

Sea Change

An Emerging Image of the Human .

FREDERICK FRANGK

Zen and Christianity are the fathers.

Thomas Merton to John Moffitt
on the eve of his death.

Bangkok, 1968

RECENTLY, in Kyoto, I came across a book by Jung Young Lee, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Dakota: *Patterns of Inner Process* (Secaucus, 1976). Dr. Lee has written previously on the I Ching, but in this most recent work he sets out to demonstrate similarities and equivalences in the I Ching and the teachings of Jesus. Only an expert on the I Ching could pretend to judge in how far the demonstration succeeds. What I find of great interest, however, is that here is another example, and from an unusual angle, of the fascination which the figure of Jesus exercises on our contemporaries in their preoccupation with a new approach to the Christos as archetype of the human, or, if I may say so, of the "True Man without rank" of Rinzai's celebrated sermon.

Returned home I found waiting for me a review copy of *Christian Zen* by William Johnston, S.J. (New York, 1975), but also, in *Earth's Answer* (New York, 1977), essays by four other Catholic priests: an essay "The Monk in Us" by the Benedictine monk David Stendl-Rast; another by Thomas Berry, director of the Riverdale Institute for Religious Research and Professor at Fordham University, who is a Passionist Father; a third paper by Fr. Robert Vachon, the Canadian priest who directs the intercultural Center Monchanin in Montreal; and a fourth by Fr. Raimundo Pannikar, Professor of Religion at both the University of California at Santa Barbara, and University of Benares. Moreover, a Buddhist friend in Holland had sent a recent book, *Ihr seid Götter* (Kloster, 1976), by the German Protestant thinker Johann Werner Klein.

This then, I had to conclude, was Providence's prescription for my "light summer reading." Diving into this plethora of material I was struck by remark-

SEA CHANGE

able similarities in attitude and focus, of a kind which would have been unthinkable in Catholic writing of even a decade ago. In their attitude to non-Christian religions these writers seem to have freed themselves from all turgid pretensions at "dialogue." These were—with the exception of Fr. Johnston's book—revealing and significant monologues, critical self-assessments and self-confrontations in a new, refreshing spirit which I would like to share with you.

One may in these writings find some proof that the Zen-seeds Daisetz Suzuki sowed not so very long ago in the West have indeed fallen on good earth. There may have been a time in which Zen had its cultish vogue, but that period is well behind us, for it is Tibetan Buddhism that is now *à la mode*. But meanwhile Zen ideas and values have percolated in many and mysterious ways into the cultivated Western mind, have created a new climate, a new way of seeing, a deepened awareness of reality, new insights into the nature of ego, a new openness for modes of spirituality lacking in contemporary Western culture. Zen is exerting a powerful revitalizing influence on Western spiritual orientation and on the evaluation of religious experience for countless people of different religious affiliations or none at all. Often it is an "incognito-Zen", not even realized to be of Oriental origin. What the role of the mushrooming Zen centers is in this filtering through may take a long time to assess. Suffice it to say that the influence of Zen-derived insights far transcends the confines of these centers which often display a devout adoption of Japanese cultural forms and a peculiar Zen-fundamentalism, if not a Zen-upmanship, which seems to indicate that the process of assimilation and acculturation is still far from completed.

Professor Masao Abe in an article "Non-being and Mu" (*Religious Studies* 11, pp. 151-192) quotes Heidegger as considering "the history of Western metaphysics as the history of forgetfulness of Being." It may well be that we are catching up. And if being/non-being are now considered worthy of contemplation, it may be because of the precarious condition of our world—and of the pioneering life of Daisetz Suzuki.



In *Patterns of Inner Process* Dr. Lee presents the I Ching ["The Book of Changes"] as the cosmological framework within which he explores Jesus's teachings anew as an expression of "the inner process of man," his ultimate concern, his inner religious reality. He argues that these teachings have been distorted and misinterpreted by the exclusively "external" orientation which, until quite recently, dominated the Christian West. Conventional Western theology "externalizes" and objectifies the religious truths of this "inner process" into moralistic categories. The "inner process," however, encompasses the wholeness of the cosmic process and cannot possibly be apprehended in these categories.

