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Review Article

Dialogues at One Inch Above the Ground

James W. Heisig

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This collection of nine articles by James Heisig addresses various aspects of our need to move into the future face forward – intentionally, skilfully, fully aware of the faith of our ancestors, while attuned to the strange and changing world that surrounds us. The only other option – the one frequently taken by fearful souls – is to back into the future, eyes fixed on the glories of one’s own prized religious past, an option that is neither skilful nor faith-aware. Heisig makes this appeal incisively and cogently throughout. The metaphor of moving into the future front face or backside first is his, and he fleshes it out in terms of alterations in consciousness, approaches to dialogue and mission, and the ongoing secularization of our lives.

The first four essays – “Sufficiency and Satisfaction: Recovering Ancient Symbolism,” “Make-Believe Nature,” “Cultivating Faith” and “The Expropriation of the Senses” – are written in the style of Jacques Ellul or Ivan Illich, critiquing the institutions of our societies for their baleful effects on everyday human consciousness.

The first essay on when to know how much is enough (a maxim that is carved on a basin at Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto) reminds one of Illich’s short essay, “The Message of Bapu’s Hut,” . . . a short meditation on life simplicity in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi. However, reading Illich or Ellul often leaves one convinced and aware of the impact of concocted needs, but with little hope for escape from the fate of being force-fed by a consumer society bent on a globalizing culture of universal economic hegemony. Heisig’s ruminations, by contrast, are “one inch above the ground,” staying more concrete and aimed at the practice of everyday convivial living. They are also enriched by insights from eastern traditions – in this first essay from the “Sutra on the Buddha’s Final Instructions.”

The essay on “Nature” is a critique on the reified and sentimentalized idea of nature – as an environment that we can take care of by technological repair. If nature is “environmentalized” it becomes a tolerable balance to the ongoing “economic development” measure of a world “in which all the kami (divine spirits) are dead.” Heisig

carries his social critique forward in rejecting health as an institutional value within a global culture that denigrates and marginalizes “vernacular cultures” and non-institutional healing. The issue at the conference where Heisig gave this paper, “Catholicizing Health,” was how to apportion ICU care. This, for Heisig, becomes a metaphor for a broader set of beliefs lying transparently (that is, unseen) in the background.

The final essay of this set treats the asceticisms that we are obliged to follow by the consumer societies we have created – goods we do not need but have to work to acquire, impoverishing services that we are expected to work toward, systems that we have to conquer and follow to meet everyday needs. The larger the superstore, the more skill is demanded of the “shopper.” The more complex the medical insurance, the more skilful one has to become to claim the reimbursements for prescriptions. The path of practical virtue long recommended by our religious traditions offers a counter to such tendencies. By making transparent values visible, they enable people consciously and intentionally to engage in the arts of living and dying.

Mission as Dialogue

The next set of three essays – “Converting Buddhism to Christianity, Christianity to Buddhism,” “Interreligiosity and Conversion,” and “Sutras on the Dialogue Among Religions” – draw on Heisig’s extensive practice of such interreligious dialogue. The Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (Heisig was a founding member and long-time director) is attached to a Roman Catholic university in Nagoya, Japan, and is devoted to interreligious dialogue. It has never lost the missionary impetus which accompanied the Society of the Divine Word missionaries who founded the university. That impetus, however, had been radically deepened and today’s missionaries reread their mission to convert all peoples. Heisig, while preaching the gospel in its radical call for conversion, understands conversion to be an “intransitive” verb. That is to say, the aim of preaching Christ in a context of dialogue is not to alter anyone’s religious affiliation, but to open each and every person – from whatever tradition – to the awareness of the ultimacy that grounds us all in the call to live towards a just and peaceful future. Conversions (metanoia) are radical changes of heart and mind, changes that enable one to live more fully and more humanely. They should not be attempts to change the religious identity of one’s interlocutors, but to elucidate the depths of each tradition, often in the light of the other. They enrich, they challenge. They find points of contact, they confess to differences. They become a new theological culture that stretches beyond the monocultural modes of accustomed thinkers.

These three essays are, to me, the most valuable in the book. There are few other people in the world of Christian thinkers who can enunciate such an agendaless program for dialogue, avoiding the easy syncretism of some pluralisms, remaining faithful to the Christ of the gospel, and at the same time embracing the depths of the Buddhist cultures of Japan. Indeed, the Nanzan Institute, under the leadership of Heisig and Jan van Bragt,

and now Paul Swanson, has been the main agency for the translation and introduction of the broad Kyoto School philosophy of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani to a wide range of western readers. When Heisig meditates on dialogue, he draws upon lifetimes of practice, a love of the gospel, and a cherishing of the traditions of a sometimes very wise east.

Secularization and Pluralism

Heisig's final two essays – “Christianity Today: The Transition to Disestablishment” and “What Time Is It for Christianity?” – address the secularization of the Christian faith and the decreasing role of the institutional form of religion today. The debates are interesting. Both essays were written just before the millennium and predict Christian religious fervor and excesses that, for the most part, did not occur. Millennial fears seem to have focused more around the Y2K computer bug, with people withdrawing money from their bank accounts, hoarding food, and literally taking to the hills, all in the fearful expectation that major computing systems would collapse and society be rendered inoperable.

Heisig also thinks that there is nothing that the Church can do now to reclaim its aliveness, for, disestablished as it is, the culture hardly cares about what it does. I wonder about this, for sociologists of religion, like Finke and Stark, paint a different picture, where the diversity of religious options that are available increases participation in churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques. This is in contrast to the secularization that Peter Berger announced some decades ago. At least here in the United States, the institutions have recently experienced significant increases in their membership.

Yet Heisig's meditations on how to retrieve eschatology rings true: enlivening faith through dialogue, inculturating the gospel in vernacular cultures, and recovering the stress on orthopraxis. These do seem to be the marks of healthy institutions, while the millennial madness is more secular, as in the religious secularism of an American government that has openly begun to bruit about ideas of an American empire. Heisig would, I think, agree, for he does write about the increasing sacralization of the saeculum – and it is there, I submit, that the issues of what time it is will be played out in the remaking of our familiar world.

Heisig writes with insight and depth, without soaring far into the imagined skies of pretended concord and brotherhood and without cynically keeping his thought stuck in the mud. Rather, like his poet mentor Saigyó, he moves just one small inch above our experienced lives – just enough to invite the reader to tread a little more lightly over this tattered earth.