

Merton's Dialogue with Zen: Pioneering or Passé?

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1. *Introduction*

The recently published *Merton and Buddhism* is a collection of essays that contributes to the literature on Thomas Merton.¹ The book offers a substantial and thorough overview of Merton's lifelong encounter with Buddhism. One article in particular by John P. Keenan, a former Catholic religious and retired Buddhist scholar, raises some critical questions concerning Merton's knowledge of Zen and its implications for current dialogue with Buddhism. The article is entitled *The Limits of Thomas Merton's Understanding of Buddhism*. However, more specifically than the title would suggest, it concerns the limits of Merton's understanding of Japanese Zen gleaned as it was, by the guidance of D.T. Suzuki. Since Merton's dialogue with Zen raises questions pertaining to the method of interreligious dialogue, the issues raised in Keenan's article warrant further consideration and reflection.

Keenan's argument proceeds in the following manner: (1) Merton's understanding of Zen was pioneering but is insufficient for current dialogue; (2) much of this insufficiency follows from his reliance on D.T. Suzuki whose expertise is increasingly called into question by scholars; (3) the assumption that Zen is based on a wordless or unmediated experience needs to be checked, and (4) some consideration regarding the questions of method in the dialogue with Buddhism need to be addressed.

In this paper I would like to present this argument in more detail and raise some questions and considerations that arise as a result. I will offer some comments on Merton's reliance on Suzuki, the recent critique of Suzuki by various scholars, the issue of unmediated experience, and some comments on method for interreligious dialogue.

¹ Thurston (ed.), *Merton and Buddhism: Wisdom, emptiness and everyday mind*, Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2007.

2. MERTON AND SUZUKI

From 1959 to 1966 Merton carried on a rich and substantial dialogue with a prominent authority on Japanese Zen, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki 鈴木大拙. The dialogue was unique and pioneering because both scholars were purported experts in their own traditions and each had an intense interest in the other's tradition.²

A formal dialogue between the two took place in print in Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Later, Merton writes an article entitled *A Zen Revival* that prompted Suzuki to declare after reading it that Merton had the best grasp of any Westerner he has ever met.³ Merton also considered Suzuki an authority and refers to his work as "certainly without question the most complete and most authentic presentation of an Asian tradition and experience by any one man *in terms accessible to the West*".⁴ Granted, this essay is written in the form of a eulogy, which Merton writes in honor of the man he greatly admired. However, Merton's laudatory comments are tempered by the words, "in terms accessible to the West." Suzuki was a communicator and popularizer of Zen due in part to his exceptional command of English and his fascination with Western culture. Many scholars now criticize Suzuki because they disagree with his interpretation of Zen and because his success as a popularizer has led to misconceptions by Western scholars. These critics not only believe Suzuki misrepresents Zen, but they believe he ignores the various complex lineages of various schools and the doctrinal aspects as well.

Keenan's critique of Merton flows from this context of post-Suzuki criticism. To summarize:

Based as his works are on D.T. Suzuki's Zen teachings, I think we must recognize that we cannot look to Merton for any adequate understanding of Buddhism. Because of the limitation of sources available to him in his time, his understanding of Zen Buddhism as presented, for example in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, was imperfect and incomplete. It is not enough—as Merton learned to do from Suzuki—to appeal to a

² Their relationship can be divided into two periods: (1) from Merton's initial correspondence in 1959 to their face to face meeting in New York City in 1964; (2) from that initial meeting until Suzuki's death in 1966. Raab, *Openness and Fidelity*, 135, n. 9.

³ D.T. Suzuki's comments to Mr. Lunsford Yandell. See Christmas Humphrey's forward to *The Zen Revival*, London, The Buddhist Society, 1971.

⁴ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 62-3. Emphasis added.

simple, non-discriminative experience of truth and reality as if that were the core experience behind all our varied and sorry words and doctrines.⁵

There are some points to be made about Keenan's passage. First, Merton does recognize that Zen has very complex doctrines, but he admits that having had limited time with Suzuki, he wanted to use the time more wisely to discuss matters of more immediate interest.⁶ Not only is Merton aware that there is a complex system of doctrines in Zen, he is also aware that his knowledge is incomplete, and perhaps always will be.

Second, while there may be some truth in Keenan's critique, I wonder why he generalizes this to Merton's understanding of Buddhism, as for example, in the Tibetan tradition which Merton also delved into. It may seem like I am quibbling here, but consider that Merton's contemplative lifestyle may have predisposed him to grasp certain elements of Buddhism more readily than others, and as such, he may not have been as reliant on 'book knowledge'. It is worth considering the comment by the Tibetan monk Chadrak Rinpoche, who after having a stimulating dialogue with Merton, called him a *rangjung*, a naturally arisen Buddha.⁷ Perhaps Chadrak was being polite, but if there is such a thing as a 'naturally arisen Buddha' then it would seem that there is the possibility of grasping essential aspects of a tradition without a formal apprehension of them.

Having said all of this, I would concede that Keenan may be correct when he says that we should not rely on Merton for an adequate understanding of Buddhism, and if Merton were alive today he would probably agree. So while his knowledge of Buddhism may have been pioneering for its time, and in some ways it might be now passé, what is truly going forward in Merton's engagement with Buddhism is his success at interreligious dialogue. It is a method that seems to have taken the magisterium of the Catholic Church 50 years to accept, despite the achievements of Vatican II.⁸ Merton was ahead of his time.

