

Enlightenment: Zen, Christian, and Modern

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“A religion of Nirvana...cannot understand what kenosis means in a Christian sense; but it is a hair's breadth away from it.”

Hans Urs von Balthasar

The Children of the Enlightenment

We are the Children of the Enlightenment. In fact, we are the heirs of two enlightenments, but one of them occurred a very long time ago and has been eclipsed, in almost every sphere of life, by the more recent one. This later enlightenment placed the Cartesian ego at “the starting point of an infallible intellectual progress to truth and spirit, more and more refined, abstract, and immaterial”¹ and bases itself solidly on the power of reason and the sufficiency of the empirical world. Those of us who recall, however dimly, the older enlightenment may not be entirely pleased with the situation, but neither can we deny that our own tradition is implicated in the very success of this newer view. Cartesian dualism does not spring full-grown from the ground, but is grounded, to a large extent, in the Medieval Scholastic tradition. The scholastic, fascinated by the power of reason to dissolve the most difficult theological problems, gradually separated the intellectual from the spiritual; eventually, the divorce became final. The West wearied of its priests, prophets, and poets; we became convinced that by a steady gaze at the empirical world, mediated by the power

of reason, the truth would reveal itself in an infallible way. Enlightenment, once the province of all through grace and prayer, became the exclusive property of the specialist through education and science.

In establishing man's mind and the empirical world as the whole basis of truth, Modern Man has rejected the primordial religious knowledge of man that “the world of appearances that surrounds us...cannot possibly be the ultimate, absolute reality.”² As such, the modern world is the first authentically *anti-religious* society. Other cultures have, in practice, corrupted their religions to accommodate their secular concerns, but never has there been a case where religion, man's longing for the absolute, has been denied *in principle*. But however much society may deny the religious principle, it cannot suppress the religious longing. This longing remains at the heart of man's quest for himself and for meaning, and it begins with man's vague awareness of his own guilt and his firm knowledge of his own inevitable death.³ Man is aware, however vaguely, of the loss of some initial harmony, or primal unity,⁴ a unity

¹ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, (New York: Delta Books, 1969) 26.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Christian and Non-Christian Meditation”, in *New Elucidation*, translated by Sister Theresilde Kerry, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) p. 149.

³ Gawronski, p. 6.

⁴ Gawronski, p. 8.

he longs to recover. Such longings cannot be rationalized, and a civilization based on rationalism can never do more than deny the questions. However much light the rational can bring to the phenomenal world, it can never enlighten us as to the ultimate ground of our being. What the religions share is not an answer to this question, but the question itself.⁵ Since the question cannot be either answered or denied by the “enlightened” world, the one in whom the longing has not been totally anesthetized must seek his answer elsewhere. Although the Christian religion also rejects the ego as the ultimate norm of truth, it nevertheless has too often taken on the appearance of rationalism, and many seekers feel compelled to look for other sources; frequently, they seek the light from the East, and among the most prominent sources of this light is Zen Buddhism, which is diametrically opposed to the enlightenment of rationalism.

Zen Enlightenment: The Distinctly Indistinct

“There is no Zen without *satori* [enlightenment], which is indeed the Alpha and Omega of Zen Buddhism.”⁶ It is a difficult matter, however, to communicate the precise nature of this enlightenment; the experience is personal and subjective and more a matter of character than intellect.⁷ It is “the ontological awareness of being beyond subject and object, an immediate grasp of being in its ‘suchness’ and

‘thusness.’”⁸ Even the Zen masters dispute the meaning of the experience. As in Christianity, there are a variety of schools and methods, such as the “sitting-only” method of Dogen,⁹ the Koans of the Rinzai School,¹⁰ contemplation of the Sutras (Scriptures), and many others besides. Probably the best way to grasp the experience, for those of us, like this author, who have not experienced it, is to examine the most fundamental dispute in Zen, that between “mirror-polishing” and “no-mirror” Zen, a dispute that begins with the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng.¹¹

As the time came for the Fifth Patriarch, Hung-jen, to transmit his authority to a successor, he asked his monks to write a verse to summarize their insight. Shen-hsiu was the senior monk and regarded as the natural heir to the patriarchy.¹² He wrote:

The body is the Bodhi-tree¹³
 The mind is like a clear mirror
 standing.
 Take care to wipe it all the time,
 Allow no grain of dust to cling to
 it¹⁴.

