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Catholicism and Zen

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RICHARD BRYAN MCDANIEL, *Catholicism and Zen*. Richmond Hill, Ontario: The Sumeru Press Inc., 2017. 209 pp. CAN. \$26.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-896559-35-3

Catholicism and Zen explores the history of Christian/Buddhist dialogue, and profiles fourteen modern Catholic clergy who have become authorized to teach Zen practice within their Christian faith. These stories of men and women engaged in a spiritual quest enliven the meaning and form of awakening beyond traditional constrictions. The North American Zen adherents come from non-Buddhist backgrounds. The clergy interviewed are divided between Canada, and the United States. Early membership, as today, was largely made up of occidentals who questioned or wholly rejected the faith traditions in which they had been raised. It is intriguing, however, how frequently Catholics retained affiliation with their church even as they committed themselves, often with fervor, to Zen practice. Nor were these Catholic inquirers necessarily disaffected church members. Loyal clergymen and women religious took up Zen practice, encouraged others to do so as well, and at times went on to acquire authorization to teach. They, in effect, earned the right be considered Zen Masters.

The term “Master,” as used in this context, refers to one who has mastered a particular practice. In Japan, where the term originated, there are masters of the tea ceremony, master flower arrangers, and master swordsmen. There are also master carpenters, master piano tuners, and master electricians. “Zen Master” is an unofficial term for one who has not only attained a certain degree of spiritual insight—the stated aim of Zen practice—but who also has demonstrated an ability and an

inclination to help others attain similar or deeper insight. Becoming a Zen Master is a rigorous process. In institutional Zen, only a very few receive formal recognition—transmission or *inka shomei*—of such attainment. The American Zen Teachers' Association [AZTA], for example, has only about 225 members, which includes teachers in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Given the small number of authorized teachers, the fact that any are in fact also Catholic priests or nuns is noteworthy.

There are two types of Zen practice presented in McDaniel's work. The first is categorized as a very strict form of Zen replete with iconographic deities, rites, the chanting of sutras and so forth. The second is categorized as an "iconoclastic form," which he deems "pure" Zen. Notwithstanding the dispute about whether there is really such a thing as "pure" Zen, McDaniel asserts that if you follow "pure" Zen, it will make you a better Catholic (10). While the Japanese, as a whole, don't like mixtures—either you are Soto or you are Rinzai—the Catholic practitioners of Zen seem to think the two categories are somewhat fluid. Thus, there is no single dominant school of Zen held by Catholic Zen Masters. The relationship between Zen and Catholicism is synergetic. While Zen helped certain Catholics recapture elements of a mystical tradition in church teaching which had fallen into abeyance, Catholic enthusiasts like Thomas Merton, especially in the 1950s and '60s when the first practice centers were being established in North America, helped Zen acquire an intellectual credibility in the West long unrivaled by other Asian disciplines.

Ever since Catholic priests from Portugal and Spain entered Japan in the 1500s on missions to convert the Japanese to Christianity, a quiet transformation had been taking place, beginning among the Jesuit missionaries and continuing to the present among American and European Catholics. As McDaniel writes in this important book, in seeking to understand the Japanese mind so as to know better how to convert the Japanese to Christianity, these early—and later—priests undertook Zen

practice. Although there are a number of books written on Christianity and Zen, including several by Catholic clergy, this is the first to consider the origins of the relationship commencing with the Jesuit missionaries sent to Japan, and extending to the present through interviews with the many contemporary Catholic clergy, priests, and nuns both, who maintain their Catholic faith and practice, yet find it enhanced by their Zen training. This includes, for example, the focus of Zen training on bare attention; simple, direct, non-interfering awareness, and non-judging awareness. Students who establish a Zen practice find that it opens the Way for them amid their own circumstances and conditions. Practice then becomes its own reward. Learning to center one's being in the present moment leads to the other main benefits of a life centered on Zen principles. These other benefits include awakening to the Way of wisdom and compassion (forgetting the self), and then embodying the Way in one's daily life—a progressive and life-long undertaking. Many of these men and women have done extensive Zen practice under recognized Zen masters and have become authorized to teach Zen practice and see no conflict with their Christian faith. The author himself was raised Catholic and has practiced Zen for several decades, thus having a unique background through which to explore the congruencies between the two. His research has resulted in some fascinating insights into the accord between the two religions.

Although there may be little in common between Buddhism and Christianity as they are commonly understood, at some level both the Zen experience and the experience of certain Christian mystics intersect. This book does not have a thesis, per se. McDaniel is simply chronicling a phenomenon that he finds significant and interesting. Although McDaniel is Roman Catholic by birth and heritage, he claims to be a Zen practitioner by nature and temperament. Regardless of one's heritage or temperament, however, the topic of Catholic engagement in Zen is an intriguing one for many reasons, not the least of which is that the initial en-

counter between Zen and the West was fraught with misunderstanding and hostility on both sides. For example, cultural misunderstanding colored Francis Xavier's interpretation of Zen practice. He observed the monks at Ninshitsu's temple spending long periods of time in seated meditation. What he did not grasp was that Buddhist meditation was a process of clearing the mind rather than, as in the Ignation system, reflecting on a topic or scriptural passage. When he asked Ninshitsu what the meditators were thinking about, the abbot told him: "Some, no doubt, are thinking about the income generated by their temples, others are thinking about clothing and food; still others about various pastimes and festivals. In other words, about nothing of any importance" (23). Although Xavier counted Ninshitsu a friend, he was unable to convert him, and eventually the Buddhist community understood that what Xavier was presenting was not a new form of Buddhism but a rival faith, and one which denied the validity of all other points of view. At that point they became less welcoming.

The book is divided into seventeen chapters, and includes a glossary of Zen terms for those who need further explanation. All in all, this is a strong introduction to the practice of Zen related to its encounter with Catholicism. Given that this book is a narrative of the encounter between Catholicism and Zen, rather than a critical treatment of the topic, it would be well-suited to a non-academic readership. Students or practitioners of Zen are likely to find value in the text.