

Christian Transformation and the Encounter with the World's Holy Canons

PETER FELDMEIERS
University of Toledo

Philosophical approaches to hermeneutics, such as we find in Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, offer insights into how a classic text expands one's horizons, through both a dynamic game of conversation between reader and text and the enlarged sense of self that comes from entering into the proposed world of the text. Comparative theology follows these leads by showing how engaging in the canons of the religious other allows one fresh insights into one's own religious tradition's familiar and revered truths. This article is an exercise in such an approach, examining three Asian traditions and samples from their most classic textual representatives. By engaging the Dhammapada from Theravada Buddhism, classic sayings from Zen, and the Dao-De-Jing and Zhuangzi from the Daoist tradition, we see how we might appropriate the Catholic theological and spiritual traditions with fresh eyes and new insights.

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I. Hermeneutics and Comparative Theology

IN *Truth and Method* Hans-Georg Gadamer argued that theological hermeneutics carried an essential tension between a text and the sense arrived at by its application in the particular moment of interpretation. Religious proclamation is not simply there to be understood as some data set but exists for us at every moment in a new and different way. While not recommending a slavish solicitude for the text, and

Peter Feldmeier is the Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Toledo. He has written extensively in Christian spirituality and comparative theology. His most recent publications include Encounters in Faith: Christianity in Interreligious Dialogue (Winona, MN: Anselm, 2011) and The Path of Wisdom: A Christian Commentary on the "Dhammapada," with Leo Lefebure (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011). His forthcoming book is The God Conflict: Faith in the Face of New Atheism (Liguori, MO: Liguori,

recognizing the historical biases of any texts, Gadamer still insisted on a kind of subordination to a classic text's claim on our consciousness.¹

Aristotle's influence on Gadamer's argument is of notable importance. Aristotle accepted the idea of an absolutely unchangeable law, but he limited this to the realm of the gods and did not think it applicable in the phenomenal world. Thus, absolute truth and absolute morality have a critical function, for they condition the possibility for the existence of truth and morality. Even so, these cannot be instantiated by inviolable principles or laws on earth. Every situation calls for a new application to truth and morality. For Gadamer, Aristotle's analysis provides an insight into the issue of hermeneutics. Here too application is not the conformation of some pre-given universal to the particular situation; rather, application requires ongoing, fresh engagement. A classic text, for example, does not represent absolute, dogmatic, propositional claims that simply now need to be applied. Rather, understanding is determined by every new interpretive situation.²

Allow me to provide a shorthand sketch of Gadamer's hermeneutical framework. First, you attend to your own pre-understanding. We come to the text with ideas, values, and judgments about meaning. Indeed, if the text is a classic, it has probably already affected your pre-understanding, since it has affected your culture. Every interpreter enters into the act of interpretation bearing the history of the effects, conscious and unconscious, of the classics that participated in forming his or her pre-understanding. Second, you engage the text itself. The actual experience of any classic text provokes and elicits a claim to serious attention. Here you have to recognize the level of authority your pre-understanding gives to the text. Presumably in America, Mao's *Little Red Book* will not have the same claim as *The Federalist Papers*. Third, you engage what Gadamer calls "the game of conversation." Interpreters allow the text to provoke their questioning. Then you enter into the logic of question and response. That is, the text provokes a new way of considering things. This creates the condition not only for rethinking your prior understanding, but also for coming back to the text seeing differently, and thus posing new questions. Hermeneutically, therefore, the primary meaning of the text does not lie behind it in the mind of the author or even in the text itself. Rather, meaning lies in front of the text, in the dynamic of conversation.

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cummings (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 274–75.

² *Ibid.*, 278–89.

Let me provide an additional gloss of the contributions by Paul Ricoeur, as it applies to my approach to engaging world religions, which follows.³ Ricoeur considered what happens when a text goes beyond its original audience. He argued that the shift to a new audience renders the text somewhat autonomous, independent of the author. Of course, the text is not an authorless entity, and authorial intention remains a dimension of it. Still, that is just one dimension. Once the text passes from the intended audience with its own religious and cultural horizons to a new audience and situation, the text's meaning can no longer coincide with what the author intended.

Ricoeur calls this dynamic *distanciation*, and *distanciation* frees the reader from the misguided and impossible task of getting inside the mind of the author. Like Gadamer, Ricoeur believed that interpretation is not a search for the psychological intentions of the author concealed behind the text. Rather, interpretation involves entering into a world proposed by the text. To interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world provided by the text. What must be interpreted then is a proposed world, which one could inhabit and wherein one could project one's own possibilities. The text is a medium through which we understand ourselves anew. Appropriation does not respond to the author; it responds to the proposed world provided therein. For Ricoeur, to understand is not to project oneself into the text; it is to receive an enlarged self from the appropriation of the text's proposed world. This is how religious texts become revelatory: they occasion an event of encounter with things transcendental, both outside of us in the text's proposed world and within us by our experience of that world.

