all are basically the same. The *kami*-nature dwells in man and man is a potential *kami*; this is also the belief of today's Shinto.

Buddhism acknowledges the Buddha-nature as Absolute Reality; it is a cosmic, impersonal and spiritual principle, identical with the essence of everything, the ultimate nature of all beings. Man himself is ignorant about this. His task then is to overcome this ignorance in order to experience this Buddha-nature in himself and his unity with everything; man attains Buddhahood — in Christian terms, salvation. No wonder that the *sokushin-jobutsu* idea — to become a Buddha alive in this human body — became widespread in Japanese Buddhism past and present.

The founders of the New Religions that are flourishing in Japan are in many cases considered to be *ikigami* (living *kami*) or *ikibotoke* (living Buddhas). We should be very careful here not to apply western categories. An *ikigami*, for example, should not be understood as God who becomes man or man who becomes God. What prevails in Japan is a vague notion of deity, and there is no precise line demarcating the divine from the human. Hence the concepts of *ikigami* and *ikibotoke* do not coincide with the breakthrough of the divine into this world as manifested in the incarnation of Christ.¹¹

II. 3. *No outspoken ideas of a basic alternative to values*

The phenomenal world is a harmonious reality; human life fits into its larger context and man does not need to divorce himself from his natural surroundings. A key concept here is *wa* which basically means harmony. Man longs to live in harmony with everything and everybody and finds his own experience to be natural and good. Hence, there is a deep appreciation of nature, man and things in terms of facilitation or inhibition of human life and one is concerned only about isolating harmful effects from the rest of life. Applying this to the realm of concrete ethics, good and evil are not opposed in an elemental dualism. No wonder that the Japanese consciousness of sin lack a certain depth. Words like sin, offense, bad, evil, etc., refer primarily to

¹¹ H. Neill McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods: A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) pp. 72-73, 188.

a lack of harmony and beauty. And since man's nature is good, he is being destined to succeed; his natural dispositions are good and are not suppressed unduly and there is little inclination to severe asceticism.¹²

The same phenomenon of no outspoken ideas of basic alternative values is visible in the relationships between the individual and the group. Japanese society promotes the realization of harmony through a heavy stress on the group. It is undeniable that the Japanese individual thinks of himself as part of a greater whole so that the rules of the group determine individual life to a large degree. The observance of group norms has to be respected in terms of a mutuality defined more by the sensitivity of the total group than by rational categories. Some call this anti-individualism,¹³ a term I would like to complete by a "certain anti-personalism". I must also add immediately that this impersonalism is being remedied slowly since the Second World War.

II. 4. *Other characteristics*

In as far as the deeper level which is characterized by an encompassing view of reality manifests itself on the level of religion, we can say that Japan is traditionally polytheistic. However now, in some of its modern currents, there is an evolution towards a view of Ultimate Reality with monotheistic overtones, due to contact with Christianity. It is at the same time anthropocentric, resolutely stressing man's possibilities, especially in the case of the New Religions.

The religious scene is also bewilderingly mixed in two more ways. On the one hand, there is an immense number of officially registered religions; their main streams are Shinto, Buddhism, the New Religions and Christianity. On the other hand, Shinto, Buddhism and the New Religions are multi-colored themselves, displaying various Taoist, Confucian and Christian features. Ultimate Reality has many names in Japan indeed. The

¹² Ernest Piryns. "Japanese Morality and Christianity," *Bulletin Secretariatus Pro Non-Christianis* XII (1977)/1-2, 1-12; Ernest Piryns, "Buddhist Contributions to the Japanese Ethic," *The Japan Christian Quarterly* XLIII (1977)/3, 139-148.

¹³ Charles Moore, "Editor's Supplement: The Enigmatic Japanese Mind," *The Japanese Mind: Essentials of Japanese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu. East-West Center, 1967) pp. 299-300.

