

THE END OF RELIGION

New Explorations in Spiritual Practice with Aelred Graham

Richard Boileau

‘The devout Christian of the future will either be a “mystic” ... or he will cease to be anything at all.’ (Karl Rahner)¹

‘To me, Eastern Wisdom gives the key to Christianity.’ (Bede Griffiths)²

N IETZSCHE PRONOUNCED GOD DEAD in 1882, a proclamation that has been amplified one way or another ever since. The fact that church attendance has declined dramatically in most places is offered as evidence. Though absolute numbers are increasing in some parishes, the fact that attendance is diminishing overall as a percentage of the baptized population in most Western countries is indisputable.³

A number of factors can be cited to explain this. According to one observer, ‘The Christian religion today ... has lost much of the power to stimulate the mind. It appears dull and uninteresting, especially to the young.’ This is not a recent observation. It was written exactly fifty years ago and appeared in a book called *The End of Religion* by Dom Aelred Graham, published in 1971, when it won the National Catholic Book Award for popular theology.⁴ At the outset Graham quoted Ecclesiastes—‘Better is the end of a thing than its beginning’—as well as a familiar passage from T. S. Eliot’s *Little Gidding*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploration
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁵

¹ Karl Rahner, ‘Christian Living Formerly and Today’, in *Theological Investigations*, volume 7, translated by David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 15.

² Bede Griffiths to Martyn Skinner, 1971, quoted in Shirley du Boulay, *Beyond the Darkness: A Biography of Bede Griffiths* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 181.

³ See Ronald F. Inglehart, *Religion’s Sudden Decline: What’s Causing It, and What Comes Next?* (Oxford; OUP, 2021), 97–99.

⁴ Dom Aelred Graham, *The End of Religion: Autobiographical Explorations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 14.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 1969), 197.

This is the hope that Graham raised in his book and the hope about which I wish to write here.

Among the social effects of the COVID-19 epidemic is a resurgence of predictions about the end of churchgoing, at least as we have known it until now. Speculation about the end of religion itself has been with us for a long time and lingers unabated. Yet, if there is reason to worry about the health of religion today, there is clear evidence that spirituality, however defined, as a driving force within and among individuals, is alive and thriving. The quest for meaning is ever-present and reveals an underlying hunger for authentic spirituality that satisfies the deepest human yearning.

Is Christianity Enough?

The title of Graham's book is a clever double entendre. On the one hand, it raises the prospect of a kind of death. On the other, it points to resurrection in the mode of a radical recentring on religion's ultimate goal. Does it have a singular purpose? If there is a one-size-fits-all answer, Graham skates around it, aside from pointing to the impulse for truth about ourselves. But a purpose is nonetheless assumed by each devotee and it is to that end that each must be faithful. For Christianity, it has something to do with salvation, but what does that mean to each person?

Regardless of the answer, Graham posed a telling question with the title of his fifth chapter: 'Is Christianity enough?' He pointed out, for instance, that 'the primitive Church was the congregation of "the end of days"'. As the ultimate end was then assumed to be imminent, it follows that strategies proposed for the first Christians were shaped by that understanding. Might we wonder if these are still as relevant today as they once were? Graham added:

C. S. Lewis could be right in his suggestion that after a mere 2,000 years we are still early Christians

The truth appears to be that the primitive Church had no consistently thought-out ethical system comparable, for example, to that of Buddhism.⁶

This statement may seem outdated to some half a century after Vatican II, but to others it still has merit. While libraries have been filled by brilliant

⁶ Graham, *End of Religion*, 96.

scholars during the intervening years, a question remains about the extent of their influence on the lives of parishioners. Graham continued:

Comparing for a moment the Judaic tradition with that of Hinduism, in the whole of biblical literature, I can think of nothing to compare—for an ethical ideal expressed with succinctness, clarity, and precision—to Krishna's counsel to Arjuna at the opening of the sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita.⁷

Christianity and Buddhism

The wisdom and ethical principles from which all schools of Buddhism operate were summarised at the very beginning by Gautama in addressing his first disciples at Sarnath, on the outskirts of Varanasi (Benares):

... the Four Noble Truths, concerning the nature, origin, term and cure of all human distress; and the Noble Eightfold Path, the cure, whose stages are Right Views, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.⁸

It is upon these admonitions that all Buddhist teaching (*dhama*) rests.