FREDERICK FRANCK

Theology might therefore almost be replaced by cosmology.

He sees the New Testament itself as a witness to certain patterns of inner process and proceeds to present the I Ching and its sixty-four hexagrams (it has been called a "microcosm of the universe") as the cosmological frame of reference which may help us in gaining a fresh and essential insight into Jesus's teachings, and this notwithstanding the enormous cultural and time gap between I Ching and Gospel and the even wider generation gap between both of these and ourselves. Since Lee calls "external" that which deals with the phenomenal manifestations of Reality, while his use of "internal" refers to its noumenal aspect as a Whole, the external approach to Reality is focused on differentiation (for the phenomenal manifestations of Reality imply differentiation), whereas the "internal" or "noumenal" approach focuses on the Undifferentiated Continuum, the root of existence, the Whole.

The Western mind, because of its habitual overvaluation of consciousness, even—before Freud—an almost total neglect and ignorance of the unconscious, coupled with an exclusively quantitative and empirical approach to reality, could not but externalize and intellectualize Christ's use of the word "I" as referring to the core of the inner process, thereby missing its central significance. The Christ is the exemplar of this "I." When Jesus speaks of "I" in "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," in "Who sees Me, sees the Father," or "Before Abraham was, I am," he does not refer to his external but to his internal presence, a Presence that transcends that causality principle which is the basis of our usual rational and logical frame of reference. This "I" is the ultimate core and authentic subject of all beings and of every process of becoming. What is indicated in "I am the Light of the World" (a "Light" not split off from darkness, but complementary to it) and "I am the Bread of Life," is the "I" as "spiritual quantum of action." Jesus becomes therefore—as the Christ—the archetype of the human, Rinzai's "True Man," the Messiah within. This "inner Christ" is light-years away from the objectified Saviour of theology. He does not claim to be identical with the Father nor to be differentiated from Him. He is "in" the Father as the Father is "in" Him, stressing an inner reality and in no way an external identity. He is not the bringer of God's grace from the outside: He is this "grace" in us. Lee uses Nangaku's Zen-mondo to illustrate his point: "No polishing of a tile does make it into a mirror."

Zazen does not bestow Buddhahood on us; it uncovers and discloses that Buddha Nature which has been there from the beginningless beginning. Thus the Christ as the inner aspect of the reality of Jesus becomes the paradigm of our own Inner Self, the Cosmic Self, fully realized.

"In all faces lies the Face of faces veiled as in a riddle" (Nicholas Cusanus).

SEA CHANGE

The "Son, who is us loves the Father in spirit" is Zen terms "one mirror reflecting another with no shadow between them" (D. T. Suzuki in *Mysticism East and West*).

He concludes his study: "As we have already indicated, Christ left us the 'I' as the frame of reference in which we can identify our Selves as the same 'I', the true 'I' which is always in us and which is not limited to the historical Jesus but is unlimited and is eternal reality to all. . . . It is weakness on the part of Christianity to stress Jesus's historical uniqueness as its special claim to being the true religion. . . . The historical Jesus was the manifestation of his inner life which transcends all individual and historical limitations. In this inner reality all religions can share." Thus far Dr. Lee.

Whatever the merit of the parallelism between I Ching and Gospel, the book is of such considerable interest, because of its conclusion as to the nature of Christ and the Christ Nature in man. For in this, it is typical for a new Christian self-understanding, which seems to be spreading after 2000 years and might create a totally new meaning of the word "Christian" and of the claim of "being Christian." One might speak here not of the de-mythologization of Jesus, but of a de-idolization of Jesus and a re-mythologization of the figure of the Christ.

Could it indicate that after centuries of neglect and under the threat of imminent demise of our species, we are developing a new appreciation of, what Leibnitz called, the Perennial Philosophy?

