

THE CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER WITH JAPANESE BUDDHISM

Notto R. THELLE

Early Encounters?

At the bottom of the magnificent graveyard at Mount Koya, one of the major centers of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, there is a beautiful replica of the Chinese Nestorian monument. The original stele, erected at Sian-fu, China, in 781, records the history of the Nestorian church in China, including a statement about its doctrines. When a replica was made and placed in one of the sacred places of Japanese Buddhism, it was because a number of scholars and interested lay people were convinced that the Nestorian Church and Esoteric Buddhism had been in close contact in China, and perhaps in Japan, and had exerted a mutual influence on each other. Some people, including the English lady who took the initiative for erecting the replica at Mount Koya, Elisabeth A. Gordon, even believed that Esoteric Buddhism represented a synthesis of the two religions (Gordon 1911, 193–209, Reichelt 1948, 66–7).

It is a fascinating fact that the Nestorian Church was active in the capital of Changan in the same period as Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi) and other distinguished Japanese Buddhist monks were studying and practicing in the area, and it is certainly conceivable that there was contact between representatives of the two religions in the multicultural and cosmopolitan atmosphere of the capital. The Nestorian monument itself evinces the attempt of Christians to express their faith in terms that might be familiar to Buddhism and Chinese indigenous philosophical traditions, and it has been suggested that the Esoteric Buddhist terminology in particular suggests influence from Nestorian ideas. However, even though Kūkai relates his understanding of Esoteric Buddhism to other religious traditions, for example in his *Hizō hōyaku* (The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury), there seems to be no references to Nestorian Christianity and, further, no direct indication that he ever encountered representatives of the Nestorian Church. The theories about the presence of a Nestorian church in

Japan, formulated by such a distinguished scholar as P.J. Saeki (Saeki 1916 and 1951) and repeated by others (England 1996; Aprem 1976; and Young 1984), are not necessarily mistaken, but as they have not yet been substantiated by historical evidence, such theories can hardly be regarded as more than intelligent guesses.

The replica of the Nestorian monument at Mount Koya might be misleading as a testimony about the early historical encounter between Christianity and Esoteric Buddhism in China and Japan, but it certainly expresses the wish to initiate such a dialogue about one century ago, and it could even be seen as a prophecy about a dialogue which deserves much more attention in the century to come. While the Christian encounter with Japanese Buddhism in the twentieth century has been preoccupied with Zen, and partly with Pure Land Buddhism, there is no doubt that a deepening of the relationship with Esoteric and other Buddhist traditions may open new perspectives and fresh insights.

Encounters in the "Christian Century": Trimphalism and Defeat

The first documented encounters between Buddhists and Christians in Japan took place immediately after the arrival of Francis Xavier and the Jesuit mission in 1549. The Jesuits had extremely positive impressions of the Japanese, and reported favorably about their cultural and intellectual abilities. They also established friendly relations with the Buddhist leadership as they entered new places. Their evaluation of Buddhism was initially colored by their own tradition. They observed many similarities in religious practices, such as monastic orders, vestments, the use of rosaries and other ritual elements, but were shocked by the moral laxity of the monks, notably in relation to sexual practices, heterosexual and homosexual (Schurhammer 1982, 77, 84–5). The Jesuits, eager to find indigenous terms in order to make their faith more easily understood, were led to adopt a considerable amount of Buddhist terminology. From the Buddhist point of view, consequently, Christianity seemed to be just another denomination of Buddhism. As the missionaries gradually discovered that the terminology failed to distinguish their teaching from Buddhism, they changed policy and began to denounce Buddhism. The inevitable result was, of course, broken relationships and an increasingly negative stance also on the part of Buddhism.

One characteristic example of such misunderstanding is the initial designation for God, introduced by the first interpreter, a Japanese named Yajirō, who had also given the missionaries a fragmentary introduction to Buddhism. He