

BOOK REVIEWS

WILD IVY: The Spiritual Autobiography of Zen Master Hakuin. Translated by Norman Waddell. Boston: Shambhala, 1999. pp. xlv + 177. Hard cover.

NELSON FOSTER

These people [“advocates of blind, withered-up, silent illumination Zen”], true to their words, do not do a single thing. They engage in no act of religious practice; they don’t develop a shred of wisdom. They just waste their lives dozing idly away like comatose badgers, useless to their contemporaries while they live, completely forgotten after they die. They aren’t capable of leaving behind even a syllable of their own to repay the profound debt they owe to the Buddha patriarchs.

Maintaining come hell or high water, “We are Buddhas just as we are—plain, unvarnished bowls,” they proceed to consume heaping piles of rice day after day. Then they disburden themselves of steaming loads of horse flop—great copious pillows of the stuff! That is the sum total of their achievements.

Ah, Hakuin—unforgettable Hakuin! Norman Waddell has given us another of his superb translations of the great Rinzai Zen master’s impassioned teaching, this time of the *Isumadegusa*, which is both more and less than the “spiritual autobiography” promised by the English subtitle. Happily, Dr. Waddell has furnished readers the means to peer beneath the surface of this complex, late work and to make a nuanced assessment of Hakuin Zenji’s enterprise. The scholarly helps he provides include a substantial introductory essay and extensive annotations (one page of notes for every three pages of translation).

Though written in 1765, when Hakuin was 81, *Wild Ivy* effectively ends half a century earlier, at the point when he was called home from his pleasant hermitage—or so the story goes—by an aged retainer tearfully conveying his father’s dying wish: that he revive Shōin-ji, a small Zen temple with which his family was associated. Of the book’s four chapters, the first three follow his religious career from childhood through his return to Shōin-ji, while the last describes an encounter with the mountain sage Hakuyū that Hakuin dates inconsistently, once to his twenty-fifth year but elsewhere five or six years later in life. Chronology is just one of many

problems with this tale of meeting Hakuyū, and Waddell joins other scholars in suspecting that it really belongs to the realm of fiction.

On the whole, though, Waddell reckons the narrative trustworthy. He acknowledges “some degree of exaggeration and embellishment, an occasional stretching and bending of the facts,” but finally takes the position that “Hakuin’s account of his life is accurate in its general outlines.” One can accept this cautious conclusion without denying the possibility, even probability, that Hakuin modified important details of his life to suit his own purposes. In fact, *Wild Ivy* carries a series of authorial disclaimers signaling the reader that its contents ought not be taken entirely at face value. “Not one word or phrase of [the book] rises above the feeble and shoddy,” Hakuin declares in an epilogue to the first chapter, claiming that senility has required him to ask his attendants how to write each character. The third chapter ends with an admission that ineptitude at composition and calligraphy—“riddled with blunders of various kinds”—has marred all of his writings, not merely the late ones, and that memory failure prevents him even from recalling the titles of his past works: “when you’re as old and forgetful as I am, you can’t be expected to remember everything.”

For all his caveats, Hakuin’s own words and Waddell’s commentary offer ample evidence that the *Isumadegusa* was shaped by a razor-sharp intelligence, working in the service of specific aims. I think the old master himself would concur with his translator’s observation that “Hakuin’s principal motive for relating his story was clearly instructional”—to inspire others to practice Zen, to furnish them guidance in that practice, to warn them away from the “Unborn, silent illumination Zen” he so abhorred, and to pass along his *naikan* cure for the obscure malady of “Zen sickness.” Hakuin opens with an injunction to fierce, unrelenting practice and devotes so much space to such themes that it becomes hard to say whether he is digressing from his life story to address them or digressing from them to tell his life story.

That a Zen teacher should put personal history to instructional uses seems unremarkable by present standards, especially in America, where readiness to speak openly about intimate matters is expected not only of small children or talk-show guests but also of the clergy and candidates for high public office. As Waddell remarks, however, Hakuin’s predilection to preach from his own example was extraordinary in his milieu and, far from being confined to *Wild Ivy*, had “increased with age, becoming in his seventies and eighties a prominent feature of his teaching style.” What are we to make of this? Perhaps wisely, Waddell does not pursue the question, but it seems to me that he has handed us a much-needed key to understanding Hakuin, a key that unlocks important passages in *Wild Ivy* and opens up some of the most critical issues in his illustrious career.

Hakuin’s late-life tendency to talk about himself might simply be chalked up to vanity or at least to a degree of self-absorption unseemly in a great Zen master. Statements like the one heading this review offer some support for that opinion; evidently Hakuin had no intention of being among those “completely forgotten after

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they die.” My own inclination, which may be overly sympathetic, is to see his autobiographical proclivities chiefly as a by-product of his fame and particularly of the vituperation he publicly and repeatedly heaped upon his peers. This behavior too was extraordinary in Hakuin’s milieu (indeed, in Japanese society as a whole), and it inevitably drew a counterattack.