More recently, there has been a great advance in taking these hermeneutical insights and applying them to encounters with other religious traditions. Some, such as David Tracy in his *Plurality and Ambiguity*, argue that any good theological thinking ought to be done in light of religious plurality, taking in larger frameworks than one's own tradition's assumptions.⁴ James Fredericks points out: "Christians now live in a time when looking on the plurality of faiths as a subsidiary problem for their theology and practice is no longer possible."⁵ This is the work of comparative theology, which is an approach

³ Here I am broadly relying on Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); and Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁴ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁵ James Fredericks, introduction to *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), ix–xix, at xix.

to doctrine and spirituality that takes seriously the religious plurality in which we live. Here one passes over into the texts and religious imagination of other faiths and then returns to one's own asking new questions or bringing new insights into one's theological horizon. This is not merely a comparison of religions; rather, it involves taking the message of Gadamer, Ricoeur, and others seriously, and now globally.⁶ One ought not to think that comparative theology is merely a Christian begrudging adjustment to the fact of the religious other's proximity because of our ongoing globalization. As Fredericks wisely remarks, "Christians need to open themselves to other religious believers in such a way that the other religion comes to be seen as a genuine spiritual resource for living more faithfully the path of Christ."⁷ The point of comparative theology is not to create new theological truths, and certainly not to suggest a new religious metanarrative by merging insights from other religious traditions. Rather, the comparative procedure "can make possible fresh insights into familiar and revered truths, and new ways of receiving these truths."⁸

Method in comparative theology is hardly exact. Francis Clooney, certainly the foremost leader in the field, describes the practice as somewhat "arbitrary and intuitive.... It is a back-and-forth learning, confident about the possibility of being intelligently faithful to tradition even while seeking fresh understanding outside that tradition."⁹ Even the choice of texts requires more of a cultivated instinct that a given comparison will be fruitful than an already decided-upon agenda. Clooney writes: "There is no overarching narrative that explains, already in advance, how we are to make our own multiple religious insights and experiences of the human race."¹⁰ Typically, one would compare short, discrete texts. Such a comparison facilitates a deep understanding of the religious other. Here depth lends itself to breadth. But this approach is not entirely necessary. It would not be unusual to address larger themes or insights by comparing greater swaths of religious material.¹¹ In this article, I will follow the latter approach.

⁶ See also David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 13:9125-34.

⁷ James Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), xi.

⁸ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹¹ Clooney is again a good example. On the former approach, see Francis X. Clooney, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaisnavas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008). Here his Hindu text involves just three mantras,

The following exercise looks at three religious traditions and examples of their classic texts in ways that try to fulfill the aims of the aforementioned hermeneutical agenda, now applied to comparative theology. We will briefly pass over into Theravada Buddhism, specifically a small part of the classic text the *Dhammapada*. From there, we will open into the more enigmatic religious horizon of Zen, whose uniqueness provides a very different invitation to a Christian reimagining of the spiritual life. Since there is no standard Zen canon, we will engage classic stories and sayings from this tradition that have become normative. Finally, we will enter into a Daoist religious horizon, particularly through the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*. This proposed religious world may help us reconsider how artful attention to emerging energies might invite a reassessment of a Christian worldview, one that may overcome limitations discovered in our own. The purpose of this article is not to undertake a deep investigation of any one of these religious horizons. Each tradition, of course, could easily garner a number of books addressing comparative issues. Rather, my intent is to demonstrate the utility of comparative theology in opening one's own theological and spiritual framework through an encounter with the religious other.

II. Buddhism and the *Dhammapada*

Let us begin with Theravada Buddhism and the *Dhammapada*.¹² The *Dhammapada* is a canonical anthology of the Buddha's teachings in the form of aphorisms collated under twenty-six themes as chapters. I have chosen the *Dhammapada* because it is the most revered and quoted part of the canon.¹³ Theravada monks typically memorize the entire 423-verse text as part of their formal training and chant many of its verses daily. Part of the *Dhammapada*'s value is that it acts as a kind of canon within the canon, referencing every essential part of fundamental Buddhism, from the Eightfold path to the complexity of Buddhist anthropology. Additionally, its very style intends to inform the aspirant's proposed world. Thus, this text is not merely a compendium or Buddhist catechism but lies at the very heart of the Buddhist ethos.

collectively just twenty words. On the latter approach, see Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

¹² Translations of the *Dhammapada* are mine.

¹³ Wimal Dissanayake refers to the *Dhammapada* as "the inmost soul of Buddhism, embodying the whole of the Buddha's teaching." See Wimal Dissanayake, "Self and Body in Theravāda Buddhism: A Tropological Analysis of the *Dhammapada*," in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, ed. Thomas Kasulis *et al.* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 123–45, at 129.

It begins famously: "All phenomena are preceded by the mind, created by the mind, and have the mind as their master. If one speaks or acts from a corrupted mind, suffering follows as a cart wheel follows the ox's foot." Verse 2 is its counterpart: "All phenomena are preceded by the mind, created by the mind, and have the mind as their master. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows as a never-departing shadow."¹⁴ Here we have a foundational supposition in Buddhism. Our experience and subsequent happiness or suffering is grounded in the quality of our mind. Chapter 1, "Pairs," offers different versions of such a contrast. The subsequent chapters flesh out these two mental postures and show in detail how the fool and the wise one variously engage life, given this foundational teaching. The purpose of the *Dhammapada* is to reveal the true path as attractive and promising and to expose the path most traveled for the affliction that it really is.