This verse angered Hui-neng, who was not even a monk, but an illiterate oblate of the monastery who

⁵ Gawronski, p. 6.

⁶ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, edited by William Barrett, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 84.

⁷ Suzuki, p. 96-97.

⁸ Merton, p. 14.

⁹ Merton, p. 35.

¹⁰ Dumoulin, p. 62.

¹¹ Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Enlightenment, Origins and Meanings*, translated by John C. Maraldo, (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, Sixth Edition, 1993), p. 44.

¹² Dumoulin, p. 44.

¹³ That is, the tree under which the Buddha became enlightened.

¹⁴ Dumoulin, p. 44.

worked in the kitchen.¹⁵ Hui-neng had experienced sudden enlightenment upon hearing a verse of the *Diamond Sutra*.¹⁶ He composed a response which he asked another novice to write down for him:

The Bodhi is not like a tree,
 The clear mirror is nowhere
 standing.
 Fundamentally not one thing exists:
 Where then is a grain of dust to
 cling?¹⁷

Based on this sutra, Hung-jen conferred the symbols of the patriarchy on Hui-neng, who was forced to flee from the envy of Shen-hsiu and his followers.¹⁸

The resulting split divided Zen into the Southern School of “sudden” enlightenment and the Northern School or “gradualism.”¹⁹ Within these two schools, we may get a glimpse of the poles of Zen Buddhist thought. The Northern School of Shen-hsiu, pejoratively called “mirror-wiping” Zen, meditation is a means of achieving inner purity to obtain a pure view of the Absolute; “it indicates a program of purification and ‘liberation’ of the soul from terrestrial and temporal conditions imposed on it by the body and the five senses, so that it rests in our ideal essence or nature.”²⁰

From the Buddhist standpoint, however, the verse is quite problematical, since it asserts inner

purity as the central reality, which at best ends in self-absorption.²¹ Such a pre-occupation with purity places the ego at the center, but the whole object of Zen, as we shall see, is precisely the dissolution of both the self and its ego. Thomas Merton sums up the problems of “mirror-wiping” Zen as:

What has happened is that this clinging and possessive ego-consciousness, seeking to affirm itself in “liberation,” craftily tries to outwit reality by rejecting the thoughts it “possesses” and emptying the mirror of the mind, which it also “possesses.” Thus, “the mind” will be in “emptiness” and “poverty.” But in reality, “emptiness” itself is regarded as a possession and an “attainment.” So the ego-consciousness is able, it believes, to eat its cake and have it. It renounces its empirical autonomy in order to sink into its spiritual, pre-biological nature. But since this nature is regarded as one’s possession, the “spiritualized” ego thus is able to affirm itself all the more perfectly, and to enjoy its own narcissism under the guise of “emptiness” and “contemplation.”²²

The Northern School emphasizes the ethical, and from a Western viewpoint it is easy to understand. However, religion does not arise from ethics, but ethics from religion. Zen is deeply ethical, and all Zen includes this ethical dimension. But it is “no-mirror” Zen which, although more problematical for the Western mind, presents more clearly the paradoxes of Eastern thought. “Fundamentally, not one thing exists”

¹⁵ Merton, p. 19.

¹⁶ Dumoulin, p. 44.

¹⁷ Merton, p. 19.

¹⁸ Dumoulin, p. 45.

¹⁹ Dumoulin, p. 47.

²⁰ Merton, p. 19.

²¹ Dumoulin, p. 48.

²² Merton, p. 23.

gets to the core of Buddhist thought: Nirvana, nothingness, the Void, *Sunyata*, which is the ground of being.²³ But as soon as we have said this, we are immediately forced to ask how the Void can be the ground of being; how the “nothing” can ground the “something.” The beginning point for this connection to the Void is found by looking within one’s self.