Buddhist Ultimate Reality has left visible traces on earth under the form of the Shinto-*kami* (Ryobu-Shinto or Dual Shinto); the Shinto-*kami* are at the origin of the Buddhist deities (*Yui-itsu Shinto* or Unique Shinto); but these two doctrines are only the philosophical elaborations of intellectuals and thus the objectification of the basic intuition of the common people who give many names to the same Ultimate Reality. This intuition is still very much at work today. When it has to be expressed in acts, one returns to structured religion and addresses himself to Shinto for birth and marriage, to Buddhism for death and now also to Christianity for marriage.

Few people in Japan, especially the younger generation, know the word used for Confucianism. Its influence is, however, very strong. Japan is par excellence, a *tate-shakai*, a vertical society in which the duties, the responsibilities and the favors are distributed according to rank and social position; the higher one ranks in the company, the school, the family, the club, etc., the greater the responsibilities become.¹⁴ The Confucian mentality also contributes to the rigid Japanese societal patterns. This is reflected very strongly in political and economic matters; the most important positions are held by older people and there is a heavy stress on hierarchy and authority. This mentality provides for discipline and order and is indicative that Japanese behavior is group behavior as was mentioned above. The younger people, even when openly resistant to this established order, spontaneously transfer these concepts of responsibility and duty to their own groupings like their class, clubs, senior and junior comrades, etc. Also while sometimes being very critical of this societal structure, they quickly comply with it once they leave the university or high school and enter an industrial company.

This vertically shaped society coincides more or less with the so-called emperor system. Its blending with the traditional emperor concept provides for a societal way of life that defies the western view on democracy even when democracy is one of the basic themes of the Japanese constitution. When we put this

¹⁴ Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, (Tokyo: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1977).

authority concept into the Japanese basic layer with its view of Absolute Reality within this world, we can really speak of a kind of immanent theocracy.

Intra-mundane interest, combined with the Confucian ethic of loyalty and devotion, is one of the incentives behind relentless efforts to assure the progress of the industrial company and an inbuilt system of social injustice. The Japanese economics system is capitalistic and unequally divides the riches of the country. Though the number of very poor people is really small, the group of unskilled workers are and remain at the bottom of society, unprotected by social guarantees one sees in the West.

There also exists in Japan a kind of unsound nationalism which can be dangerous for the future. It centers around certain Shintoistic concepts, for example, the enshrined spirits of those who died during the war and something more than respect for the emperor in some circles. It is also often connected with right wing politicians.

In concluding this bird's eye view on the principal lines of the present day Japanese situation, we can say that Japanese religiosity and its ramifications in everyday life are not strongly dogmatic; they are emotional rather than noetic, communal rather than personal. It is often more associated with the ambience created by the presence of the crowd flocking together on the occasion of the customary shrine and temple feasts, of the beauty of the places of worship. Structured religion, stressing convention, rigidity and belonging to a certain religious sect, is less important in Japan than religiosity itself that centers around experience and inner attitudes.

III. *Challenges, Present-day Answers and Perspectives.*

The challenges and present-day answers to them leap immediately to the eyes; from the answers to these challenges and from the refusal to give a response to these challenges certain perspectives for the future come about.

III. 1. *The message of Christ: a catalyzing factor*

Without playing down the understanding that God's saving will manifests itself through the situation of Japan, the most

important aspect in contextualization is the present context of Japan. Through this we are able to come to a critical assessment. I mean that the message has a catalyzing function within the context; it brings about a catalyzation process. Is it not true that the message frees us from the situation in order to make us free for it? It enables us to participate in God's saving work in taking up from the situation what is God-willed and correcting or eliminating what is the result of sin. We must avoid here two extremes. First, we should not view the Japanese situation as completely sinful as has been done for too long. This extreme leads to proclaiming the message in a vacuum and the already existing values within Japan's culture and religions are ignored or destroyed or replaced by new imports.¹⁵ A kind of canned religion comes about. Second, the Japanese situation should not be over-enthusiastically accepted as perfect. In this case, the message has no relevance for a society that is already perfect in itself and the call for conversion to the Kingdom becomes meaningless. In both cases contextualization becomes impossible and the encounter process between the message and the situation does not take place, is not even needed.