Graham was not striving for conciliation between Christian and Buddhist doctrine, and he was candid about incompatibilities within and between traditions of the West and East. The long chapter entitled 'Promptings from India' begins with the uneasy relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism, and ends with a long description of the tantric tradition and his meeting with the Dalai Lama. Concerned about what he perceived to be Christian unwillingness to apply practices that could prove beneficial, Graham observed,

Catholicism takes account of the fact that God is immanent as well as transcendent, though Church authority has not always been very happy about the divine immanence. Things are really much simpler to handle if people would only be content to go to Mass instead of wanting to sit quietly in meditation.⁹

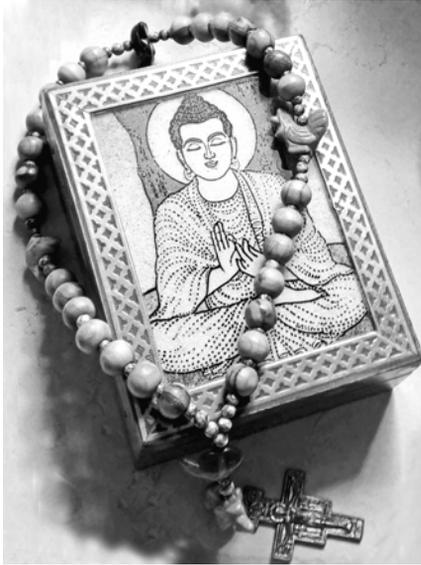
Eight years before the publication of *The End of Religion*, Graham's book *Zen Catholicism* appeared in print as a response to the restlessness and genuine curiosity felt by many. In the same year, Thomas Merton published

⁷ Graham, *End of Religion*, 97–98.

⁸ Graham, *End of Religion*, 153.

⁹ Graham, *End of Religion*, 102.

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Mystics and Zen Masters.¹⁰ Both are disciplined explorations that the authors hoped would lead to a deeper and more constructive practice of the Roman Catholic faith. Merton is often credited with popularising the wisdom of Asia among Catholic readers seeking new ways of relating to the divine. Like many others who have made the journey and felt a kind of epiphany, Merton seized on Zen in a special way.

'Zen enriches no one', Merton wrote in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*—one of his last books to be published before his death in 1968. 'There is no

body to be found. The birds may come and circle for a while ... but they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the "nothing", the "no-body" that was there, suddenly appears. That is Zen.'¹¹ As Bonnie Thurston explains:

Thomas Merton realized that 'you can hardly set Christianity and Zen side by side and compare them. That would almost be like trying to compare mathematics and tennis.' Problems like those of emptiness vs. God, nirvana vs. salvation, and wisdom vs. faith loomed large in his mind. And yet he did, in fact, set the two side by side and, without unduly distorting either, gleaned from them a remarkable approach to human identity. He understood so well because he understood from both positions.¹²

Much of this exploration rests upon the idea that Zen (translated from Sanskrit as *meditation* or *contemplation*) is not the exclusive property of Buddhism. The Zen abbot Shibayama Zemkei wrote:

¹⁰ Dom Aelred Graham, *Zen Catholicism* (New York: Crossroad, 1963); Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Delta, 1963); also worth noting is Chalmers MacCormick, 'The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 9 (Fall 1972), 802–818.

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), ix.

¹² Bonnie Bowman Thurston, 'Zen Influence on Thomas Merton's View of the Self', *Japanese Religions*, 14/3 (December 1986), 17–31, here 17, quoting Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 33.

Zen can be accepted in the broad sense as Zen itself ... apart from its narrow sectarian interpretation as a school of Buddhism. When Zen is seen in such a broad sense ... there can be a Christian Zen, or Taoist Zen.¹³

Many people either eschew the lessons of other religious traditions, randomly adopt religious practices only to suit their preconceptions, or try to resolve any tension at the intellectual level by trivialising them. They may use the word *Zen* interchangeably with relaxation—not unlike those who freely associate Franciscanism with birdbaths and restful gardens—rather than awakening to the true nature of things or awareness of the true self, which may ultimately lead, almost as a bonus, to the resolution of tensions. The internet is riddled with facile escapes from the effort that is required for this awakening.