⁵ Keenan, 123.

⁶ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 62.

⁷ Thurston (ed.), *Merton and Buddhism*, 75.

⁸ See Dadosky, "Towards a Fundamental Theological *Re*-Interpretation of Vatican II."

3. CORLESS ON SUZUKI

Roger Corless raised the initial questions concerning the genuine integrity of Suzuki's grasp of Christianity and Merton's grasp of Zen. Keenan is in agreement with Corless and relies heavily on him to support his own argument. In his article *In Search of a Context for the Merton-Suzuki Dialogue*, Corless criticizes Suzuki's understanding of Christianity along with the latter's preferences and biases pertaining to Zen as well as his assumptions about what is distinctively 'Japanese'.

The tone of Corless' article is iconoclastic and sweeping, so much so that after reading it one wonders if there is anything worth salvaging in Suzuki's work. Nevertheless, Corless' critique is probably legitimate to some extent, especially with respect to Suzuki's knowledge of Christianity. Most significantly, it highlights Suzuki's neglect of the importance of the symbol and theology of the Cross within Christian theology.

Second, regarding Suzuki's knowledge of Zen, Corless concurs with the growing tendency to blame Suzuki's version of Zen for perpetuating caricatures and being too simplistic. Moreover, central to Suzuki's ideas is the belief that the fundamental aspect of Zen is the 'transcendental' experience and it is Corless' critique of this that I will return to in a subsequent section.

Corless focuses his critique of Suzuki on a personal and political context. From a personal context, he suggests that Suzuki's emphasis on 'transcendental' experience may have come from his mother's adherence to a marginal sect of Shin Buddhism which emphasizes a "direct experience of Amida Buddha".⁹ Corless declares that Suzuki interpreted "the Zen of his father in terms of the experiences of his mother."¹⁰

While this is intriguing, it seems like a stretch, especially if one considers that other Zen practitioners, especially non-Japanese ones, have emphasized the 'transcendental' experience of Zen.¹¹ Moreover, according to Robert Sharf, Nishida Kitaro, the founder of the Kyoto School of Zen, shared this same interest with Suzuki, and Corless does not seem to think

⁹ Corless, R., "In Search of a Context for the Merton Suzuki Dialogue," 81, n. 16.

¹⁰ Corless, 83.

¹¹ See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys: A guide to practice of Zen*, New York: Doubleday, 1995.

the sect of Buddhism that Nishida's mother followed is relevant, or at least he does not mention it.¹²

There is a *zeitgeist* among various scholars in Japan and Europe in the early twentieth century which gives an ontological priority to a transcultural experience as the basis of religion, and these scholars included Suzuki and Nishida. Thus, Suzuki was influenced by certain figures in Western scholarship including Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, and William James (one could even add Mircea Eliade), who distinguish between the fundamental essence of religion as experience on the one hand, and the subsequent cultural mediation of that experience on the other. Corless argues that Suzuki borrowed this distinction from the Western scholars, and this consequently colored the Zen that he exported to the West. "[I]n fact, a conservative 'back to *bodhi*' reform movement, was ignored in favor of packaging it as a non-doctrinal, pan-human awakening to reality-as-it-really-is."¹³ From this he can speak to Suzuki's influence on Merton:

It was perhaps because Merton accepted Suzuki's transcendental interpretation of Zen that he felt it might provide the needed stimulus to revive the contemplative tradition in Christianity. What Merton did not seem to realize is that Zen Buddhism is Buddhism, and to practice it sincerely entails, as with any other form of Buddhism, the giving up of belief in the Christian (or any other) God.¹⁴

From a political context Corless addresses Suzuki's interpretation of Zen with its 'Japaneseness' (*nihonjinron*). The latter refers to Suzuki's attempt to emphasize the distinctively Japanese nature of Zen. *Nihonjinron* refers to the fascination that the Japanese have with themselves as to what is unique about their culture. The suspicion that such questions can lead to a cultural narcissism and nationalism prompts Corless to ask what is exactly unique about Japanese culture? He responds that Shinto, the only true indigenous religion of Japan, can account for the distinctive 'Japaneseness' of the archipelago. He ventures the thesis: "The only way in which Shinto differs from other pre-Axial religions (such as the religions of ancient Greece or Egypt) is that it is still living."¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is curious that Corless, in his attempt to preserve the

¹² Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," 126-7.

¹³ Corless, 84.

¹⁴ Corless, 84-5.

¹⁵ Corless, 85.

integrity of the different lineages of Zen, would so readily lump Shinto together with ‘pre-axial’ religions, as if there is such thing as ‘pan-indigenous’ religions.

