

Beyond Christianity

Transcendentalism and Zen

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The landscape, by its patient waiting there, teaches me that all good remains with him that waiteth, and that I shall sooner overtake the dawn by remaining here, than by hurrying over the hills of the west.

—THOREAU

Introduction

Any serious student of philosophy and religion must wonder at times what everybody else is doing. The questions which these disciplines address are so obviously basic and pertinent to himself, as they have haunted and inspired mankind from time immemorial, that in his zeal to get them answered he can't possibly imagine a more rewarding or exciting endeavor.

With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become essentially students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike.¹

So thought Henry Thoreau, and so must think many another. Beyond childhood, are not all men and women concerned about questions respecting their own identities, their relationship to the rest of mankind, to nature, to the universe? These are the quests which naturally and truly energize us, and in the light of which our more routine and normal activities seem to pale. How *can* a man set up an ice-cream stand, or even go off for a game of tennis, before *this* work is through?

¹ *Walden and Other Writings (Walden)*, p. 179.

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It is in the sphere of philosophy and religion that we traditionally consciously tackle the fundamental, nagging questions inherent in human nature. It is in their domain that such work is carried on, and, to be sure, every philosophy and religion contributes something to the enterprise. But raising such questions is only half the battle, for they are not posed in play. It is not a sport. The answers are what we crave, and in this respect individuals become quite discerning. As Thoreau also observed:

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.²

Thoreau here puts his finger on a decidedly relevant issue. Any school of thought can offer us interesting theories, but where does the weight of those very same theories rest? "Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."³ Conjecture is an airy business, but there is nothing abstract about the test. We pine to see someone, anyone, who, in flesh and blood, has actually solved "some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically."

It is along these lines, quite frankly, that I find the writings of the Zen Buddhists and the American Transcendentalists most compelling. They resemble each other in their utter conviction that they have answered more than adequately, at least for themselves, the deepest and most fundamental questions raised by humankind. Moreover, they are strikingly similar not only in the conclusions which they draw but in the approach they take to arrive at them. They share an almost identical understanding of what spirituality is all about.

A comparison of Zen Buddhism and Transcendentalism is itself an exciting enterprise; but no less interesting is a consideration of how, together, they stand opposed to traditional Christianity. A century and

² Ibid., pp. 116-17.

³ Matthew 11:19.

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a half ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who himself had been a Unitarian minister, voiced some pointed objections to the religion of his day. It would appear that in good measure the position he then articulated has again surfaced on the world stage as Zen has entered into the interfaith dialogue.

In this essay, I want to address three issues. First, let us outline in brief, general terms how Zen poses a distinct contrast to traditional Christianity.

Secondly, we will consider how Zen and Transcendentalism are solidly aligned on a whole series of matters in connection with spirituality. To maintain something of a focus, we will draw primarily from the works of D. T. Suzuki and Abe Masao in Zen, and from the writings of Emerson and Thoreau.

Finally, let us review how this mutual understanding might manifest itself in the present religious interplay. Abe is not only a Zen philosopher but a theologian in his own right. He has a thorough command of Western philosophy and theology, past and present. However, his understanding represents a radical departure from the more orthodox position, as set forth, for example, by Hans Kung. Because Kung's stature in theological circles is undeniable, and because he is directly involved in the theological encounter with Abe, it seems fitting to draw from his celebrated work, *Does God Exist?* Although Kung is a Catholic, his book is a defense of Christianity in general, and not Catholicism particularly. It is in this part of the discussion where I will suggest ways in which, to me as an outsider, both Transcendentalism and Zen seem to go beyond Christianity.

I. Zen and Christianity

Any religion, it would appear, would have us believe that developing our religious consciousness is the single, most important task of our lives. This project takes priority over, if not altogether supersedes, all our other schemes. That they share this goal of fostering man's spirituality is perhaps the main reason we can find so many common elements among the various religions.

Given this, to consider Zen Buddhism and Christianity side by side, however, reveals a rather curious picture. For though both aspire to

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assist man in the development of his spirituality, they have radically different understandings of what this means, and go about their respective tasks in practically opposite ways. To begin with, Zen denies the existence of a God who is creator and ruler of the universe, as well as the existence of an individual soul. There is, then, no One or nothing to worship, or petition, or to call on for any assistance. Neither is there anything that needs to be saved.

This flies in the face of Christianity, which posits a God who created all things and who loves his creation and is personally involved in it. He has endowed human beings with immortal souls and it is his desire that these souls live with him in his glory forever. Furthermore, to demonstrate his love and to fulfill his desire, he sent his only son, Jesus, into the world. It is through faith in Jesus that our salvation is granted and our eternal life assured.

But in Zen there is no such concept of salvation. What prevents a person from his own fulfillment and the greatest good is not his sin but his ignorance. He simply does not know himself and is in the dark about his own nature. Thus spiritual discipline in Zen aims at individual enlightenment, and it effects not salvation but self-awakening.

If what has so far been said is accurate, a chart would outline these basic differences in this fashion:

<i>Zen</i>	<i>Christianity</i>
Nothingness	God
no soul	soul
Enlightenment	Faith
Self-Awakening	Salvation

This chart is a simplification, of course, but it is a valid one, and these basic differences, it seems to me, color all the rest of what is involved in these systems. For instance, there are some similarities that should not be discounted. Both Zen and Christianity had a founder, Buddha and Jesus respectively. Also, their teachings have been preserved and play important roles. While Christians talk of heaven, Buddhists speak of nirvana. These things, too, should be added to the chart.

<i>Zen</i>	<i>Christianity</i>
Buddha	Jesus

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sutras
nirvana

Bible
heaven

These additional ingredients would make it appear that, indeed, Zen and Christianity share at least some vital elements in common. But this comparison is superficial, and the resemblance here is merely apparent. The minute we look below the surface, the contrast continues. Although these components are real in Buddhism, where Zen diverges strikingly from Christianity is in its *attitude* towards them.

Naturally, Zen reveres Buddha as a great teacher. But this is all he is. If he is in any way different from the rest of us, it is due only to his own spiritual development *as a human being*. His advanced wisdom and undying compassion are what endear him to his followers, and it must be pointed out that these were not supernatural qualities but rather the flowering of natural, strictly human ones, albeit ones gained after a long and arduous personal struggle. The Buddha had no outside help and warned his followers about seeking it for themselves. Moreover, he insisted that any other who is willing to undertake the search can penetrate the veil of ignorance, dispel darkness and share in the same vision of reality which he celebrated. All this Zen holds, and it is a cornerstone of its thought. In the "Sutra of Hui-neng" we read: "Without enlightenment there would be no difference between a Buddha and other living beings; while a gleam of enlightenment is enough to make any living being the equal of a Buddha . . . those who enlighten themselves need no extraneous help."⁴

In Christianity, on the other hand, Jesus holds a far more exalted position and performs an absolutely critical, if not peculiar, role. For Jesus is not a man only but God as well, and believing in him as such is a person's only hope for salvation and eternal life. Faith in Jesus as a divine/human entity will insure a response on his part, while rejecting him as savior implies a virtual refusal of the redemption freely offered. It is interesting to note that the very attitude Zen exhibits towards the Buddha is not only foreign in Christianity but strictly forbidden and would have constituted, for much of Christianity's history, nothing less than heresy.

