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Living Zen, Loving God (review)

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LIVING ZEN, LOVING GOD. By *Ruben L. F. Habito*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004. 136 + xxvi pp.

In his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine states that non-Christian “seekers of wisdom” may have “said things which are indeed true and are well accommodated to our faith,” and even goes on to assert that “some truths concerning the one God are discovered among them.” Augustine urges that taking the “gold and silver” of genuine moral and spiritual wisdom from non-Christian sources “should not be feared . . . but rather [that these treasures ought to be] taken . . . and converted to our use” (II, xl, 60). As the title of his book implies, Habito believes that “living Zen,” and particularly practicing the discipline of zazen, or contemplative sitting, is, for Christians at least, equivalent to the practice of loving God. He addresses himself to Christians—specifically, Roman Catholics—who are seeking to deepen their spirituality, and the book’s overarching purpose is to show that the practice of Zen meditation is both helpful in this quest and conformable with Christian faith. At various points throughout his book, Habito emphasizes that following the path of Zen, if done properly, will in fact strengthen Christians’ commitment to their beliefs and, especially, the Gospel’s call of loving one’s neighbor.

Living Zen, Loving God is divided into ten short chapters. In the first chapter, Habito gives a personal account of his experience with Zen. This opening allows him to demonstrate his authority to speak about Zen Buddhism, to introduce the fundamental experience that he is inviting his readers to share, and to illustrate how, in his own case, the practice of zazen shed new light on his Christian faith. As a former Jesuit priest and practicing Catholic, Habito may dispense with any discussion of his qualifications to speak as a Christian. His claim to speak for the Zen experience is less obvious, and so he relates the validation of his *kensho* (initial enlightenment) by two Japanese Buddhist masters. This, along with the testimonials in the forewords by John Keenan and Fr. Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, SJ, is an assurance that his presentation of Zen is reliable, despite the cultural gulf between his background and that of his Zen teachers.

What Habito discovered in his initial enlightenment was nothing less than a transformative encounter with reality, an awareness that is irreducible to conceptual knowledge. *Kensho* is the experience of nothingness that cannot be expressed but only patiently awaited in silence (p. 5). This experience carried with it a new awareness of the Christian doctrine of creation and a renewed commitment to social involvement on behalf of those who suffer.

The nature of Zen is explored more fully in the second chapter, “Emptiness and Fullness.” The experience of nothingness involves a self-emptying, a “peeling off” of layers of the false self to find the “depths” in oneself (pp. 13–14). This work of self-realization proceeds by the use of a koan, an enigmatic state-

ment or story that brings the disciple to an intellectual impasse. The goal of zazen may be indicated inchoately by understanding that the purpose of the koan is precisely to stop thinking and thus to experience oneself as one is and not according to the labels or concepts one habitually uses. Self-realization, the kensho experience, then opens the capacity to relate to others and the world directly, without the falsification of translating experience into thought: "One who is fully emptied in Zen finds himself or herself in everything, literally, and is able to identify fully with everything, to be all things, and thus to act in total freedom, according to what the particular situation demands. Such a one is no longer separated by the illusory barrier between himself and the 'other.' One sees one's True Self in the 'other,' and the 'other' in one's True Self" (p. 22).

The next three chapters develop the themes in this summary through readings of classic Buddhist texts. In chapter 3, on the Heart Sutra, Habito stresses that Buddhist meditation, when practiced genuinely, is not solipsistic, an escape into oneself from concern for others' suffering, but rather a way of freeing oneself from idols (including the self) in order to be capable of true compassion, founded on "the total absence of self-consciousness" (p. 42). Similarly, in chapter 4, he argues that the Buddhist adage "Every day is a good day" must not be taken as recommending a facile retreat from social concern. Rather, the saying expresses the attitude of one who has achieved wisdom and who has reached the point of feeling the suffering of all sentient beings as his own. Chapter 5 is an analysis and explication of "The Song of Zazen," and it focuses on the meaning of *samadhi*, the calm mind of the fully realized Self. Again, the central message is the absence of self-consciousness, a removal of all that separates a person from directly experiencing reality and from acting freely and compassionately toward others. Only someone who has achieved this state knows the dynamism at the heart of this emptiness (pp. 46–47).

In the sixth chapter, "The Enlightened Samaritan: A Zen Reading of a Christian Parable," Habito proposes that moral readings of this famous story overlook a key theme, namely, the reason why the Samaritan acted as he did. From a Zen perspective, the immediacy of the Samaritan's response to the injured and abandoned stranger reveals his living of nondualism; the Samaritan does not see the stranger as an object, separate from himself, in need of his assistance; he simply does what love requires and thereby exemplifies the Presence of eternal life here and now (p. 75). Habito concludes the discussion by holding up Mary, the mother of Jesus, as "the epitome of the enlightened person who embodies the wisdom of nonduality" (p. 78).

