Internment and Ministry: A Dialogue with Joseph Kitagawa

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ABSTRACT: This dialogue presents a profile of the late Joseph Kitagawa—a renowned scholar of the history of religions (Religionswissenschaft). It focuses on comparative religion and philosophy, as well as several other important issues related to his distinguished career as an Episcopal priest and dean of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. They are: his experience of American concentration camps during World War II; Christian atheism and new theological models; concepts of time in Oriental and Occidental faiths; depth-psychology and contemporary ministry; and Paul Tillich's significance for the pastoral counseling movement.

Introduction

When I think of the late Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa, I envision a lighthouse beacon pointing through turbulent waters to critical ports of call. From such a perspective, I continue to revere him. He was an exceptional priest, as well as a scholar who was actively aware of his immediate community—which was international. On two occasions he profoundly influenced major decisions related to my ministry. He guided me toward new perceptions about my profession. Furthermore, he offered such guidance to many. I believe my experiences of him are illustrative of the type of impressions I have heard many others ascribe to his ministry during the last fifty years—beginning with the time he spent in internment.

In the early 1960s I was a student of comparative religion at Washington University in St. Louis. My faculty advisor was the dean, Burton Wheeler, who was a scholar of religious literature. He introduced me to the work of Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa. He was also the first person to suggest that I consider the University of Chicago for graduate work.

In 1966 Dean Wheeler arranged for my appointment as a research assis-
tant in ancient Christian history. My basic task was identifying certain esoterically expressions for the devil in the Church Fathers. I also read everything I could digest by Drs. Eliade and Kitagawa. By the time I completed this tenure, I was nearly obsessed with the history of religions school or Religionswissenschaft.

Consequently, my bishop suggested that I consider entering Seabury-Western Theological Seminary with the eventual goal of doctoral work at the University of Chicago. I followed his advice and visited the seminary when classes entered their second week of the Epiphany quarter. The faculty was a fine group of Anglican thinkers headed by a dean who personified gentility. I was very influenced but not convinced that this was my best choice of seminaries, even though the University of Chicago was so close.

Then, at Evening Prayer, my reservations were resolved by the guest preacher, Joseph Kitagawa, a graduate of Seabury-Western. Professor Kitagawa's sermon impressed me as a powerful description of ecumenical truths based on common myths in world religions. 4

At dinner that night I was introduced to Dr. Kitagawa. When he found out that I was at Washington University, he immediately asked, “How is Burton Wheeler?” As we talked about Seabury-Western, he told me, “This seminary helped me to direct the course of my ministry. You will like it. If you want to go on to graduate school at the University of Chicago, call me in a few years and I'll see if I can help.”

Four years later we had dinner again, at the home of the Episcopal chaplain of Northwestern University, Scott Jones. 5 Dr. Jones brought us together to celebrate our latest degrees from Seabury-Western: Professor Kitagawa received an honorary doctorate; and I was awarded a Master in Sacred Theology. 6 He mentioned that he knew two other things about me since we last met: that I had been appointed Assistant Rector of St. Chrysostom’s, the largest Episcopal Church in Chicago; and that I had recently applied for admittance into the University of Chicago for the coming fall.

A few days later I received a personal note that I immediately recognized as a “pastoral call” from one priest to another.

Dear David,

You already have a good training in comparative religion and a keen interest for theology. From what I know about your work in our diocese you have other talents as well. Why don’t you combine them? Go and talk to Carroll Wise about this. He will know how to help you. Northwestern is the best place for you.

Sincerely,

Joe