What has been said here about the Buddha and Jesus applies equally

⁴ *The Sutra of Hui Neng*, p. 31.

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to the sutras and the Bible. In Zen the sutras are highly valued. They inspire and instruct. However, they are not essential, and Zen writers are adamant in making clear that they are to be regarded only as guides. For Christians, on the other hand, the Bible is the word of God. All teaching and preaching must accord with what is written there; scriptural authority is sacrosanct.

If my understanding on these matters is correct, the situation is climatic. Zen could forfeit the Buddha and dispense with the sutras and still remain intact. Yet, remove Jesus and the Bible from Christianity, and the whole edifice crumbles.

The whole approach also varies in regard to nirvana and heaven. Whatever it may be, nirvana for Zen clearly is not separate from this world and life as we daily live it. Again in the words of Hui-neng we find this:

The Kingdom of Buddha is in this world, within which enlightenment is to be sought. To seek enlightenment by separating from this world is as absurd as to search for a rabbit's horn.⁵

In Christianity our present lives can certainly be enhanced by faith in Christ, but unquestionably the focus traditionally has been on a life after death. The Kingdom of God is yet to come; heaven is generally conceived as distinct from this world. Rather, it is the urgent hope of the Christian to enter paradise when he dies, and there live forever in the light of God's presence.

The apparent similarities in Zen and Christianity give way, then, to radical disparities upon closer inspection. In fact, these last considerations would compel us to portray things more accurately by amending our initial diagram. By adding crucial information even parenthetically, we could keep the distinctions clear. Thus a reformed chart might read:

<i>Zen</i>	<i>Christianity</i>
Nothingness	God (Creator and Ruler)
no soul	soul (immortal)
Enlightenment	Faith

⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

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Self-Awakening (now)	Salvation (esp. for future life)
Buddha (human, teacher)	Jesus (God/man, savior)
Sutras (guides)	Bible (literal world of God)
Nirvana (here)	Heaven (after life)

This overall contrast creates an exciting tension. Any item on the chart as a general notion requires elucidation, and to contrast it with its counterpart, or rather its opposite number, could itself prove a stimulating study.

At the same time, taken on the whole, Zen and Christianity seem to me to represent fundamentally different understandings of what spirituality is all about. This perhaps is not shocking or even remarkable, considering the fact that they are the outgrowths of diverse cultures. But to view the matter as an East/West clash offers only one explanation, and a bare one at that. My own feeling is that this would be grossly inadequate, and that a more comprehensive investigation might demonstrate that the root of the contrast lies elsewhere.

In this connection, the writings of the American Transcendentalists shed helpful light. Though Westerners emerging from Christian soil, they sound themes we hear echoed in Zen writings. Indeed, were we to replace Christianity on our chart with Transcendentalism, we would find alongside Zen something of an even match, and our exercise would be one of comparison, not contrast. Conversely, astonishingly, lift out Zen and plot Transcendentalism in its stead, and almost point for point we would be delivered of their bones of contention with the Christianity of their day.

Our task at present will be to do something of this very nature. Here we will explore some ten themes which will serve as points of contact between Zen and the Transcendentalists. A keen vitality marks the writings of both, and in comparing their outlooks one can't help feeling that the world in which we live is wonderfully alive. Something there is refreshing in hearing that the highest attainments are but a step away, and in the suggestion that everyone can find for himself what these masters, East and West, discovered "beyond the pale."

II. Zen and Transcendentalism

One characteristic shared by Zen and Transcendentalism is their elusive nature. They are not truly concerned with doctrines, nor are they attached to metaphysics. They are difficult to pin down. The reason for this is that language is never adequate in describing experience, and experience is their source.

In this connection I wish to make some remarks against certain scholars who consider the philosophy of Sunyata to be really the foundation of Zen. Such scholars fail utterly to grasp the full purport of Zen, which is first of all an experience and not at all a philosophy or dogma. Zen can never be built upon any set of metaphysical or psychological views; the latter may be advanced after the Zen experience has taken place, but never before.⁶

Suzuki's point here is a crucial one, for of primary importance is experience, not expression. The best approach, I think, is to view Zen utterances as exclamations, as opposed to declarations. The same thing might be said of the Transcendentalists as well. Brooks Atkinson points out: "Scholars accustomed to exact knowledge could not make head or tail of Emerson's school of thought. That was not surprising. Transcendentalism had no system; it was more poetry than thought."⁷

Suzuki and Emerson were both scholars who saw tremendous value in books. At the same time, they knew firsthand the value of experience, and so they were quick to point out which was means and which ends. Quoting a sermon by Szu-hsin Wu-hsin, Suzuki writes:

This is the moment you can transform this great earth into solid gold, and the great river into an ocean of milk. What a satisfaction this is then to your daily life! Being so, do not waste your time with words and phrases, or by searching for the truth of Zen in books; for the truth is not to be found there.⁸

⁶ *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Vol. I (Suzuki, I) p. 188.

⁷ *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (RWE)*, p. XV.

⁸ Suzuki, II, p. 24.

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The point here is not that books are not good, but it is rather that in any given moment the reality to which any great book is pointing is present to us. There is no need to separate ourselves from that ever-present reality. Emerson wrote in "The American Scholar" that: "Books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings."⁹

In *Walden*, Thoreau devotes an entire chapter to extolling in the most superlative language the virtues of the written word, but to begin his next chapter he quickly reminds us that:

No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert. What is a course of history, or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity.¹⁰

For the Transcendentalists, as well as for Zen, the truth that will answer all our questions is every moment before our eyes. Constantly they point to the present moment. For them, reality rests there, and there only. Indeed, for Thoreau, "God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages."¹¹

At this point we could multiply endlessly from both schools of thought suggestions to live in the present. However, what is imperative to understand is the nature of the revelation disclosed in any now-moment. No matter how solemn or even glorious the vision, there is nothing static about it. Suzuki writes:

. . . and this present moment is not something standing still with all its contents, for it ceaselessly moves on. Thus the past is the present, so is the future, but this present in which the past and the future are merged never remains the present; in

⁹ RWE, p. 50.

¹⁰ *Walden*, p. 187.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

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other words, it is eternally present. And at the center of this eternal present the Buddha has his fixed abode which is no abode.¹²

For the Buddha it is always the same time—now; and he is always in the same place—here. His abode is fixed because it rests on movement. He learned not to swim upstream. The Buddha could be said to be in a state of flowing repose, much like a leaf floating downstream.

