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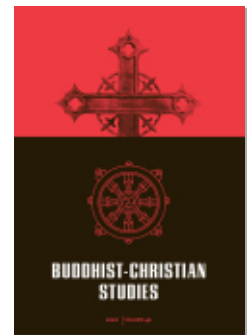
Zen Wisdom for Christians by Christopher Collingwood
(review)

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ongoing bugbear of them all remains the rhetoric of “contemplation,” which is pervasive throughout this book. I believe Park uses the term in ways entirely consonant with current prevailing discourses: as a catch-all to refer to a wide range of meditative, prayerful, or more generally philosophical or religious practices. This gets complicated further when we are told such things as that Merton came to a realization that “contemplation could not be separated from human activities” (17). Then what is it? Or what *isn't* it? It is also noted that Merton “used the terms ‘contemplative,’ ‘mystical,’ ‘aware,’ ‘enlightened,’ or ‘spiritually transformed’ interchangeably” (28). “Contemplation” is the watchword of the moment, reflective of a zeitgeist that bridges religiosity, scholarship, and secular cultural practices. And yet the enduring vagueness of the meaning of the term remains a problem, at least for this observer of these trends.

The book is effective in synthesizing the findings of an extensive body of secondary literature devoted to understanding the life of Thomas Merton. Park works especially closely with the work of Pierre-François de B  thune, Fabrice Bl  e, John Dadosky, William Shannon, and Bonnie Thurston. Moreover, writing as a Catholic monk and a practitioner with years of direct involvement in programs in South Korea and North America that understand themselves as continuing Merton’s work, Park has a particularly well-informed take on the matters at hand. In the end, the book is illuminating concerning the past, present, and as Park hopes, the future of Father Merton’s unique take on how Buddhists and Christians can best learn from one another.

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ZEN WISDOM FOR CHRISTIANS. By *Christopher Collingwood*. Foreword by Father Patrick Kundo Eastman Roshi. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019. 264 pp.

In *Zen Wisdom for Christians*, a non-academic book, Collingwood suggests that with Zen, Christian faith “comes alive in hitherto unexpected ways” (p. 32). His premise is that Zen can lead Christians toward the rediscovery of their deep spirituality. This notion is complemented by the ideas that both traditions present real convergences, can learn from one another, and meet in the ineffable ground of existence. Organizationally, the book is divided into three parts, each containing two chapters, juxtaposing comparable patterns of spiritual progress along the Christian and Zen paths. Collingwood starts with a historical introductory chapter where we are reminded of the early relationship between Christianity and Zen in Japan, which began with mutual incomprehension—even antagonism—between Buddhists and the earliest Christian missionaries. This is illustrated by the persecution of Spanish and Portuguese priests at the end of the 16th century, as depicted in the film *Silence*, directed by Martin Scorsese. The story ends with several Jesuits committing

apostasy to save converts. From here, the author jumps ahead 400 years to the arrival of Fr. Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle (1898–1990) in Japan. This German Jesuit was a missionary, fully committed to his Christian faith, who became a Zen master. According to Enomiya-Lassalle, Zen let him understand Christianity more deeply and become a better Christian.

In Part 1, “Raising the Bodhi Mind,” Collingwood is concerned with what he believes to be a shared beginning in the spiritual quest: a universal search for the realization of our true nature (p. 39). In Chapter 1, “A Sense of Exile,” he describes the practice of seated meditation (*zazen*, in Japanese) and explains what, in his view, Zen is all about: “to enable us to see into our true nature and to awaken to who we truly are” (p. 39). At the onset of the quest of Zen lies the intuitive realization that “we are not truly at home with ourselves,” that we feel estranged from our real nature, along with a desire to find out who we truly are. In “Zen terms,” Collingwood writes, this is known as “Raising the Bodhi Mind,” which is about “responding to the intuitive aspiration to wake up to who we truly are” (p. 40), and leads to our desire to emerge from exile and return home. In this, Collingwood finds a common starting point with Christianity, which also starts with a sense of exile and the desire to return home.

Collingwood exemplifies this feeling of estrangement and homelessness with Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son, the biblical story of the Fall, and the story of Siddhārtha Gautama’s search for awakening. In the Christian tradition, the sense of exile and the desire for homecoming are shaped by a sense of duality, fashioned by the desire to be a separate self, which produces estrangement and disharmony. As a result, the person longs for a way back home, which is found by reuniting with the Father. In the story of Siddhārtha’s search for awakening, the expression “living in exile” may seem inappropriate. He had everything at his father’s palace, but a feeling of discontent prompted him to seek liberation. In both cases, there is dissatisfaction, a yearning to return home, and a sense of exile that arises from the “I” which perceives everything as separate, and references all within its narrow self-interest. It is this wrong perception that Christianity and Zen, in their distinctive ways, deal with (p. 67).