The idea that propels the genuine rapprochement of Christianity with Zen practice is one of mindfully returning meditation and contemplation to the very heart of Christian understanding and devotion, beyond the cacophony of doctrines and rituals. In an interview Robert Kennedy, a Jesuit priest and Zen teacher, recalled what his own teacher Yamada Roshi had said: “I do not want to make you a Buddhist. I want to empty you in imitation of your Lord Jesus Christ who emptied himself.” Zen helped me with letting myself be emptied.¹⁴

On the other hand, detaching Zen from Buddhism is a little like detaching the Eucharist from Christianity. Some of the wrapping sticks to the gift, and Zen comes in a package that should not be discarded. It favours, among other things, a mystical knowing beyond concepts, which some see as threatening to religion but which, for others, is the salvation of their faith and the path to a different kind of consciousness. In 1959, Merton wrote:

Not to be foolish and multiply words, I'll say simply that it seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the Gospels, and the Gospels are bursting with it. It is the proper climate for any monk, no matter what kind of monk he may be. If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation.¹⁵

¹³ Zenkei Shibayama, *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays*, translated by Sumiko Kudo (Rutland, Vt: Charles E. Tuttle, 1970), 16.

¹⁴ Robert Hirschfield, 'God Is in the Zendo: A Profile of Father Robert Kennedy Roshi, a Catholic Priest and Zen Teacher', *Tricycle Magazine* (Fall 2005), available at <https://tricycle.org/magazine/god-zendo/>, accessed 4 October 2021.

¹⁵ *Encounter: Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki* (Monterey, Ky: Larkspur, 1988), 5–6.

Most people stay safely back from the boundaries of their own tradition. Some go to the edge and occasionally cross over, gingerly. Few are at home in both. Ruben Habito is a Filipino Zen roshi of the Sanbo Kyodan lineage and a former Jesuit, who teaches theology at Southern Methodist University. He has written many books, including *Be Still and Know: Zen and the Bible*, *Zen and the Spiritual Exercises* and *Living Zen, Loving God*. He begins by asserting that Zen Buddhism is non-theistic and that its aim is awakening by emptying the ego-conscious mind, returning to the concrete world and, ‘what divides Self and Other having been broken, one awakens as in a bottomless ocean of compassion, every single breath finding oneself at-one with all sentient beings in suffering’.¹⁶ Like all Christian contemplatives, Habito values silence: ‘If one follows the Breath in trust, and opens one’s heart to listen, one may be able to hear a voice, saying, “You are my Beloved. In you I am well pleased.”’¹⁷ In *Be Still and Know*, he recalls with deep gratitude the invitation from his own Zen teacher, Yamada Koun, ‘to explore the Bible for ways that can point us toward paths that merge with the Zen path’.¹⁸

Zen and Contemplative Practice

Long the hallmark of the monastic life, contemplative practice, the West’s rough equivalent of *zazen* (sitting in meditation), has spread to the active life as well. Much is written and said these days about contemplative consciousness, which Richard Rohr describes as a non-dual openness to reality by which ‘you can stand back and compassionately observe the self or any event from an appropriately detached viewing platform’.¹⁹ Rohr may be its most systematic advocate, but James Finley, a novice of Merton’s at Gethsemani Abbey, is perhaps contemplative practice’s most poetic voice:

You can sit and renew your awareness that you’re sitting in the presence of God all about you and within you. As you inhale, inhale God’s silent ‘I love you’, in which God is being poured out and utterly given away to you as the miracle of your very life Then when you exhale, exhale yourself in love and giving yourself in love to the love

¹⁶ Ruben Habito, *Living Zen, Loving God* (Boston, Ma: Wisdom, 2004), 107.

¹⁷ Ruben Habito, ‘Zen and Christian: God-Talk out of Silence’, in *Translating Religion*, edited by Mary Doak and Anita Houck (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013), 184–189, here 187.

¹⁸ Ruben Habito, *Be Still and Know: Zen and the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017), 171.