But it is not really the “self” that one experiences in this process, since of all the things that fundamentally do not exist, the self is the most fundamentally non-existent of all. The experience of Zen begins (and ends) in *chein-hsing*, “seeing into one’s own nature”, which is the Buddha-nature.²⁴ The self, or rather the illusion of self, is set up by intellection and constitutes the root of all evils.²⁵ This self, this mind, sets up distinctions in the world of non-distinction and this mind must be destroyed at its foundations.²⁶ Thus in seeing into oneself, what one encounters is the unconscious principle of being which makes our conscious minds aware of transcendent reality.²⁷ Such a mode of expression is anathema to a “rationally” trained mind, but the whole point of Zen is “that no spiritual truth can be grasped

by ratiocination.”²⁸ The conceptual is avoided as merely the minds obscuring of the purity of the Void.

If the Absolute cannot be grasped in concepts or in thought, then it must be reached through “no-thought”, which is the central ideal of Zen. Wisdom, *prajna*, is “no-thought” or “no-mind” and goes beyond any possible concepts.²⁹ This is so because what stands behind all reality is the Void (*sunyata*). Reality is not located in the ego, but in the pure Being which is “no-mind”, which is unconscious.³⁰ The “mirror” of our mind is not our mind but the Void itself.³¹ Thus, there is no “mirror” to “wipe”; our mind is a transient manifestation of *prajna*, the formless light.³² Ultimately, “Zen insight is not our awareness, but Being’s awareness of itself in us.”³³ But if being is void, and the person who contemplates Being is empty, what is contemplated? “What Buddhists strongly insist upon in their philosophy is the merging of the two contradictory terms, distinction and non-distinction...”³⁴

But, logically speaking, non-distinction or non-discrimination, when taken by itself, makes no sense, because things are what they are by being distinguished and discriminated; non-distinction...must mean non-existence. The spirit-world is

²³ It should be pointed out here that while the opposition between the two schools is historically true, it is not necessarily *absolutely* true. Some Buddhist scholars will find the two schools as necessary halves of a complete view. The methods of reconciling the two views need not concern us here.

²⁴ Suzuki, p. 86.

²⁵ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *The Essence of Buddhism*, (London: The Buddhist Society, 1957), p. 12

²⁶ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 13.

²⁷ Merton, p. 24.

²⁸ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 15.

²⁹ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 15.

³⁰ Merton, p. 24.

³¹ Merton, p. 28.

³² Merton, p. 25.

³³ Merton, p. 17.

³⁴ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 15

therefore non-existent when it is made to stand by itself; it can exist only when it is considered in relation to a world of distinction. But the Buddhist conception of a world of non-distinction is not a relative one, but an absolute one; it is the one absolute world which exists by itself and does not require anything relative for its support.³⁵

To grasp the apparent contradictions expressed here, we must look at Kegon philosophy, which D. T. Suzuki calls “the climax of Buddhist thought.”³⁶ Kegon metaphysics revolve around two key terms, *Ji* and *Ri*.³⁷ *Ji* denotes an event, the individual, the particular, the concrete, form (*Rupam*). *Ri* is principle, reason, totality, abstract, void, (*Sunyata*). *Ji* is always contrasted to *Ri*; *Ji* is distinction, while *Ri* is non-distinction. *Ji* exists by virtue of *Ri*, but *Ri* has no separate existence; if it had, it would be another *Ji*. Where there is no form (*Ji*), there is no emptiness (*Ri*); emptiness is without self, or form, hence it is always with form. The two terms do not exactly exist in “identity”, since that would be a form of the “dualism” which the Buddhist abhors, but a “self-identity, a state of “as-it-is-ness” or “suchness.”³⁸ What then is the relationship between *Ji* and *Ri*? It is called the *Jiji muge*, the “perfect unimpeded mutual solution” expressed as “simultaneous mutual self-identification”, or “self-identity of the acting and being-acted-upon”, or

“simultaneous abrupt rising”, etc.³⁹ The “solution” here is a dynamic, and it is precisely this dynamic from which “things” arise, even though “fundamentally, not one thing exists.” *Ji* can be thought of as an “event.” Thus objects have no real existence, since existence is conceived of as static while objects must always be dynamic.⁴⁰ Another way to think of this dynamic is by the analogy of light. Light itself has no content, but only by light can we see the content of anything. But in the case of Buddhist being, not only does the light enable the “things” we see “to be”, but the light itself would be a void without the things it enables; without them, it would be a “darkness.”

