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Zen And The Birds Of Appetite



Synopsis

Merton, one of the rare Western thinkers able to feel at home in the philosophies of the East, made the wisdom of Asia available to Westerners. "Zen enriches no one," Thomas Merton provocatively writes in his opening statement to *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*--one of the last books to be published before his death in 1968. "There is no body to be found. The birds may come and circle for a while... but they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the 'nothing,' the 'no-body' that was there, suddenly appears. That is Zen. It was there all the time but the scavengers missed it, because it was not their kind of prey." This gets at the humor, paradox, and joy that one feels in Merton's discoveries of Zen during the last years of his life, a joy very much present in this collection of essays. Exploring the relationship between Christianity and Zen, especially through his dialogue with the great Zen teacher D.T. Suzuki, the book makes an excellent introduction to a comparative study of these two traditions, as well as giving the reader a strong taste of the mature Merton. Never does one feel him losing his own faith in these pages; rather one feels that faith getting deeply clarified and affirmed. Just as the body of "Zen" cannot be found by the scavengers, so too, Merton suggests, with the eternal truth of Christ.

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Customer Reviews

Merton felt that his journals contained his best writing. I'll offer a different opinion; I think his essays and book reviews contain much of his best writing. "Zen and the Birds of Appetite" is a collection of essays on what's common to Zen and Christianity, and the book includes a book review and

Merton's prefaces to two books by other authors. He seems to write these prefaces not simply because he was asked to. He writes them, I think, because the books really inspire him. (Most of us write these reviews on .com for the same reason!) His prefaces present his thinking along with the author's thinking in a way that improves the overall publication. Comparing his thinking with another author's thinking seems to make Merton's writing even more succinct and sharply-reasoned than usual. And in "Zen" he's comparing his faith with another faith, so his sensitivity, appreciation, and sharp mind are even more in evidence than usual. These essays don't amount to a textbook on Zen or Zen Buddhism, any more than a collection of short stories adds up to a novel. But together the essays address an overall question: what is it about Christianity that resembles Zen? In the process of approaching the question, Merton gives us some gems. His discussion of paradise, innocence, and knowledge is the best I've read. You may learn more about Christianity than about Zen in this volume. His essays make up the first part of the book. The second part of the book is a "dialogue" between Merton and Daisetz T. Suzuki, a Zen scholar quite accessible to the Western mindset. This dialogue seems to devolve somewhat into a "point-counterpoint" duel, but that's fun and a lot of well-framed truth comes out.

Merton introduces Zen and explores his own Christian tradition, looking for similarities. Merton looks at Christian writers like Meister Eckhart, e.g., "The shell must be cracked apart if what is in it is to come out ... therefore if you want to discover nature's nakedness you must destroy its symbols...". Whatever Zen is, Merton recognizes that it is somehow there in Eckhart. Merton outlines the differences also, in that Christianity is eschatological with the idea of salvation, grace and divine gifts. Merton also grapples with whether Christianity is dualistic. The intuition of God's presence and direct experience in a mystic like Saint Theresa or the desert fathers sounds similar to the quest for direct experience in the Buddhist. The dialogue with the Zen teacher D.T. Suzuki in the book's second part further explores this dualism and differences. I think this book starts a dialogue that will deepen both Christian's and Buddhist's understanding.

There is something refreshing about this little book. The title will seem a bit misleading - if expecting to find an account of Zen per se - minus the Christian based reflections of the author. However, Merton is known well enough - and these essays show him at his best. The dialogue between D.T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton is fruitful. Christianity and Buddhism have often been presented as antithetical, working from bases too different - to afford dialogue. These essays challenge that perception, without falling into vague generalisations. If anything, recent years have seen a

'hardening of the orthodoxies' - a retreat into numbingly conservative attitudes. Happily, the essays in this book evoke a more open-ended perspective. There is something arrogant and unspiritual about the wish to deny the value of dialogue between spiritual traditions. Where the 'birds of appetite' wheel and prey, the truth has fallen from sight - be it Christian 'innocence' or the 'fundamental face' of Zen. We can't deny the merits of a Christian who endeavoured, with a whole heart, to take stock of what goes on in the other World religions. Similarly, we can't look badly upon a Buddhist, who was large-hearted enough to share the workings of the Christian mind and spirit. Merton's encounter with Buddhism exerted a seminal influence upon his whole life-thought. Suzuki's encounter with Christianity - chiefly, through Eckhart, exerted a similar influence (the Eckhartian equation 0=infinity -found its way into Suzuki's hand-written notes appended to the Mastugaoka Zen Bunka ed of the Rinzai Roku). Let's hope that this new century of ours witnesses more dialogues in this vein.

Thomas Merton, a trappist monk who specializes in eastern philosophy and religion, writes a cogent, understandable, and compelling work on the nature of Zen. Zen, of course, is a difficult concept to pin down, but Merton makes it accessible to the western reader. If you have a critical eye, a moderate grounding in the Western classical tradition, and an interest in Zen, this book is for you.

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