III. 2. *The problem of theological identity*

The Church in Japan and Catholic theology in general are known for their conservative overtones. Though strongly dominated by western theology, Protestantism has produced many more creative thinkers than Catholicism.¹⁶ Contextual theology is not yet a fact in Japan. One of the reasons seems to be the problem of identity and this can be seen from two sides.¹⁷ Is it the sameness of theological affirmations in the Japanese language with scripture, medieval or modern western theology, declarations of Rome, etc., all of which are orthodox because and in so far as they are recognized as such by the official teaching of the Church? There is no space for contextual theology here. It can also be seen as

¹⁵ John Power, *Mission Theology Today*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1971) p. 127.

¹⁶ Ernest Piryms, "Japan and Christianity: Towards the Overcoming of a Dilemma," *Oriens Studies*, No. 3 (Tokyo, 1974) pp. 11-14, 17-19.

¹⁷ Hans Waldenfels, "A Japanese Theology for Japan," *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* XXVIII (1974), 484.

the identity between the original intentions of Christ, verbalized and acted out by his followers in today's Japan. It is here that contextual theology comes about. The present day theological climate of Japan is not very promising in that respect, though there are some exceptions of course. Some say that a Japanese theology should be a systematic theology; they require Japan's readiness to produce its own Thomas Aquinas, equipped to domesticate for Christ Japan's Shinto, Buddhist and Confucian thought,¹⁸ innocently forgetting how many centuries Europe needed to produce its own systematic theology. They do not see that theological reflection on some themes of the message in reference to the situation is already contextual and Japanese. I feel also that the reluctance to go to bat in favor of a "Japanese theology" is their fear of insularity and their conviction that it cannot be Japanese unless it is first and foremost universal and catholic.¹⁹ I agree that in Japan a certain nationalistic insularity is real, but this danger can be avoided, provided that the context of tradition in modernity and modernity in tradition is rightly understood.

III. 3. *Tradition in modernity and modernity in tradition with regard to contextual theology*

Japanese and western theologians in Japan are almost exclusively non-Japanese in their theology, whether conservative or not. Nothing can be brought against the tradition of translating western theology into Japanese, but the blind acceptance of it can block the way to creative reflection. When it comes to the point of contextual theology, westerners are quick enough to attack the few "Japanese" theologians.²⁰ It could be that some of these "Japanese" theologians seem to be engrossed by Japanese traditions that may actually belong to the past. When it comes to the point, however, of pronouncing a judgment on whether something is too traditional or not, it is certainly not the task of westerners

¹⁸ Joseph J. Spaë, "The Ecumenical Actuality of Japan," *The Japan Christian Quarterly* XLIII (1977)/2, 100-101.

¹⁹ Spaë, *ibid.*, p. 101; and "Not a Japanese Theology but a Theology for Japan," *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* XXX (1976) 565-570.

²⁰ Jan Swyngedouw, "Church Weddings and Christmas Celebrations: Problems of a Japanized Christianity," *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* XXXI (1977), 296, and his criticism of Inoue Yogi, *Nihon to Jesu no Kao* (Japan and the Face of Jesus) (Tokyo: Hokuyosha, 1976).

to act as if they were the supreme judges. Full credit should be given to the few attempts that are being made. A correct view on tradition and modernity can make us aware of what Japanization entails in reality. The mistakes committed by some sociologists of religion can teach us what should not be done. It is not because Japan takes over western customs which belong to the fringe of western culture and without much connection with Christianity, that they are entitled to speak of true Japanization; their view boils down to a very superficial understanding of the problem.²¹