This is also a text rich in metaphor and metaphoric relations. David Tracy points out that every major religion of the world is grounded in root metaphors.¹⁵ We see this in the very title of the collection. *Dhamma* (or *dharma* in Sanskrit) can mean "truth," "law," "teaching," and so on. *Pada* means "foot," "footstep," or "path." Its verbal root is "to go" or "to participate." The image created is one of movement. One is on a journey, and this text both describes the right path and presents itself as a companion along the way. Everywhere we find images of walking, journeying, running, navigating, arriving, and leaving. Even those first two celebrated verses lead us to consider life through the image of travel, either with the drudgery of a heavy yoke or with the happy lightness of a shadow.

Even as action expresses skillful Buddhist practice, its primary intention is to cultivate tranquility. Some form of calm or equanimity, such as being a rock or an island, is imaged in over half of the *Dhammapada*. The *Dhammapada* characterizes authentic religious life as a life of action and stillness. Consider the following verses regarding action:

29. Vigilant among the negligent, wide awake among the sleeping, the deeply wise one goes forth, like a swift horse who leaves the nag behind.
31. The monk, devoted to vigilance, and seeing the danger in negligence, goes forth like a fire burning every fetter, gross and subtle.
46. Knowing this body to be like foam, realizing its mirage-like nature, cutting off the flowers of Māra, one may go unseen by the King of Death.

¹⁴ One is reminded of the way the *Didache* begins: "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways." See *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Michael Holmes, trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 149.

¹⁵ David Tracy, "Metaphor and Religion: The Test Case of Christian Texts," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 90.

- 60. Long is the night for the wakeful, long is a trek for the weary, long is samsara for fools who do not understand the true Dharma.
- 91. Those who are mindful depart; they do not delight in a house. They leave behind every home, like geese who abandon a pond.

Consider the following verses regarding stillness:

- 25. Through effort, vigilance, restraint, and self-control, the wise one makes himself an island no flood could overwhelm.
- 28. When the wise one expels negligence by vigilance, having ascended to the stronghold of wisdom, and free from sorrow, he observes the sorrowing crowd, as a sage standing on a mountain observes fools on the plain.
- 81. Just as a solid rock is unmoved by the wind, so the wise are unmoved by blame or praise.
- 82. Just as a deep lake is clear and undisturbed, so the wise become clear, having heard the teachings.
- 94. One whose senses are as calm as horses well tamed by a charioteer, who has abandoned pride and is free from toxins, is envied even by the gods.

Can Buddhism and the *Dhammapada* challenge the way that Christians think about or engage their own religious concerns? That is, if we place ourselves in a kind of submission to this classic's authority and allow ourselves to be enlarged by its proposed world, how might it speak to our preengagement posture? It turns out to be most helpful.

Christian Response

Most authentic spiritualities have an ultimate horizon that guides and inspires the aspirant. Buddhists understand their ultimate horizon as Nirvana, and for Christians it is heaven; although this is not an attempt to equate the two. A danger in focusing on such a horizon is that one can become overly concentrated on the endgame and miss the importance of the path as well as the quality of the moment. Biblical texts are dominated by considerations of heaven and hell. Of course, the Bible recognizes the importance of life in the Spirit, such as Paul's fruits of the Spirit in Galatians. Even so, this very same presence of the Spirit is regularly described in conjunction with ultimate salvation. Consider the following:

We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we await for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom 8:23)

But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment. (2 Cor 1:21–22)

He who has prepared us for this very thing [salvation] is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. (2 Cor 5:5)

[You] were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance. (Eph 1:12–13)

Many exhortations to virtue and holiness in the New Testament are also posed in terms of salvation or damnation:

People who do evil will never inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9)

Anyone who eats and drinks [the Lord's Supper] without recognizing the body is eating and drinking his own condemnation. (1 Cor 11:29)

Even Paul's long exhortation to holiness at the end of Romans, encouraging purity of mind and body, unity among members, and love for all, ends with "each one will be held accountable to God" (Rom 12:1–14:12).

While the *Dhammapada* includes Nirvana, it is dominated by the quality of life here and now. Further, it is concerned far less with the nature of experience and has much more to do with the quality of our mind and our relationship to whatever we experience. The first noble truth is that life is suffering. The second is that the reason that life is suffering is because of craving. The third is that if we simply stopped craving, we would be free from our suffering. The fourth is the eightfold path to attain this freedom. We crave gratifying experiences and security to protect and advance our ego. The Buddha's fundamental message is the following: See suffering, expose its cause, and be free. Here is where either freedom or imprisonment exists. Our craving or lack thereof determines whether life is filled with suffering or embraced as a joy.

If we take this Buddhist posture seriously and let ourselves be infused with it, it is not as if we need to reject our own Christian presuppositions. We may, however, see them in a different manner. As the Christian tradition points out the tragedy of sin and the inevitability of God's judgment, Buddhism emphasizes the suffering that comes from a toxic mental state.

Consider how this different emphasis affects an encounter with one of Jesus' parables:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or

even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." However, the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. (Lk 18:10–14)

It is obvious that Jesus contrasts here the posture of pride with that of humility and challenges his hearers to the latter. A Buddhist sensibility, however, invites an additional analysis—that is, the Pharisee is suffering. Not only will his ego-inflated pride condition a wretched afterlife, it also creates suffering in the moment. Of course, the Pharisee does not realize his situation, and his delusion makes him all the more tragic. "Whatever an enemy would do to an enemy, a hater to one hated, worse still, the harm a wrongly directed mind can do to itself" (*Dhp* 42).