This dynamic of Being has its roots in the interaction of the Tai-chi and the Tai-pei, the Great Wisdom and the Great Compassion.⁴¹ These two flow from each other and are thus one, according to Suzuki,

...not mathematically united, but spiritually coalesced, the One is to be represented as a person, the Dharmakaya. The Dharmakaya ... is the Wisdom or the Compassion, as either phase of his being is emphasized for some special reason.⁴²

Here, we see Buddhism make its closest approach to a notion of an absolute

³⁵ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 10

³⁶ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 46.

³⁷ For a more complete discussion of Kegon Philosophy, see *The Essence of Buddhism*, pp. 46-60.

³⁸ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 49.

³⁹ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 50.

⁴⁰ “The Kegon philosophers, like all other Buddhists, do not believe in the reality of an individual existence, for there is nothing in our world of experience that keeps its identity even for a moment; it is subject to constant change.” *The Essence of Buddhism*, p. 53.

⁴¹ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 46.

⁴² Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 46.

“person”, and even to a “trinity”, a trinity composed of the Tai-chi, the Tai-pei, and the Dharmakaya.

This brief survey has attempted to identify some of the major aspects of Zen enlightenment and metaphysics. We are presented with a series of statements that appear to be paradoxical: Enlightenment by the contemplation of one’s own nature; nature as void, as “no-mind”; the absolute as the “distinction of non-distinction”; the dissolution of subject-object relationships and the rejection of all “concepts”; a knowledge that “knows and knows-not”; emptiness as totality. Is it possible to reconcile some or all of these paradoxes with a purely Christian view?

The Paradoxical Christian

The Christian, of all people, cannot reject out of hand the merely paradoxical; certainly a religion which preaches “three-in-one,” a God who becomes man, a crucified God, wine that becomes blood, etc., has some basis for dealing with apparent absurdity. In fact, we may intuit that it is in the very absurdities that the two religions must find their common ground. The rational tends to be exclusive to its own premises; the paradoxical is broad enough to be open to the whole complexity of being.

The Christian mystic since Origen, like the Buddhist, also begins his journey of enlightenment with the self. St. Bernard identifies the first step of true knowledge as knowing one’s self.⁴³ Of course, Bernard is speaking of examining the whole person, and not just

one’s “nature,” but certainly a consideration of one’s nature is part of this process. Nor should it surprise us that the nature is “unconscious,” for only persons can be conscious. Since this nature is also an image of the divine, we at the same time get a glimpse of the divine, if not its fullness. But so long as we are contemplating natures, we are contemplating a “thing”, an object not a subject, and an object that doesn’t even exist, at least not apart from some subject that possesses the nature in the act of existence. And it is precisely in examining this act of existence that the paradoxes arise.

For even in Christian metaphysics, no less than in Buddhist, the structure of existence emerges as highly paradoxical. From a standpoint of the strictest Thomistic metaphysical realism, the being of a thing cannot itself be a thing; that is, it cannot be “anything”. As Frederick Wilhelmsen puts it, “The most striking paradox about the act of existing is that it neither is nor is not.”⁴⁴ We live in a world of existing things, but we cannot identify being itself with the being of any particular thing. If the existence of a tree existed, then everything would be tree; but if the existence of a tree did not exist, then the tree would not be.

It follows that existential activity as such can neither be affirmed nor denied. This activity cannot be denied because such a denial would deny that the thing is. A sign of this is the truth that the thing continues be-ing as long as it is. Because existence is beyond affirmation and

⁴³ John R. Sommerfeldt, *The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1991) p. 46.

⁴⁴ Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *The Paradoxical Structure of Existence*, (Irving, Texas: University of Dallas Press, 1970) p. 71.

negation, existence is negative transcendence.⁴⁵

No matter how hard we try, we cannot isolate “being” as something separate from any particular thing, yet no-thing that is can be without existence.