For both Zen and Transcendentalism, Nature is a process, and man is in no way separate from that process. Neither is there a separation of mind and body. All flows, and thus Thoreau wrote:

The moods and thoughts of man are revolving just as steadily and incessantly as Nature's. Nothing must be postponed; take time by the forelock, now or never. You must live in the present, launch yourself on any wave, find your eternity in each moment. Fools stand on their island opportunities, and look toward another land. There is no other land, there is no other life but this or the like of this.¹³

This is practically a summation of Buddhism; Zen in a nutshell. In recognizing the fluidity of nature; in identifying man as nature; in equating eternity with the present; in rejecting any other, and certainly future, world; and insisting that we look to what is directly before us, the Transdentalists are in par with Zen. Both understand also that the duality of subject and object must be overcome. Reality is something to be realized; it is not something to be *comprehended* as much as to be *apprehended*. In this respect they favor intuition as opposed to reason.

Suzuki says of the enlightened man that "in him life is not split into object and subject or into acting and acted."¹⁴ In the same vein, Emerson writes:

And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the

¹² Suzuki, III, p. 77.

¹³ Thoreau. *The Poet Naturalist* (quoted from).

¹⁴ Suzuki, I, p. 265.

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spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.¹⁵

The reality aimed at cannot be objectified because that immediately sets up a duality. Nature cannot step outside itself. They say in Zen that, "The eye cannot see itself."¹⁶ This is quite so, for the eye cannot be an object of its own vision. Yet it sees, and this metaphor suggests something of the nature of the experience. It corresponds exactly to Emerson's own metaphor of the "transparent eyeball." He elsewhere wrote: "I conceive a man as always spoken to from behind, and unable to turn his head and see the speaker."¹⁷ What is being described in both cases might safely be styled an absolute subjectivity.

Reason as only one function of the human organism is therefore recognized as deficient, just as one hand is incapable of grasping the whole body. And it is an experience of the whole being which is at stake here. "Zen . . . emphasizes the faculty of seeing (*darsana*) or knowing (*vidya*) though not in the sense of reasoning out, but in that of intuitively grasping."¹⁸ Emerson would agree with Suzuki here as well.

Meantime, whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition; this, namely, it is an intuition.¹⁹

Reason has its uses certainly, but for the greater project it must be set aside. In Thoreau's words: "The moon was made to rule by night, but the sun to rule by day. Reason will be but a pale cloud, like the moon, when one ray of divine light comes to illumine the soul."²⁰

Indeed, not only is reason insufficient for the larger task of directly experiencing reality, it serves as a hindrance. It must be viewed as a tool, ideal for certain projects, dangerous when misused. One does not reach for a rake to comb one's hair, or put on a pair of skates to climb a mountain. Such an act would be comical, and the results disastrous. Thus Emerson writes in "Experience": "What help from thought?"

¹⁵ RWE, p. 262.

¹⁶ Suzuki, II, p. 187.

¹⁷ *Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 65.

¹⁸ Suzuki, I, p. 269.

¹⁹ RWE, p. 71.

²⁰ *Selected Journals of HDT*, p. 65.

Life is not dialectics . . . Intellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity. If a man should consider the nicety of the passage of a piece of bread down his throat, he would starve."²¹

For Zen and the Transcendentalists, intuition, not rationality, is the route, and the destination is spontaneity, not analysis. We saw how Suzuki warned of the error of attempting to build a system on concepts. The product of such a process is a fallacy. The undue reliance on Reason in the West has proven fatal. Building philosophy, or religion, upon such a foundation is like constructing a house on stilts. Such a structure is bound to collapse. "All attempts to contrive a system are as cold as the new worship introduced by the French to the goddess of Reason—to-day, pasteboard and filigree, and ending to-morrow in madness and murder."²²

But whatever transpires on a mass scale is but an exaggeration of what goes on a smaller one. If society is the macrocosm, the individual is the microcosm, and it is to the individual that Zen and the Transcendentalists make their appeal. They would have us believe that our problems are largely hallucinations, and that we are prisoners of our own minds. It is as if we were caught in a gigantic web, but one of our own spinning.

Reason here is not the solution but the culprit. This is the faculty which, from the time we were born, has been ensnaring us, and to increase its activity would only complicate the maze. We have been conditioned, it is true, but to rectify the situation we need not add knowledge to it. Rather, we seem to need to unravel the entanglement, and for this a sort of "unlearning" is called for. "All knowledge is an acquisition and accumulation, whereas Zen proposes to deprive one of all one's possessions . . ."²³

Zen advocates not a continuation of the process we are accustomed to but its reversal. Along these lines Emerson writes in "Intellect": "Who leaves all, receives more. This is as true intellectually as morally. Each new mind we approach seems to require an abdication of all our past and present possessions."²⁴ Elsewhere he states: "Let us unlearn

²¹ RWE, p. 349.

²² Ibid., p. 83.

²³ Suzuki, I, pp. 351-2.

²⁴ RWE, p. 302.

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our wisdom of the world.”²⁵ At Walden Pond, Thoreau would let his mind empty, and be reduced to a kind of non-knowledge.

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born.²⁶

However ironic it may appear, it is through a process of un-learning that our original, or true, nature will reveal itself. Buddhists, we will remember, do not believe that man has fallen, only that he is ignorant of his real nature. The Transcendentalists rejected the notion of “original sin” and saw the problem as *lethe* rather. Man does not need a redeemer; he must awaken from his dream state. A beguiled and wretched man who expects someone else to be his deliverer is deluding himself and presents a pathetic sight. He must break his own chains. Suzuki writes:

The first object was to escape the bondage in which all finite beings find themselves, but if we do not cut asunder the very chain of ignorance with which we are bound hands and feet, where shall we look for deliverance? And this chain of ignorance is wrought of nothing else but the intellect and sensuous infatuation, which cling tightly to every thought we have, to every feeling we may entertain. They are hard to get rid of, they are like wet clothes as is aptly expressed by the Zen masters. ‘We were born free and equal.’²⁷

This is the point of view of Zen, that though we are chained down, those shackles are in our minds. We were indeed, however, “born free and equal.” We did not emerge from the womb clad in layers of “wet clothes,” but naked. Thoreau tells us that “alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our pre-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²⁶ *Walden*, p. 178.

²⁷ Suzuki, I, p. 23.

judices."²⁸

This endeavor to emancipate ourselves, to smash to bits the chain of ignorance, is no mean task. Yet it is the single, most important one of our lives. However, as Emerson said, "We must go alone."²⁹ In this Emerson echoes the Buddha. According to legend, when the Buddha was nearing his death, his close disciple and personal attendant, Ananda, expressed sorrow and concern. What would the Buddha's followers do when the master died? The Buddha warned Ananda never to rely on anyone. "Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge."³⁰

Zen has seized upon this, and certainly self-reliance is the hallmark of Emersonianism. Indeed, it is his only creed. In "Self-Reliance" he writes:

Our dependence on these foreign goods leads us to our slavish respect for numbers . . . In like manner the reformers summon conventions and vote and resolve in multitude. Not so, O Friends! will the God deign to enter and inhabit you, but by a method precisely the reverse. It is only as a man puts off all foreign support and stands alone that I see him to be strong and prevail.³¹

The road is before us, and it is a lonely one. What we must do is clear, and equally clear is who must do it. To escape our enthrallment we must go within, and there face who and what we are. Ridding ourselves of the overbearing weight of our complex mental entrapments establishes a severe and solitary struggle. Of this fact Zen is keenly aware. In the same essay cited earlier in this connection, Suzuki writes:

But the comprehension does not come so easily. Being so long accustomed to the oppression, the mental inertia becomes hard to remove. . . . The passage is strewn with thistles and brambles, and the climb is slippery in the extreme. It is no

²⁸ *Walden*, p. 111.

