

Zen and the Forms of Knowing: Possible Contribution of Zen to Christian Religious Education

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It seems to be the common perception these days among religious educators in the West that modern science, technology and epistemology have put religious education in a difficult predicament. This paper will explore some of the problems caused specifically by Western epistemology in contemporary Christian education, and in what ways the forms and images of knowing as presented by Zen Buddhism can throw some light on these issues.



Zen is the Japanese version of traditional Chan Buddhism which originated in China in the 6th Century. With its radical emphasis on direct intuitive knowledge of the self and of the inner truth of reality, and its anti-logic and anti-doctrinal character, it has been attracting no little interest among Westerners in recent years.

This article will focus on the teachings of the preeminent Japanese Zen master Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1961), whose literary works on Zen Buddhism, according to Carl G. Jung (1875-1961), have made the greatest contribution to the understanding of Buddhism of modern times.

Problems of Western Epistemology

The predicament in which religious education finds itself these days has been brought about by the prevailing philosophical understanding of how we know. Epistemology is dominated by the so-called scientific mentality that limits knowledge to "the definite,

the objective, and the verifiable."¹ This theory of understanding offers a concept in which the only way to know anything is through processing "facts, concepts, technical skills, and know-how."²

Such an epistemology is detrimental to the cultivation of the imagination, which is a major aim of all religious education. Cognition is only one of the many ways of knowing. There is a whole realm of human experience that lies beyond the grasp of the reasoning mind, and there exist whole areas of knowledge that cannot be objectified or verified by our cognitive powers. Such knowledge may be termed ineffable. Certainly, religious experience belongs to this realm of reality. In its truest and deepest sense, religious experience is the experience of the transcendent, of numinous mystery. To use Karl Rahner's term, the experience of God is "unthematic knowledge."³ It is primordial knowledge that is prior to and forever transcends human cognition and thus cannot be thematized.

The overemphasis on cognition and the exaltation of rational thinking as the highest form of epistemology tend to confine knowledge to mere concepts and measurable data. As such, it can hardly be expected to pay proper respect to the notion of genuine religious experience. On the contrary, it threatens to stifle the religious imagination, which empowers individuals to encounter religious experience, and which enables them to open themselves to the acquisition of knowledge through faith. Even more, such a narrow and unbalanced approach to epistemology has brought about a dualism in the way we look at our world and in the way we look at ourselves. As a result, instead of seeing ourselves as holistic living persons, embodied pneuma, we see ourselves as disembodied ghosts. Maria Harris' analysis of the problem is quite succinct.

We trace this emphasis on only a part of our knowing back of course, to Descartes' "I think, therefore I am." This emphasis leads toward an image of ourselves as decorpit (John Killinger's marvelous word), or as an "I-am-a-think" (Elizabeth Sewell's chilling phrase), and away from viewing ourselves as embodied earth creatures, spirits in the world, sacramental beings of flesh and bone and sinew. Instead of Wordsworth's "amplitude of mind or reason in her most exalted mood," our knowledge of ourselves, and by extension of much else, faces the danger of which William Blake

warned in Albion. "Entering into the Reasoning Power," we have "forsaken imagination" and found ourselves "spectres."⁴

It is evident that the exaltation of the cognitive faculty over all other forms and images of knowing can place religious education in a difficult predicament. It puts limitations on our human potential for knowing, and it places restraints on the powers of the imagination, which is, indeed, the bridge between the human and the divine, between human faith and divine revelation.

Perhaps this explains in part the present "pressing necessity"⁵ for Christians to engage in interreligious dialogue focusing on the religious imagination. Also, it may help to explain why Zen Buddhism has become so attractive in the West during the past few decades. Let us now move on to discuss Zen Buddhism and what it can offer contemporary Christian religious education.

