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## In Memoriam\*

ROGER JONATHAN CORLESS (1938–2007)

Roger Jonathan Corless died on January 12, 2007, in San Francisco, California, from complications associated with cancer. Born in Merseyside, England, in 1938, he began studying religion at the age of sixteen, understanding himself as being Buddhist, though attending Christian churches. He studied theology at King's College at the University of London, receiving a Bachelor of Divinity in 1961. In wrestling with the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, and particularly in the sacrament of the Eucharist, Roger experienced God's presence. He was baptized into the Roman Catholic church in 1964 after coming to the United States to pursue a PhD in Buddhist Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, from which he received that degree in 1973. From there, he joined the Department of Religion at Duke University and remained there until his retirement in 2000.

In 1980, Roger took refuge as a Gelugpa Buddhist under Geshela Lhundup Sopa, having first obtained permission from his Catholic spiritual director and having explained to Geshela what he was doing. His refuge or dharma name was Lhundup Tashi, “spontaneous fortune” or “luck.” Later, Roger also became a Benedictine oblate, taking Gregory as his Oblate name after Pope Gregory, whose instruction to Augustine of Canterbury was not to destroy the pagan temples, but to bring them into the church by trying to find what was good and preparatory to the Gospel. Roger understood himself as a dual practitioner, but did not seek to blend the two practices or traditions. Rather, he sought to be present to each in their own irreconcilable differences and deep riches.

Roger was always reflecting and writing on something, wanting to be open to the insights emerging from his studies and practices. His works are prolific. Over the past thirty years, he published three monographs (*The Art of Christian Alchemy: Transfiguring the Ordinary through Holistic Meditation* [Paulist Press, 1981]; *I Am Food: The Mass in Planetary Perspective* [Crossroad, 1981, and Wipf and Stock, 2004]; and *The Vision of Buddhism: The Space under the Tree* [Paragon House, 1989]), one edited volume (with Paul Knitter, *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity: Essays and Explorations* [Paulist Press, 1990]), essays in thirty-one books, thirty-seven articles in twenty journals, articles in six encyclopedias, and twenty-seven papers. Before his death, he had also completed six additional essays, forthcoming in edited volumes, and a draft of another monograph, *Where*

\*This In Memoriam appeared in the April edition of the CSSR bulletin (36.2) and online at [www.society-buddhist-christian-studies.org](http://www.society-buddhist-christian-studies.org).

*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.

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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