²⁹ RWE, p. 159.

³⁰ *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 60.

³¹ RWE, p. 169.

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pastime but the most serious task in life; no idlers will ever dare attempt it.³²

Primarily poets, the Transcendentalists speak in terms of analogy and metaphor; but clearly they saw the matter as a journey into the unknown. The Buddha once suggested that it is easier to fight a battle against ten thousand warriors than to engage in the inward flight. In his conclusion to *Walden*, Thoreau writes:

Be rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clarke and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes . . . Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice . . . What was the meaning of that South-Sea Exploring expedition, with all its parade and expense, but an indirect recognition of the fact, that there are continents and seas in the moral world, to which every man is an isthmus or an inlet, yet unexplored by him, but that it is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being along . . .³³

Thoreau understood full well, as did Suzuki and the Buddha, what kind of excursion requires the rarest courage. It is the route to self-discovery, which is neither a group enterprise nor a picnic, which demands the most nerve. Imagine the parallels these gentlemen could draw today. They would probably tell us that, unbeknownst to society at large, it takes less mettle to step with one's comrades into a spaceship and cruise to the moon, than to wend one's own way to the depths "of one's being alone," a destination hardly any closer.

Treading this isolated path, however threatening and unpleasant it may be, is urgent business; but the endeavor is not without its reward. There is a light at the end of this tunnel. It would appear that Zen and

³² Suzuki, I. p. 29.

³³ *Walden*, pp. 341-2.

Transcendentalism direct us to a wholly transformed sense of self, a quite new feeling of existence. In a rare instance where Suzuki describes his own experience of awakening, he tells us that it is:

Not, necessarily, that I get unified with a being greater than myself or absorbed in it, but that my individuality, which I found rigidly held together and definitely kept separate from other individual existences, becomes loosened somehow from its tightening grip and melts away into something indescribable, something which is of quite a different order from what I am accustomed to. The feeling that follows is that of a complete release or a complete rest—the feeling that one has arrived finally at the destination.³⁴

This is a remarkable passage, and in it Suzuki is more trying to simply give us a sense of the experience than attempting to make any statements about the nature of ultimate reality. He seems to suggest that his usual sense of self has dissolved. It has not gone out of existence as an organism, but it does not feel itself cut off from the rest of nature or the universe. It seems as if the being knows itself as an aperture through which the energy sustaining the whole world freely streams. One is again reminded of Emerson's "transparent eyeball." He writes in *Nature*:

Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the universal Being circulate through me . . .³⁵

In Zen writings we find numerous references to momentary experiences in which the world appears luminous, or transparent, and where there is a sense of infinite expansion. One Zen Master, Kōhō, reports: "I felt as if this boundless space itself were broken into pieces. . . . I forgot myself, I forgot the world, it was like one mirror reflecting another."³⁶ Another declared: "O monks, lo and behold! a most auspicious light is shining with the utmost brilliancy all over the

³⁴ *Zen Buddhism*, pp. 105-6.

³⁵ RWE, p. 6.

³⁶ Suzuki, I, p. 253.

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great chiliocosm . . ."³⁷; while another says: "Feel cosmos as *translucent, ever-living presence*."³⁸

Of such experiences Suzuki explains that "even the consciousness of identity is lost as when one mirror reflects another, the subject feels as if living in a crystal palace, all transparent, refreshing, buoyant, and royal."³⁹ Elsewhere, he writes in connection with the use of light as a metaphor:

. . . but what we have here is an infinite mutual fusion or penetration of all things, each with its individuality yet with something universal in it . . . To illustrate this state of existence, the Gandavyuha makes everything it depicts transparent and luminous, for luminosity is the only possible earthly representation that conveys the idea of universal interpenetration.⁴⁰

This principle, that each individual thing is, at one and the same time, both particular and universal, is found in Emerson's "Over-Soul." He seems to have been as fond of light as transparency. "From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all."⁴¹ In the last paragraph of this essay he tells us "that the universe is represented in an atom, in a moment of time."⁴²

If from these extracts we get a glimpse of a world that is radiant, permeated with beauty, and pregnant with meaning in its every detail, we should know that the passage from darkness to light transpires in an instant, and it can occur at any moment. "Any prospect of awakening or coming to life to a dead man makes indifferent all times and places. The place where that may occur is always the same, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses."⁴³ Zen would agree with this assessment of Thoreau's. It would further hold:

³⁷ Suzuki, II, p. 39.

³⁸ *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, 166.

³⁹ Suzuki, I, p. 258.

⁴⁰ Suzuki, III, p. 77.

⁴¹ RWE, p. 263.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁴³ *Walden*, p. 204.

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. . . that the coming of enlightenment is instantaneous, and does not allow any gradation as there are no stages of progress in it . . . for Zen could not be anything else but an instantaneous act of intuition. As it opens up all of a sudden a world hitherto undreamed of, it is an abrupt and discrete leaping from one plane of thought to another.⁴⁴

Opening one's eyes takes a split second, or considerably less, and simultaneously there appears light and the world. For Thoreau the seasons served as metaphors. In *Walden* enlightenment is represented by the spring. "Walden was dead and is alive again."⁴⁵ Thoreau continues, and see how neatly his description coincides with Suzuki's assertion:

The change from storm and winter to serene and mild weather, from dark and sluggish hours to bright and elastic ones, is a memorable crisis which all things proclaim. It is seemingly instantaneous at last. Suddenly an influx of light filled my house. . . . I looked out the window, and lo! where yesterday was cold gray ice there lay the transparent pond already calm and full of hope. . . .⁴⁶

Emerson wrote in his "Introduction" to *Nature*: "Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy."⁴⁷ This seems to me a remarkably fresh way of putting things. It shines as yet another example of Emerson's understanding that man is an expression of nature, and that those perennial philosophical questions which mankind quite naturally asks are quite naturally answered.

Awakening may come abruptly as a new light, but it is a light which shines perpetually. A man operating in broad daylight is not encumbered like one stumbling around in the dark. The questions and concerns which arise in one case do not occur in the other. Thus one

⁴⁴ Suzuki, I, pp. 214-5.

⁴⁵ *Walden*, p. 334.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁴⁷ RWE, p. 3.