Chapter 2, “Finding the Way Home,” explores how the practice of Zen wakes us up to the need to return home and offers what the author describes as “a pathless path to that home” (p. 69). To do this, Collingwood uses the story of the Bodhidharma (c.440–c.530 C.E.), the First Patriarch of Chinese Chan. Through the practice of *zazen*, we discover that we identify ourselves with our thoughts and that the self, which is created by thinking, “is something of a fantasy and the cause of our dis-ease and anguish” (p. 81). Nonetheless, when we experientially realize the self as an empty construct, we also realize that this emptiness is the very source “of an infinitely dynamic energy, creativity and compassion” (p. 81). In Zen, “we wake up to who we really are and realize that we are always at home already” (p. 99). Turning to Christianity, Collingwood believes that the parables of Jesus are also like *kōans* that entirely transform our inner world, and awaken us to who we really are. In the Sermon on the Mount, the common thread is that when we let go of our sense of self, instead

of grasping and protecting it, we discover our true self. For Christians, the foundation of compassionate awareness is God's love.

Part 2, entitled "Clarifying the Great Matter," deals with the spiritual meaning of life and death. Chapter 3 discusses "the need to take responsibility for our lives" (p. 102), which includes the struggle to be aware of our behavior and worldview. The first step is to realize that we are in an unawakened state, to accept the whole of our lives and not to blame others, instead, we should understand the causes of our failures, as a form of reconciliation with life. To illustrate the need for greater self-awareness, Collingwood compares the stories of Wagner's Parsifal and Eihei Dōgen (1200–1253), the latter being one of the most significant figures in Zen history. Parsifal's spiritual path takes him from being asleep to the reality of his life, then to awakening to it, and to "bring redemption to all those who suffer" (p. 113). Unlike Parsifal, Dōgen was a historical figure. In his case, taking responsibility for his life meant: coming to understand that practice is an activity omnipresent in every facet of life, not just during *zazen*. The Christian path and Zen are different, but both lead to the realization that all lives are essentially one.

In Chapter 4, "The Great Death," the author explores how the inevitability of death relates to both traditions and "the mysterious and ambiguous relationship between life and death" (p. 138). In Zen, this is known as "clarifying the great matter of life and death," or the "Great Death," and Collingwood explores how it can shed light on "Jesus's death and some aspects of his life and teachings" (p. 138); he uses two stories: that of Bhikkhuni Gotami in the *Discourses of the Ancient Nuns*, and Jesus' death. In both cases, the essential lesson to be learned is "that life and death are mysteriously intertwined, that living inescapably involves dying, that if we wish truly to live, we must also learn to die" (pp. 142). The "Great Death," an expression that Collingwood applies without distinction to both traditions, means dying to the deluded fiction that we are an unchanging, independent, substantial self (p. 177).

Part 3, entitled "Living Your Own Life," deals with the most profound authenticity and spontaneity that comes with deep integration with life. Chapter 5, "At Home with Oneself," discusses the human aspiration to be who we really are and the need to overcome our tendency to compare ourselves with others. Collingwood illustrates the need for authenticity and lack of duplicity with a story about the relationship between Peter and John in the Gospel of John, and a Zen story about the Master Jōshū. Collingwood believes that living with the most profound authenticity is what in "Zen terms" is described as living in accordance with our "self-nature," that is to say, to be fully in tune with the way things truly are. In "Christian terms," the author says, this is being who we really are in Christ, "the one in whom all things come to be (John 1:3–4)" (p. 183).

It has been said that in both Christianity and Zen, a disconnection exists between practice and action in the world. In chapter 6, "At Home with the World," Collingwood argues that this is not the case, for both traditions seek the alleviation of suffering. However, Christians are second to none in the alleviation of suffering through social action. In recent times, Zen has made progress in this field. The work of Vietnamese Master Thích Nhất Hạnh and that of Zen Peacemakers International

come to mind. In both cases, Collingwood says, “the result is action grounded in wisdom and compassion.” All this proves that the division between meditation and action is “an entirely false one” (p. 223). Meditation develops both awareness and compassion, from which action in the world inevitably arises. Such quality of attention requires an absence of the self, selflessness, to be at one with the activity.