Suzuki does not dispute that Shinto is an intimate part of the Japanese identity but as Corless points out, Suzuki misguidedly focuses on its transcendental experience instead of its ritualistic/doctrinal aspects.¹⁶

Although certain Shinto themes may already be implicit in Suzuki’s understanding of Zen, according to Corless, there is a greater danger. He feels that Suzuki’s understanding of Zen perpetuated the ideological beliefs of the superiority of the Japanese race and specifically the warrior class: “We are treading on dangerous ground...the gentle mystic begins to turn into the mighty warrior who will die for the *kokutai*, the Spirit of Japan which can never be wrong”.¹⁷

Moreover, Corless criticizes Suzuki for making too simple a distinction between the Eastern and Western worldviews, and although Corless may be correct about this, his rhetoric seems unfair: “Well, let me screw up my courage and say flat out that this is nonsense. It is a bad joke, as anyone who has been to Japan realizes as soon as s/he steps off the plane”.¹⁸ Perhaps I am not as confident as Corless to make judgments about a culture just by stepping off a plane, but if the Japanese are the technological rivals to the West as Corless suggests they are, it may very well have to do with a work ethic that includes a renunciation of individuality for the sake of the group—might we say, a transposition of the self-sacrificial ideal of the ‘the mighty warrior who will die for the *kokutai*’? I will leave that for the experts to decide, but having traveled through Japan myself, I do find it to be a distinctive culture. While I am not an expert, having begun a project delving into the philosophy and theology of beauty, I think that the Japanese aesthetics of *wabi-sabi* is unique to Japan. I am not aware of any culture that has an aesthetic category which articulates the beauty of *loneliness* and *emptiness*. On this point, I am sympathetic with Gilbert Ryle who believes that there is a genius to every culture and the recognition of such genius does not have to imply nationalism. I suspect that the aesthetics of *wabi-sabi* constitutes

¹⁶ Consider the following quotation from Suzuki, “Zen, therefore, most strongly and persistently insists on an inner spiritual experience. It does not attach any intrinsic importance to the sacred sutras or to their exegesis by the wise and learned.” Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 34.

¹⁷ Corless., 87.

¹⁸ Corless, 88.

part of the genius of Japanese culture regardless of its origin within that culture. I am surprised that Corless does not recognize this as distinctively Japanese but rather focuses exclusively on Shinto.

In sum, Corless' analysis of Suzuki may have many points worthy of consideration, but his rhetorical polemics cloud rather than clarify the issue. Regardless of whether Merton was a better listener than Suzuki, as Corless suggests, both men were trying to build bridges of dialogue in the post-War context, and regardless of how imperfect the dialogue may have been, their attempts are laudable.

4. ROBERT SHARF

Keenan and Corless refer to recent works by Robert Sharf who has been on the forefront of the post-modern critique of Suzuki and the Kyoto School of Zen. While I do not have his expertise in Japanese Zen or Buddhism, I would like to examine some of these criticisms for logical consistency.

Sharf is critical of Suzuki and the Kyoto School because he believes they exported a popularized notion of Zen that includes a propagation of Japanese nationalism, an anti-institutional emphasis, and a fundamental unmediated experience as the basis of Zen.

There are some inconsistencies in Sharf's critique concerning the nationalism that purportedly Suzuki and others either implicitly or explicitly expound. First, Sharf's definition of nationalism is incomplete. For him, nationalism is "an ideology or rhetoric that posits a nation or an ethnic or racial group, the members of which all participate equally in the glory of their 'collective past'".¹⁹ Setting aside the fact that Sharf does not distinguish between patriotism and nationalism, one would think that the real danger of nationalism, rather than the belief in a 'glorious past', is when the group maintains an ideology of its identity in such a way that it either imposes this on others or scapegoats those who do not 'belong' to the group. Nationalism is more about a glorious future than a glorious past although the perception of a glorious past will undoubtedly fuel the ideology.

Second, there is strange irony in this blanket accusation of 'Zen nationalism' leveled against Suzuki, Nishida, Masao Abe and others. It

¹⁹ Sharf, "Whose Zen? Zen Nationalism Revisited," 46. Corless cites an earlier version of Sharf's paper, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism."

may be that they were guilty of either intentionally or unintentionally supporting a nationalist ideology running rampant at the time, not only in Japan, but throughout the world. However, to simply dismiss them in this manner is to ignore the fact that these men, especially Suzuki and Abe, are quite cosmopolitan in their desire to engage the West.

Moreover, in his article *Zen and Japanese Nationalism*, Sharf elaborates on the context of the Meiji period (1868-1912) which was wrought with anti-Buddhist rhetoric and suspicion against Zen for not being Japanese enough. Therefore, is it possible that Suzuki's emphasis on a distinctively 'Japanese Zen' may be influenced by this context of accusation against Buddhism for not being Japanese enough? In this way, perhaps Suzuki's 'nationalism' can be viewed in a different light, as an attempt at preservation, although to what extent it acquired the decadent form of nationalism is another question.

Admittedly, it seems clear that Suzuki thought that Japanese Zen was the superior form of Buddhism. But should this really surprise anyone? Is there not a kind of 'triumphalism' to greater or lesser degrees pervading many of the world's religions? The Dalai Lama is a case in point. He believes that his lineage of Tibetan Buddhism is the most authentic expression of Buddhism.²⁰ Presumably many advocates of other religions believe that their tradition is the fullest expression, and so on.