III. 4. *Reflection from within the Japanese situation*

A not yet adequately explored domain of investigation is the implication of our growing world unity and contextual theology. Is it really true that a world that has to become more and more of a community will necessarily develop one world culture or a kind of superculture wherein the western factors will be dominant? I feel that some observers of the world scene want us to believe that. I will not go here into a discussion on what is meant by culture but I will go into a comparative view of one aspect of culture, namely secularization. Is it really true that secularization is at work in Japan in the same way as in Europe and North America? This investigation should not be started from the western point of view of the so-called expanding secularization process and growing superculture, as is usually the case. Isn't this starting point a one-way street from West to non-West and once again an imposition of western thought on non-western situations? It would be much better to start the other way around from the Japanese side and ask: how does the Japanese react in his own culture to the world-wide phenomenon of technical civilization that is closely linked up with secularization in the West? I said that the Japanese view of seeing Ultimate Reality as anchored within this world and the deep interest in the human possibilities predisposed Japan to integrate western technology. It is not at all a miracle that Japan could modernize within a few decades after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Japan's modern day situation is really different from the western secularized world. This non-western kind of approach gives us a better appreciation

²¹ Swyngedouw, *op. cit.*, pp. 293-294.

of Japan; it does not turn the Japanese into materialists and a copy of the West; it relativises the western view of secularization. If this kind of reflection could be applied to other domains of life, for example, Japanese morality and the like, the results could be surprising and would help to find deeper ways of contextualization.

III. 5. *The encompassing view of reality*

We should be more sensitive to the distinction between faith and theology. We communicate too much western theology as if it were faith itself, and in doing so the expression of faith in the message of Christ by means of a theology corresponding to the concrete situation of Japan is greatly hampered. Here we find another reason why there is so little Japanese theology. I touch here on a problem that refers to the Japanese encompassing view of reality but it fits also into the topic just mentioned. I touch on it here because it refers primarily to the concept of God in the Japanese context.

In the western world and western theology, to the atheist as well as to the man of faith, the concept of God is not very different. The atheist denies God, the man of faith recognizes him; but the two of them concur in the idea of what God is. Their concept of God has the same meaning. At the basis of this way of thinking about God is the western discursive, binomial and dualistic way of reflection: God-man, absolute-relative, sacred-profane, spirit-matter. The one who accepts the concept of God is called a theist in the West; the one who does not accept it is called an atheist. But this way of thinking does not exist in Japan; the two levels compenetrates each other and become blurred. The Japanese can move smoothly without many jumps from God to man, from spirit to matter, from the absolute to the relative, from truth to falsehood and from falsehood to truth, from sin to virtue and from virtue to sin, as though ascending and descending on the currents of the same line.²²

Contextual theology will have to wrestle here with the Japanese subjectivism that sees God or gods as something very much

²² Fernando M. Basabe, *Japanese Youth Confronts Religion: A Sociological Survey*, (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1968) p. 135; and *Religious Attitudes of Japanese Men: A Sociological Survey*, (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1968) p. 113.

determined by the human subject and by anthropomorphism while God is a reality that goes also beyond man. In Japan we do well to stress the theocentric character of Christianity without forgetting the humaneness of our God and without separating God from human concerns. A presentation of religion whereby God is too transcendent and separated from the human side of life with its sufferings and its joys is unsound; there is no religion that does not need mediation by natural and human reality. But it is equally unsound to present a religion in which God becomes totally immanent and worldly, or totally in function of the intramundane and human reality.²³ Japan's evolution from its ancient polytheism to monotheism is very positive here.

III. 6. *The deepening of the vagueness of basic alternatives to values*

Contextual theology must stress the fundamental intuition of harmony with man and nature; nature, man and things have to be looked upon as good and are to be appreciated. However, this may not induce us to agree with the rather shallow sin-consciousness of the Japanese that follows from this intuition.

Quite a few scholars say that Japan knows only a shame culture and not a guilt and sin culture to which I strongly object. It is unwise to press a one-sided view, and I accept for Japan a relationship between shame, sin and guilt. Though shame is a real factor in Japanese life, it does not necessarily exclude a consciousness of guilt and sin. Moreover, shame is in itself not just a matter of face, but is something delicate and internal. Many westerners testify to a strange cultural prejudice that it is shameful to live in a culture where shame plays an important role. In our days also the consciousness of guilt and sin are growing in Japan. One has only to watch some of the TV dramas or to speak with people in order to feel that a kind of interiority is growing which is moving away from superficiality under the influence of the gospel. As a matter of fact, the innermost core of man which makes him conscious of sin, is becoming deeper at the expense of shame. Especially among the younger people, individual and per-

²³ Jan Van Bragt, "Faith and Human Development", *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* XXXI (1977), 404-410.

sonal responsibility, guilt and internal consciousness of sin, attention to the dictates of one's own heart are reducing the concept of shame to an ever lower degree.

