

# **Zen Buddhism: Spiritual Key for Religious Education in a Roman Catholic Way**

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## Abstract

This essay explores how Zen Buddhism can act as a creative bridge to aid religious educators within a Catholic tradition to better reconcile traditional Catholic teachings with the challenges of religious pluralism. Through Zen's ordinary, everyday spirituality and appreciation of the paradoxical and more-than-rational, certain Catholic traditions in education can be re-interpreted and more effectively applied to a pluralistic, postmodern world.

“Interreligious dialogue must grow out of our common humanity as persons whose sense of what it means to be human expresses itself through different, yet valid and real encounters with the Sacred.”

Paul Ingram  
Wrestling With the Ox: A Theology of Religious Experience

## **Introduction**

This essay will engage Zen Buddhism in a conversation with the field of religious education as it is embodied in the Western Roman Catholic tradition. The intent is to illustrate how Zen can be a source of religious and educational wisdom that can help the field better engage the challenges of religious pluralism. It will be argued that our increasingly pluralistic, postmodern world demands a greater awareness of and a more effective response to the challenges of interreligious dialogue, that in fact, an interreligious dimension is essential for any religious education program today. This essay will also build on Moran's theory of education as a creative interplay between life's major forms: family, school, work, and leisure. It will be asserted that Zen's practical, everyday spirituality and potential in aiding and forming a viable interreligious teaching can be effectively illustrated through the work of Moran.

This essay will proceed from a reconceptualist perspective of the field of religious education. Here, the term reconceptualist will mean an emphasis on personal religious experience over dogma and creeds. It reflects an approach that begins with resistance; resistance to widely held assumptions regarding how religious education should be done. It is an approach that is experimental and not closed to the possibility of failure. Following in the tradition of Dwayne Heubner, the author will use language that is incarnate and corporal, and resists the abstract, intellectual language that too often threatens to separate intellectual discourse from the ordinary, everyday world. It is this author's belief that if approached from a reconceptualist perspective, Zen Buddhism can act as a bridge between traditional Catholic teachings and the demands of religious pluralism.

To develop a religious educational teaching that is both pluralist and Catholic is problematic. While there has been some creative and promising work done by Catholic educators and scholars such as Mary Boys and Thomas Groome, the ultimate aim of traditional, Catholic education has always been the formation of true believers. Strongly associated with Catechesis, a Catholic vision of religious education is, in the end, about certainty not doubt. It tends to be transmissive with a firm belief in the value of tradition and authoritative interpretation of scriptures through the Magisterium. The question of revelation, always of central importance and concern, begins with the assumption that it is revealed through the church and her established traditions and teachings.

In contrast, the defining characteristics of postmodern, pluralistic Western society: the relativism of all truth, knowledge, and morality, and the rejection of all metanarrative stories, fundamentally clashes with the Catholic belief in the existence of eternal and absolute truths. For instance, the central belief in the unique role played by Jesus the Christ as the sole Savior of humanity becomes problematic within a pluralist context. If true interreligious dialogue is to occur, all claims of religious superiority—whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or Buddhist—need to be, if not discarded, reinterpreted. What is increasingly called for is an open receptiveness to other tradition's teachings and insights (Ingram 1997: 49). This is no easy task. In the case of Christianity and the Catholic Church, many believe it to be impossible.

However, the Catholic Church has a long and rich educational tradition that suggests the possibility for a more involved interreligious teaching and education. Underlying all Catholic philosophy of education is the recognition of the supernatural in the world that is most perfectly revealed in the person of Jesus the Christ, the incarnate Word of God (Boys 1989:82). While this can be a significant barrier to meaningful interreligious dialogue, it can also, if creatively applied in a directed, academic manner, lead to a greater appreciation of the mystery and wonder of God, and the unknowability of the Sacred. Zen Buddhism can offer some fresh insight and perspective into how this can be done.

There is the belief in the universal character of Catholic education and a perception of life itself as an integrated whole. The early church's educational tradition that asserted religious truth and personal transformation could be achieved through directed and informed reason, while limited in itself, does allow for the engaging of outside philosophies and ideas to deepen and enrich religious meaning.

Paul Ingram describes what he refers to as a "primordial" model of interreligious dialogue that views religious diversity as an inherent strength that can lead to deeper, more meaningful experiences of the Sacred (Ingram 1997: 14). This model explores the nature of generic religious experiences and attempts to answer the question of why there is so much diversity in the religious Ways of human beings (Ingram 1997: 14). Ingram further wonders if the reality of religious pluralism can tell us anything about the nature of the Sacred. Again, increased exposure to Zen Buddhist teachings can be of immense help here.

Ingram makes the analogy of religious traditions being akin to language. All languages are legitimate in their own right and convey their own interpretations of the world to the people and culture from which they emerged. Yet, as most philosophers and some theologians know, words are quite limited in their ability to completely and accurately relate meaning and descriptions of physical, everyday phenomena, let alone

the metaphysical and spiritual (Ingram 1997: 50). In a similar vane, while theological doctrine is important, if not essential to religious education, it also needs to be recognized as a limited and imperfect attempt in capturing the nature and meaning of the Sacred. To believe in the creeds and doctrines of one's faith tradition should not automatically discredit and invalidate other traditions. Essential to productive interreligious dialogue is an admission to the unknowability of this core Sacredness that all religions ultimately point to, and concede to this mystery with humility and awe.

