



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Remembering Professor Corless

Rose Drew

Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 27, 2007, pp. 153-154 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2007.0008>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/220079>

*Do We Go from Here? The Many Religions and the Next Step.* Over the years, his works examined Buddhist teachings and practices, Christian teachings and practices, Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and interreligious dialogue; more recently his focus had turned to queer dharma topics and same-sex issues.

A memorial service, "We Are Life, Its Shining Gift," was held for Roger on March 10, 2007, in San Francisco. Friends and colleagues spoke of Roger's life and accomplishments and his impact on their lives. There were Buddhist chanting and Christian hymns, with the service opening and closing with two musical pieces selected by Roger for that purpose: "The Swan of Tuonela" by Jean Sibelius and "The Lark Ascending" by Sir Ralph Vaughn William.

Monetary memorial gifts are being received by the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies to be used in some fashion toward the 8th International Buddhist-Christian Dialogue to be held in 2009. Gifts should be sent to SBCS Corless Memorial Fund, CSSR Executive Office, Rice University MS 156, PO Box 1892, Houston, TX 77251-1892. To donate by credit card, call 713-348-5721.

\* \* \*

I was about six months into my current PhD research on Buddhist-Christian dual religious identity when I read a profile of Roger Corless in which he spoke about his own Buddhist-Christian identity (or "identities," because Roger saw his Buddhist "self" and his Christian "self" as two distinct identities). Roger immediately earned a place on my "most wanted" list, and when the time came to approach potential interviewees, I was delighted to find that Roger was eager, despite his failing health, to share with me the results of his "experiment" in dual belonging. So, last spring, I stayed with him for a few days and we talked at length about his religious thought and practice.

That Roger was a remarkable man is clearly evident in his work: his wit and playful sense of humor, his sharp and inquisitive mind and vast knowledge of his subject, his intellectual integrity and concern for authenticity, and his insightful and innovative perspectives. Roger also possessed a healthy awareness of the potential for theology and "dharmology" to fail to do justice to the Christian's and the Buddhist's experience (which was what he considered to be crucial)—an awareness that was complemented by his remarkable ability to combine an intuitive, emotional response to truth and a sensitivity to the power of myth, symbolism, and poetry, with a thoroughgoing academic rigor. Sometimes he might start an essay with a song and, then, as he put it, "try to convert it into a philosophy," asking any readers who felt he had failed in the conversion to return again to the song, because, as far as he was concerned, the song would be true even if he himself had not correctly understood it. When I met Roger in person, I was delighted to find my sense of his intuitive spirituality, rich imagination, and shrewd intelligence confirmed, and was immediately struck also by his disarming honesty and humbling humility.

It is a great privilege to have had the opportunity to meet Roger and talk

with him about his fascinating ideas. I was not always sure I fully understood them, and we certainly did not agree on everything: argue though we did about his notion that there could be more than one “Absolute,” we never did come to share a perspective. But his ideas nevertheless continue to be a challenge to me and a reminder of the need for all of us engaged in dialogue to be respectful of the integrity of the religious traditions, and a warning to anyone who, like Roger, sees himself or herself as a person who, rather than simply being *engaged* in dialogue, *is* a dialogue, to be wary of quick-fix solutions to the questions and difficulties he or she inevitably faces. As far as Roger was concerned, it was better to live as an authentic Buddhist and as an authentic Christian and to accept what he took to be their conceptual irreconcilability than to accept any tidy reconciliation that might reduce both to the status of merely partial truths. This path of dual allegiance was not one Roger felt he had chosen; rather, it was a vocation. He referred to it as a “way of No Expectations,” for he made no pretense to know where it would end. His concern was simply to be a host to the traditions and to see where this would lead.

Over time, Roger had come to feel that, despite what he took to be the contradictions between them, his Buddhism and his Christianity somehow supported and enriched each other. He had also come to feel that, whether seen from a Christian or a Buddhist perspective, the universe “appears to be wise and compassionate and energetic at its deepest level.” This belief was supported by occasions when, in prayer or meditation, Roger felt he was contacting a realm or level of consciousness “of absolute love and wisdom and energy, which was the place at which the different religions coinhered.” Buddhists and Christians, Roger had come to believe, could agree on a fundamental level that “the universe is friendly.” It was this fundamental insight that Roger felt he could affirm, “as a Buddhist, a Christian, a person relating to Gaia, and a recovered alcoholic,” and it was this basic trust in the reality of love and wisdom that seemed to me the linchpin of Roger’s multiple religious commitments.

I will treasure our conversations, not merely for the way in which Roger’s insights are assisting me in my academic work, but also for the way in which they help me in my own spiritual life. And I am truly thankful for his lifetime of work in the field of interreligious dialogue; I know his writings will continue to be an inspiration to me and to many others.

Rose Drew

\* \* \*