The logician’s “being” is actually the last residue of a long series of abstractions which begin with the concrete thing, let us say a man, and which proceed to his specific essence, humanity, then to his generic essence, animality, and on back—through living substance to substance—until simply “being” is reached. This concept or idea of being possesses the greatest extension because it “covers” everything, but it is the most impoverished in all meaning and comprehension because it says “nothing” at all about everything that is. ...the logician—in order to reach his concept of being—is constantly moving away from existing things and hence from their “to be.” The essential determinations of being which he strips from his idea of “being” themselves **are being**. It follows that **his** “being” truly is non-being.⁴⁶

Thus existence emerges as “radical-extramentality.” “This extramentality is neither conceived by, nor experienced by, man. Direct metaphysical realism bears upon the direct evidence of a world of existents; it does not reach their **esse** as it would a presence.”⁴⁷ Wilhelmsen concludes his demonstration,

Each essence is identically itself: man, horse, tree. Since no essence is identically being or existence, it follows that by essence all things are nothing. Existentially expressed in the light of identity, nature is zero. By nature, things are non-being. We are all so many nothings made to be. But although we are made to exist, being takes no root in us.⁴⁸

Here we have reached, from a basis of Thomistic metaphysics, Hui-neng’s insight, “fundamentally, not one thing exists.” Although we are immersed in a world of things whose essences may be analyzed and resolved to their causes, being itself is without cause, is beyond concepts; it escapes analysis. Being is neither the same as essence (the “whatness” of a thing, all of the principles which may be analyzed and reduced to the four Aristotelian causes), nor is being different from essence.⁴⁹ Being is neither “this thing” nor “that thing” nor any “thing” at all. Hence, it is not distinct. But all that is, is so by virtue of being distinct, that is, by being what it is and not something else. Hence we may say that all that is, is the distinction of non-distinction.

This relationship of being and essence is similar to the *Jiji muge*, “the unimpeded mutual solution of Ji and Ri”; we find that it is a fairly easy matter to fit this into a framework of the Aristotelian relation of matter and form, or the Thomistic relationship of essence and existence. When we strip away the oriental vocabulary, we find ourselves in a world familiar to both the Greek and the Christian.

⁴⁵ Wilhelmsen, p. 71.

⁴⁶ Wilhelmsen, p. 74, boldface in original.

⁴⁷ Wilhelmsen, p. 59, boldface in original.

⁴⁸ Wilhelmsen, p. 79.

⁴⁹ Wilhelmsen, p. 76.

Thus far we have looked at some of the more problematic aspects of Zen and found within the Christian tradition very close parallels. Can these parallels be pushed even further, perhaps into the very notion of the Trinity itself?

Emptiness and Annihilation

We have seen in Suzuki a “Buddhist Trinity” composed of the Tai-chi and the Tai-pei, whose interaction produces the Dharmakaya. Wisdom and Compassion interact to bring forth the “Law-Body.” Have we reached here an identity, more or less, of Christian and Buddhist thought? Surely Christianity is rooted in the Trinity, and all ontology, philosophy, ethics and religion flow from this fact. If we can find the same in Buddhism we will have discovered an identity; if we cannot, we have located the crucial differences.

As Suzuki explains the meaning of the Buddhist “Trinity”, “The highest reality is not a mere abstraction, it is very much alive with sense and awareness and intelligence, and, above all, with love purged of human infirmities and defilements.”⁵⁰ Here at the center of Suzuki’s understanding of Buddhism we find a lively, intelligent and aware Love. At the center of Christianity, we find the same. However, there is an important difference. The term one most frequently encounters in Buddhist thought is not love, but compassion. This compassion is, from a Christian viewpoint, indiscriminate. That is, it is not aimed at persons *as persons*, and cannot be, because for the Buddhist both the ego and the person are mere illusions. Since the person cannot exist, compassion cannot be directed towards

this illusion, but only towards the moral or physical sufferings themselves.⁵¹ In Buddhist compassion, the person is not prized for himself, is not prized at all, since the person does not really exist. His suffering is no more important than the suffering of inanimate objects. This is illustrated in the koan of the polo post. The Zen master Bokuju asks a student who has been watching a polo match if the men and the horses were tired. After getting an affirmative answer, he asks, “Is the wooden post here tired, too?” The student was taken aback at this question, and after pondering it all night, replies in the affirmative, because “unless the post was tired too there could be no real tiredness anywhere.”⁵²

There is a real love of neighbor in Buddhism, except that there is no real neighbor, just aggregates who are impermanent and filled with pain.⁵³ Thus, Buddhist compassion has a tendency towards the utilitarian: It becomes a technique for attaining selflessness.⁵⁴ Charity remains at the bottom of the six *paramitas* or “perfections”; it is “vulgar” and temporary, to be replaced by more worthy paramitas, as in the Master Asanga,

It is in this order that they lead to each other: having no concern for any kind of fortune, the Bodhisattva embarks upon morality, and so on. It is in this order that they get higher and higher: morality is higher than

⁵⁰ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 46.