III. 7. *The Confucian societal system*

The Confucian conservative authoritarian societal system provides for a rigid hierarchical order that makes man the prisoner of the group. This system contributes to the conservative character of the Church with her still strongly traditional ecclesiology. The authority and responsibility belong to the hierarchy: pope, bishops, priests who have to teach, sanctify and govern; the remaining Christians appear to be the passive receivers who are taught, governed and sanctified. This pre-Vatican II ecclesiology coincides with the Confucian hierarchical order and immobilizes existing Church patterns. This is not only the case of the older Japanese priests and Christians, but also for quite a few foreign missionaries who look upon the more democratic, younger priests, religious and Christians as difficult people to deal with. In Japan we desperately need a modern ecclesiology not only for the Church herself so that new and fresh ways of exercising authority and leadership can come about, but we also need it in order to more deeply influence the structure of a vertical Japanese society.

In the near future a number of parishes will no longer have any priests. The lay people have to be prepared for leadership. This is the complaint one often hears nowadays. I fully agree with the principle of lay leadership but I cannot possibly agree with the reason why lay people are suddenly called to responsibility. The reason is obviously the shortage of clerical priests "who do everything". If a kind of leadership emerges that will continue to function in a clerical fashion, we are not any further ahead as a Church. Today's shortage of priests could become a blessing and compel us to resolutely move away from a priest-dominated Church towards a Church of the people of God, a sign of the Kingdom where new ministries develop freely.²⁴

²⁴ Ernest Piryns, "Ministries in the Church: Possibilities and Limitations," *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* XXXI (1977) 523-530.

III. 8. *The Church and marginality*

Marginality is not allowed in Japan for Japan means group consciousness. One has to keep step with the other under penalty of social excommunication. It is not an imaginary danger that the Church, being only a small group, will find her identity in terms of things that separate her from the majority of the people. In this case, non-Japanese, unessential, Christian elements can become identified with Christianity as such. It is unsound to see the Church's identity in terms of otherness, and thus make it marginal to Japanese society. The ideal should then become non-incarnated symbols, creeds, rites, morality, etc.

Some people or groups can also become marginal within a highly bureaucratic and organized Church as such, but the decision to live as a Church member within the margin is a very uncomfortable position. Simply put, the Christian has two possible choices: either to disappear from the community without leaving any trace, or integrate into the community and adhere to the minimum considered respectable in Japan, i.e., Sunday mass, financial contribution, and, for some, participation in one or another movement. Certain priests, religious and lay persons are tempted to stay away from the classical Church without breaking with it, and to consciously go into marginality. The actual marginal groups are very small. They may proclaim as loudly as possible what they are in search of, but their voices will not stir up the Church for there is not communication that transmits to the top what they feel they must refuse or protest against.

One may even ask whether separation from the hierarchy and central authority automatically brings marginalization. A clear example is the movement for young workers that has opted for a hard-line position. It refuses to be an instrument of the hierarchy and to be called a movement of the official Church. Its centers of interest are not the Christians, the language of the Church, etc., but the workers' milieu, their culture and organizations. It has its own mechanisms, objectives and methods. Animated by young Christians alike, it has simply changed its center of orientation from the official Church to the wider world of the workers, the bottom of Japanese society, people who have never

been reached before.²⁵ If one prefers to call this movement marginalization, then it could be that this new way of being together around Christ is a real place of encounter of the message with the Japanese situation and not marginality at all.