• • •

Fr. Robert Vachon speaks in his meditative paper "Dying to Christ" of a crucial form of witnessing to Christ, "whom we can not fully know and live without dying to him, for otherwise we shall never understand his Presence in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, African religion, Taoism, Confucianism and even atheistic Humanism, for we shall ever be setting up barriers between men, between God and man in the name of God and of Christ." He quotes Jules Monchanin, the Catholic priest who lived in India as a Christian saduh: "We must transcend . . . the level of concepts, our last and most dangerous idols."

Vachon feels it is essential to recognize and adopt the Oriental insight that there is no distinction between God and man's Ground, that God is no other than the Self (or "neither Other nor Self, or neither Being nor Non-Being") and reconcile it with the "Holy Otherness" of God traditional in the West. He quotes Eckhart's "Man is truly God, and God is truly Man." In this non-dual context "Dying to Christ" therefore means: "Refusing to distinguish Christ from our deepest being whether this distinction is stressed by proclaiming 'I

FREDERICK FRANCK

am a Christian,' by defining it in Christian dogma, by preaching about it or even by experiencing Christ as being 'other' than our True Self, instead of as 'not-other,' as being our very Nature."

And since even this may still be a subtle form of objectification and distinction, we must say that Christ is neither Self nor Other, neither Being nor non-Being: "He is the No-Thing, the Void. His omnipresence has no need of our 'Christian testimony.' It is not our witness that brings him into the world! Silence or non-affirmation can be as true a witness as crying his name from the rooftops. There is such a thing as Christian idolatry; Christians in general have not guarded themselves . . . against this idolatry, instead of denouncing it with the same vehemence with which they have denounced other idols. . . . Christ reveals our true Nature: Emptiness . . . the Abyss draws us into the Abyss." And finally: "Christians accept to die to all egos except to the Christian ego, their last refuge . . ." So far Fr. Vachon, who proclaims in fact "the Wholly Other is within."



In remarkable agreement with this Canadian Catholic, the German Protestant Johann Werner Klein in his book on St. John's Gospel, *Ihr seid Götter*, views the Christ figure as challenging man to the awareness and self-understanding of his full humanness. For this writer also, Christ is the paradigm of man born from the Spirit, independent from genealogy and the gynecological particularities of his birth: "Man transcending to what he is." Christ is "a new human type." "Grace" is The New Man's potentiality of Enlightenment; it is his birthright.

Klein asks: "Is God, to use this name as a term for the Whole, indeed Wholly Other? Does, as Israel preached, a chasm separate us from God? Does not Jesus, addressing the spirit of the world as 'Father' invite us to do the same? 'As the Father has life within himself, so has the Son.' "

"Jesus never claimed a monopoly. He was as aware of his own uniqueness as of that of all others. . . . He calls for the freedom which one can only find within. Faith . . . has nothing to do with the acceptance of dogmatic formulations. It is the mode of action based in trust in the meaning of one's being. As some external phenomenon, as 'object,' as 'institution,' Christ must vanish."

Klein, without using the word, indicts the failed *upaya* of Christian tradition and convention, and presents a view of the Christ as the timeless exemplar in time of the specifically Human Nature, the Christ Nature. He does so without apparent indebtedness to Eastern insights.



SEA CHANGE

The next essay on my table was Brother David Stendl-Rast's. Brother David, a Benedictine monk, was born in Austria, has a Ph.D. in psychology and has seriously studied Zen. "It has finally become clear to us," he says, "that what is really essential to all religions, is faith," which he defines as an "attitude of letting go, a courageous trust in life." "It will become increasingly obvious that there are only two ways of being religious . . . one is fundamentalist. . . . This is the religion of fear, which is not religion at all, but is called 'religion.' Let's call it the wrong kind, the monkey religion, the aping religion, and over against that is the catholic faith, catholic with a small c, because the problem with Catholics is that they aren't catholic enough. There are catholic Buddhists who are much more catholic than those with a capital C, as there are catholic Jews and catholic Hindus . . . even catholic atheists, but . . . there are also fundamentalist atheists, and that is where the line goes through. Fear in its religious expression takes all sorts of forms. Dogmatism is the most obvious one. . . ."

