INTRODUCTION

CHRISTIANITY AND SHINGON

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in other religions.”
Vatican II, Nostra Aetate, n. 2.

“Kukai, while respecting the religion of every person, taught the important source of salvation, hidden in their teachings.”
Shingon Monk Ryuko Oda, This is Esoteric Buddhism!, p. 4.

Inter-religious Dialogue

During the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the Catholic Church changed from its exclusive attitude to other religions to a fundamentally dialogical one. Therefore, the Church, at the end of the Council, made the famous statement in the Document Nostra Aetate, n. 2:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.\(^1\)

This Document, which recognized the salvific value of other religions, was received with applause all over the world. After the Second Vatican Council, especially due to the efforts of Pope John Paul II, inter-religious dialogue was encouraged. In 1986, now 30 years ago, he summoned all religions to a prayer meeting to pray for peace in Assisi, Italy. This great moment in the dialogue with other religions set an example for other religions too. For instance, every year since then, the head priest of Tendai Esoteric Buddhism in Kyoto calls religions to come to Mount Hiei to pray for peace together. Indeed, the Buddhist monks of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism in Koyasan, following their visit to the Vatican in Rome in 1988, have engaged in dialogue with the

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\(^1\) Walter Abbot, SJ (ed.), The Documents of Vatican II, The America Press, New York, 1966, p. 662. The document was passed by a vote of 2,221 versus 88 of the assembled bishops, and was promulgated on 28 October 1965, by Pope Paul VI. Our Superior General of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary at that time, Father Omer De Gryse, has been one of the creators of this document, and he has told me the intriguing story behind the making of it.
Catholic Church. In 2005, at the invitation of Koyasan University, Catholic theologians from the Faculty of Theology of Central Italy in Florence started a theological dialogue.\(^2\) Reverend Shodo Habukawa of Muryokoin in Koyasan has been a constant supporter of this dialogue. The Catholic Movement *Comunione e Liberazione* has invited him many times to attend their annual inter-religious event in Rimini, now already 30 years. He felt inspired by their Founder Don Luigi Guissani to do the same at home with their spiritual brothers of Tendai Esoteric Buddhism.

**Theology of Religions**

The Catholic Church’s inclusive attitude towards other religions is to be found with the Founder of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism, Kukai, too. He is also known by his posthumous name: Kobo Daishi. According to Ryuko Oda 織田降弘, Kukai already taught such an attitude more than a thousand years ago:

Kukai, while respecting the religion of every person, taught the important source of salvation hidden in their teachings.\(^3\)

Kukai showed this in his numerous works, especially in the *Study of Three Teachings*, *Two Teachings of Esoteric and Exoteric Buddhism*, and *Ten Levels of the Mind/Heart*. While recognizing the value of other religions, he sought to teach the truth of his own religion, also because the Emperor demanded that he shows the newness of the religion he had brought from China before allowing him to introduce it into Japan.

At present, the Catholic Church is also in search of such a balanced view of other religions through a new field of theology: Theology of Re-


\(^3\) 高野山大僧生織田降弘, 『これが密教だ』, 高千穂, 1990, p. 4: 「空海はそれぞれの人のもつ宗教を尊びながら、その教えの中に秘められている大切な救いの泉のあることを教えるのです」.
ligions. Therefore, Inter-religious dialogue is divided into four basic fields as follows:

1. dialogue of life,
2. dialogue of experience,
3. dialogue of theology,
4. dialogue of action.

Although all four fields are interrelated, in this study we will focus especially on the aspect of dialogue of theology. Catholic and Protestant Theology of Religions is based on a dialogue of life, of experience and of common action. Its primary aim is to gain a theological understanding of the fundamental concepts, dogmas, teachings, rituals, religious behavior of other religions.⁴ However, in the case of Shingon, the Buddhist, especially the Esoteric Buddhist, and Hindu background make it a more challenging object of study. Nevertheless, we hope, through this comparative study, which is a translation and revision of a scientific study that was published in Kyoto under the title *Jesus and Kukai, a World of Non-Duality*, to bring the Shingon-Buddhist message closer to the Christian reader, and *vice versa*.⁵

**A World of Non-Duality**

Whereas prior to the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church was seeking to establish how Christianity differed from other religions, the main quest now is to find what unites them. Thus, this study is born from the spirituality of “non-duality.” Thanks to many of my spiritual teachers, such as Advaita-Vedanta master Sri Ranganathananda of the Sri Ramakrishna Mission, Jewish master Henri Van Praag, Zen master Shodo Harada, Shingon master Shodo Habukawa, and Siddha master Sri Ganapati, I grew up with this spirituality and am still exploring its wondrous world. It is therefore only natural that I should look for aspects that bind Christian and Shingon followers, without overlooking their differences.