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Zen master said, "According to my present state of mind, I am perfectly satisfied with myself and the world. All is well with me, and there is nothing of which I have to seek further understanding."⁴⁸

The world is the same; one's view of it is what has changed. Lin-chi says: "The truly religious man has nothing to do but go on with his life as he finds it in the various circumstances of this worldly existence. He rises quietly in the morning, puts on his dress and goes out to his work."⁴⁹ Thoreau writes in *Walden*:

After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring to answer in my sleep, as what-how-when-where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on *her* lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight . . . Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask . . .

Then to my morning work. First I take an ax . . .⁵⁰

There is a sense in which, in the course of millenniums, nature has not altered. Neither has her light. The same sun which shone over the path of the Buddha in India twenty-five hundred years ago rose daily over Palestine five centuries later. "There has always been the same amount of light in the world," Thoreau wrote in his first book, "There was but the sun and the eye from the first. The ages have not added a new ray to the one, nor altered a fibre of the other."⁵¹

This is precisely why Zen claims that there is one mind common to all those who awaken. Again, Lin-chi states:

If you turn your light within yourself as you are told to do, without delay, and reflect, and stop seeking things external, you will realize that your own mind and those of the Buddhas and patriarchs do not differ from one another.⁵²

⁴⁸ Suzuki, II, p. 30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁵⁰ *Walden*, pp. 313-4.

⁵¹ *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, pp. 192-3.

⁵² Suzuki, II, p. 232.

In Zen this is a pivotal point which is reiterated again and again. The masters were absolutely convinced that their own experience equalled that of the Buddha and that their outlooks were identical. This is quite reasonable, for reality is singular after all. Certainly the Transcendentalists firmly held this. Emerson wrote that “. . . the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, one mind: and that one mind is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool.”⁵³ In another essay he tells us:

It shines for all. There is a certain wisdom of humanity which is common to the greatest men with the lowest, and which our ordinary education often labors to silence and obstruct. The mind is one, and the best minds, who love truth for its own sake, think much less of property in truth. They accept it thankfully everywhere, and do not label it or stamp it with any man's name, for it is theirs long beforehand, and from eternity.⁵⁴

It takes great effort perhaps, but enlightenment is for all of us certainly within reach. It is, it would appear, before us all along, and in the final analysis the truest spirituality might prove to be a very simple matter.

In a way, Zen and Transcendentalism share the singular task of guiding us home. The codes which they utilize to do this are not one hundred percent uniform, but their message, it seems to me, is the same. On all the major points they are solidly agreed, and we can summarize those thus:

- 1) Direct EXPERIENCE is paramount. It is not to be forfeited for book-learning or superseded by anything else.
- 2) They call for living in the PRESENT, and for them the Present Moment and Eternity are one and the same.
- 3) MAN/NATURE are inseparable, and the underlying principle is FLUIDITY.
- 4) They advocate INTUITION OVER reason.
- 5) They call for a process of UNLEARNING, as opposed to ad-

⁵³ RWE, p. 69.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 267.

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ding new knowledge.

6) They hold that man's problems and anxieties are rooted in IGNORANCE, in which he is enslaved.

7) SELF-RELIANCE is strictly demanded, as each individual is completely on his own.

8) They insist on an all-out effort at self-emancipation, and this requires a stringent SEARCHING WITHIN.

9) SELF-AWAKENING is the goal and the reward. As light dispels darkness, a person awake is free from the doubts and questions which once beset him.

10) There is ONE MIND common to all awakened individuals.

If it has been shown that on all these matters Zen and Transcendentalism are in accord, then we will find that, in turning the spotlight on their confrontation with Christianity, they are indeed soul-mates. Imagine a set of twins, separated at birth, who were brought up in different cultures on opposite sides of the planet. They speak different languages and adhere to diverse customs. However, bring them together, even after they have matured, and you find that they still look alike and think the same. In meeting Christianity, Transcendentalism and Zen find themselves faced with identical dilemmas.

III. Beyond Christianity: Transcendentalism and Zen

In his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James distinguishes the Transcendentalists from the other religious thinkers he investigates. James writes:

It is only transcendentalist metaphysicians who think that, without adding any concrete details to Nature, or subtracting any, but by simply calling it the expression of absolute spirit, you make it more divine just as it stands.⁵⁵

James is accurate in this assessment, but it must be remembered that for the Transcendentalists philosophy was a product of experience, and not vice-versa, and that for them the world was alive. Thoreau

⁵⁵ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 401.

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writes even of the pond itself:

Who would have suspected so large and cold and thick-skinned a thing to be so sensitive? Yet it has its laws to which it thunders obedience when it should as surely as the buds expand in the spring. The earth is all alive and covered with papillae.⁵⁶

And later in the same chapter we find:

The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth . . .⁵⁷

Translated into theological language, it means that ultimate reality is active, and so Emerson writes:

In how many churches, by how many prophets, tell me, is man made sensible that he is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God? Where now sounds the persuasion, that by its very melody imparadises my heart, and so affirms its own origin in heaven?⁵⁸

The idea that ultimate reality is an active principle is stressed by Abe Masao in his explanation of the Buddhist concept of Sunyata. Neither is it one from which we are at any moment separate. Abe writes:

This total *dynamic movement* of emptying, not a *static state* of emptiness, is the true meaning of Sunyata. If we conceive of this total dynamic movement of emptying as *somewhere outside* us or *sometime beyond* our present self-existence, however, we fail to realize Sunyata. Sunyata is not outside us, nor are we outside Sunyata.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *Walden*, p. 327.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

⁵⁸ RWE, p. 76.

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Later in the same essay, Abe reminds us that it is best to think in terms of a verb. "Sunyata should not be understood in its noun form but in its verbal form, for it is a dynamic and creative function of emptying everything and making everything alive."⁶⁰ This emphasis on a verb is not merely an exercise in semantics; it is indicative of the whole thrust of his theology. In opposing it to the usual Christian conception, Abe perceptively targets this statement from Kung's *Does God Exist?*

God in the Bible is subject and not predicate: it is not that love is God, but that God is love.⁶¹

Herein lies a fundamental disagreement. Ultimate reality for the Christian is a subject distinct from us. God as the creator sets up as a concept an essential split between the maker and the made. What this thinking engenders cannot be helped, namely a tendency to view ultimate reality as a power beyond this world and as an entity which is static. Moreover, the Christian notion that man alone was created in God's image gives birth to the corollary to all this, that nature is beneath man, something inanimate which was manufactured. This leaves mankind in a precarious position. He is divorced from Ultimate Reality above and from nature beneath. Such a species is indeed in want of redemption.

But the problem here is that such an understanding balks modern reason, which is the very "bar" at which, for Kung, faith must be tested. It also contradicts science. Modern physics seems to be confirming the kind of reality Buddhism has proclaimed since its inception and which the Transcendentalists attested to a century and a half ago. Because Transcendentalism and Zen do not refute but harmonize with science, they seem to me to go beyond Christianity.