"There is a whole dimension of life to which we have to listen with our whole heart, mind-fully. Mindfulness is necessary to find meaning and . . . the intellect is not the full mind."

He warns that the term "faith" should not be "used more than absolutely necessary, for it throws us off. We think faith means believing something, but having faith does not mean subscribing to some dogmas or articles of faith. . . . The particular form that religious faith takes, depends entirely on the time and place, on the social structure and the cultural patterns into which we are born. If we grasp and rigidly hold on to certain truths next we will clash with everyone who does not hold these truths. . . . Giving ourselves to the truth, is not taking the truth, grasping and holding onto it."

As essence of the monastic lifestyle, he sees "cultivating that openness towards meaning, which all of us experience during our 'peak experiences.'"

There may not be anything startlingly new in these statements, except as statements by a Catholic monk they are, as such, profoundly touching by their radical openness.



I am tempted to complement them by quoting another Catholic priest, Raimundo Panikkar: "Contemplation without action is powerless; action without contemplation is simply blind. . . . The compartmentalisation which we often take for granted and often has been imposed by bureaucratic exigency or by the belief that religion is a 'subject matter,' a 'department,' something that can be taught or handled 'academically' breaks down completely. Any religion which can be merely 'taught' by system A or by procedure B is . . ."

FREDERICK FRANCK

obsolete. . . . Any religion which is not a new creation on an ongoing basis is not an authentic living religion. Any religious education which teaches only 'traditional doctrines' and neglects to handle living contents—and by so doing metamorphose them, is neither education nor religion . . . [for] religious education constrained by the past, afraid of the future is not religious education."

• • •

Fr. Thomas Berry's paper is entitled "The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification and Transmission of Values." It hardly manifests an obvious debt to either Christianity or Mahayana Buddhism. Yet while reading this radical paper almost immediately after the author's admirable *Buddhism* (New York, 1975), I could not help feeling that his thorough readings in Buddhism had left their powerful influence. From this paper the terms "God" and "Christ" are almost absent.

But let me summarize it in some detail. "We are in trouble," Fr. Berry starts his argument, "because we lack a good 'story.' We are in between such stories. The old myth of Christianity had shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with a life aim, consecrated suffering, integrated knowledge and guided education. Without either making us good or eliminating the pains and stupidities of life, it provided us with a context in which we could function meaningfully. This traditional story has, in larger social dimensions, become dysfunctional. Valid as it may still be for certain individuals, it leaves to the great majority of mankind only the choice, on the one hand, between various modern programs that quickly prove to be as ephemeral as they are marginal . . . or, on the other, a return to earlier religious fundamentalisms which are bound to quickly prove themselves as sterile."

The religious communities, having become tribalized and dysfunctional, still provide at most a semblance of meaning to the institutional and public life of a society which has itself become equally dysfunctional. Its miraculous technologies serving ephemeral purposes, remain without satisfactory meaning and are even impotent to restrain the violence of its own components.

Fr. Berry holds that Western society only had a functional myth until around the fourteenth century, when the Black Death tore the fabric of society apart and people responded to the disastrous events in two distinct ways. One of these was to develop into the secular and scientific community; the other reverted to the spirituality of recaptured esoteric traditions, even to pre-Christian beliefs and rituals. Within traditional Christianity this tendency led to an excessive emphasis on "redemption" and to a withdrawal from all creativity, even to a neglect of its own creation doctrines. Cosmology became a glossed-over subject, almost taboo. This trend was further exacerbated by the religious

SEA CHANGE

upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and even more by the shock of the Enlightenment movement and the revolutionary periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This engrossment with redemption survived in contemporary Western society and remained relatively effective in America until recently. It no longer is, however, for it does not take into account either the "story" of the earth nor an integrating "story" of mankind. It has become sectarian and isolationist, characterized as it is by an intense preoccupation with the personality of the Saviour. An obsessive Jesus-fixation, one might say, became the exclusive form of the spiritual life of the faithful and of their salvatic community. This sectarian, isolated faith-system has now inevitably entered into its stage of entropy and is becoming increasingly unproductive.