The word “non-duality” goes back to a concept in Hindu Vedanta philosophy “a-dvaita” (not two), based on a “monistic” worldview in which all things are related. The meaning is that two things do not oppose each other, they are equal, do not differ, do not discriminate, and two

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⁴ 古屋安雄, 『宗教の神学, その形成と課題』, ヨルダン社, 1990.
⁵ ペテロ・バーケルマンス, 『イエスと空海, 不二の世界』, ナカニシや出版, 京都府, 2012.
things that resemble each other may be, in essence, one. A phenomenon might appear to differ at first glance, but be on an essential level all the same. Buddhism teaches this “non-dual wisdom” in a practical way through the “Middle Way” in which a practitioner tries to overcome all opposites by never going to extremes. For instance, following the Buddha’s example, choosing neither to be rich nor to be poor, or as Jesus did, not choosing to have friends nor to have enemies. Buddhist concepts such as “emptiness” or “Interdependent Co-arising” cannot be understood but from this non-dual point of view. In addition to this, typical Shingon Esoteric Buddhist concepts such as “Yoga of Three Mysteries” 三密瑜伽, “Kaji 加持 and “Nyuga-Ganyu” 入我我入 are based on this spirituality, and can be understood as a Buddhist formulation of the Hindu idea of union between the individual soul and the universal soul, the Atman and the Brahman.

Although there is no evidence of a relationship between Christianity and Shingon on the historical level, there is a meaningful meeting-point: Jesus and Kukai both lived in such a “non-dual world.” In order to understand them, one has to enter into their world, as Goethe once said: “The one who wants to understand the poem will have to enter into the world of the poet.” Moreover, Christian theology and Shingon teachings are rich in “non-dual thinking” and should be understood from that angle, too. Lastly, through a spirit of non-duality combined with scientific research we can discover the unity present in such very different concepts as the Three Mysteries and the Sacraments, the Three Karmas and Original Sin, and so on.

**Faith and Mysticism**

However special Christian mysticism is, it does have a universal aspect. When a religious man or woman feels the mystery of his/her own religion strongly, there is the risk that he or she may become a fanatic and look down on the faith of another. Even scholars of religion or theologians run this risk. However, I am of the opinion that in order to understand a religion well, one has to dare to believe its teachings to a certain extent, and experience its practice up to a certain point. Not everyone is convinced thereof, but it is my experience in the study of religion. Through my willingness to enter into their world of faith, even

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6 中村元著, 『佛教語大辞典』, p. 1171.
to experience the religious discipline to become a Shingon priest, I was able to understand the “mystery” of their faith.

Through understanding the practice and faith of Shingon, I also came to better understand the practice and faith of Christianity: the universal love of God, the universal sacrifice of Christ, and the universal action of the Holy Spirit. I should like to share with the reader this particular example of the “Theology of Religions” as follows:

**Structure of the Book**

First the Teachings of Shingon were divided into seven main themes: starting with the life of “Kukai” 空海 and his encounter with the practice of the “Three Mysteries” 三密. Behind the Three Mysteries there is the teaching of the “Three Karmas” 三業. The aim of the Three Mysteries is known as: “Becoming a Buddha in this Body” 即身成仏. Furthermore, still in relation to the Three Mysteries is the role of the Cosmic Buddha, “Dainichi Nyorai” 大日如来 and the world of the “Twinned Mandalas” 両部曼荼羅. Lastly, there is a concept that is very essential to Esoteric Buddhism: the idea of “Three Powers” 三力. Taking these seven themes, we will look at the way Christian theology views them, and try to point out their universal aspects. Thus, in each chapter, the Shingon Teachings will come first, followed by a comparison with Christian theological ideas, and lastly with a reflection around the non-dual aspect (not one, not two) of a specific theme:

Ch. 1: Kobo Daishi Kukai and Jesus Christ:  
*Mystery and Prophecy;*

Ch. 2: The Three Mysteries and the Sacraments:  
*Meditation and Ritual;*

Ch. 3: Three Karmas and Original Sin:  
*Faith and Practice;*

Ch. 4: Becoming a Buddha in this Body and Sanctification of the Human being:  
*Truth and Method;*

Ch. 5: Dainichi Nyorai and God:  
*Monism and Dualism;*

Ch. 6: The Two Great Mandalas and Jesus’ Personality:  
*Absolute Truth and Relative Truth;*

Ch. 7: The Three Powers and Grace:  
*God/Buddha and Human Being.*
We shall follow the phenomenological method used by Gerardus Van der Leeuw in Comparative Religion. This method, based on the researcher's own experience, serves to discern the essential structure of a religious phenomenon. This comparative study will therefore be interspersed with personal experiences or experiences of other scholars. It is also the ideal method for Theology of Religions because this theology is—and should be—based on the Dialogue of Religions and an in-depth comparison of different theologies, a so-called Comparative Theology.

Word of Thanks

We are grateful to Reverend Shodo Habukawa, former administrative head of Koyasan Sohonzan Kongobuji and specialist in Shingon rituals, for his request to make my former comparative study of Shingon and Christianity, 『イエスと空海，不二の世界』(Jesus and Kukai, A World of Non-Duality), also available in concise form for English readers. Father Christian Tauchner, SVD, director of the Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, was so kind as to prepare its publication at their Institute in Sankt Augustin, Germany, with Ms. Martina Ludwig as a most efficient editor, and also for taking it up in their monograph series Studia Instituti Missiologici SVD. The English text has been artfully corrected by Miss Philippa Woolridge and my sister Lieve Jerger. And last but not least, as member of the missionary Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM), we feel a deep gratitude that our efforts in inter-religious dialogue are accepted and stimulated by my religious superiors.