And science is not the only area which is confirming the insights of Zen and Transcendentalism. Our entire list is supported by psychology as well. We will recall how Thoreau claimed that "The moods and thoughts of man are revolving just as steadily and incessantly as Nature's." Emerson wrote in his own journal:

⁵⁹ *The Emptying God*, p. 28.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁶¹ *Does God Exist?* p. 634.

. . . as the river flows, & the plant flows, and the sun flows, & the mind is a stream of thoughts . . . If anything could stand still, it would be instantly crushed and dissipated by the torrent which it resisted, & if it were a mind it would be crazed; as insane persons are those who hold fast to one thought & do not as the mind does, limit and correct it by other thoughts, & so flow with the course of nature.⁶²

In practically identical terms, Suzuki writes:

Let the intellect alone, it has its usefulness in its proper sphere, but let it not interfere with the flowing of the stream. If you are at all tempted to look into it, do so while letting it flow. The fact of flowing must under no circumstances be arrested or meddled with.⁶³

Such passages as these are fast becoming textbook material for what we are learning in psychology. Finally man is scientifically validating the wisdom of letting go, of abandonment and spontaneity.

Contrariwise, the attitude exhibited in Christianity, with its concept of a fixed, absolute reality and its establishment of a personal savior who must be embraced, is seen in the light of psychology as a sign of weakness. The tendency is towards fixation, which is dangerous. In such a scheme, even "faith" can prove disastrous, as Erich Fromm points out in a book apropos of this discussion. In *To Have or To Be*, he writes: "Faith, in the having mode, is a crutch for those who want to be certain, those who want an answer for life without daring to search for it themselves."⁶⁴

In respect to such matters as faith and belief, the Buddhist philosopher and the Christian theologian are clearly on opposite sides of the fence. For instance, in his book, Hans Kung tells us:

Belief in an Absolute, in an ultimate reality, in God, is certainly a 'religious experience' or—better—a total experiential insight.⁶⁵

⁶² *Journals of RWE*, p. Vol. 8, May 1, 1841.

⁶³ Suzuki, I, p. 19.

⁶⁴ *To Have or To Be*, p. 42.

⁶⁵ *Does God Exist?* p. 634.

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I am not sure why Kung makes this statement. Certainly belief itself is not a religious experience or an “experiential insight.” If he had said that belief in ultimate reality or God is a *result of* religious experience or insight, then his statement would make more sense.

On the other end of the spectrum, a Buddhist scholar, such as Walpola Rahula, might suggest that:

The question of belief arises when there is no seeing—seeing in every sense of the word. The moment you see, the question of belief disappears.⁶⁶

This is a markedly different attitude than the one Kung takes, who feels that faith is a “decision” based upon reason. Indeed, his faith sounds dangerously close to the type Fromm is talking about, one which is the product, not of light, but of darkness. Because Zen and Transcendentalism are not, unlike Christianity, opposed to modern psychology but instead supply it with much needed insights, they seem to me to go beyond Christianity.

Transcendentalism and Zen hold that ultimate reality cannot be proven intellectually; it can only be intuitively realized. The questions which one raises indicate something of where he stands. However, they more sharply outline where one is not. The whole business of proving ultimate reality is only a problem for those to whom it is not a living presence. Again, only people in the dark ask questions about their surroundings. The whole line of questioning, based upon reason, which we find in *Does God Exist?* creates for us an inescapable maze. There we find such questions as these:

Does God really exist? What is he? Are these really irrelevant questions as long as God ‘functions,’ ‘is useful?’ . . .⁶⁷

What is God like? People have always asked this question. It is particularly serious for someone who is certain of God’s existence, but even more for someone who doubts this. For whether God exists depends for many on what he is like.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 8.

⁶⁷ *Does God Exist?* p. 610.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 619.

But a radically understood rationality in particular demands an answer to the question: 'Why is there anything at all and not nothing?'⁶⁹

Kung attempts to answer these questions by invoking the intellect. In the end, only the rational mind *might* be satisfied. But arriving at reality is not like solving a mathematical puzzle. The very questions imply a mind separate from the reality inquired into. Indeed, for Kung there is a distinction between religious experience and reflection which he takes for granted.

For Zen, on the other hand, the mind is not separate from ultimate reality but a function of it. Thus for a philosopher like Abe Masao the business is perceived quite differently. Abe's philosophizing is not to be seen as an individual making objective statements about Sunyata from the outside, but rather as the process of Sunyata itself in any now-moment. To someone who is awake, the act of writing or speaking is an expression of ultimate reality in the same way that a bird singing is nature in harmony with itself. We would all agree that a bird is nature. Would anyone suggest that the moment the bird begins to sing that it separates itself from nature, and is nature no longer? For Zen, as Abe reminds us, "'Seeing' does not see itself just as an eye does not see itself. 'Seeing' is *non-seeing* in regard to itself."⁷⁰

Nevertheless, in his work as a philosopher Abe invariably encounters questions of the nature Kung is prone to raise. In one such live interview he attempted to throw the question back:

Whenever I ask you 'What is it that is so talking?' you say that it is your consciousness, it is your own consciousness of yourself, your personality or so on. Thus you objectify your own consciousness, your own existence, your own self, and in that way *you yourself* move back step by step.⁷¹

Pressed further in the same interview, Abe tries to explain his position:

If you ask me to show you the ground on which I am stand-

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 640.

⁷⁰ *Zen and Western Thought*, p. 75.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 196.

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ing, I may show it by stepping back and pointing to the ground with a finger. However, that is not the ground on which I *am standing now* but the ground where I *was standing before*. To show the ground on which I *am standing now*, I may again step back and point to it. Again, however, it is only the ground where I was standing before. How can I show the *ground on which I am standing now*?⁷²

Abe cannot show us the ground on which he is standing. But this is not because he is hiding it; it is only that we cannot see it. The Zen philosopher must be tempted to exclaim what Emerson, who found himself in the same quandary, confided to his journal.

It pains me never that I cannot give you an accurate answer to the question, What is God? What is the operation we call Providence? and the like. There lies the answer: there it exists, present, omnipresent, to you, to me.⁷³

The God which can be objectified in any way, whether it be as an object of study and analysis or even one of worship and devotion, is not ultimate reality for Transcendentalism or Zen. Only when it is used to point to what is before us does such language make sense. "O my brothers, God exists," Emerson says in "Spiritual Laws."⁷⁴ In that essay, as in so many other places, Emerson is trying to say what the Zen layman Hō-koji, in typical Zen fashion, put so succinctly:

How wondrously supernatural,
And how miraculous this!
I draw water, and I carry fuel!⁷⁵

If Transcendentalism and Zen could offer anything to Christian thinking, wouldn't it be to remind us that God should always be written with an exclamation point, as God! This would not demonstrate profanity but make us see the term as a sacred, inevitable utterance. Erich Fromm once wrote in connection with the word "love":

⁷² Ibid., p. 197.

⁷³ *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, September, 1842.

⁷⁴ RWE, p. 194.

⁷⁵ Suzuki, I, p. 319.