Zen and the Ways of Knowing

According to Suzuki, Zen is the crystallization of all Eastern philosophies, but of itself it is not a philosophy in the ordinary meaning of the term. "Zen is decidedly not a system founded upon logical analysis. If anything, it is the antipode to logic, by which I mean the dualistic mode of thinking," says Suzuki.⁶ Nor is Zen a religion in the same sense that Christianity is, for it is basically anti-doctrine. In the words of Suzuki: "There are in Zen no sacred books or dogmatic tenets, nor are there any symbolic formulae through which access might be gained into the significance of Zen."⁷ While Zen does claim to be a form of Buddhism; nevertheless, all Buddhist sutras and teachings are treated only as a means to reach enlightenment. Once enlightenment has been attained, all sutras and teachings become meaningless, and are to be considered as "mere waste paper, whose utility consists in wiping dirt from the intellect and nothing more."⁸

Thus Zen is both hostile to logic and dogma. Zen refuses to be limited by the rules and boundaries imposed by logic, philosophy or religion. Its goal is to transcend them all, to rise to a level where truth is apprehended in the most direct and profound way.

In order to touch reality directly at its deepest level, "Zen defies all conceptualizing."⁹ But it does treasure the moment when

genuine contact is made with the deepest dimensions of reality. Even in meditation, Zen does not focus on ideas or concepts, but rather on "taking things as they are, to consider the snow as white and the raven black... Zen perceives or feels, and does not abstract nor mediate. Zen penetrates and finally loses itself by immersion."¹⁰

Zen, therefore, does not ask us to concentrate our thoughts on the idea that a dog is God, or that three pounds of flax are divine. Should Zen do this, it would be committing itself to a definite system of philosophy, and there is no more Zen. Zen merely feels fire warm and ice cold, because when it freezes, we shiver and welcome fire. The feeling is all in all, as Faust declares. All our theorization fails to touch reality.¹¹

By stripping away concepts, Zen directs our attention to the inner workings of our being. Zen believes in the inner purity and goodness of humanity. In order to obtain enlightenment about our true self, we should make recourse to our inner resources and not be distracted by other elements. We should know our true self in the most direct way; language and concepts can be and often are obstacles in the path of making contact with our true self.

The basic idea of Zen is to come in touch with the inner workings of our being, and to do this in the most direct way possible, without resorting to anything external or superimposed. Therefore, anything that has the semblance of an external authority is rejected by Zen. Absolute faith is placed in man's own inner being. For whatever authority there is in Zen, all comes from within. This is true in the strictest sense of the word. Even the reasoning faculty is not considered final or absolute. On the contrary, it hinders the mind from coming into the most direct communication with itself.¹²

Zen directs us to live our ordinary lives on the deepest level, to see the mystery embodied in the most ordinary things, i.e. a flower blooming in a field, the lifting of a finger, or the act of kicking a ball. Zen achieves this by being directly and immediately in touch with the basic truth of our inner being.

It (Zen) opens a man's eyes to the greatest mystery as it is daily and hourly performed; it enlarges the heart to embrace the eternity of

time and infinity of space in its every palpitation; it enables us to live in the world as if walking in the Garden of Eden; and all these spiritual feats are accomplished without resorting to any doctrines but by simply asserting in the most direct way the truth that lies in our inner being.... Indeed, Zen cannot be anything else but original and creative because it refuses to deal with concepts but deals with the living facts of life. Conceptually understood, the lifting of a finger is one of the most ordinary incidents in everyday life. But when it is viewed from the Zen point of view, it vibrates with divine meaning and creative vitality.¹³

There is another reason why Zen resists reasoning and conceptualizations, and that is because these things can be deceptive. Concepts are human constructs formed to represent reality; syllogisms are designed by the human mind to facilitate our understanding of reality. However, the concept is not the reality it represents; nor is logical reasoning the only path to knowledge. However, we have become so used to relying on them, it is almost impossible for us to imagine the existence of other ways of knowing or viewing reality. We have become chained to them; and we use them as objects in the games we play while skirting on the surface of reality. As a result, we find ourselves unable to penetrate the deeper truths that underlie our existence. It is the intention of Zen to break through the limitations imposed by Western epistemology in order that we might attain that deeper and truer knowledge of reality as apprehended through the senses, through intuition, through the heart and whole person.

Suzuki summarizes Zen's case against the exaltation of logical thinking in the following way:

Zen is so vehement in its attack on logical thinking because logical thinking has entered into our lives in such an all pervasive manner so as to make most of us conclude that logical thinking is life and without it life has no further significance. The map of life has been so definitively and thoroughly structured by logical thinking that all we really have to do is simply follow its directions, and we should not even think about violating its rules of thought, which are presented as absolute and final...Zen, on the other hand, seeks to preserve our vitality, our innate freedom, and, above all, the wholeness of our being.¹⁴

It is obvious, then, for the sake of our spiritual well-being, we must endeavour to free ourselves from present limitations, and gain a new perspective of the world in which we live, one that adds depth and wholeness to our lives.