¹⁹ Richard Rohr, *A Spring within Us: A Year of Daily Meditations* (London: SPCK, 2018), 275.

that with the next inhalation will give itself to you. And so, 'I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.' From the reciprocity of love, destiny is fulfilled, and the foundations of suffering are healed.²⁰

Finley expresses those fleeting moments of mystical consciousness in meditation as 'infinite union with infinite love'.²¹

Paradoxically, such a union is only possible beyond the concepts we might conjure up about the state of union or the nature of love, especially infinite love. Here too, Zen serves to help us set aside the natural desire for simple cognitive understanding. Graham wrote that 'Zen meditation is instantaneously contemplative; it has been described as seeing without desire'.²² Unlike traditional *lectio divina*, Zen meditation is totally non-discursive and tied to non-dualism (*advaita*), which eschews distinctions. Though distinctions serve an important purpose in many respects, *advaita* is not all that different from Ignatian *indifferentia* inasmuch as it renounces personal preference as a criterion for relating to reality. In the moment of meditation, we are invited to prefer neither this nor that. In this regard, Graham quoted this Buddhist scripture:

The perfect way knows no difficulties
Except that it refuses to make preferences; ...
If you wish to see it before your own eyes
Have no fixed thoughts either for or against it.²³

Among other benefits of Zen practice are attentiveness and consideration of religious experience in everyday life, connection with all humanity and nature, and compassion as the means to peace with self and others. These are not antithetical to Christianity, nor are they quaint ideas to be simply grafted on to the trunk of tradition, as they contain vital ways of being Christian, not only open to encounter and dialogue, but eager for a more fraternal world, in accordance with Pope Francis's encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. In a 1965 address to the Society of St John the Evangelist, Aelred Graham offered a complex and compelling argument in which he stated,

²⁰ James Finley, *Practice That Grounds Us in the Sustaining Love of God* (Center for Action and Contemplation, 2020), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-A16N4hKou0>, accessed 26 September 2021.

²¹ James Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 6.

²² Graham, *Zen Catholicism*, 145.

²³ Graham, *Zen Catholicism*, 42.

What seems to me of great interest to Christians is the Buddhist insight and manner of meditation. By the Buddhist insight I mean roughly what is indicated in Gautama's Holy Truths, and by meditation I mean the kind of physical and mental discipline practised by Zen Buddhists.²⁴

Many people today subscribe to the style of Christian meditation inaugurated by John Main or the similar centring prayer advocated by Thomas Keating.²⁵ But for others, neither is quite enough. Some feast on the Gospels and Epistles, and the wisdom literature of Hebrew scripture, as well as the sutras of Hinduism and Buddhism. This mixed diet is nourishing to those who find merit in a degree of engagement with what is partly complementary and partly dialectical, leading to a new understanding and practice. Paul Tillich alluded to this search for new foundations by referring to the insufficiency of religion that answers some questions but not others: 'Religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all of its functions', meaning that religion that does not house all reality will not suffice without responsible additions or renovations.²⁶

The process of building an adequate spiritual frame can be fraught and frustrating. William Johnston, an Irish Jesuit who lived in Japan and was an active participant in the Christian–Buddhist dialogue, approached the task cautiously. 'I do not think that Christian contemplation and Zen are the same thing', he wrote, but drew a parallel between *satori* (enlightenment) and *metanoia*, citing Paul's sudden reversal on the road to Damascus, Moses taking off his shoes as he realised that the very ground was holy, and Isaiah and the prophets coming to an inexplicable awareness of God's action.²⁷ In each case, the language is Judaeo-Christian, but points to mystical consciousness beyond our own.

The juxtaposition of Zen and Christianity is not universally appealing and is even an anathema to some. For those who are inclined to investigate its possibilities, high among the merits of Zen is its capacity to declutter the heart and mind, and broaden the ground on which

²⁴ Aelred Graham, 'On Meditation', *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 1/1 (Winter 1967).

²⁵ See John Main, *The Way of Unknowing: Expanding Spiritual Horizons through Meditation* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2011); Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 2009).

²⁶ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford U, 1964), 5–6, quoted in Graham, 'On Meditation'.

²⁷ William Johnston, *Christian Zen* (New York: Fordham U, 1997), 130. Also worth noting is John James Kendall, 'Through Words and Silence: A Comparative Study of William Johnston and Thomas Merton, Roman Catholics in Dialogue with Zen' (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1983).