The word 'love' is meant to be a symbol of the *fact* love, but as soon as it is spoken it tends to assume a life of its own, it becomes a reality. I am under the illusion that the saying of the word is the equivalent of the experience, and soon I say the word and feel nothing, except the *thought* of love which the symbol expresses.⁷⁶

Ought not such thinking be applied to the term "God"? Is it a static being, an object of adoration, a "Father" we would have; or is it not rather a human experience, full, complete, of a vibrant and living reality that we truly seek? It is, Zen and Transcendentalism insist, *experience* that answers our age-old questions and brings heaven to our doorstep. Paraphrasing Fromm, the word "God" is meant to be a symbol of the *fact* God. God! as an experience, here and now, versus God as creator and ruler of the universe. Would such a slight shift in thinking make any difference?

If ultimate reality is a living fact of which we are in every moment flowing expressions, then there is no need for a mediator. Emerson writes in "The Over-Soul":

We know that all spiritual being is in man. A wise old proverb says, 'God comes to see us without bell'; that is, as there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul, where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins. The walls are taken away.⁷⁷

Our divinity, for Emerson, is our natural state. It is what we are! For him, the role of Jesus was that of a teacher. Jesus did not come to infuse us with grace and the power of God, but to show us that we are already sanctified. His mission was not to redeem us but to wake us up. Emerson wrote in his journal that, "If Jesus came now into the world, he would say You, YOU! He said to his age, I."⁷⁸ Emerson's meaning here is wonderfully illustrated by a story Abe relates in an essay, "Zen and Its Elucidation."

⁷⁶ *Marx's Concept of Man*, p. 45.

⁷⁷ RWE, p. 264.

⁷⁸ *Journals of RWE*, Vol. 5, August 14, 1837.

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One day Rinzai (Lin-chi) gave this sermon: 'There is the true man of no rank in the mass of naked flesh, who goes in and out from your facial gates (i.e., sense organs). Those who have not yet testified (to the fact), look, look!'

A monk came forward and asked, 'Who is this true man of no rank?'

Rinzai came down from his chair and, taking hold of the monk by his throat, said, 'Speak, speak!'

The monk hesitated.

Rinzai let go his hold and said, 'What a worthless dirtstick this (true man of no rank) is!'⁷⁹

We will remember that Zen expounds that there is One Mind, the Buddha Mind, and that the task of the master is to help direct his students to its realization within themselves. Emerson believed the same thing. Rinzai-like, he inserted the purport of the journal entry cited above into a sermon of his own, which he gave one year later to the young men at Harvard Divinity School.

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets . . . One man was true to what is in you and me . . . He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think . . . He felt respect for Moses and the prophets, but no unfit tenderness at postponing their initial revelations to the hour and the man that now is; to the eternal revelation in the heart. Thus was he a true man.'⁸⁰

Because Transcendentalism and Zen would realistically view Jesus as they do Buddha, as a human being who fulfilled his potential, a potential that is ours, right here and right now, and not as an unique incarnation of a supreme being sent here to save us, it seems to me they go beyond Christianity.

Having considered the opposing conceptions of ultimate reality and the contradictory views of what role a figure like Jesus plays in religion,

⁷⁹ *Zen and Western Thought*, p. 70.

⁸⁰ RWE, p. 72.

we are left with one, final area of discussion. What, in a religious sense, is the place and responsibility of each individual?

Grappling with the fundamental questions inherent in human nature is a daring enterprise and constitutes rather unsettling business. It would appear, however, that the Christian has maneuvered himself in such a way as to easily postpone this challenge. In the first place, by positioning ultimate reality to another plane, quite beyond this world, an individual might all too readily, even conveniently, assume it is inaccessible. In addition, by elevating Jesus to the status of a divine intermediary and making the individual dependent upon him, a Christian is able to keep the haunting questions at bay. The teachings of Jesus, really direct and quite radical, remain remote. Isn't it possible that for many Christ has become not an encounter but a detour?

In Transcendentalism and Zen, on the other hand, the onus is entirely on the individual. Ultimate reality is not elsewhere, and the questions human nature poses each individual must face head-on, in a stark confrontation. Such stress is laid on self-reliance and personal soul-searching that never could one's own obligation be eclipsed. Each self stands in the spotlight, and there is no God, or Jesus, or congregation to stand with him.

In his "Address," Emerson showed that he was keenly aware of the radical nature of Christ's call. "Where shall I hear words such as in elder ages drew men to leave all and follow father and mother, house and land, wife and child?"⁸¹ We will remember that the Transcendentalists saw that the key was not in acquisition but in unlearning and renunciation. "Every step so downward, is a step upward. The man who renounces himself, comes to himself."⁸²

This process is the Zen approach as well, and it is not lost in the work of Abe. Even as he attempts to work within Christianity, Abe zeros in on the need for the individual to pare itself to its own nothingness. For him, ultimate reality, God, is in perpetual flux, which he calls self-emptying, and the process which both God and Jesus undergo is the same one in which the self must participate. There is no mistaking what Abe sees as the work of the individual. He writes:

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 76.

⁸² Ibid., p. 69.

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This denial of our life, this death of our ego-self, should not be partial but total. Without the total negation of our life, or the complete death of our ego-self, our new life as a manifestation of the life of Jesus is impossible. There can be no continuity between the 'old person' and the 'new person' in the Pauline faith. If one believes the self of Christianity is somewhat continuous between the 'old person' and 'new person' in terms of a responsible subject in relation to God's calling, the religious significance of the self-emptying and abnegation of Christ—that is, the death and resurrection of Jesus—is not fully grasped.⁸³

Neither in Abe's Zen nor in his Christianity is there anything nihilistic. Rather, in both he highlights what is the true business of religion. In doing so he points at the same moment to the real miracle; for he understands full well that, by whittling away at his conditioned sense of self, a Christian might at last be able to declare with St. Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."⁸⁴ This same process of self-negation leads another on the opposite end of the globe to exclaim with Hakuin:

How boundless the sky of Samadhi unfettered!
How transparent the perfect moon-light of the
Fourfold Wisdom!
At that moment what do they lack?
As the Truth eternally calm reveals itself to them,
This very earth is the Lotus Land of Purity,
And this body is the body of the Buddha.⁸⁵

It is only by losing our world that we can find our true home, and learn that we are now in the heaven we only partially seek. As Abe points out, it involves a continuous process of self-emptying. Thoreau wrote in *Walden*:

Every man has to learn the points of compass as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are

⁸³ *The Emptying God*, p. 11.

⁸⁴ Galatians 2:20.

⁸⁵ Suzuki, I, p. 337.

lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.⁸⁶

Whether in poetic or theological language, Transcendentalism and Zen underscore what is in Christianity merely latent, namely the need to relinquish our footing. Because they activate this crucial principle, and Christianity allows it to remain dormant, it seems to me Transcendentalism and Zen go beyond Christianity.