In addition, Sharf's critique of Suzuki runs dangerously close at points to the informal fallacies of the genetic and the straw attack. In terms of the former, he claims:

If the importance of credentials, of institutional sanction, or of traditional authority in Zen comes as a surprise, it may be due in part to the fact that so many of those responsible for popularizing Zen in the twentieth century lacked formal institutional sanction themselves. D.T. Suzuki, Nishitani Keiji, and Abe Masao, to name but a few, all lacked the formal transmission in a Zen lineage, and their intellectualized Zen is often held in suspicion by Zen traditionalists.²¹

This quotation is laden with logical problems if one pushes it too far. If one wants to make formal sanction a criterion of authority within a tradition, then one wonders by what authority Sharf speaks of Zen—as Zen master or Zen intellectual? Second, Sharf is presuming that 'Zen

²⁰ See Heim "A Protestant Reflection on Interfaith and Ecumenical Issues."

²¹ Sharf, "Whose Zen?", 43.

traditionalists', whoever they may be, somehow speak for an entire system of lineages, as if the traditional or 'orthodox' are somehow more 'authentic'. In fact, the most conservative in a tradition can often represent the most aberrant. What is more, by presuming this, Sharf implicitly presupposes the very thing he cautions against, that there is a purer notion of Zen, and of course he presumes that Suzuki does not possess it. Sharf does not account for the fact that Zen, as with any other religious lineage, developed historically and that often reform movements can be a 'purer' expression than those prior. Such was the case in Christianity with St. Francis and his reforms relative to the medieval monastics. Could it be that Suzuki and the Kyoto School are part of a modern development in Japanese Zen?

In terms of a straw attack, Sharf basically lumps Suzuki and the entire Kyoto School together to describe their position as "some sort of nonsectarian spiritual gnosis...by insisting that Zen is a way of experiencing the world, rather than a complex form of Buddhist monastic practice".²² Certainly Suzuki and Nishida place priority on Zen experience and thus they may have been influenced by Western thinkers such as Schleiermacher, James, *et al.* But why should this matter? On the one hand, Suzuki is a communicator. He is trying to communicate his enthusiasm for Zen to Westerners. This enthusiasm spread to Merton and other notable figures at the time. On the other hand, what is wrong with finding categories from other cultures which help people understand their own traditions more deeply? During the 13th Century many 'traditional' Christians opposed Thomas Aquinas' use of Aristotle within his theology but nevertheless, his use of Aristotle remains a permanent achievement in Catholic theology. The fact is that belief systems develop, and one way to view Suzuki and the Kyoto School, however imperfect their attempts may be, and regardless of how subsequent generations popularize or misappropriate their views, is that they were trying to communicate Zen to the West and found categories from the Western intellectual tradition that helped them understand their own conception of Zen.

Intimately related to these critiques is the question whether there is an 'essence' of Zen. Sharf is critical of attempts to identify an essence of Zen and distinguish this from its cultural expressions. He even goes so far as to link this distinction to nationalism and fascism.²³ I have to admit I find this connection to be an unconvincing leap. If Suzuki and Nishida

²² Sharf, "Whose Zen?", 43.

²³ Sharf, "Whose Zen?", 43-44.

were the nationalists he claims them to be, it seems they would not want to eschew the cultural expressions of Japanese Zen in some transcultural experience.

Second, I am not sure in what light Sharf, Corless and others hold the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, but according to him: “The essence of Zen is awaking. This is why one does not talk about Zen, one experiences it”.²⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh seems to advocate Zen as wordless experience, but one would not call him a Vietnamese nationalist or fascist. In fact, he is quite the opposite; he is a staunch activist for peace and social justice. In 1967 he was nominated by Martin Luther King Jr. for a Nobel Peace prize. Therefore, the linking of this type of Zen experience to decadent nationalism does not follow.

Finally, it would seem that the polemical hermeneutic of suspicion that is being leveled against Suzuki and the Kyoto School is at times as reductive as their critics accuse the supposed ‘Zen nationalists’ of being. But the question remains, do Keenan, Corless, and Sharf have some legitimate criticisms of this Suzuki conception of Zen?

5. IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE AS RHETORIC?

Each of Suzuki’s critics mentioned so far in this article cite Bernard Faure’s work on Zen, especially his critique of Suzuki. Faure’s two groundbreaking works on Zen, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy* (1991) and *Chan Insights and Oversights* (1993), seek to reverse some of the Western misconceptions about Zen.

Faure’s treatment of Suzuki, Nishida and the Kyoto School is less polemical and more sober in approach. He argues that Suzuki and the others were part of a lay movement that emphasized the non-cultural/religious aspects of Zen with anti-intellectual tendencies, and at times made sweeping generalizations and misinterpreted various other lineages.

Faure begins his analysis of Suzuki by citing Merton’s laudatory praise of him (cited above) as “without question one of the most complete and most authentic presentations of an Asian tradition and experience by any one man in terms accessible to the West”.²⁵ Undoubtedly this kind of

²⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 49.

²⁵ Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, 55; Merton, “D.T. Suzuki: The man and his work,” in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 62-63.

praise makes Suzuki's critics cringe, for it not only recognizes him as an authority but also seems to legitimize his understanding of Zen, which they view as a modern form and even decadent in comparison to more traditional forms. It does not account for the many lineages of Zen and the complex traditions and doctrines pertaining to them.

