

Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

- Conversion in Buddhism and Christianity 22 March 2017

ABSTRACT

Professor Haug talks about *conversion* mentioning several different aspects of conversion. I suggest my proper typology, by which I identify four positions that emerge in the four stories told by professor Haug. I ask questions about the character of boundaries, but also about *oneness* or *unity* or even *comm-unity*. Professor Eiko starts with the affirmation that “All is one”. There are reasons to why I find any talk about ‘oneness’ problematic, but I also believe that a different reading is possible. This alternative reading of *oneness* circumvents identifying ‘oneness’ with ‘subsuming all’.

TEXT

I start by making some comments on professor Haug’s paper and bring them to a point where I see a connection to professor Eiko’s paper. I will then end by a broad, overarching—or perhaps underlying—comment.

The topic of Professor Haug’s talk was *conversion*. She mentioned several different aspects of conversion. It may be something that happens very suddenly, or rather slowly, or put differently conversion can be characterised as a process or as an event. Conversion can also be seen as a phenomenon that concerns individuals—solely or primarily—or the collective aspects may be in the foreground. She also underlined that in conversion there are political, social, economical and perhaps even more aspects involved.

Now, there are still further aspects that may be added. *Conversion* may be seen as a continuous change, i.e. *within* a given (religious) tradition. It would rather be something that takes place—or should take place—every day; one can see that in terms of spiritual conversion (*metanoia*), for instance. There is of course also the aspect of *change* or *transformation*. It appears that talking about change implies talking about a movement *from* something *to* something. More can be said about that. If we talk about change from/to, a distinction can be made between on the one hand what professor Haug talks about as ‘tradition transition’, that is to say moving from one religion to another, or on the other hand ‘institutional transition’, which means going from one community to another, while remaining in more or less the same (religious) ‘tradition’.

This makes me ask questions about boundaries. In what has been said so far there seems to be an implicit category ‘boundary’. But what kind of boundaries are we then talking about? Boundaries that have been created, or boundaries given as pre-existent boundaries (to some degree at least)? Are boundaries artificial? To what extent? What does it mean to claim the one or the other? Are boundaries porous? Or does the very idea of ‘boundary’ imply being imporous? And of course, furthermore, what are the implications if affirming the one rather than the other?

By no means, I want to be mean by bringing these questions on the table. The only thing I wanted to point out is that when professor Haug talks about *conversion* and when she so diligently thematises a number of various conceptual aspects, I cannot but agree and say that there are even more factors in the same vein.

Professor Haug then tells us about four concrete cases in Thailand. It is indeed helpful as it shifts focus from an endless analysis of numerous concepts. She formulates two questions: a) How is the religious other perceived? b) How is *conversion* understood? and she gives a brief account of four encounters or experiences in which she sees four different responses to these questions.

For heuristic reasons, I would like to suggest my proper typology here. Not that I am unhappy with the way professor Haug presented the material. But my typology serves my purposes better. So, I identify four positions that emerge in the four stories told by professor Haug.

1. The attitude in the first case can be summarised as something like ‘all religions teach people to be good’; there is certainly place for hospitality but being Thai is being Buddhist—the very notion ‘Thai Christians’ looks suspicious. Yet, by the end of the day, all religions are fundamentally one [type 1].

2. In case number two, the focus is on the idea that to convert means going *from* something *to* something else. Hence, there is, and must be, a clean break. An immediate consequence is that Thai Christians cannot participate in several aspects of Thai life (official ceremonies, cultural events...). The fundamental idea is that there is a neat separation; one has to make a choice [type 2].

3. The third case is *aggressive evangelism* (in Haug’s own wording). The term is almost self-explanatory. The underlying idea is that there is separation, which entails aggressiveness or enmity [type 3]. (I believe it should be noted however that aggressiveness here does not necessarily entail violence or hostility.)

4. In the fourth case, interfaith dialogue is seen as something good. Interestingly enough, the fundamental and yet un-thematised idea is that between various religions there is separation, but the question is open as to how far it goes and what points are concerned [type 4].

Hearing professor Haug’s account of these cases, other issue(s) are evoked than the ones she brings up herself. Perhaps I could summarise them in the three words separation, community and oneness.

I will stop here for the moment, and make a small step to professor Hanaoka Eiko’s paper. Listening to professor Haug made me ask questions about the character of boundaries when talking about *conversion*, but also about *oneness* or *unity* or even *comm-unity* (as opposed to separation). Professor Eiko starts rather bluntly with the affirmation that “All is one”—or rather, to be more precise, “All is *becoming* one”. I think I can see how it is possible to say so, and I believe that there is some convincing force behind this statement. Yet, when I hear the word ‘oneness’, I take shelter. In a sense—it is true—I fear oneness. I basically find it a terrifying perspective, a frightening concept. This is due to the fact that I find any idea dealing with the *absolute* is something that tends to have the idea of subsuming all. In my eyes it appears to imply no variation, dullness, and a total standstill. There will be peace and repose, perhaps. But the price is high, namely death.