The alternative response to the trauma of the Black Death led eventually to the secular and scientific structures of our society: earthly terror, obviously not to be remedied by supernatural powers, could only be eliminated by an understanding of nature, of the earth process itself. Scientific inquiry became the dominant human preoccupation, pushed forward by obscure forces in the unconscious of Western man.

The discovery of the time-sequence of the formation of the earth and of life on earth prepared for Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) which could not but explode the Judaeo-Christian Creation Myth in which the complex of life-manifestations was ascribed to some external divine act, a once and for all event, instead of a process of continuous transformation. Soon physicists by their study of light and radiation would come to an understanding of the infra-atomic world and of galactic systems.

A new story of the universe seemed ready to replace the old. The opaqueness of matter had dissolved. The scientist's worldview brought to man an awareness of not being an isolated Olympian observer: the proud observer proved to be integral to the process observed, as the latest expression of a cosmic-earth process. Man became the being in which the evolving cosmic-earth-human process may become self-aware.

If one may speak here of the emergence of a new myth, it is an entirely different one from all previous Eurasian creation myths. It presents the world as a continuous process of emergence in which there is an inner organic bond of interdependence, in which the origination of each reality issues from an earlier reality.

The dominant Christian redemption mystique resulted in an a-cosmic, a-historical religious mood which is, creatively speaking, played out. It has grown apart from both the history of man and the earth story and is rapidly being vitiated by entropy. The secular scientific community on the other hand is exclusively committed to a purely physio-biological version of the cosmic-earth-human process, to the exclusion of its spiritual components. The society

FREDERICK FRANCK

supported by this vision simultaneously is now falling into entropy. Because of its lack of meaning, it increasingly reveals itself as absurd. Meanwhile the religious community continues to propagate its redemptive values, dysfunctional as they may be to humanity as a whole, whereas scientific development is veering into a direction in which it is becoming increasingly realized that the cosmic process, the universe, does indeed carry within itself a psychic as well as physical dimension. But until the scientific mind and that of the man of faith can agree on the existence and synthesis of the "physical" and "psychic" aspects of the cosmic-earth-human process, no universal "story" can emerge as an aid to the orientation of our understanding of the universe and the conduct of human affairs.

This "story" of the universe would have to be one in which each new level of being emerges through the urgency of self-transcendence, in a process of transformation in which all galactic systems, our solar system, our earth take shape, as well as man: a being in whom this entire unfolding process may become conscious of itself, for only man can become aware of bearing the universe in himself as the universe bears him. It is from this scenario that a new revelatory experience, a new paradigm of what it is to be human, emerges. Man now determines to a large extent the earth processes which once determined him. To a degree the earth now controls itself through man.

An important component of a new "story" must be the realization of the intercommunion within the universe itself, in a web of relationships, and that in the human consciousness the potentiality for realization of the relationship of individual to the human community and ultimately, that to the entire earth-human process, and to the Whole. As far as the transmission of values is concerned, we lack initiation techniques for such transmission from one generation to the next. In our time an integrational phase of the earth process seems to announce itself; to the extent that the limitations of redemption rhetoric and scientific rhetoric are becoming recognized as such, a new integral language of being and value has a chance to develop.

I have tried to lift the most salient points out of Professor Berry's densely written paper in which the "spiritual" emancipates itself as a "Will to Reality," a "Will to Meaning" to replace the Will-to-Power inherited from Nietzschean nihilism. Is it the beckoning of Prajna-Karuna as the full awareness of cosmic process and the realization of our place in it?