This is a matter that cannot be overemphasized. The whole purpose of religion is to transform or "transcend" the self; yet Christianity unquestionably in practice insists on "faith" in Christ demonstrated by participation in church activities. The individual self is not challenged but rewarded. Religion for the Christian is not a denial of the life he is living but an extension and strengthening of it. Christianity makes people better perhaps; it does not make them fundamentally different.

This can be seen easily enough by participating directly in Christianity. In Catholicism, for instance, extraordinary value is placed on the sacraments, which have ancient origins and which were no doubt meaningful at one time. A baptism, for example, has all the earmarks of a pre-Christian ceremony. Included among the essentials are: candles, special ointment, holy water, white gowns, incantations and solemn pledges. It is a re-enactment of what went on in churches thousands of years ago, at a time when the ritual and the reality were often construed as identical. Similar ceremonies were part of the "mystery-religions" prevalent in the Mediterranean world at the time of Christ, and S. Angus tells us concerning baptism that "the union of 'water' and 'spirit' was a conception current in ancient religion which did not dis sever the sign and the inner experience."⁸⁷

What reasonable person today would hold that such rites actually produce the intended results? Still, rituals are tell-tale signs of the thinking at work behind a religion. Should a baptized infant die before coming of age, the age "of reason," he is assured of going to heaven. However, his immortal soul, if he is not baptized, is doomed, not to hell, but, still innocent, to "limbo." To hear a priest, educated in

⁸⁶ *Walden*, pp. 231-2.

⁸⁷ *The Mystery-Religions*, p. 82.

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theology, talk this way makes one suspect the ground, the whole structure of his religion.

It is unfortunate that even sophisticated theologians lend themselves to almost bizarre peculiarities. Hans Kung's book, however "celebrated", is a perfect illustration of this. It may be that in *Does God Exist?* Kung tells believers exactly what they want to hear, but the outsider must view the work with different eyes surely. In fact, it would appear that the irony of this book is that it fails most miserably at precisely where the author throughout intends for it to pass the great test, namely at his "bar of reason."

It is odd that at one point the author insists that the one charge the Christian theologian must escape is provincialism. He therefore considers, and dismisses, nearly the whole line of modern Western philosophical thought, as well as all other religions, at the same time reserving for himself a single source for his own thesis, one book written over thousands of years by writers conditioned by their own environments. Indeed, as a book untouched in two thousand years, his lone source remains an ancient one. Is this not itself an unreasonable act?

Moreover, Professor Kung asserts that there is something which distinguishes the God of Israel from the ultimate reality of all other religions and philosophies. And what is it, for Kung, which makes the God of the Bible so unique? He talks.

Where others perceive only infinite silence, Israel heard a voice. Israel was permitted to discover for itself and for others that the one God can be heard and addressed: that he comes among men saying 'I,' making himself a 'thou' for them, one who speaks to us and to whom we can speak.⁸⁸

The ancient Israelites always claimed to be "God's chosen people," and it would seem that for Kung the torch has been passed on to Christians. This is provincialism at its best.

Yet this is exactly the kind of corner into which one paints himself with the brush of reason. Still, it is one man's peculiar brush, and a critical observer must marvel at the whole paint job and find it unsatisfactory. What objective student of world religions could take

⁸⁸ *Does God Exist?* p. 634.

Kung's supposition seriously? It severely thwarts the very reason he is being asked to employ.

One can only suspect that Kung represents a line of thinking that is fast coming to a close. It is 1991, and God, or ultimate reality, has little to do nowadays with burning bushes and talking angels. Ancient texts must be interpreted afresh, as befitting a world in which men have frolicked on the moon.

Kung exhibits an attitude in his book which displays a problem. Graciously he admits that other religions can provide salvation for people, but still they are not religions in possession of the truth. He writes:

In that sense, the other world religions can also be ways of salvation. *The question of salvation must therefore be distinguished from the question of truth.* And if the question of salvation is settled positively, this by no means renders superfluous the question of truth.⁸⁹

It is interesting that Kung feels the need to cling to his conceptions. For him, other religions are valuable, but only the Christian is in possession of the one, true God. The future is not far off, I opine, that will show that this possession is not the product or reason as much as it is the need of an unhealthy psychology. The world religions are no longer sources of amusement to the western world, brought to Rome as mere scribbling on strange parchment presented by Marco Polo. "Other religions" are no longer vague to us, are not insensible poetry from unknown lands where people live in grass huts and rub stones together to make fire. The *attitude* which Kung exposes in his writing is not a rational one, albeit it is one which Christianity has manifested from the beginning.

We live now in a small world, and never has there been a greater need for a religion that makes sense and bears fruit. Certainly it is not a time for closed systems. But closed systems will be the inevitable result when people test their faith at the "bar of reason" instead of at the well of experience. Reason may supply intellectual answers, if one wishes to solve a mental puzzle, but it is experience, here and now, which eliminates the questions altogether.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 634.

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The moment the doctrine of immortality is separately taught, man is already fallen. In the flowing of love, in the adoration of humility, there is no question of continuance. No inspired man ever asks this question or condescends to these evidences. For the soul is true to itself, and the man to whom it is shed abroad cannot wander from the present, which is infinite, to a future which would be finite.⁹⁰

In the final analysis, is it what one *believes* that counts, or what one *is*? To read side by side the works of our Christian theologian and our Zen philosopher is quite illuminating. To support his thesis, Kung continually refers to his ancient textbook; but just as often as he does this, Abe points, not to books or teachings, but to reality, here and now. In the one instance, "thinking" is emphasized; in the other, "being."

Zen does not attach itself to any doctrines. The Transcendentalists had no rituals nor dogmas. Both point to and celebrate reality. But they believe that reality is singular, and we will recall their suggestion that there is one mind, so that each of us can behold the world as did the Buddha or Jesus. What they held, it seems to me, does not stretch our reason but adheres to it.

As Christianity stands today, it is founded on belief, and it cuts off those who cannot accept the theories it sets forth. The writings of the Zen masters and the Transcendentalists, on the other hand, are grounded in experience. They address themselves to each individual, regardless of his situation and the whole world of conceptual baggage he has accumulated. If Zen has in the past decades spread beyond the borders of its original home and has appealed to reasonable and intelligent people in this modern world, perhaps there is good reason for it. There is nothing in it, as far as I can see, which is scientifically, psychologically, or philosophically assailable. Zen is the deepest religious experience itself.

By the same token, there should be a lesson for Christianity in what became the fate of the thinkers it pushed away a hundred and fifty years ago. Banned from the Christian circle, such as Emerson and Thoreau were relegated to the field of literature to express themselves.

⁹⁰ RWE, p. 271.

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If their works are considered classics, isn't it because society at large has recognized in them themes which are eternal? It is reassuring to know that here, in the writings of the Transcendentalists, young and old both can find, regardless of their religious affiliation, or lack of it, the kind of thinking that truly addresses the questions which most fundamentally concern them. This is because such writings are for all of us. In this way, they, like those of Zen, go beyond Christianity.

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