Indeed, as noted above, Suzuki could write very clear English, and he could communicate his understanding at a time when Western scholars were ready to receive it. Thus, Keenan is perhaps correct to suggest that Merton's understanding of Buddhism must be kept in context. What is more, one cannot help but wonder if there is merit to the criticism of Suzuki's overgeneralizations especially if we consider the following comments:

I would like to say that there are two types of mentality that fundamentally differ from one another: (1) affective, personal, dualistic, and (2) nonaffective, nonpersonal and nondualistic. Zen belongs to the latter and Christianity to the former.²⁶

However, even this quotation as simplistic as it may sound probably pertains to Suzuki and Merton's attempt to distinguish what Lonergan would call *the world of immediacy* and *the world mediated by meaning*.²⁷ Is Suzuki suggesting that the Eastern mentality has been more oriented to the world of immediacy?

In addition, Faure does not emphasize the 'nationalistic' aspects of Suzuki's thought as Sharf does. Although he is suspicious, along with the others, about the issue of unmediated experience as a basis for religious belief, and how this leads to a separation of belief from experience and seems to indicate a transcultural basis for belief, Faure's critique cites the oft quoted argument from Stephen Katz, who states, there "*are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.*" This notion "if not self-contradictory" is "at best empty." Rather, 'mystical' experiences are effected by the mystic's "pre-formed anticipation".²⁸ Undoubtedly influenced by Faure, Keenan raises an interesting point about this issue, and since he invokes Lonergan I would like to offer a clarification.

First, it is necessary to examine Katz's critique more closely. Since his rhetoric has influenced many people, it will be necessary to

²⁶ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 133.

²⁷ See chapter 3 "Meaning" in Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

²⁸ Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," in Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, 26.

provide a response by Jamie Price from a Lonergan perspective, and a clarification of the latter's response.

Katz emphasizes a “two-directional symmetry” wherein “beliefs shape experience, just as experience shapes belief.”²⁹ He uses the example of Manet's painting of the Gothic Notre Dame Cathedral wherein the painter assumed the archways were Gothic and painted them accordingly. It has been established, upon closer inspection, that the archways are indeed Romanesque and Manet's interpretation is inaccurate.³⁰ His experience of the total architecture as Gothic, according to Katz, shaped his belief that the archways were Gothic as well.

Secondly, Katz insists that we cannot take two mystical experiences from distinct traditions and assume that they are the same. It is “misleading” to believe that there is a “common core” to a mystical experience. He spends considerable time contrasting a experience of a Jewish mystic to that of a Buddhist and concludes: “There is no intelligible way that anyone can legitimately argue that a ‘no self’ experience of ‘empty’ calm is the same experience as...one of whom is conceived of as the personal God of Western religion...”³¹ This criticism echoes that of Corless who also posits a dialectical difference between Buddhism and monotheism. Nevertheless, in order to make this claim Katz must presume that he has understood both experiences at least to some extent in order to claim this non-intelligibility.

Mystical experiences may have similarities with regard to generalized descriptions but this by no means proves that they are the same for Katz. Any “metaphysical entity” can be compared if the “phrases are indefinite enough”.³² Likewise, Katz criticizes “those seeking some variety of the *philosophia perennis*” because they assume some “universal common mystical experience” in which, upon closer inspection, they are “misled by appearances”.³³

Katz' conclusion is that all mystical experiences are contextual and therefore cannot be understood outside of this “total context”.

...choosing descriptions of mystic experience out of their total context does not provide grounds for their comparability but

²⁹ Katz, 33.

³⁰ Katz, 30.

³¹ Katz, 39-40.

³² Katz, 51.

³³ Katz, 57.

rather severs all grounds of their intelligibility for it empties the chosen phrases, terms, and descriptions of definite meaning.³⁴

His article is a plea to respect the richness and diversity of the data of mystical experiences. We need to let the experiences stand on their own (let God be God, Brahman be Brahman, etc.) and not simply try to equate them.³⁵ Hence, he advocates rather a “plea for the recognition of the differences”.³⁶ While I would concur with this latter statement, I would add that equally important is the recognition that there are *different* types of differences, a topic to which I will return below.

There have been several critiques of Katz's position. James Price III in an article which appeared in *The Thomist* (49) in 1985 puts forth a response from a Lonergan perspective.³⁷ Price recognizes Katz's position that mystical experience is “essentially mediated” as a “welcome development.” Yet it does not follow that there is no objectivity to such claims—that the experiences are culturally bound. Katz assumes an inaccurate cognitional theory which reduces knowledge to experience and interpretation. “An accurate cognitional theory,” Price states, “would objectify knowing as a threefold process of experience, interpretation, and judgment.” That is, for Lonergan there is no objectivity until one has answered the question authentically, “Is it so?” For example, when Katz refers to the painting by Manet of Notre Dame Cathedral, he presupposes objective knowledge. This occurs when he presumes that *upon closer inspection* of the archways one can determine the style accurately. He must presume a third level of cognitional operations—judgment. Thus, to affirm with Katz a cognitional theory which either ignores or denies the performance of “true judgment” is to affirm a position on cognitional theory which, while not self-contradictory, is nevertheless “self-destructive”.³⁸

Secondly Price takes issue with Katz's belief that there can be no unmediated experiences. Price does not assume as Katz does that interpretation necessarily filters out or distorts “the real”. Following Lonergan, Price claims that the real can be apprehended through interpretation and subsequent judgment.