⁵¹ Henri de Lubac, S. J., *Aspects of Buddhism*, George Lamb, translator, (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1953) p. 37.

⁵² Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 61-2.

⁵³ Gawronski, p. 82.

⁵⁴ Balthasar, p. 158.

giving, and so on. It is in this order that they grow more refined: giving is, in fact, vulgar, and so on.⁵⁵

Here then we can see most clearly why the idea of the Trinity cannot simply be projected unto Buddhism, unlike, say, the idea of “the distinction of non-distinction,” or the idea that “fundamentally, not one thing exists.” For the Trinity is not a mere “concept”, not is it about mere “three-ness” or even “three-in-one”, things which in themselves could easily find a Buddhist equivalent. Trinity is about three *persons* that constitute the one living divinity. This absence of the *person* has severe consequences for Buddhist thought, as Henri de Lubac explains.

Not in terms of this virtue [charity] can the Supreme Being—or non-being—be defined, nor can such a virtue enter into any account of man’s last end. Here, as everywhere else in Buddhism, the absence of a real God, a living God, a God of charity, makes itself felt most painfully. For the Christian the commandment to love God is founded upon God’s love for man, and this love of God for man expresses the very Being of God: *Deus est Caritas*.⁵⁶

If you lose the reality of the person, you lose all, or at least all that the Christian holds dear. He holds it dear because the divinity holds it dearly. Buddhist compassion must equally be offered to the person and the polo post, because the person is no different from the polo post; all are one in the void. In

Buddhist thought, the self arises from intellection (although it is not clear what the source of the intellection is, if not a pre-existing self), and this self constitutes the root of all evils.⁵⁷ The solution is to merge the self into the void. Thus the annihilation of the self is also the annihilation of the absolute, which itself can only be void. Thus far, we have been speaking of Zen in terms of paradox, but in the case of the person, Zen is insufficiently paradoxical. The problem of the person dissolves into the absolute; the “many” is dissolved into the “one.” But this very dissolution breaks the tension on which paradox depends. Paradox upholds both sides of a conundrum within a tension, and seeks a solution which bridges, rather than cancels, the tension.

For the Christian, this bridge is Love. The “I” of the person is affirmed, and affirmed in the most radical way possible: by an Absolute that is the “I’s” own “Thou,”⁵⁸ for in love there must always be an “I” and a “Thou.” Along with this affirmation of the person, comes the affirmation of the physical world, for the creation of this world is the first step in God’s self-communication. Thus the world is affirmed as “very good” and its “otherness” from God need not amount to alienation and unreality.⁵⁹ From the standpoint of love, the person (and the world) need no longer to be dissolved into a void; love bridges a gap precisely because it is a love between persons. Nor must love be limited to a formless “compassion” that treats persons and polo posts as equals in pity. In creation,

⁵⁵ Quoted in De Lubac, p. 43.

⁵⁶ De Lubac, p. 41.

⁵⁷ Suzuki, *Essence of Buddhism*, p. 12.

⁵⁸ Balthasar, p. 152.

⁵⁹ Balthasar, p. 151-3.

God makes “space” for the other “to be,” and to be fully, not just as an impermanent manifestation of the divine. God can make this “space” because within the fullness of the Trinity itself, there is space for the “other.” The full range of the physical world, including its history is thus a means of God’s self-communication, a communication perfected by his own personal entry into that history.