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core values are lived. In an age when classical religious categories and claims are increasingly rejected and when relativism is emerging as a dominant force, a thoughtful bridging of complementary beliefs and simplification of praxis may ultimately serve faith better than tiresome debates and hollowed-out symbols.

Theological Objections

We cannot don the garment that Graham calls Zen Catholicism without adjustments. Though it may be fashionable to bring out our 1960s clothing, it will surely bind and tear here and there. Despite the truths that are shared, if expressed differently, we must take account of fundamental distinctions and incompatibilities. In listing a few challenges, there is no pretence of solving these riddles. For some, they will be prohibitive. But for others, this brief exploration may serve as an invitation to determine what reasonable accommodations suit their particular circumstances.

Eschatology

James Fredericks raises the question, 'In order to practise Zen meditation, do Christians have to forsake their eschatological hope in future fulfilment? By embracing the mystic in Zen, are we casting out the prophet?' He added that Buddhism can be said to have its own unique eschatology. 'Masao Abe (eminent Japanese Buddhist philosopher and religious studies scholar d.2006) once spoke to me about a fully realised eschatology in Zen.'²⁸

²⁸ Correspondence with the author.

Eric Cunningham is a professor at Gonzaga University in Washington State and a specialist in modern Japanese literature and history, with interests that include Zen Buddhism, religion and postmodernism. He points out that the respected Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro (d.1945) depicted the entire historical process as an unfolding Zen dialectic in an eternal now leading to absolute nothingness.²⁹ Kitaro believed that human life and history were eschatological in their essence, inasmuch as everyday life was a constant creation and recreation of the world; he also maintained that this eschatological quality of life and the world corresponded to what Zen master Rinzai (d.866) understood as the moment of enlightenment.³⁰ On the surface, at least, such an eschaton seems incompatible with Christian revelation, which is both rich and necessary to understanding the teachings and actions of Jesus. In so far as Christian life is an imitation of Christ—maybe better stated as a kind of channelling of Christ—its eschatological hope is part of its efficacy.

The fact that both one's present stance and eschatological orientation are important is obvious; it is also self-evident that orientation affects one's stance. But to what degree? Is it not still possible to derive considerable benefit from a common stance even if the orientations are different? Moreover, is it not necessary to guard against fixing one's gaze upon a distant horizon only to overlook the present graced moment, thereby paralyzing our capacity to integrate experience in order to appreciate our orientation with more clarity? Indeed, is it not possible that by sitting in this common stance we might sharpen our awareness of the true nature of hope?

Zen silence is not quietism, and to the extent that it is probably impossible to keep experience unframed, unexamined, and disconnected from the functions of understanding, judgment and decision, a Zen practitioner's assumptions about the path and purpose of life are never set aside for long. While it is true that a purist would argue that hope is an attachment and implies dualism, and so is antithetical to Buddhism, there is a degree of indulgence in sheltering theological hope from the surreptitious encroachment of wishful thinking or the avoidant tendency to construct elaborate ungrounded scenarios.

In an analysis of mysticism as it relates to the Christian encounter with Zen, William Johnston reminded us that Zen meditation is dedicated

²⁹ Correspondence with the author.

³⁰ Nishida Kitaro, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, translated by David A. Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 110.

to enlightenment, recalling Suzuki's expression *kensho*, 'seeing into the essence of things', which may be interpreted as having redemptive qualities about which one might truly sit hopefully.³¹ To be sure, the role of grace is key, and Johnston exhaustively exposed the history of Christianity's complex relationship with grace, only to leave this reader wondering how that understanding might evolve in the future. 'The true mystical descent to the core of one's being', Johnston concluded, 'is always accompanied by progress in moral virtue and in psychic maturity, and it effects a reform or a conversion'.

Religions from the East and West fall into two distinct but complementary categories. We may regard the West as soundly representing the prophetic tradition and the East constituting the best of the wisdom tradition. If so, it is not sufficient to ground Christhood in biblical insights only. The wisdom of the East can serve to deepen our understanding. But wisdom traditions are not sufficient either.