Hakuin goes out of his way to address this problem in *Wild Ivy*, relating a conversation in which one of his students, identified only as an “elderly gentleman,” made so bold (in *dokusan*, no less) as to implore him to hold his tongue:

You have always detested the one-sided, sterile, lifeless sitting practices espoused by the teachers of Unborn Zen. You have abused them as if they were mangy curs covered with running sores. You have reviled them as if they were clods of matted filth. But if you continue your attacks on those unpriestly bands of silent illumination bonzes, they will come to regard you as their bitter enemy. Before long, they are sure to trump up perverse and unwarranted criticisms to level against you, to hatch clever plots of various kinds and use them to damage your good name as a virtuous priest.

The old man goes on at length in this vein, sounding very much like Hakuin himself and wrapping up with the dire prediction that, if “some misfortune [were] to befall you, the wind of the true Zen spirit and tradition would fall to earth. . . . The Buddha’s Dharma would sink and vanish into the dust.” This sets the stage for a patently self-congratulatory reply from Hakuin, including the very paragraph from which he took the book’s title:

It’s like a single loyal and upright man gladly sacrificing all he owns and life and limb together for the sake of his native land. I speak out for good reason, and even if I am visited by trouble of some kind, in order to repay the long-standing debt of gratitude I owe the Buddha-patriarchs, I will continue to place my trust in the benevolent god who stands guard over the Dharma. On that benevolent god, with utmost respect, I confer the name Wild Ivy deity. So long as he remains firmly established in the world, even if the quietistic, withered-sitting methods of Unborn Zen were to spread and infest every corner of the land, the true wind would not sink into the dust.

I find it very difficult to believe that this dialogue took place as reported, but even if it did, Hakuin’s decision to recount it so completely in his autobiography and to make it so central to the text, indicates that the subject held great importance for him and that his purposes in writing were more than “instructional.” Clearly his motives included self-justification, even self-defense. Along with other passages, this one makes plain that *Wild Ivy*, like many other autobiographies, must be taken as an *apologia pro vita sua* and an attempt to beat back his detractors.

Hakuin seems intent on shoring up a weak point in his credentials as a Zen master by linking himself and his teachings closely to the master he calls “Shōju Rōjin,” Old Man Shōju. Even today, probably the biggest conundrum in Hakuin scholarship is why he departed, never to return, after studying for just eight months with this man, whom he lauds as utterly without peer either in wisdom or in training methods. In his introduction, Waddell sets forth the theory “most plausible” to him (and to me): “that Hakuin only realized the full extent of the debt he owed his teacher after Shōju’s death.” This makes it highly plausible, too, that in his autobiography Hakuin would want to buff up the record of their interactions, and it comes as no real surprise that *Wild Ivy* contains an unsubstantiated, rather fishy report of an exchange in which Hakuin, then just 23, declines Shōju’s request to succeed him when he dies. The portion of the manuscript covering his study with Shōju also contains a description of Zen training that is couched so ambiguously as to necessitate an explanatory note: “As Hakuin quotes from Shōju throughout the rest of this section, he is obviously mixing in elements of his own (for example, The Sound of One Hand), making it sometimes impossible to distinguish between his words and Shōju’s.” Exactly the crafty old boy’s intention, I suppose!

And then there is the fantastical episode of the aged retainer variously referred to as Yake, Yoke, and Yokubari Shichibei, who had served not only Hakuin’s father and grandfather but even his great-grandfather and yet was spry enough to track him down in his isolated hermitage, making “an arduous journey of more than a hundred leagues, through steep, mountainous terrain.” We can only conjecture why Hakuin might have conjured such a superannuated *deus ex machina* to extract him from his refuge, prying him loose with a moist appeal to filial piety. Perhaps he considered it a poor precedent for his disciples that he had spent relatively little time in intensive, solitary practice. Or then again, his rivals may well have accused him of vaulting ambition, presenting him a need to justify hanging out his shingle as an independent master at the comparatively tender age of 31.

That Hakuin adopted the autobiographical mode as a means of both giving instruction and fending off his critics should not blind us to a third factor in his motivation: to amuse himself and entertain his readers—his contemporary Japanese readers, that is. Modern Anglophones impatient to get to the meat of *Wild Ivy* may bypass the vital information about its literary form that Waddell provides deep into his exemplary introduction: Hakuin wrote the entire book in seven-character lines, affecting “a peculiar style of Chinese *kanshi* verse,” probably under the influence of a rage for “mad poetry” which peaked about that time. The result, I gather, is a text of almost Joycean difficulty. The Chinese characters must first be resequenced “to conform with classical Japanese syntax” and, even then, “usually do not yield their meaning unless they are read as if they were composed in a highly vernacular—sometimes vulgar—Japanese idiom, laced with puns and other verbal eccentricities typical of the ‘mad poetry’ genre.”