Zen Wisdom for Christians is a valuable source for learning Christian and Zen intersections. It offers food for comparative thought and Zen insights that, indeed, resonate with Christian practices. Yet, this very readable book is not without inadequacies. Christians’ appropriation of Zen practices—which, originally and primarily are those promoted by the Sanbo Kyodan Zen lineage in Japan—raises questions that relate not only to Collingwood’s book, but also to what many authors have come to call “Zen for Christians” or “Christian Zen.” Unfortunately, Collingwood does not address openly the foundations, basic assumptions and rationale of the use of Zen by Christians in his book. Since the mid-twentieth century, Christian priests and nuns of various denominations have taken up Zen with the aim of improving their Christian practice and infusing life into the Christian contemplative tradition. Some of them have become Zen teachers, transferring lineage to others. Collingwood comes from this tradition of Christians practicing Zen that can be traced back to Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle SJ and his relationship with the Sanbo Kyodan lineage. Within this movement, the incorporation of Zen into Christian practice is justified by its effectiveness. Yet, this incorporation has always been highly controversial. Both Christian theologians and Buddhist scholars have criticized almost every single aspect of the practice, and we can comfortably state that all the questions that “Zen for Christians” or “Christian Zen” raises have not been satisfactorily addressed by the supporters of these practices.

Another line of criticism is particular to *Zen Wisdom for Christians*. Often, Collingwood fails to present the spiritual realities of both traditions according to their own traditional self-understanding. For example, when describing the final states in both traditions, he replaces the Christian notion of permanent union with God—basically a dualist notion—with a non-dualist notion close to the Buddhist concept of emptiness (p. 88). Or, when talking about the Fall, he speaks of “falling into duality” (p. 49). Collingwood also often collapses the religious language and imagery of one tradition into the other, which is undoubtedly problematic. This is the case when he speaks of “having undergone the Great Death and having clarified the ‘great matter of life and death’, whether on the mat or on the cross” (p. 185). He syncretizes practices from both traditions (e.g. prayer and *zazen*), fusing them without taking their subtle differences into account. Examples can be adduced of easy equivalences, as when he draws parallels between Zen *kōans* and Jesus’ parables “showing that what is labeled ‘Zen’ can also be seen in Jesus’ approach” (p. 69). Or between tradition-specific terms and notions as, for instance, “delusion” and “sin” (p. 168), distorting their rich meaning and nuances. Collingwood, at times, reduces both paths to a common denominator, which then reads from a Christian perspective.

What do we then make of *Zen Wisdom for Christians*? Has the author attained his stated aim? If the goal was to illustrate how with Zen, Christianity “comes alive in

hitherto unexpected ways” and how *kōans* can illuminate the meaning of Jesus’ teachings and parables, it must be said that this goal has been only partially achieved. In my view, *Zen Wisdom for Christians* does not make a convincing case for the use of Zen by Christians. In fact, some readers might find that the mixing of the religious teachings and languages of two very different belief systems create more confusion than clarification.

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TENDREL: A MEMOIR OF NEW YORK AND THE BUDDHIST HIMALAYAS.
 By *Harold Talbott*. Marion: Buddhayana Foundation, 2019. 344 pp.

The Tibetan term *tendrel* describes, among other things, auspicious connections, which benefit those involved. Harold Talbott’s autobiography, thus entitled, chronicles the many people who rendered the author’s existence a life worth living, indeed *a precious human life*—in the words of Buddhist teachings, to which the author devoted the largest part of his life. Sadly, Harold Talbott passed away shortly after the publication of this volume. His book may therefore serve as a commemoration of the author’s remarkable life, of his contribution to American Buddhism as well as a celebration of the early era of Buddhism’s rapid globalization in the twentieth century.

In his modesty, the author does not devote many lines to report on his own achievements, important for the activity and support of his Buddhist mentors and friends. Yet Harold Talbott was an influential scholar and practitioner of Buddhism, supporter and benefactor of Tibetan lamas, prolific book editor, and cofounder of the practice center in Marion, Massachusetts, the site of early encounters between Americans and Tibetan masters.

Following the epiphany paradigm found in narratives of conversion, the memoir is divided into two parts, the “before” and the “after,” devoted to, respectively: the time in the author’s life before he was able to meet with and appreciate the teachings of the Buddha; and the part of his life since that happened.

The book’s first part describes the sophisticated society amid which Harold Talbott was raised and educated. In light of the author’s openness about his homosexuality and effeminate boyhood persona, the title “Swanning About” of part 1 appears quite reflective of Talbott’s brilliant and self-deprecating humor—a trait that he displays throughout his work. Wit is merely one of the many merits that makes this account so delightful to read. The author impresses us with an erudite knowledge of various faith traditions. The scintillating and thoughtful descriptions of encounters with an imposing amount of cultural and religious luminaries of his day are delivered in the matter-of-fact, yet refined, narrative style we can expect of a man born into the elite and educated in the finest of American schools, but who chose to live a near-monastic life as a full-time, lay practitioner of Buddhism.