Buddhist cultivation of awareness of the burden of a toxic mind does not stop here. Without deep self-awareness, such as Buddhism fosters, the reader can easily and unwittingly take on the very mental state of the Pharisee, judging the judger. One can proudly imagine oneself supreme for not being like that judgmental Pharisee, whom one is of course now judging. Theravadin wisdom constantly brings us back to the quality of our own minds, and the relationship we have with our experiences. What is our mental state as we appropriate the insights of the parable?

In Gadamer's game of conversation, we reenter Buddhist wisdom with new questions; perhaps in this case, What do I do with these toxic thoughts? The *Dhammapada* offers many suggestions, from investigating their source to countering them with wholesome thoughts to cultivating a repugnance for the harm that they do (*Dhp* 5, 7, 8, 223, 224). Given, however, that for Buddhists all phenomenal reality is without absolute substance (*anatta*) and impermanent (*anicca*), we are given a strategy as simple as watching these thoughts dissipate on their own. They are not us, we need not identify with them: "For those who are always awake...the toxins disappear" (*Dhp* 226). Returning yet again from Ricoeur's proposed Buddhist world, we find an invitation to embrace the parable more fully and to cultivate compassion toward all who suffer delusion—Pharisee, publican, and oneself alike. Could Buddhism help us understand Jesus better?

III. Zen and Its Classics

While the *Dhammapada* represents fundamental precepts embraced by most Buddhists, it directly reflects the Theravada school. Zen, an

expression of the Mahayana school, reinterprets it most interestingly. There is no Zen canon, and thus the choices I have made in order for us to enter into a Zen proposed world represent some of the most beloved and quoted expressions in the Zen tradition, by many of its most important historical contributors. These represent Zen's version of Gadamer's classic texts, those that warrant our respectful subordination to the truths they announce. Collectively, they give us a respectable proposed world into which Ricoeur would invite us to enter.

Nāgārjuna (150–250 CE) is widely considered the intellectual founder of Mahayana Buddhism. Among other things, he argued that the necessary conclusion to the Buddha's teaching on no-self and impermanence was that even Nirvana is empty. Further, emptiness cannot itself be maintained as an absolute metaphysical principle: form is emptiness and emptiness is form. How could Nirvana be empty of itself and also include form? The Theravada tradition held that Nirvana was neither empty nor a relative truth but something ultimate (*parammatta*) and beyond the phenomenal world. Nirvana, in fact, represented freedom from the conditioned life (*samsara*). For Nāgārjuna, Nirvana and samsara interpenetrate and even collapse into each other:

There is no difference at all between Nirvana and samsara. There is no difference at all between samsara and Nirvana.... What is identity, and what is difference? What is eternity, what non-eternity? What do eternity and non-eternity together mean? What does negation of both issues mean? Bliss consists in the cessation of all thought, in the quiescence of plurality. No separate reality was preached at all, nowhere and none by Buddha!¹⁶

The meaning behind the identification of samsara and Nirvana is not obvious. It is not clear that Nāgārjuna meant that they were exactly the same reality or that they referenced different experiences of the same reality. It could even be that he did not intend a metaphysical claim at all but rather used this new identification between the two as a heuristic device that freed the mind from dualistic thinking so as to allow one to see reality directly.¹⁷ A favorite Zen reference is one of the Buddha's sermons in the Mahayana canon. Here the Buddha simply held up a lotus flower. Monks imagined it as a metaphor. It was a popular one in Indian spirituality, as the lotus is often encountered in muddy waters, while its texture ensures the slime does not stick.

¹⁶ E. A. Burtt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha: Early Discourses, the "Dhammapada," and Later Basic Writings* (New York: New American Library, 2000), 152–53; translation slightly modified.

¹⁷ James Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2004), 60–61.

Thus, one ought to remain pure in a filthy world. Only one monk, Mahākāśyapa, understood the sermon and became immediately enlightened. The lesson was simply seeing the flower—no more, no less. And Mahākāśyapa did this; he was engaged in the everyday, ordinary experience of life, directly and immediately. This is the “ordinary mind” of Zen.

Stories like this abound in Zen. A disciple asks the master: “What is enlightenment?” And the master responds: “I chop wood. I carry water. What joy! What bliss!”¹⁸ Another story involves two aspirants boasting about their masters. One describes his master’s ability to bilocate and walk on water, while the other responds that his master is more advanced: “When he is tired, he just rests; when he is hungry, he just eats; and his mind is ever at peace.” The great master Huang-po (d. 850) described enlightenment simply and elegantly: “Enlightenment is not something to be attained. If right now you bring forth this non-attaining mind, steadfastly not obtaining anything, then this is enlightened mind. Enlightenment is not a place to reside. For this reason there is nothing attainable.”¹⁹ Simply chopping wood, just eating, or bringing forth a nonattaining mind requires extraordinary spiritual discipline and mental cultivation.

Dōgen (1200–1253) writes: “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.”²⁰ In this famous and somewhat enigmatic teaching, one hears echoes of the historical Buddha’s insistence on looking at oneself in order to realize that there is no eternal self at all. Thus, paying attention to the self reveals no-self, allowing one to stop identifying with one’s experience and, thus, to stop craving. One can also detect Nāgārjuna’s insistence that form drops into emptiness. Still, we see something new: “No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.” For Dōgen, enlightenment is right before us, simply to be realized. To imagine enlightenment other than attending to the continuous flow of reality—something that has a trace—is to fail to understand its very nature.