III. 9. *Proclaiming the message within the social strata*

I feel that there is an urgent need to start proclaiming the message more from within the social strata through a missionary-conscientization of all Christians rather than from the parish centers. Christians must be enabled to influence their own milieu so that people interested in the message be attracted to the person of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. Small groups could be brought together *in loco*, at the spot where they are living and working.

Christians of certain social strata address other people of the same or similar social level through their life witness, and trigger the encounter process. In this case, the encounter process becomes a kind of religious accompaniment of growth towards full humanization. This could become very effective in Japan where Church and Christianity are regarded as "foreign", but where the values of the message are undoubtedly penetrating the deeper layer of Japanese life. Some of these values are silently at work: the slowly growing consciousness of the concept of the human person which is tending to a more healthy balance between the individual and the group; the concept of freedom which must be respected and defended against the too oppressive Confucian societal structure; the interiorization of morality and the personalization of religion as such. By personalization, I do not mean a traditional individualistic religion as is often found in the West, but the growing insight that religion in Japan is not only a communal group event but a personal attitude as well; this view on religion differs greatly from "customary" religion. It originates in the depth of Japan's religiosity and is influenced by Christian values.

The respectful and loving presentation of these values through missionary-minded Christians could be the best way to spread the

²⁵ Olivier Chegaray, "Marginalite dans l'Eglise au Japon," *Spiritus*, 68 (1977), 243-255.

message. Everyone knows that there are many self-styled Christians in Japan, people who do not belong to any Church but who try to find in the values of the gospel an answer to the deepest questions that move their hearts and a new motivation for a meaningful life. New way of being Church can be developed and tried out here through the bringing together of interested people and sympathizers without imposing prefabricated western patterns, structures and institutions.

III. 10. *Contextualization Phases*

Is contextualization as expounded in this paper dangerous? Does it guarantee orthodoxy? I do not think that these questions are the right ones. Contextualization in terms of an encounter process should not be seen in terms of the danger of heresy, deviation, etc. I propose here some reflections based on comparative religion that can help up to see more clearly the contextualization phases as an encounter process.²⁶ This process brings along a more or less complex relationship between the message of Christ and the situation into which it enters.

There is first of all, the phase of *contact* that simply is the presentation of the means of communication: the presence of a Christian, a priest, the bible, the way a Christian lives and worships through rituals, etc. This phase has certain connections with structured Christianity and is unavoidable. No matter, the message of Christ *can* pass to others. The second phase can be called the phase of *ambiguity*. It means a certain deeper degree of acceptance of factors prevailing in the situation into which the message enters; it also means that the message starts influencing these factors. In other words, message and situation start influencing each other such as philosophical or theological concepts, customs. Language-expressing concepts of Ultimate Reality can try to reinterpret the basic Christian concept of God

²⁶ Based on E. M. Pye, "The Transplantation of Religion," *Numen* 16 (1969), 234-239; the term "transplantation" (not to be confused with the plantation of the church theory) refers more to structured religion as clearly indicated in our case; we will keep as much distance as possible from structured religion and refer more to the message of Christ and the basic layer of Japanese religiosity

and vice versa, the God-concept influences the Japanese view on Ultimate Reality. The shift in Japan from polytheism to monotheism is characteristic of this ambiguity. At this point, questions will arise relating to orthodoxy and heterodoxy, morality (what is right and what is wrong?), etc. This boils down to the problem of the identity of the message of Christ expressing itself now in terms of the Japanese situation and Christ's original intentions; or in other words, what does the re-statement of this message from within the Japanese situation look like? Theologians educated in the western tradition will ask immediately if this is still Christianity? Is this not heresy and syncretism? Indeed, in this phase, a tension arises but why do we always see this tension in terms of doctrine? Rather, shouldn't we give importance to the tension between the message of Christ and the total situation itself? Moreover, did the West always escape heterodoxy? And with regard to syncretism, it may suffice to say that Christian theology has always seen this phenomenon too negatively and that, in as far as the present study of comparative religion shows, it is very difficult to come to an exact view of it.²⁷ The phase of ambiguity cannot be avoided and so contextual theology has to risk itself in this phase without fear. Many aspects of Christianity reflect this ambiguity very well.