• • •

It is as if we were separated by ages from Catholic utterances like Dom Aelred Graham's *Zen Catholicism* which appeared in 1963, armed with *Nihil Obstat*

SEA CHANGE

and an Imprimatur by Cardinal Spellman, guaranteeing it to be free of doctrinal and moral error. Graham's book is that of a sophisticated and gentlemanly Catholic apologist of distinct goodwill, who is gladly prepared to use Zen "techniques" to shore up faltering Catholic morale. But he still seemed to share that hereditary obsession of Christian scholars, who regard non-Christian religions as little more than hors d'oeuvres for the Last Supper. He also shares the facile shudders at Zen as being in constant danger of anomie, as if authentic Zen insight were not that of compassionate reverence for all beings, and he has to assure his readers that "given God's grace we can live in the continuous presence . . . Zen is aiming at" and that "with greater possibility of success it is the goal of Catholic spirituality." In other words: "With God's grace, who needs Zen?"

Fr. Graham, obviously aware of the Church's failure in its task to be a guru to modern man, points repeatedly and defensively to the treasures of wisdom in his own tradition, which no one doubts: "If Zen is to be the *occasion of benefit* to the Church, it can only be that Zen's essential insight, here understood as the insight of the Compassionate Buddha, is already latent in Catholicism," although "it must be confessed—not as an open river but as a hidden stream." Certain aspects of Zen presumably are acceptable to be appropriated, *ad majoram Dei gloriam!*

One is tempted to let Thomas Merton answer: "Zen enriches no one. There is no body to be found. The birds may come and circle for a while in the place where it is thought to be. But they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the 'nothing,' the 'no-body' that was there, suddenly appears. That is Zen" (*Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, New York, 1968). In Merton's *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York, 1961), which appeared two years before Dom Aelred's book, one discovers a Westerner and a Catholic whose grasp of Zen one deeply and reverently respects. But then he was a profound man and a poet, the forerunner who can see: "If the Zen of Hui Neng is what we tried to show it to be, then it is anything but a mystique of passivity and of withdrawal. It is not a resting in one's own interiority but a complete release from bondage to the limited . . . self."



By way of contrast with the foregoing profound and fearless self-confrontations, which is hardly conceivable without the clarifying influence of Zen, I regret but find it important to mention a book by William Johnson, S.J., purporting to introduce "Christian Zen." It shocked me, coming fifteen years after Merton's extraordinarily sensitive essays. Is this painfully graceless, and to the guileless reader, even misleading book a mistake that escaped uncorrected from the

FREDERICK FRANCK

author's desk? One hopes so, for Fr. Johnston has experience of Zen and has lived in Japan for many years. The book is a throwback to the days in which it was assumed that Zen could simply be annexed to make up for "devotions that have propped up popular faith in the past . . . the rosary, the way of the cross, novenas." Often the writing is tactless: "First of all I think that things like Zen can help to update and demythologize much of the theology that underlies Christian mysticism." Or even offensive: "People sometimes say that Zen is crazy and that anyone interested in the business should have his, or her, head examined." These are fair samples of a literary style that boasts, "I myself don't fall down in admiration before (James) Joyce and consider him something of a nut," or characterizes Christianity as: "[It] began as a Jewish thing, but Augustine, Gregory, and the rest did not swallow the whole bit hook, line and sinker."

Where Merton understood that to conceive of satori as "an experience a subject is capable of 'having' is contrary to all the implications of Zen," Johnston speaks of "joy [of enlightenment] . . . that . . . floods the *personality*" (italics added) and lest the reader is still unaware of it he counsels: "Every potential mystic needs an occasional kick in the pants, lest he—or she—fall into conceit . . . and all the tomfoolery popularly known as bloody nonsense." I trust that Fr. Johnston on seeing his writing in print, was as regretful of his *Christian Zen as I*, and realized with R. H. Blyth that "writing about Zen is easy," but that "if one cannot write by Zen, one should not write at all."

• • •

None of the writers quoted proposes to scrap traditional and even conventional Christianity, yet they seem to agree in announcing a meta-Christian mentality as a religious alternative for the multitudes estranged from the Christian message in its institutionalized form and as a bridge to the non-Christian religions.

It is this ancient Zen-insight of Hui Hai: "Whether a man gains illumination or remains deluded depends on himself, not on differences and similarities in doctrine," which seems to have been realized by the majority of the writers discussed, without the least betrayal of their own heritage. Have they found the *sharira* in the ashes of time-bound institutions?