At this point the Buddhist is likely to throw up his hands in total incredulity. After all, have we not just violated the primary motive of religious belief, which is the very insufficiency of the physical world? Is he not likely to maintain a healthy skepticism towards a system that maintains the absurdity of both the “absolute” and the “other”, for what could be more absurd than an “absolute” that is less than “all”? And if there is an absolute, how can it leave room for the less than absolute, and particularly for the individual “person”. This being the case, the only way to reach the absolute is to merge with it, for the many to become “one.” This, so far, is perfectly consistent with Greek philosophy, which negates the many into the one. Zen takes it further by negating the one as well.⁶⁰ There can be no doubt of the compelling logic of this case. In fact, it is suspiciously logical, almost mechanically so. From a Zen viewpoint, a viewpoint that proceeds by paradox, it is certainly surprising that the whole question ends in such a “neat” solution, a solution devoid of any hint of paradox or complexity.

The logic of the situation forces an annihilation of the many into the one, and with it an annihilation of the

individual, himself a mere illusion, even as the one itself turns out to be the emptiness of the void. It is this emptiness which the Zen master seeks to touch. The Christian mystic as well seeks to empty himself in the face of the divine. Is he fooling himself in thinking that he can achieve both emptiness and maintain his own personality? Is there any way to bridge the gap between the One and the Many, between emptiness and fullness?

Kenosis: Emptiness as Fullness

Both the Christian mystic and the Zen Master begin with selflessness, and at this initial phase their tasks are the same. The Buddhist must let go of the ego at his center as a preparation for annihilation; the Christian must let go of his “geocentric” world in favor of a heliocentric view in which his “self” is received entirely from the Central Son.⁶¹ This emptying has for its purpose a filling up with love, which is attained by accepting and passing on forgiveness.⁶² Thus it is oriented, not towards an inner purity for its own sake, but to a relationship of love towards one’s fellows and towards God. God’s word is not understood solely as something “inner”, but is communicated through history and through the world around us. The purification is never an end in itself, but a means for ordering the whole person, of eliminating any resistance to his openness towards God.⁶³

In both Buddhism and Christianity, the emptying imitates the Absolute. For the Buddhist, it is an

⁶⁰ Gawronski, p. 73.

⁶¹ Balthasar, p. 162.

⁶² Balthasar, p. 159.

⁶³ Balthasar, p. 160.

imitation of the Void. For the Christian it is the image of the original Kenosis which is God himself. The Father's generation of the Son is an eternal act of self-surrender in which all that the Father is is handed over to the Son. Moreover, the Father must not be thought to exist before the self-surrender; he *is* the self-surrender that holds nothing back.⁶⁴ The Son answers with a Eucharist as selfless as the Father's self-surrender and the Holy Spirit proceeds as their subsistent "we". "As the essence of love, he maintains the infinite difference between them, seals it and, since he is the one Spirit of them both, bridges it."⁶⁵ But this kenosis which *is* God must not be understood as self-annihilation.

We must remember this; the Father, in uttering and surrendering himself without reserve, does not lose himself. He does not extinguish himself by self-giving, just as he does not keep back anything of himself either. For, in his self-surrender, he *is* the whole divine essence. Here we see both God's infinite power and his powerlessness; he cannot be God in any other way but in the Godhead itself.⁶⁶

Here we see a bridging of the gap between emptiness and fullness, between the One and the Many. God fills (or rather, fulfills) the divine nature in emptying himself. In begetting the Son, he let's the other "be". The divine unity

⁶⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama, Volume IV: The Action*, Translated by Graham Harrison, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994) p. 323.

⁶⁵ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, p. 324.

⁶⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, p. 325.

is not threatened, because he has surrendered all he is, without remainder. We no longer need fret about the opposition between the One and the Many; God in himself is both one and many. He is as many as three, but he is many more, for the Son continues this kenosis by emptying himself of divinity to take the form of a slave. In these divine "emptyings" we find the ontological ground of our own kenosis; we imitate the divine action, however crudely, in emptying ourselves of our ego-centeredness, but this emptying allows us to be filled with divinity. And to eliminate the last vestige of the ego-centric, it is not even "we" that imitates the divine, but the divine itself, working through grace, that works this emptying within us. It is always the "we" but a "we" enabled to participate in the divine kenosis.