While the Dōgen represents the Sōtō school, there is also the Rinzai school, which advocated a kind of pressure-cooker approach in which an

¹⁸ This is an ancient, unattributed Zen saying.

¹⁹ Dale S. Wright, “Four Ch’an Masters,” in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, Early Chinese*, ed. Takeuchi Yashinori (New York: Crossroads, 1995): 33–42, at 35.

²⁰ Stephen Addis *et al.*, eds., *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea, and Japan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2008), 152.

enlightenment experience (*satori*) eventually explodes in the mind. One of the best-known techniques in this school is the use of the *kōan*, an impossible question or puzzling dialogue. Let us consider perhaps the most famous one: "Two hands clap, and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand?" This *kōan* can be penetrated only when the disciple moves beyond linear, subject-object thinking. The disciple must use his mind to transcend his mind. The great master Keizann Jōkin (1268–1325) writes: "[A]pply yourself wholeheartedly to the task of holding on to your *kōan*, never letting it go off the center of your consciousness, whether you are sitting or lying, walking or standing still.... [T]he time will most assuredly come...when the distinction of subject and object is utterly obliterated, when the inquiring and inquired are fused into the one perfect identity...that brings peace to all your inquiries and searchings."²¹ With intense practice, one starts living inside the *kōan*, and the two hands have now become one. There is no difference between two hands clapping (oppositional thinking) and one hand clapping (unitive thinking), as subject and object distinctions have become dissolved. Other *kōans* are just as enigmatic:

- What is your original face before your parents were born?
- If you meet the Buddha, kill him.
- Master: I don't like to hear the word *Buddha*. Disciple: Do you help people or not? Master: Buddha! Buddha!
- Disciple: In the day, there is sunlight; at night, there is firelight. What is "divine light?" Master: Sunlight, firelight.
- Disciple: Who is the Buddha? Master: Three pounds of flax.
- Disciple: What are honest words? Master: Eat an iron stick!

Christian Response

How does the encounter with these classic Zen references allow for Gadamer's to-and-fro with a Christian consciousness in a fruitful manner? We might begin by realizing that Zen's emphasis on paradoxical language and nonlinear thinking helps us focus on the very same in our own tradition. Consider, for example, the kingdom of God. Not only is this theme foremost in Jesus' preaching; it dominates Christian discourse. Like Zen enlightenment, it is both before us (Rom 14:17) and among us (Lk 17:21), and even upon us (Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20), and it is something also to anticipate realizing (Mt 6:10). Christian preaching tends to bandy the term about quite casually, as if it is clear to all and could even be equated with social justice. Zen sensitivities

²¹ D. T. Suzuki, *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism*, ed. Bernard Phillips (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1962), 313.

help us to read the Scriptures and speak about the kingdom with greater care, recognizing it for the mystery it really is (Lk 17:20). Jesus could provoke our imagination to engage the kingdom in some way, even as it could not be directly addressed. A famous axiom in Zen is not to confuse the finger pointing to the moon with the moon. Zen's beginner's mind, one that seeks a fresh openness to and direct engagement with the moment, has everything to do with receiving the kingdom like children (Mt 18:3-4; Mk 10:15; Lk 18:16-17). And while this insight may seem pedestrian, how many theologians actually operate in such a manner?

An additional interesting parallel between the Gospel and Zen is the paschal mystery: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (Lk 9:24).²² Such a saying works like a perplexing *kōan*. If a person ultimately wants to save one's life, then that person is told to lose it. If the intention, however, is to preserve one's life by losing it, then has one really given it away? One could easily imagine a Zen master saying to a disciple: "Living is dying; dying is living." As is well known, John's Gospel highlights this paradox by identifying the cross as the place of glory. It is the very paschal emptiness (*kenosis*) that draws all to the Lord (Jn 12:32), reveals his glory (Jn 17:1), and expresses the divine nature (Jn 8:28).

My point is not simply that Zen has paradoxes and Christianity does as well. Nor am I suggesting that Zen enlightenment ought to be equated with a paschal theology. Rather, the wisdom of the Zen tradition is that it trains the mind to rethink how one ought to approach Christian paradoxes. Rather than suggesting that we try to figure them out, Zen challenges us to enter into their transformational possibilities; we live or become one with the paradox. Embracing the paradox of radical self-renunciation and attaining the Absolute, and thus self-realization, is rife throughout the mystical tradition. Bonaventure writes: "For by transcending yourself and all things, by the immeasurable and absolute ecstasy of pure mind, leaving beyond all things, and freed from all things, you will ascend to the superessential ray of darkness."²³ Meister Eckhart poses the same sort of challenge to transform:

Men's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God. St. Paul took leave of God for God's sake and gave up all that he might get from God.... In parting from these, he parted with God for God's sake and yet God remained in him as God is in his own nature... but more as an "is-ness," as God really is. Then he neither gave to God

²² See also Mt 10:39; Mk 8:35; Lk 14:26; Jn 12:25.