If we really want to get to the bottom of life, we must abandon our cherished syllogisms. We must acquire a new way of observation, wherein we can escape the tyranny of logic and our one-dimensional approach to everyday reality... Zen wants us to acquire an entirely new point of view whereby we can look deeply into the mysteries of life and explore the secrets of nature.¹⁵

Suzuki quotes a famous *gatha* of an ancient Chinese Chan master as an example of how Zen can challenge our thinking:

Empty-handed I go, and behold the spade is
in my hands;
I walk on foot, and yet I am riding
on the back of an ox;
When I pass over the bridge,
Lo, the water floweth not,
but the bridge doth flow.¹⁶

To Suzuki, the apparent illogicality of this *gatha* declares that words are only words and nothing more. Its purpose is to break through the ordinary rules of understanding that we all take for granted, rules that are conditioned by logical formulae, such as A is A, A is not not-A, or A is not B. In doing this, Zen frees the powers of imagining, knowing and understanding from the tyranny of logic, words and concepts.

Suzuki also points out that what may first appear to be illogicality is "not in the last analysis necessarily illogical; what is superficially irrational has, after all, its own logic which corresponds to the true state of things... So long as we think logically, in the end, we are enchained...we have no freedom of spirit, and the real facts of our lives are lost sight of."¹⁷

From this it follows that when it comes to religious experience which is beyond the grasp of logical reason or conceptualization, we are asked simply to plunge into the abyss of the 'nameless' and embrace directly the divine mystery. Such is the state arrived at by individuals who are in radical union with the ultimate reality, and have attained this

without the intervention of logical reasoning or philosophizing, or as Suzuki says "without the murdering of human nature in order to subject it to intellectual dissection."¹⁸

CONCLUSION

It seems quite obvious from all we have said above that Zen can provide a vital source for enriching contemporary Christian life and religious education. If the goal of education is to train non-conformists, to offer counterpoint to the dominant themes of contemporary culture and society, if education is to break down barriers and do away with stereotyped ways of thinking, if the chief aim of religious education is to cultivate the imagination in order to enable young people to open themselves up to life, to see more clearly and deeply, and, above all, to open them to experience the divine mystery, then Zen has indeed something positive to contribute to religious education. While on the one hand, Zen does present a way of knowing that challenges radically Western dependence on cognition alone; it can, on the other hand, help us to expand our potential for knowing through direct and pure feeling. This can well serve as a counterpart or complement to the cognitive mode of knowing, and it can also deliver us from the tyranny of logical and conceptual thinking, which often blinds us to the hidden depths of reality itself. More importantly, by bringing to our present epistemological approach the teachings of Zen, we will discover that we can indeed live out our lives in the fullness of our humanity as balanced individuals and whole persons.

Endnotes

¹ Maria Harrie, "Enlarging the Religious Imagination: The Imagery of Knowing." *Pace* 13, 1982-83, 1.

² Ibid.

³ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, tr. William V. Dych, New York: Crossroads, 1992, 21.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Paul Knitter, "Religious Imagination and Interreligious Dialogue," *The Pedagogy of God's Image*, ed. Robert Masson, 1981, 97.

⁶ D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 1964, 38.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 38-9.

⁹ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 41.

¹² Ibid., 44.

¹³ Ibid., 45-6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 63-4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 58-9.

¹⁶ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷ Ibid., 59-60.

¹⁸ Ibid., 61.

We are Chinese

by our China pilgrim

Willy nilly, Chinese or not, we are all of the same family because we are much more similar than we think.

In the course of my travels in many countries, I have met people with a big heart, very much like the good people back home. I am even convinced that 95% of human beings are really good, provided we never do anything to make them afraid of us. Five percent are perhaps less agreeable. We should not conclude that all of humanity is a disaster because of this tiny gang.

In any case, I feel very much at home in China. Seeing all these people so much like the rest of the world, I say to myself, "We are all Chinese!"