Gnosticism

It has been suggested that appeals to religious experience may be at risk of gnosticism, which emphasizes personal spiritual knowledge over traditional religious authority. James Fredericks, professor emeritus at Loyola Marymount University in California, a specialist in dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, says 'without the prophetic dimension, the mystical decays quickly into mere Gnosticism. Christians are always in need of resisting Gnosticism.' This implies that the Church as an institution is the repository of prophetic teaching.³²

On the other hand, Paul Knitter, author of *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, affirms:

... if we truly believe that the Holy Mystery we call God is a loving Mystery, then we would expect this mystery to be available/communicate itself to all human beings. If the Mystery is one, then the communication and experience of this Mystery would surely show common qualities and characteristics. Surveying the mystics of the various religious traditions of the world, that is precisely what we find As much as some forms of Gnosticism affirm a Mystery that is detached from and dismissive of the material world, I would, as a Christian with firm Jewish roots, have to disagree.³³

³¹ See William Johnston, 'Defining Mysticism: Suggestions from the Christian Encounter with Zen', *Theological Studies*, 28/1 (February 1967), 94-110, here 94, 109.

³² Correspondence with the author.

³³ Correspondence with the author.

Gnosticism does represent a real danger to coherence in the Roman Catholic faith, as it did long before being discredited by Irenaeus, but, I suggest, the label is often too easily deployed.

As authentic Christianity and Buddhism both invite us into the universe of experience, arbitrary abstractions are of course unhelpful, particularly as they may cause us to gloss over real differences or, in the worst cases, scramble things together into some unscrutinised and undifferentiated porridge that is neither satisfying nor nutritious. It is a fact that the random parroting of sacred texts and the arbitrary adoption of diverse religious practices can easily slip into syncretism. But this calls for caution, not fear. The risk of confusion or dilution can be mitigated by rigorous rules of engagement.

Relationship

A major difference between Christianity and Buddhism is encountered where the former seeks a *relationship* with Christ, as the only Son of God, enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth. As Buddhism draws our attention to the Self, it is tempting to conclude that Zen precludes relationship. Yet, it is important to point out that this is not the egoic self. There is a kind of relationship in *identifying* with the True or Universal Self, the Cosmic Christ to which St Paul alludes enigmatically in his letter to the Galatians (2:20).

Indeed, Aelred Graham pointedly asked: 'Is religion best seen in terms of a relationship or an identity with the pure Existence we call God?' He acknowledged the contrast between the Eastern emphasis on the divinity that abides in the human person and the Western insistence on otherness, a kind of immanence-versus-transcendence dichotomy. He offered provisionally, 'For the moment, let us say that the ideal situation between God and man is best expressed as neither identity nor relationship but as harmony'.³⁴ On one level, this is a brilliant solution, but practically—theologically, liturgically—it solves nothing.

But it may just be that such theological distinctions are not the most important consideration. Ultimately, the Judaeo-Christian tradition invites us 'to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8). If these can best be done by drawing what is most inspiring from what appear on the surface to be different sources,

³⁴ Graham, *End of Religion*, 23–24.

so be it. And if that is the case, can we continue to maintain that, in God's plan, these sources are truly disparate?

Eric Cunningham acknowledges, 'Zen is a genuine path to transcendence, and its mystics over the centuries have revealed as much about the nature of the spiritual world as have visionaries such as St John of the Cross or St Theresa of Ávila', but also 'It is one thing to seek Unity behind dualism, another thing to realise that without some separation between things, there is no space for love to flow between them'.³⁵ This issue cannot be overlooked, but as his own journey—as well as those of Graham, Merton and others—has indicated, finding a way to hold these facts in tension offers benefits that outweigh the risks.

Being Religious Spiritually

'Let me end as I began, on a limiting autobiographical note, the better to avoid any pretense of impersonal objectivity.'³⁶ So wrote Graham in the last chapter of *The End of Religion*. I claim the same protection from prosecution here. The dialogue between East and West has continued unabated in my head and heart for half a century already. I have found the spiritual quest to be a roller-coaster ride, or maybe a modest facsimile of the mythical and archetypal 'hero's journey'—rife with trials, ordeals and transformations. There will be no final resolution in this life, I suspect.