²³ Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God; The Tree of Life; The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 115.

nor received anything from him, for he and God were a unit, that is, pure unity.²⁴

One finds perhaps the most daunting example in John of the Cross, who images coming to union with God as ascending Mount Carmel. What is most interesting here is that even as the path itself is expressed as nothing, the goal is also characterized as attaining nothing: "The path of Mount Carmel, the perfect spirit: nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and, even on the Mount, nothing."²⁵ Of course, in this achieved goal the very same nothing is simultaneously everything: "As soon as natural things are driven out of the enamored soul, the divine is naturally and supernaturally infused, since there can be no void in nature."²⁶ When Zen masters say that emptiness is fullness and fullness is emptiness, perhaps a legitimate Christian parallel could be emptiness is divinization and divinization is emptiness.

As paradox is essential in understanding Zen's proposed world, it provides us with a kind of grounding to continue our game of conversation at another level. One of Zen's great gifts is its insistence on being radically engaged at every moment in a posture of "nonattaining," as we saw earlier. Nonattaining actually turns out to be the only posture to attain the Absolute. We see this clearly in Thérèse of Lisieux's famous *little way*. Every moment is an offering, a self-emptying in love. She writes: "Yes, my Beloved, this is how my life will be consumed. I have no other means of proving my love for you than that of strewing flowers, that is, not allowing one little sacrifice to escape, not one look, one word, profiting by all the smallest things and doing them through love."²⁷ Inspired by Zen's insistence that emptiness is fullness, we can see more clearly how spiritual poverty actually works toward the richest kind of life:

Living on Love is giving without limit
 Without claiming any wages here below.
 Ah! I give without counting, truly sure
 That when one loves, one does not keep count!...
 Overflowing with tenderness, I have given everything

²⁴ Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. Raymond Blakney (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957), 204.

²⁵ John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieren Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 111.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁷ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clark (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1975), 196.

To his Divine Heart...lightly I run.
 I have nothing left but my only wealth:
 Living on Love.²⁸

One need not imagine that Zen's understanding of such things as the unity of the absolute and the relative, Nirvana and samsara, and practice and enlightenment, is exactly represented in the relationship between nature and grace or humanity and divinity. Nonetheless, the conversation with Zen and the enlarged self that we have from its proposed world help us to reappropriate our own spiritual wisdom in perhaps a new way. The Divine is everywhere and nowhere, and union with God is precisely elusive until we give up the ego's grasp for it.

IV. Daoism, the *Dao De Jing*, and the *Zhuangzi*

A Daoist religious horizon is best expressed by its foremost representatives, Laozi [Lao Tzu] (sixth c. BCE) and Zhuangzi [Chuang Tzu] (369–286 BCE), and their respective classics, *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi*. These texts and the spiritual worldview they provide take us to another horizon whereby we can reconsider our own religious suppositions. To begin, we must not try to co-opt the uniqueness of Daoism's horizon, as many translations have done. Consider the following translation, which attempted to bring Daoist intelligibility to the West:

The *Dao* that can be told is not the eternal *Dao*. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth. The named is the mother of ten thousand things. Ever desireless, one can see the mystery. Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations. These two spring from the same source but differ in name; this appears as darkness. Darkness within darkness. The gate to all mystery.²⁹

This translation sounds quite mystical. And one can even imagine theistic themes and detect principles aligned with Christian spirituality. The eternal *Dao* could easily correspond to God the Father as absolute mystery, and the *Dao* that can be named as Christ/*logos*, through whom the universe was created. We also seem to be invited by the text to approach divine realities with the detachment and emptiness recommended by John of the Cross. In

²⁸ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Poetry of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. Donald Kinney (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996), 90.

²⁹ Lao Tzu [Laozi], *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Vintage, 1972), 5.

this chapter, we might also imagine a description of how both the apophatic and the kataphatic authentically witness to the same divine mystery (the same source) but also differ. Knowing God in this creative tension, one enters the gate of divine mystery.

Such an approach presumes that Chinese metaphysics corresponds to our own assumptions about the universe. Traditionally, the Western mind thinks of the universe as divinely governed by unchanging natural and moral laws. From God (*theos*) comes an underlying creative organizing principle (*logos*) that reflects divine order and law (*nomos*). In contrast, the Chinese Daoist point of view is virtually acosmic; that is, there is no concept of a coherent single-ordered world. The closest Chinese word for “cosmos” is *yuzhou*, which expresses the interdependence between time and space.³⁰ Further, there is no permanent reality or eternal substratum behind appearances. There is just the ceaseless flow of life. Even things are more like events that are intrinsically related to other events. The shape of things and what they do are real, but they are interdependent, mutually determining realities expressed in a wide-ranging flow. This approach is found in Mahayana Buddhism as well, and Ch’an/Zen Buddhism is particularly influenced by Daoist principles. Consider this alternative translation that tries to respect this acosmic perspective:

Way-making (*dao*) that can be put into words is not really way-making, and naming that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming. The nameless is the fetal beginnings of everything that is happening, while that which is named is their mother. Thus, to be really objectless in one’s desires is how one observes the mysteries of all things, while really having desires is how one observes their boundaries. These two—the nameless and what is named—emerge from the same source yet they are referred to differently. Together they are called obscure. The obscurest of the obscure, they are the swinging gateway of the manifold mysteries.³¹

Here, instead of *dao* as a Chinese version of God, we find *dao* as emergence. We are invited to see mystery in life but will do so only if we do not impose on it what it must look like. To be objectless in your desire is to stop trying to manipulate reality but to allow it to unfold. Yet to have some kind of intention can be valuable in properly engaging that same reality. The challenge is to learn how to balance knowing and unknowing, conceptualizing and recognizing that reality is beyond the limits of concepts. *Dao* is intimately associated with *yin* and *yang*. They have a dynamic relationship with each other,