The seventh and eighth chapters expand on the themes of nonduality and the intrinsic relationship in Zen Buddhism between meditation and social action. Chapter 7, "The Four Vows of Bodhisattva," explains how all the vows converge on the idea (or rather, the living experience) of nonduality, the realization of the "True Self" through self-forgetting. Chapter 8, "Kuan-Yin with a Thousand Hands," describes the devotion to the female figure Kuan-Yin (Kannon or Kannon in Japanese) as a concrete instance of Buddhism's commitment to actively

alleviating suffering. As Habito notes, there are obvious connections between the veneration of Kuan-Yin and Roman Catholic devotion to Mary. The lesson for Catholics, he suggests, is to identify with Mary's compassion.

In the final two chapters, Habito explicitly correlates the teachings of Zen with Christian doctrine. Chapter 9, "Zen Experience of Triune Mystery," employs Augustine's famous analogy of Lover/Father–Beloved/Son–Love/Spirit to demonstrate that the Christian experience of divine mystery is reflected in the Zen Buddhist's three fruits of Zen, which he labels "emptying of self-consciousness" (zazen meditation), "return to the concrete world" (*kensho* or enlightenment), and "sea of compassion" (achievement of nonduality). In the same way, Christian experience of God as unknowable mystery prepares the seeker for the self-emptying transformation into Christ and leads to a solidarity in suffering through life in the Spirit. The final chapter briefly returns to the theme of the creative Breath and makes the connection between the Zen practitioner's attention to breathing and Jesus's attunement to the movements of the Spirit. The book concludes by stressing the spontaneous love for all creatures born of a spirituality that is both genuinely Buddhist and fully Christian.

As I noted in my opening, this book is intended for Christians who are seeking to deepen their spirituality and are interested in Eastern meditation. In this, Habito's project is similar to Bede Griffiths's work in presenting Hindu spirituality to the West, as well as Thomas Merton's promotion of Eastern traditions in his later books. These writers also share a lively and engaging style. However, one might ask Habito why so little attention is paid to the apophatic tradition in Christianity, which is mentioned only in the appendix (p. 119). Arguably, a comparison of Zen with Christian mystical traditions would produce a more interesting conversation and remove the impression that Christianity has little to say about direct and immediate encounter with the ground of being.

Taking this criticism a step further, one might question more incisively the largely unexplored assumption that Zen Buddhist spirituality is completely benign for Christian faith. In the passage cited from *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine unambiguously calls for the assimilation of other cultures into the mold of Scripture and implies that it is necessary to be uncompromising about this allegiance. By contrast, Habito tends to use Scripture as a proof-text in illustrating Zen teachings. This is most clearly evident in his references to the Book of Revelation (e.g., on pp. 25 and 64), in which the apocalyptic meaning is virtually eliminated. He does acknowledge the importance of the eschatological tension in Christianity (p. 69), yet if apocalypticism is central to Christian faith, the consistent muting of this theme needs to be explicitly addressed.

Raising central issues is one mark of a book that can be read with profit by nonspecialists and more advanced students. Another is that it anticipates trends, as Habito's call to discover the experience of mystery enfolded in Christian doctrine has found a reflection, albeit in a different context, in Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical. The pope's recalling of the dynamism that should inspire social action and that makes it truly efficacious finds ready support in *Living Zen, Lov-*

ing God (see especially p. 113). This book is highly recommended for introductory seminary courses in spirituality and for faith development programs.

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BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN DIALOGUE: THE GERALD WEISFELD LECTURES 2004. *Edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel.* London: SCM Press, 2005. 262 + x pp.

BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY AND THE QUESTION OF CREATION: KARMIC OR DIVINE? *Edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel.* Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006. 182 + xii pp.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel has been professor of systematic theology and religious studies at Glasgow University since 2000, and member of the secretarial board of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies (ENBCS) since 1997. The volumes under review are collections of essays presented at conferences sponsored respectively by Glasgow University and ENBCS. *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue* derives from the second series of the Gerald Weisfeld Lectures organized by the university's Centre for Inter-Faith Studies, whereas many of the essays in *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation* were produced for the fifth conference of the ENBCS, which was devoted to the theme of creation. In the following, I will summarize these two books and then comment more extensively on Schmidt-Leukel's project in particular, especially as that project is expressed in both texts.

Schmidt-Leukel coordinated the Weisfeld lectures in May 2004 as a prelude to the Dalai Lama's visit to Scotland. The four parts of this volume represent the four weeks' worth of lectures on the respective topics of life and death, the ultimate, mediators, and the quest for peace. For each week, two lectures were given, one each from Christian and Buddhist perspectives, with responses from each one to the other's lecture as well. Hence, there are sixteen chapters in *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue*: the original eight lectures (four by Christians and four by Buddhists), plus the short response of each of the eight lecturers to the lecture of his or her dialogue partner.

Elizabeth Harris (University of Birmingham) and Kiyoshi Tsuchiya (University of Glasgow) discuss life and death, leading to the tentative conclusion that Christians emphasize the need for the redemption of the ego (hence embracing a personal God), whereas Buddhists wish to lose the ego's perpetual desires (hence advocating a more cosmic or naturalistic view of life and death). This is followed