³⁴ Katz, 47, 56-57.

³⁵ Katz, 66.

³⁶ Katz, 24.

³⁷ Price III, “The Objectivity of Mystical Truth Claims,” *The Thomist* 49 (1985), 81-98.

³⁸ Price III, 87-89, 91.

Interpretation does not, in principle at least, distort experience; rather, it grasps the intelligibility inherent in it. True meanings, therefore, are interpretations of experience affirmed to be true through the performance of correct judgment...The problem of objectivity, then, is not the problem of perceiving unmediated experience; it is the problem of making correct judgments.³⁹

Finally, Price takes issue with Katz's contention that there is no "sameness" to cross-cultural mystical experiences. Price respects Katz's desire not to reduce the richness of diverse mystical experiences to the "same". However, by overemphasizing this point Katz is committing an "oversight" which leads to a radical pluralism and relativism. Price uses the example of an Inuit and a Pueblo who visit Manhattan. They both have different experiences, interpret them within the context of their own cultures and traditions, yet this does not "preclude objective knowledge".⁴⁰

...it can also be affirmed that mystics from different traditions may know the same mystical reality, and that their respective linguistic and cognitive predispositions do not preclude the possibility either of objective knowing or mutual understanding and correction.⁴¹

If Katz is correct and there is no objectivity to mystical experience (even though he has to assume objective knowledge about mystical experience in order to make this claim), there is no possibility for dialogue other than mere conversation. I can listen to a Buddhist's 'mystical' experience but I cannot relate to it. On the other hand, following Lonergan, if Price is correct, then there is a need for dialogue which facilitates, "mutual communication, correction," and "expansion" of understanding. Therefore, Price calls for a "qualified relativism," which offers "the foundations for a critically grounded *philosophia perennis*." He concludes:

For, if the recognition of the mediated character of mystical experience can eliminate the facile presumption of a perennial philosophy, so the recognition of an adequate cognitional theory can eliminate the wrong turn that leads not only to the easy assumption of a radical pluralism among the world's mystical traditions, but to the categorical denial of the objectivity of

³⁹ Price III, 93-94.

⁴⁰ Price III, 98.

⁴¹ Price III, 97.

mystical truth claims, and the effective foreclosure of an important avenue of interreligious and cross-cultural dialogue.⁴²

At this point some clarification of Lonergan's treatment of this topic is in order. Strictly speaking, as far as I know Lonergan does not use the term *unmediated* experience and if he does it is only on occasion. To the extent that he does, he would be referring not to a reality free from cultural-religious meanings. Rather, he uses the terms *pure pattern of experience*, *infrastructure*, *elemental meaning* and *mediated return to immediacy* to try to explain those experiences wherein the distinction between the subject and object is not clearly differentiated, such as Heidegger was attempting by invoking the term *Dasein*. But Lonergan's use of these terms does not refer to an unmediated experience, that is, one devoid of meanings culturally or otherwise.

In his critique of Merton and Buddhism, Keenan asserts that the question of pure experience remains an open question.⁴³ While this may be true, I do not think he understands that for Lonergan the 'pure' of pure experience means something very specific. When he uses the expression 'pure pattern of experience' he does not mean that it is pure in the sense that the experience is free of all socially inhabited/constructed meanings. He means it is pure in the sense that in those moments the subject's consciousness is free of instrumentality, e.g. the differentiations of common sense (ordinary living) and theory—viewing the world through a scientific *Weltanschauung*. For example, in his famous experience at Polonaruwa, Merton claims that he is "jerked clean out" of himself.⁴⁴ Presumably what he means is that he is jerked out of the ordinary instrumentalization of differentiated consciousness to an immediate experience that is very difficult to describe.

Nor does this type of experience necessarily pertain to religious-mystical experience. It occurs in the aesthetic pattern of experience and regularly in the fecund imaginings of the artist. On this point, I would agree with Keenan who suggests that these experiences occur in the ordinary events of everyday living. Of course they do and this is supported by the fact that Lonergan was influenced on this account by the developmental theory of Jean Piaget.

⁴² Price III, 98.

⁴³ Keenan, 130.

⁴⁴ See Raab, "Madhyamika and Dharmakaya," *The Merton Annual*, (2004), 195-205.

Secondly, this experience is *patterned*, so there is not some kind of raw data with no intelligibility affecting the mind like some *tabula rasa*. Frequently, subsequent reflection can lead to a symbolic representation that aims to communicate the multivalent nature of the experience. A dramatic instance of this can be seen in the struggle of Theresa of Avila to expound the mystical journey within the image of the seven mansions of the Interior Castle.