Taken together, Graham's books raise a range of possibilities for engagement with Eastern teaching. It seems improbable that God would have given either the East or the West a monopoly on wisdom, or that Judaeo-Christianity and Hinduism-Buddhism are sufficient unto themselves. More plausible is the proposition that God's plan from the beginning was to seed a desire to be known through one another, then putting us on the path of dialogue.

One hears a great deal these days about a distinction made by disaffected Christians between being spiritual and being religious. Though it often reflects a sincere desire for authenticity, such a statement conveniently avoids hard and important questions. Is it more authentic to be religious or spiritual, or is there not more of a need to be religious spiritually? By itself, religion can be rather deadening. I once said in jest that it 'inoculates a person against spirituality'. Though there is

³⁵ Correspondence with the author.

³⁶ Graham, *End of Religion*, 253.

some truth to this, to be spiritual unsystematically exposes us to the tyranny of the false self. Still, you cannot blame some people for being unenthusiastic about going to church. James Finley quotes Thomas Merton as saying, 'There's a lot of people losing their faith, and they're losing it in church', adding, 'The tragedy of it all is that this unitive state of realization we're talking about is the pull of all world religions, including Christianity. The scandal of the church is that it does not teach its own traditions.'³⁷

I can only speak about what revitalised my faith, not once, but twice in my own life. The solution was meditation, combined with attention to my personal religious experience, which is the fruit of what is increasingly called contemplative consciousness. From this perspective, understanding the place of religion was enriched and its practice became better integrated with daily life. While this is a personal reflection, I have written this article to serve readers who may feel similarly.

At the same time as being religious spiritually, one must be spiritual religiously, by rigorously attending to God's presence in all moments of life. Though this seems like a highly individualistic activity, in fact it is deeply communitarian because meditation throws open the shutters of our private or tribal consciousness while attentiveness to personal experience acquaints us with the mystery of God in the world. John Main, a pioneer of Christian meditation, wrote: 'Meditation is the way that is entirely open to God because it is open to our own being and the world of creation'.³⁸

I have sometimes mused that we need two religions: one for religious belonging, a shared theology and a common home where we rest and find our meaning in God, the other to inspire us in fresh ways and to raise necessary questions about a range of unexamined assumptions. In choosing to live religiously, I am well aware of the obligation to strive in all things for authenticity, which requires inherited tradition and teaching to be subjected to the crucible of experience in a manner that is attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible. We are invited by life itself to live religion mindfully and heartfully, not as some standard-issue uniform or, God forbid, weapon. It takes courage, maybe even audacity, to do this, because risk, hard work and—sometimes—loneliness are unavoidable.

³⁷ 'James Finley: Breathing God', interview with Tami Simon, at <https://www.resources.soundstrue.com/transcript/james-finley-breathing-god/>, accessed 4 October 2021.

³⁸ John Main, *The Way of Unknowing: Expanding Spiritual Horizons through Meditation* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 119.

Near the end of his life, Merton wrote in a letter that rather aptly summarises what I have come to believe:

I have no hesitation in saying that the 'Buddhist' view of reality and life is one which I find extremely practical and acceptable, and, indeed, I think it is one of the very great contributions to the universal spiritual heritage of man. It is by no means foreign or hostile to the spirit of Christianity, provided that the Christian outlook does not become bogged down in a slough of pseudo-objective formalities, as I am afraid it sometimes tends to do.³⁹

One might add a similar admonition concerning certain Roman Catholic formalities.

My purpose here is not to promote Zen or Buddhism per se to a Christian readership, but to encourage the simple and earnest exploration of the wisdom literature and appropriate practices of other faiths. To paraphrase Knitter, without such wisdom I would not have fathomed the depths of my own tradition. Specifically, had it not been for a star that rose in the East, I could not be Catholic with the fire that fills me today. Personal experience of God's presence, often beheld in meditation, particularly in natural surroundings, has been the stronghold of my faith. I confess that I pray from Catholic literature and the breviary as a prelude to meditation, but I readily acknowledge that the Upanishads and the Dhammapada also adorn my prayer space. As well, I may add to my prayer three sun salutations, to which I privately refer as Trinity salutations, or three OM breaths before meditating. Combined, they have helped me to focus more sharply on the end for which I pray.

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³⁹ Thomas Merton to Mr Lunsford, in *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, edited by William H. Shannon (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 167–168.