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James L. Fredericks

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## In Memoriam: Masao Abe (1915–2006)

James Fredericks  
*Loyola Marymount University*

Professor Masao Abe, a pioneer in the international dialogue among Christians and Buddhists, died in Kyoto, Japan, on September 10, 2006. He was 91 years old. Professor Abe was given a quiet funeral service reserved to family and close friends, according to sources in Kyoto.

After the death of his mentor D. T. Suzuki, Abe became a leading exponent of Zen in the West and a driving force in the encounter between Buddhism and Christianity. Abe must be credited with much of the intellectual vitality of this dialogue, as well as its relevance to contemporary social problems.

Abe was a tireless exponent of the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness as the standpoint for realizing the True Self, yet was also willing to place this basic Buddhist teaching in dialogue with Christianity. Rejecting the notion that Christianity and Buddhism were either fundamentally similar or completely different, Abe saw in interreligious dialogue an opportunity for the mutual transformation of dialogue partners and pursued dialogue to help Buddhists and Christians in confronting the threat of nihilism in the modern world.

In the ruins of postwar Japan, Abe began his studies with Hajime Tanabe at the University of Kyoto, a prominent figure in the Kyoto school of contemporary Zen Buddhist philosophy in Japan. But it was his encounter with Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, another philosopher of Zen at the University of Kyoto, that would be decisive for Abe's turn to Zen. In a series of Zen retreats with Hisamatsu at Myoshinji Temple in western Kyoto, Abe was forced to confront the reality of nihilism within himself and eventually resolve this problem by entering the Zen standpoint of emptiness, wherein the enlightened self arises.

At age 40, Abe left Kyoto for New York to study at Union Theological Seminary with two of the most prominent Christian theologians of his day, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. This encounter began a distinguished career of teaching, writing, and, above all, dialogue with leading Christian thinkers, including David Tracy, Langdon Gilkey, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Jurgen Moltmann, and Hans Kung. Abe served as visiting professor at the University of Chicago, Purdue University, Claremont College, Columbia University, Princeton University, the University of Hawai'i, and other schools. In Germany,

Abe taught at Heidelberg, Tübingen, and Munich. In addition to his many Japanese publications, Abe wrote extensively in English. These works include *Zen and Western Thought*, an award-winning collection of essays, and a groundbreaking reflection on Christian belief in Christ interpreted from a Buddhist perspective, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata." This essay appeared in conjunction with responses from several Christian and Jewish theologians, making the book itself a dialogue. Abe also engaged Jewish intellectuals with his Buddhist reflection on the Holocaust.

In 1984, Abe and John Cobb convened a group of Buddhist and Christian intellectuals from Japan, North America, and Europe for dialogue in depth over a sustained period of time on a number of fundamental issues. He was also a guiding influence on the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, which continues his work of dialogue today.

Masao Abe is survived by his wife Ikuko Abe, his constant companion in a life of sojourn and dialogue in the West.