This realm where the distinction between the subject and object is not clearly differentiated Lonergan also describes as *elemental meaning*. The latter also refers to *the world of immediacy*, and the important clarification is *im*-mediate rather than *un*-mediated because it does not hold that there are no meanings whatsoever present in the world of immediacy. In fact, Robert Doran, one of Lonergan's successors argues that there is a sense by which rudimentary meanings can be presented to human consciousness in this way.⁴⁵ Therefore, in a strict sense, the world of immediacy is not 'unmediated' or 'pure' in the sense that Katz objects, as if there are no meanings presented to human consciousness in the world of immediacy or elemental meaning. Moreover, the world of immediacy is inextricably linked to the world mediated by meaning and in this respect he applies it to mystical-religious experience. The experience of the mystic is one of *a mediated return to immediacy*. Hence, the very doctrinal and symbolic world of the given tradition in which the mystic lives, is the very world that mediates him or her to the world of immediacy. The surplus of meaning one encounters in this experience in the return to immediacy may be difficult to express, but this is because the nature of the experience lends itself to a surplus that, at best can only be captured in the multivalent language of symbol, allegory, and myth. Again, Merton's experience at Polonaruwa could corroborate this language of Lonergan in that the experience of being 'jerked clean out' of himself is mediated by way of the giant Buddha figures to an immediacy that is presumably Zen-like in character although we cannot know for sure. Nevertheless, Keenan is suspicious of such language. He asserts:

But no pure experience, by the very fact that it is ineffable and unmediated can ever serve as a source of any insight or judgment about anything. Mystic insight serves as data nothing...They indeed lead to awakening and wisdom but they are not useful for talking.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See Doran, "Reception and Elemental Meaning: An Expansion of the Notion of Psychic Conversion," *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 20.2 (2004), 133-57.

⁴⁶ Keenan, 130-131.

It strikes me that Keenan sounds a little cynical with respect to the relationship between a momentous experience and the ability to communicate that message. Whether or not a 'mystic insight' adds to data is beside the point, the fact is that historical examples testify that such experiences occur and, if nothing else, they lend to the mystic's authority and influence in a community. Such was the example of Catherine of Siena who mediated numerous political conflicts in medieval Italy during her time and her authority to do so stemmed from her mystical life.

6. THE ONGOING CATHOLIC DIALOGUE WITH BUDDHISM

In the last section of his article Keenan raises an important question about interreligious dialogue. Merton's lasting contribution is probably going to be in this area rather than in his knowledge of Buddhism. Although the need for dialogue with Buddhism may not seem as urgent as dialogue with some other religions, still relatively little progress has been made in the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity.

The relationship between Christianity and Buddhism has been wrought with suspicion since the arrival of the first Jesuit missionaries. Even the celebrated success of Matteo Ricci in 16th century China in establishing relations with important patriarchs and aristocrats, and in achieving a high social standing in the community, could not claim the same success with the Buddhists he encountered. In fact, Faure argues that Ricci viewed Chan as a rival group and so he was antagonistic towards them.⁴⁷ His success lay more with Confucianism.

More recently, Pope Benedict has commented: "I repeat with insistence [that] research and interreligious and intercultural dialogue are not an option but a vital necessity for our time."⁴⁸ This indicates that the Catholic Church is still coming to grips with the implications of the unprecedented positive valuation of non-Christian religions in the documents of Vatican II (1962-1965). This Council represented a paradigmatic shift in the Church's self-understanding and attitude to other religions, but it left in its wake the need for a method of dialogue which the official Church has yet to fully realize.

This paradigm shift is represented by a movement from *a strictly self-mediating identity* that viewed its relationship with the Other in terms

⁴⁷ Faure, *Chan Insights*, 19-29

⁴⁸ *Zenit News Service*, 1 February 2007.

of a *one-way* relationship to a more *two-way* direction or *mutually self-mediating* direction.⁴⁹ That is, the Vatican II documents represent the official recognition that the Church has mutual relations with the Other. For example, consider the title of the final chapter of *Gaudium et Spes* “The Church and the World as Mutually Related.” This refers to the Church’s self-understanding as *mutually self-mediating* as opposed to a *strictly self-mediating* stance that views the ‘world’ antagonistically and with suspicion. Vatican II is the official recognition that just as the Church has treasures to share with the Other, likewise it recognizes that the Church is also enriched by the treasures it finds in the Other.

In this way, Keenan is correct that there is a need for a method of interreligious dialogue because the recognition that the Church has mutual relations with the Other has put the Catholic Church in a precarious position. The affirmation of the Other, that is, of other Christian faiths, non-Christian religions, non-European cultures and secular society, runs counter to an ecclesial self-understanding that preceded Vatican II where the distortions of the Church’s self-understanding could lead to triumphalism, clericalism, and juridicism. While a movement beyond these attitudes is a welcome development, it has put the post-Vatican II Church in a kind of ‘identity crisis’ in the face of a vast pluralism. One example of this is the struggle that the Church continues to deal with concerning the question of evangelization/dialogue with respect to other religions. When does the Church evangelize, when does it dialogue with others and how does one avoid dialogue becoming simply a veiled form of evangelization, and how does one remain faithful to the evangelical mission of the Church in the dialogue? Indeed there is a tension between proclamation and dialogue but they need not be mutually opposed. Moreover, dialogue is now considered to be a part of the mission of the Church.⁵⁰ How does one keep one’s Christian identity in this dialogue? Consequently, the question of how to relate to the Other comes to the forefront, and this is a question of *method*. Thomas Merton’s life example gives us a clue as to how dialogue can be successfully carried out. In this way, Merton was significant for two reasons. He was a pioneer by successfully carrying on dialogue before it was fashionable. Secondly, Merton was successful at it, perhaps more successful than any other major Christian thinker. Merton exemplifies the method of mutual self-

⁴⁹ Dadosky, “The Church and the Other: Mediation and Friendship in Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Ecclesiology,” *Pacifica*, (October 2005), 302-322.