In a way, this is my first strong and spontaneous reaction to Professor Eiko’s paper: “All is One”, or “all will become one” simply points at death in the most negative and shabby sense. Not death as peace and repose, not as a transfer to a new and better world, but eternal dullness in a monotone emptiness in which nothing is seen, heard, experienced or lived; all is of the same colour in a tasteless soup without beginning and without end. I wanted to say all this in order to make it clear why I find any talk about ‘oneness’ problematic, not to say that I believe this is professor Eiko’s vision of oneness or that this would be the only aspect of oneness. I do believe that a different reading is possible, and that is also what I hear when professor Eiko’s talks about Kitaro Nishida in her paper.

There is certainly the trait of oneness, but as the vocabulary is slightly displaced, the aspect of *one* does not dominate the scene; *nothingness* is in the foreground. Here God is “absolute nothingness” and some of the implications are “infinite openness”, and “presence here and now” as a paradigm for life, for culture and for thinking. This represents, in my view, another tack to the issue of oneness; it circumvents identifying ‘oneness’ with ‘subsuming all’. Or so I believe. In fact, if oneness were seen in terms of a paradigm, one would have to think that there are at least two different things, the *paradigm* on the one hand, and what is inside the paradigm on the other hand; hence there is a distinction between the paradigm, and what the paradigm is for. Also, if it is possible to say that something is ‘open’, it seems that it has to be open *to something*, which seems to imply that it cannot be an all-encompassing absolute. Therefore, to me it is much easier to follow the thread of ‘nothingness’ in this sense, than talking about ‘oneness’.

Professor Eiko also makes a connection to the Christian tradition in an interesting way. In particular this comes forth when professor Eiko quotes Meister Eckhart: “human detached from the whole

creature” and when she talks about “Absolute Nothingness as God-hood breaks through to the ground of soul”.

What I hear is that this Nothingness that “breaks through to the ground of soul” resonates with Nishida’s infinite openness; in terms of “opened in each moment”, “absolute presence” and “eternal now”. Now also this approach seems difficult. So many big words, so difficult to grasp the meaning of, in the same way, as it is hard to understand references to ‘the true formless self’ that professor Eiko also makes. What would that be like? A self that has no form is unlikely to be seen as a ‘self’. On the other hand if it is not about *a* self but ‘self’ *tout court*, the term appears utterly incomprehensible.

Put differently, in a certain way talking about Oneness and Absolute and about ‘formless self’ appears to be both impossible and fundamentally uninteresting. In another way, it seems to be absolutely necessary to use this language when formulating some deep insights.

In the beginning, I said that I should link my reading of professor Haug’s presentation to the one made by professor Eiko. The *media res* is, I think, ‘oneness’. To professor Haug, I would say that in one respect it is perhaps so that there is and must be, fundamentally, some oneness—all is becoming one—while concurrently this is and has to be impossible. There is a sort of doubleness or paradox. Perhaps this implies a less scaring oneness, than I first saw, professor Eiko.

This brings me back to the theme of conversion. Now, if *conversion* can be seen in terms of continuous change, this could also be seen in terms of oneness; there is one life, one humanity, one spiritual dimension, one religion... All is *one*, or perhaps rather All is *becoming one*. Concurrently, and seemingly in total opposition to this, it is also possible to see conversion as being about going from something to something else either institutionally or as tradition transition. The conclusion is that it is not necessarily so, and it is necessarily so.

This calls for humility and carefulness in analyses. This gives us a chance to be flexible in practice. This challenges us to develop skills and wisdom in discernment as to when and how to judge and evaluate.

So, I would like to thank professor Haug and professor Eiko. Having very different approaches and talking about seemingly very different topics, their contributions appeared to be two isolated discourses. I believe however that there is at least one point—*oneness*—where a double reading of their presentations may be more than enriching.

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Biographical note

Patrik Fridlund is *docent* (reader) in philosophy of religion at Lund University, Sweden. He was a member of the research unit *Dialogue et conversion* at Catholic University of Paris 2009-2013. He is deputy director responsible for international relations of the open access review *Logoi.ph*. His main research interests are religious diversity, religion and politics, and philosophical questions about subjectivity, informed by readings of Derrida, Irigaray and Lévinas.