³⁰ Laozi, *Dao De Jing “Making This Life Significant”: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. and comm. Roger Ames and David Hall (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, no. 1.

something that one can see in the Daoist symbol. On the top of the symbol, *yang* is prominent, and the *yin* gives way. The contrast appears at the bottom of the symbol. Within each energy exists a small circle or presence of the other. The relationship between *yin* and *yang* is one of harmony, and adaption of that harmony involves careful practice in knowing which energy is called for at a given moment. Collectively, *yin* represents such things as female, darkness, earth, winter, silence, receptivity, and stability; *yang* represents male, light, heaven, summer, sound, assertion, and dynamism.

Directly associated with the principles of *yin* and *yang* are the *wu*-forms. *Wu* in Chinese represents negation. Regularly we are called to embrace a *wu*-posture. *Wu-wei*, for example, literally translates “no-action.” *Wu-wei* is no mere passivity, however; it is instead acting in a nonimposing manner. One does not force something but learns to work with the energies emerging. *Wu-wei* goes hand in hand with *ziran* (what-is-spontaneously-so). Practicing *wu-wei* becomes the condition of possibility for spontaneity. A good example of the interrelationship between *wu-wei* and *ziran* is that of the most enlightened rulers:

With the most excellent rulers, their subjects only know that they are there. The next best are the rulers they love and praise. Next are rulers they hold in awe. And the worst are the rulers they disparage. Where there is a lack of credibility, there is a lack of trust. Vigilant, they are careful in what they say. With all things accomplished and the work complete, the common people say, “We are spontaneously like this.”³²

The excellent rulers are vigilant, that is, mindful and prudent. They are not lax or unengaged, but because their activity is *wu-wei*, their creative moral presence is not even noticed. Such activity is aligned with the energy around them and works with that energy optimally. Thus, the people’s flourishing seems utterly natural to themselves, which indeed it is.

The *wu*-forms allow aspirants to work with the energy before them harmoniously. To do so, they have to be free from any artificial concepts. This latter value is expressed by the concept of *wu-zhi*, which is typically translated as “no-knowing,” but it can also be translated as “non-static knowing.” *Wu-zhi* is the principle of dropping all artificial mental constructs in order to free oneself for the uniqueness of the moment in what is unfolding. With *wu-zhi*, not only would one serve the truth better, that is, serve the ever-changing emerging reality but one would also experience great enjoyment out of life. Desiring to cling to a false, static reality is bound to frustrate and exhaust

³² Ibid., no. 17.

the human spirit. *Wu-zhi* is aligned with *wu-yu* (no-desire), which represents objectless desire or the freedom from needing to define, possess, or control the moment. There is no doubt that a Daoist worldview has an interest or desire in happiness and flourishing. The point is that these desires can be attained only when one lets go of the neurotic need to control the moment or mentally ossify reality. Aligned with Zen's belief that the world is ever unfolding uniquely, Daoism also insists that the only way to engage it skillfully is to respect this by the practice of *wu*.

Daoism could in fact be characterized as *life as art*. It is a daunting challenge to cultivate the mental and spiritual habits of letting go, being attentive, and wisely engaging the world in its mystery. Daoism seeks to help one optimize creative possibilities by exactly letting go of the ego's agenda. Zhuangzi writes:

Let your mind wander in simplicity, blend your spirit in the vastness, follow along with things the way they are, and make no room for personal views—then the world will be governed...I take inaction [*wu-wei*] to be true happiness, but ordinary people think it is a bitter thing... The inaction of Heaven is its purity, the inaction of earth is its peace. So the two inactions combine and all things are transformed and brought to birth.... I say, Heaven and earth do nothing and there is nothing that is not done. Among men, who can get hold of this inaction?³³

Daoism challenges its adherents to empty themselves of the need to control, hoard, exert ambition, and inflate their egos. The result is a spacious mind and heart that walk harmoniously with the flowering energy of *yang* and the receptive energy of *yin*.

Christian Response

It is Catholic doctrine that the universe entails a moral law that comes from God and reflects God. Expressions of the natural law are morally inviolable, as they also represent divine law. So sure is the natural law that it can be apprehended by everyone of goodwill and intelligence, is clearly understandable, and even written on our hearts.³⁴ In one sense, Daoism represents a clearly contrasting understanding of both the universe and morality. While natural law advocates argue that the natural law protects personal and

³³ Chuang Tzu [Zhuangzi], *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 91 and 191.

³⁴ See Pope John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor)* 35–36, 40, 42, 50–53, 79, ed. J. Michael Miller (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2001), 607–8, 610, 611–12, 616–20, 636; and *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1954–59, trans. USCCB, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 527–29.

social integrity, Daoism imagines that such a framing violates *wu-zhi* (non-static knowing) and, when taken as an absolute, even compromises human dignity and flourishing. Daoism insists that a one-size-fits-all moral code wrongly presupposes a static universe. In this sense, it might be akin to Aristotle's above-mentioned insistence that there is no absolute moral code for the phenomenal world. Rather, to be moral is to employ the art of virtue according to the energies and uniqueness of the emerging moment.