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Under such circumstances, it is no mean feat simply to bring the sense of Hakuin's words across in clear, unstilted English, but obviously an enormous amount has, necessarily, been lost in translation. One of the few quibbles I have with *Wild Ivy* is that it does not offer, perhaps through an appendix, at least a snippet of the original verse and a glimpse of the process by which Waddell transformed it into English prose. The very fact that Hakuin employed "such a bizarre medium for his autobiography" tells us a great deal about the fellow and ought to color our reading of *Wild Ivy* from first page to last. The verbal surface of *Itsumadegusa* would have reminded its 18th-century Japanese audience that it was a highly artificial and playful work, not the basically straightforward life story it may seem in the English rendition.

All in all, I come away from *Wild Ivy* freshly impressed with Hakuin Zenji's genius and vitality, especially with the breadth and depth of his creativity, but also less inclined to heroize him. Without diminishing his stature as a Zen master, certainly one of the greatest in Japan's history, the book brings Hakuin within reach as a human being in a way previous translations have not. In the other texts Waddell has chosen to publish, *Essential Teachings of Zen Master Hakuin* and *Poison Words from the Heart*, Hakuin remains a daunting figure, brilliant, bombastic, uncompromising in his zeal to root out false teachings and promote genuine enlightenment. This book, thanks largely to Waddell's scholarship and thoroughness, bridges the gap between that austere master and the generous, unprepossessing, humorous, even bawdy Hakuin we often meet in his sumi paintings. Citing other sources, Waddell tells us that the man was "inordinately fond of sweets," not averse to a few cups of sake, too fond of tobacco to give up his pipe, yet embarrassed to be caught in the act of smoking by his Dharma-heir Tōrei.

I lay down *Wild Ivy* with renewed appreciation, too, for Hakuin's fundamental message and its importance in our own historic moment. Surveying the North American scene, I do not see anywhere near the extent of fraudulence that Hakuin professed to find in the Buddhist leadership of his day—all those do-nothing priests snoozing like "comatose badgers." But I fear that we may, as a group, be too ready to accept (and preach) a watered-down Dharma of "just being present" and "opening our hearts," too absorbed with the so-called koan of everyday life to crack the tough nut of the real thing, too quick to overlay Buddhism with psychotherapeutic ideas and Euro-American values. A stiff dose of Hakuin will do us all good.

Finally, I am grateful to Dr. Waddell and to Shambhala Publications, which has brought out all three of his Hakuin translations. Since Philip Yampolsky's *Zen Master Hakuin* appeared in 1971, only Norman Waddell has carried on the process of making Hakuin's writings available to the growing English-language readership; through his persistence and his keen ear, he has given Hakuin the voice many of us now think of as the master's own. Shambhala deserves our praise not merely for publishing these worthy volumes but for publishing them *well*. Besides the elements

of scholarly apparatus already mentioned, *Wild Ivy* has seventeen reproductions of Hakuin's paintings and calligraphy, a map, a bibliography, and even a simple index (wonder of wonders). Reward the translator and publisher both, I suggest—and find yourself some inspiration—by adding *Wild Ivy* to your bookshelf.

FAITH AMONG FAITHS: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions. By James L. Fredericks. New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1999. pp. vii + 186, with Index.

JOHN ROSS CARTER

In 1938, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, by Hendrik Kraemer, a noted Islamicist, was published, and thereafter, through his various writings, a significant contribution was made. A theological approach to the study of humankind's religiousness, it was argued, is as appropriate as a philological, a philosophical, an ethnological, a historical approach, and, today, one could go on to name other approaches. And, over half a century later, one applauds Kraemer for making the case and James L. Fredericks who, in his book *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, continues the enterprise.¹

Fredericks proposes what he sees as a new vantage point in dialogue, "comparative theology," which goes beyond what is often categorized as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. In moving to his proposal, he presents, in summary form, the "exclusivist theologies of religion," the "inclusivist theologies of religion" and the "pluralistic theologies of religions," and then offers "comparative theology as an alternative to the theology of religions and a way to get beyond the current impasse over the pluralistic model." (p. 10)

Fredericks proposes two criteria "for evaluating the adequacy of a theology of religions." He writes,

The first of the two is responsibility to the tradition. Any theology of religions must be accountable to the demands [*sic*] of the Christian tradi

¹ There is some difficulty in conceptualizing the situation today by focusing on what some of us, namely Christians, consider ourselves to have in a context in which others of us, Non-Christians, are understood in terms of what we are not and, for that matter, in terms of what they are not. On demarcating distinctions while conceptualizing "faith and faiths," compare Stephen Neill's listing of seven "certain basic convictions which must be maintained, if Christianity is to be recognizably Christian." (*Christian Faith and Other Faiths*. London: Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 229).