

## Flight or Dialog?

### A Response to Book Reviews of William Johnston's *The Inner Eye of Love and Christian Zen*

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WITH DEEP JOY and gratitude for Christian roots and for all the riches of meeting Buddhist brothers and sisters in Japan, I appreciate reading other people's views of this present day dialog which is impregnated with hope for the future. As Arnold Toynbee indicated, future historians as they look back on our age will probably be concerned not with wars, capitalism or communism but with "what happened when for the first time Christianity and Buddhism began to penetrate one another deeply."<sup>1</sup>

Recent book reviews published however in the *Eastern Buddhist* on William Johnston's *The Inner Eye of Love and Christian Zen* seem markedly lacking in understanding of what is probably the most essential element of this dialog, namely, openness to listen attentively to the other. One does not become the other in what is unreal and illusory but there is a sense in which union is found in the awakening of a liberated consciousness (satori) and in the freeing experience of Uncreated Love (agape). What language however can express this experience? It is the level in which man communicates in silence—in the raising of one finger, in the breaking of bread.

In his book review of *The Inner Eye of Love* (*EB* xii, 1, May 1979, pp. 150-3), King accused Johnston of never having "a truly existential encounter with Buddhism" because Johnston "in the core of his being has always been and still is sitting *firmly* on his Christian pillow." Surely it is only through deep fidelity to the core of his being that the real self of Johnston can be awake for a meeting with the real self of his Buddhist brother. King says that in *The Inner Eye of Love*, "the best that is produced is a series of perceptive insights and rough parallels, suitable for an introductory comparative mystical treatise." Is this not Johnston's aim in his writings? Where in world literature do we have

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<sup>1</sup> William Johnston, *Christian Zen* (London, 1971), p. 1.

## VIEWS AND REVIEWS

a comparative mystical treatise? Christian writers today are reawakening to their rich mystical tradition which flows through different ages and cultures, through the great Western monastic movements, through the Fathers of the Desert to the source of their mystical literature in the Scriptures. At the same time as this mystical or contemplative renewal in Christianity is taking place there is an awakening in respect, attentive listening, and inner openness to all the Great Religious Traditions of the world—especially Buddhism. We do not yet have developed comparative mystical treatises, so this could be a classic in literature if it could be classified as an Introductory Comparative Mystical Treatise!

When King complains that in Johnston's book there is "no *genuine* encounter between Buddhist and Christian mystical substance and experience" he is no doubt correct, but let us respect the evolutionary, historical point at which we are in this encounter. What, for example, is the substance of the Christian mystical experience? Maybe it can be best expressed in the words of Jesus: "Father—that, they may all be one; that they may be one in us, as thou Father, art in me, and I in thee. . . . I have given them the privilege which thou gavest to me, that they should all be one, as we are one; that while thou art in me, I may be in them, and so they may be perfectly made one" (John 17: 21–23). "God is love; he who dwells in love dwells in God, and God in Him" (I John, 4: 16). It is this transformation in love which is at the essence of the Christian mystical experience which must be an ever unfolding, deepening reality in the Christian who seeks to dialog with Buddhism on the level of "mystical substance" and "experience". Unless he is grounded in unitive, transforming love of God, a Christian may become interested in Buddhism, he may profit by Buddhism and he may even consider himself more Buddhist than Christian, but within that person there is no genuine encounter between the "substance" of Buddhist and Christian mysticism—simply because there is not the transforming experience of God's love at the core of his being. This "core of his being" where man is united with God in love is the Real Self of the Christian mystic.

Similarly, a Japanese person will do little to deepen the "encounter between Buddhist and Christian mystical substance and experience" if, while the Buddhist experience is unknown to him, he seeks the Christian way of transformation in God's love. It will be a valid and pivotal response that he will make but this is not what is meant by dialog. If there is no experience there can be no real dialog, so realizing this, Johnston has endeavoured through his books to (1) encourage the Christian in the way of mystical union in God's love and (2) prepare the Christian's consciousness for "the first time in which Christianity and Buddhism will encounter each other in depth."

As with Frederick Franck who wrote a review of *Christian Zen* by Johnston in

## THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

his article "Sea Change—An Emerging Image of the Human,"<sup>2</sup> a lack of understanding of these basic aims of the author creates unreasonable distortions in the book reviews. Franck simply lifted a group of isolated quotations from *Christian Zen* and added wide, sweeping rebuttals using emotive language which contained no substantial argument but, like King, it seems that Franck disapproves of Johnston "sitting *firmly* on his Christian pillow."

What is this "Christian pillow" which King refers to at the core of Johnston's being? Is it the mystical experience of God's presence and love at the deepest core of the Christian mystic? If dialog is to be creative and evolutionary between Buddhism and Christianity, this will happen not in books but in the core of the being of the Buddhist and Christian. Where yet can we find an enlightened Buddhist who can lead us in the way of Christian mysticism? Similarly, where can we yet find a Christian mystic who can lead us to the Buddhist satori? If Johnston is criticized for this inexperience, it is an inexperience which is still a universal phenomenon. If it is because he continues to search for the depths of the Christian mystical experience, then he is criticized for what is essential to his contribution towards dialog.

Do we stand at the threshold of an evolutionary leap of consciousness through a penetration of the enlightenment of satori with the transformation of divine love? In what way can Christianity and Buddhism penetrate each other? Johnston does not claim to have the answers. He simply appeals to the Christians of today to read the signs of the times. He recalls them to their contemplative roots and gently encourages them to allow their inner eye to be opened to the Great Mystery at the heart of each religious tradition.

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Franck, "Sea Change—An Emerging Image of the Human," *EB* xi, 1 (May 1978), pp. 98-108.