That Daoism advocates a different moral framework, one that cannot be reconciled to Catholic moral thought, does not mean that it merely represents a competing vision. Allowing Gadamer's to-and-fro of conversation may help us conceive of the moral law differently. Currently, for example, there is a great deal of tension between the magisterium and many Catholics concerning formal church teachings on birth control and same-sex unions. The natural law is appealed to by the magisterium in static and physicalistic terms. Could insight be better advanced by letting go of this approach, even while still insisting on the natural law? After all, Aristotle did affirm the natural law as a condition for morality to exist. How would Catholic moral thought and formal teaching change if they were framed with the Daoist approach of life as art? How would moral decision making be enriched by skillfully attending to the uniqueness of every emerging moment and listening to and working harmoniously with the energies of the moment?

A Daoist religious imagination deeply involves negotiating complementary energies, particularly as it references the dynamics of *yin* and *yang*. Without care, the principles of *yin* and *yang* can lead to stereotypical associations. *Yin*, for example is feminine and receptive, while *yang* is masculine and active. These distinctions, however, are not meant to be absolute. Recall that even in *yin*'s strongest position it holds a circle of *yang*, while *yang* likewise contains *yin* within itself. Further, *yin* energy in everyone and everything moves toward *yang*, which itself recedes to reveal *yin*. Men express themselves also with *yin*, and women with *yang*. Such a complementary anthropology may help Catholics negotiate better the dual natures of feminine and masculine. Pope John Paul II regularly contrasted women and men, much as Daoism does, though he did so in a kind of absolute way. The *genius* of women regularly involved receptivity, watchfulness, contemplation, and nurturance. In his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* he frequently warned against blurring sexual distinctions: "'Masculinity' and 'femininity' are distinct, yet at the same time they complete and explain each other."³⁵ Women have essentially different resources and a "female

³⁵ Pope John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women (Mulieris Dignitatem)* 25, trans. Vatican (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1988), 87.

personality" (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 10, 17; pp. 37–38, 61–62). This is even something, he claimed, Christ himself recognized by excluding women from the "priestly service of the Apostles" (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 26; pp. 88–90). Daoist sensibilities include distinguishing women and men, femininity and masculinity, but not in such an unqualified way. While John Paul understood himself as *papa feminista*, Daoist wisdom invites us to rethink such absolute distinctions.

The predominance of the *wu*-forms in the Daoist art of living can be highly instructive in helping us recover a proper sense of what the early monastic tradition called discretion or discrimination (*diakrisis*). Discretion is the cultivated capacity and spiritual gift that allows the serious aspirant to recognize true and false spirits, proper asceticism, the most propitious way to pray, act, and so on. Without it, even though something is good in itself, it can be harmful to the soul.³⁶ Before acting, one has to practice the asceticism of watching and listening, trying to discern the movements of the Spirit and what would be the most appropriate response for that particular moment.

We have all experienced ministerial blunders in pastoral ministry by those who have tried to impose an agenda. Even while applying good theological principles, ministers can easily be out of sync with individuals in need or even their whole congregation. In a crisis, ministers may be so caught up in their discomfort with the pain and ambiguity before them that they lack an authentic healing presence. The principle of *wu-yu* (objectless desire) frees them from any agenda and allows the true need of the one in need of ministry to emerge most organically. Without the neurotic need to fix someone in need or answer unasked questions, one can simply allow the essential ministerial posture to emerge. Take this seemingly ordinary but typical example: a priest presides at a wedding, and the energy of the congregation is lethargic. Drawing on solid liturgical insights that a wedding is a communal celebration requiring full participation, he may be inclined to infuse the moment with added energy. What happens, however, is that he is at odds with the congregation as it actually is in the moment. Worse, his energy acts as an implicit critique of them. Rarely do they become more animated, and ironically they can even become less so, since the priest is doing it for them. *Wu-wei* (nonimposing action) and *wu-yu* (objectless desire) free him to engage the congregation as they actually are, and to utilize the energy that actually exists. The wedding liturgy may remain less than fully animated, but it is certain to be more authentic and prayerful, which is the very point.

³⁶ See *The Philokalia*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 340.

V. Conclusions

The Catholic Church teaches that revelation occurs in the interplay between Scripture and tradition, that is, between our sacred text and the ongoing experience of life in the Spirit.³⁷ Our late modern or postmodern situation now challenges us to factor in other traditions and canons. As venerable expressions of the spiritual life and with their classic texts, they make a kind of claim on us that cannot be ignored. Negotiating these claims need not undermine our faith commitments; rather, such claims offer proposed worlds different from our own that enlarge both our sense of self and our sense of home. Drinking from their wells, we find not only a different kind of refreshment, but also fascinating opportunities to be nourished and sustained by our own wells. As Gadamer assures us, every encounter challenges our pre-understanding and poses questions or concerns different from those we would have earlier held. And we can return to these very texts with ever new considerations.

The examples in this article are short and representative of the possibilities of comparative theology. What I have provided are mere snapshots. Yet, even in such a brief foray, we come away with a greater sensitivity for the nature of the mind and where our focus ought to be; we find ourselves reconsidering how religious paradox provides transformational dynamics and divine encounters in mundane experiences; and we discover additional sensitivities to the actual nature of reality as ever evolving. As for further creative possibilities, Gadamer would say that the creative possibilities are as numerous as the events of encounter.

³⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* 9–10, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), 755.