Lastly, comes the phase of *recoupment*. It is the reassertion, reclarification or crystallization of the message that unfolds itself now from within the total situation. This could also be called incarnation. On the one hand, the reassertion of the message has a real identity with Christ's intentions which he expressed in his historical time and place; on the other hand, this reassertion will not simply be the same as it was before, because it has expressed itself now from within the basic layer of the Japanese situation.

Of course, the encounter process as analyzed here takes time and each of the three phases are not necessarily successive in the same order as expounded here. The process can also be total or partial. I think however that the whole process can be furthered through courageous experimentation on the part of the proclaimers of the message of Christ. The most difficult phase to evaluate

²⁷ Helmer Ringgren, "The Problem of Syncretism," *Syncretism: Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Cultural Contact*, ed. Sven S. Hartman (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1969) pp. 714.

is the recouplement, because the elucidation of the essentials of Christ's message is needed so that it remains Christ's message indeed and does not become distorted. This is a serious theological problem with regard to the coming about of the local Church incarnate in its different aspects. It is a matter of rejoicing that daring, creative reflection and experimentation is being done in many local situations; it is a matter of regret that Japan is far behind in this respect.

IV. *Recommendations*

IV. 1. What has to be proclaimed in Japan in whatever way is not first of all Christianity, not even the Church herself, but the message of Christ about the Kingdom of God-for-man so that a deeper encounter process can take place between this message and the total Japanese situation. We have to avoid a double danger. First, the danger of undoing the message from its religious content by turning it into an ideology and defining our task in purely sociological terms. Second, the danger of neglecting the concrete situation of Japan as is often done, because in that case the message is proclaimed in a vacuum.

IV. 2. In Japan we have to continue to respectfully invite people to conversion to Christ. This might hopefully express itself in the symbol of baptism through which one joins the community around the risen Lord; this community is called Church, the historical, anticipatory sign of God's Kingdom-for-man.

IV. 3. Japanese theologians need to move away from conservatism and a purely western theology. The Japanese Church has to distance herself from conservatism.

IV. 4. In assessing the Japanese reality, theology must reflect upon Japan in terms of Japan and not from a western point of view. Serious misunderstandings could be avoided in that way. Is it true that the Japanese in general are atheistic, completely westernized, amoral, secularized, etc.?

IV. 5. Contextual theology must criticize the Japanese Confucian mentality; it must become more interested in social problems related to this Confucian mentality and speak out more courageously. It should also criticize the old, authoritarian ecclesiology that coincides too much with this Confucian order. There

is a need to reflect on new ways of exercising authority within the Church for bishops as well as for priests and creative non-clerical leadership should be developed.

IV. 6. More open Christians communities must come about, reflecting a healthy balance between the individual and the group; these communities must, through their members, offer the values of the gospel to the different social strata. I feel it necessary to insist strongly on a serious missionary consciousness of Japanese Christians. The proclamation of the message to the different social strata opens possibilities for new ways of being Church. Open communities mean also openness to the wider world in a double sense. First, to be open to the wider world of Japan. The existence of *Mukyokai*, the non-Church movement for all those who do not wish to belong to the existing Churches, should be an ardent warning against our narrow "Churchism". The originator of *Mukyokai*, Uchimura Kanzo (1861-1930), called the Churches "petrified reality". Openness to the wider world of Japan means also not being involved solely in pious Church affairs but participation in social life in a witnessing way. Second, open to the wider by transcending the purely national (istic) level of Japanese-ness and becoming more universalistic-minded. In the same sense, a future Japanese theology should be Japanese and universal at the same time.

IV. 7. I believe firmly in the immense possibilities of the message of Christ in Japan, but these possibilities can become realities only if we daringly engage ourselves in a real encounter process of the message of Christ with the Japanese local situation.

ERNEST D. PIRYNS, CICM
Oriens Institute for Religious Research
Tokyo, Japan