All this is possible because God is Love, but not an abstract love, but love which has an object, a beloved. It would be more accurate to say "God is a lover", first of God, and then of his creatures, creatures who are themselves created in love, a love that moves beyond the abstract of "compassion" to affirm the other. There is no longer need for annihilation, for love can let the other be, without itself being threatened. Thus real beings with a distinct existence, with a distinct "I" are possible. Of course, this "I", though distinct, is not self-subsistent; it can only find itself in union with God. This union, however, does not annihilate the created person's identity, but rather affirms and perfects it.

Ex Oriente, Lux

We have shown a clear parallel of many of the Zen teachings with Christian teachings. To do so, however,

we have reached back into the Christian tradition to an era that predates the Cartesian-Kantian logic that dominates the Modern world, including much of modern theology. The hallmarks of this modern enlightenment are the elevation of the ego to a central position in knowledge and the strict separation of the subject and objects of knowledge. This separation is so complete that things in themselves, the Kantian *ding an sich*, can never actually be known. It is from this Cartesian and egocentric standpoint that Zen appears most problematical. Zen emerges as the antitheses of the Modern Ego. It dissolves the egocentric view and the subject-object duality that are the foundation stones of modernism. As such, it offers a powerful tonic to the modern world.

Yet we must ask, "can modernism be so easily negated?" Is there nothing in the Enlightenment that is enlightening? It would be strange if this were true; if a theory that has proven itself so powerful could turn out to be completely wrong, completely without value. For surely we must concede that modern man has been able to peer into the heart of things as things. He has seen into the atom and beyond, where everything appears to disappear into a pure mathematical dimension. Have we not seen into the very boundary between physics and metaphysics? Nor are the accomplishments of modernism limited to the world of physics, for we must also concede that it has brought new and urgent questions regarding freedom, the social order, economics, production, etc. From the standpoint of all of these undeniable accomplishments, the Modern Enlightenment must be seen as truly enlightening, even if incomplete, even if its light throws many dark

shadows. Zen is indeed a light which enlightens many of these shadows, but it cannot blind us to the light of modernism itself.

How then is the Christian to deal with this new Enlightenment, as well as to the enlightenment that comes from the East? We noted at the beginning the modern's debt to the scholastic. Surely we cannot merely deny our own child, however unruly we find his behavior. However, when the Christian looks at the Modern World, he sees the hand of God working throughout history. Though the Christian glories in his history, in the achievements of the Fathers of the Early Church and the Middle Ages, nevertheless his mind does not rest there, for history is of course this moment equally with the previous moment, just as it is the moment yet to come. Revelation, though complete in Christ, is understood in time.

We have noted the startling similarities between the Christian and the Buddhist, and how close the religion of Nirvana comes to the religion of Kenosis. But there is a remainder, an *excessus*, in Christianity, and that remainder is the person. Just as the divine person is "He who Is," the human person is "he who becomes." The human person works out his destiny in the order of time, and as long as he has time he has hope. For this reason, the human person represents, as Frederick Wilhelmsen put it, "a metaphysics of the future."⁶⁷ Time, that is, history, is both the domain and the means of our enlightenment. Therefore, we can confront the modern world with the confidence that we can claim what is valuable, and leave the rest behind.

⁶⁷ Wilhelmsen, p. 113.

Similarly, we can look toward the East for what is truly genuine, without the slightest fear of compromising the fullness of revelation.

In an age of television evangelism, individualistic Christianity, and an often tedious neo-Thomism, many people—especially young people—have become weary of such a poorly presented Christian message, a message often drained of any authentic meaning and spirituality. Many have discovered the ancient motto, *Ex oriente, lux*. From the East comes light, and we must ever be looking towards this light, from no matter how far east it comes. Nevertheless, we cannot indulge any form of syncretism because, as we have seen, there is a level of enlightenment in Christianity—authentic Christianity—that cannot be reached by Buddhism alone; Buddhism can be a stage in the journey, but by itself it cannot reach the true self, the one emptied of self to be filled with God, with love. We can look for the light as far past Jerusalem as Tokyo. The Zen master reminds us of our own tendency to forget our roots and lose ourselves in modern egoism, and for this light we must be thankful. At the same time, we must remember that when we are standing in Tokyo, we must continue to look for the light from the East. And East of Tokyo, towards the rising of the Son, stands Jerusalem.

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