⁵⁰ See the joint pontifical statement *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), #38.

mediation. Of course, the latter is technical language; the more descriptive language of his methodology could be called *friendship*.

James L. Fredericks argues that friendship is an “invaluable” approach for interreligious dialogue.⁵¹ For example, when the Buddhist and the Christian sit down together for dialogue in a spirit of friendship, this spirit provides the best context for mutual enrichment, for mutual challenge, and for the ‘surprise’ of something new emerging through their respectful sharing and camaraderie. The spirit of friendship provides a context for engaging the different types of differences even contradictory ones: “...Christians will do well to develop deep and abiding friendships with the non-Christian neighbors as a useful way to disagree with honesty and depth”.⁵² Interreligious friendships enrich the Church’s self-understanding in two ways. On the one hand, it keeps our self-understanding from falling into complacency: “Making new friends requires us to step out of our security and enter into a less comfortable world where the unpredictable replaces the tried and true”.⁵³ On the other hand, the encounter is enriching in that it offers “new and welcome ways” of understanding oneself.⁵⁴

Keenan and Sharf are correct in that we should not ignore or reduce the differences to ‘sameness’. Dialogue should preserve the difference. However, equally important is the ability to recognize the different types of differences—complementary and contradictory. But this does not preclude the possibility of some underlying unity as echoed by Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s description of dialogue as when we discover that ‘we are all talking with each other about us.’

Conclusion

To bring this article to a conclusion I offer some final considerations. First, the concern that Thomas Merton’s knowledge of Buddhism is compromised because of his reliance on Suzuki seems to be more of a residual effect of a backlash against the scholarship of Suzuki. This is evidenced in part by the fact that Keenan and Corless do not lodge the same criticism towards Merton’s knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism or

⁵¹ Fredericks, 173ff, at 175.

⁵² Fredericks, 177.

⁵³ Fredericks, 175.

⁵⁴ Fredericks, 176.

the Chinese expression of the Rinzai School as exemplified by the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh.

Regardless of what one thinks of D.T. Suzuki, his influence on the West's perception of Zen was significant. This extends to the field of aesthetics and even to popular culture as expressed in the work of Yoko Ono.⁵⁵ His knowledge of Zen predominated, undoubtedly fueling the stereotypes and misperceptions that Keenan, Corless, Sharf, and Faure would like to see corrected. Nevertheless, it strikes me as odd that this hermeneutic 'backlash' against Suzuki and others is being conducted by Western scholars who have to presuppose an authority of Zen themselves in order to critique Suzuki's authority. By saying this I certainly do not wish to perpetuate the kind of informal fallacies that are already clouding this discussion. But it does seem to me that there may be some Western arrogance involved in that they may have not sufficiently accounted for the complexity of the cultural issues involved.⁵⁶

Secondly, religious traditions develop dialectically throughout history and undoubtedly this means that our knowledge of Buddhism will continue to develop. Therefore, Keenan's claim that we cannot rely on Merton for knowledge of Buddhism is not really fair. Any serious student of Buddhism, including Merton himself, recognizes that our knowledge develops and continues to develop so that even the contributions of Sharf and Faure will be checked by subsequent future studies. It may be that Suzuki, Nishida and the others may in fact represent a new movement in the development of Zen although if this is the case history will ultimately determine its significance.

Third, it strikes me that Keenan, Corless, Sharf and Faure are quite influenced by the critiques of post-modernity. While they are quick to point out Suzuki's reliance on Schleiermacher, James, etc. as a liability, they are not as cognoscente about their own philosophical assumptions which stem from a post-modern suspicion of any universal claims to knowledge and normative experiences of transcendence. In fact, the epistemological problems we inherited from Modernity are perpetuated rather than resolved by relying solely on the post-modern approach. One

⁵⁵ Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the concept of art*, 21.

⁵⁶ On this point, Philip Vanhaelmeersch suggests that there may be two different ways of scholars from the East and West have conceived of historiography that produces very different accounts. See his article "Cult of the Relics, Cult of the Book, or both?: On the 'Beginning' of Mahayana Buddhism," *Fu Jen International Religious Studies* 1.1 (N. Summer 2007), 43-62.

cannot build a philosophy on the sand of a hermeneutic of suspicion or *viva-la-difference* alone. The study of philosophy and religion is not just about criticizing positions or simply the preservation of 'difference'; it is also about the advance of our understanding of human being's desire for transcendence, where *transcendence* includes a horizon beyond that of hopeless suffering. Unfortunately, the post-modern approach too often focuses on reversing the attempts to advance such understanding without providing any sufficient alternatives.

In a similar vein, when it comes to making normative cross-cultural statements, we can ask: Why can the natural sciences make universal claims about human nature while philosophers and scholars of religions cannot?

Finally, for all their faults and limitations, we must recognize that Suzuki and Merton were cosmopolites—citizens of the world. In our current context of inter-religious struggles and the dramatic influence of fundamentalism, they can serve as examples of people who were trying to understand each other. Their contributions to the study of Zen may be incomplete or even wrong in some instances; nevertheless, it would seem that their friendship provides a model for interreligious relating that we can all learn from.

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