For practical purposes, the goals of this essay must remain modest and tentative. Attempting to explore such complex and controversial issues as revelation, incarnation, and religious pluralism and use them in a meaningful and workable manner to illustrate Zen's potential benefit to religious education is challenging. It needs to be noted that the emphasis will not be on a theological interpretation of Zen but on the potential Zen has to reconcile certain Catholic teachings with religious pluralism, and aid in forming a more integrated religious educational teaching. The goal is not to ascertain the theological compatibility of Zen thought and Catholic doctrine, but on bringing the words of scripture alive for the individual and being able to apply it effectively in a meaningful, educational and bodily manner. Approaching scripture from an artistic, poetic perspective, which Zen can help students do, not only can help bring to life the increasingly dead words that have less and less relevance to the young Christian and Catholic adults of today but also make them more open to genuine interreligious dialogue. To do this is to take a positive step towards further defining what the field of religious education is.

This essay will identify five areas to illustrate how Zen can aid and enrich the field of religious education within a secular, pluralistic culture: 1) scriptural interpretation: a Zen perspective on the teachings of Jesus 2) incarnation: a Zen perspective on revelation 3) faith: a Zen perspective on interreligious dialogue 4) Christian spirituality: a Zen perspective on contemplative/spiritual development, and 5) a Zen perspective on religious education. The five areas will be far from distinct and separate. There will be an overlapping of content, illustrating how each area reinforces and supports the others. The essay will end with some closing remarks with some brief speculation on the wider implications of the study.

### **Scriptural Interpretation: A Zen Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus**

Many Christians too often remain hampered in their attempts to truly engage the wisdom of other religious traditions due to perceived incompatibilities, issues of faith, and doctrinal requirements. These are legitimate concerns. The essential beliefs of the Christian tradition cannot be glossed over and watered down for the sake of tolerance and intellectual respectability. To ask devout Christians to sacrifice their identity and distinctiveness in such an endeavor is not acceptable. Zen can be instrumental in providing new insight into many of the theological and intellectual challenges brought about by religious pluralism and postmodern relativism. Through the application of certain Zen sensibilities to the reading of scripture, a deeper and richer appreciation of its words can be realized, and in the process, allow a creative space to open up that can facilitate interreligious dialogue while remaining faithful to the spirit of the words of scripture.

Zen Buddhism has been referred to as a religion of the ordinary and the “Art of Living” (Leong 1995: 52-53). Leong notes that probably nowhere in human history has there ever been such an artful integration of the sacred with the mundane. It is through the practice of artful living that the gulf between the spiritual and the material is most effectively and artistically bridged (Leong 1995: 35). The sixth Zen patriarch Hui Neng (636-712 C. E.), promoted the idea that one could be at once spiritual and earthly (Leong 1995: 38). He had a firm belief that any spirituality not grounded in the ordinary concreteness of everyday life was not worthy of the name. Such a view has the extra benefit of no longer making spirituality the prized possession of monasteries and clerics but opens it up to all (Leong 1995:38). It is this everyday practicality of Zen that can be of immense insight into the field of religious education since it expands the spiritual into all aspects of life and helps express the mystical and the religious in endless numbers of ways.

Cultivating such an everyday spirituality is conducive to the development of a more pluralist Catholic way of religious education. Any time the Sacred and spiritual are assumed to be found in the everyday world, the possibilities of finding common religious ground to stand on increases. The ministry and teachings of Jesus are surprisingly compatible with many Zen Buddhist teachings. Leong asserts that the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth reflect a simplistic, poetic beauty and penetrating insight to the human condition that confirms him as a Zen Master of exceptional skill and wisdom. His clever use of paradox and parables and his frequent use of natural imagery parallel long established Zen methods of instruction. This is in no way meant to lessen the role of Jesus the Christ or to challenge orthodox church doctrine. Such a perspective is meant only to emphasize the common sense, human dimensions of his teachings in order to make them more relevant to people today.

Leong identifies five key elements of Zen: presence, ordinariness, zest, insight, and wu-wei, which roughly translate as “creative quietude” (Leong 1995: 43-53). These elements can open up scripture to compelling new interpretations that can allow new possibilities for productive interreligious dialogue.

Presence is the first essential element of Zen. It simply refers to a person’s ability to beware of where he or she is and what he or she is doing. To do this effectively, one needs to be fully aware of both interior thoughts and emotions, and the surrounding environment. This is the foundational Zen Buddhist ideal of mindfulness and it is here where the seeds of enlightenment are found (Leong 1995: 45). Too often we are all too busy thinking, worrying, and speculating on what happened in the past or what might happen in the future. As adults, our minds get filled with worrisome responsibilities and we become preoccupied with various fears, anxieties, and desires. Zen teaches us the art of silence. We learn to be quiet and focus on the task at hand. Similar messages are found repeatedly throughout the gospels.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus addresses the universal human problem of our basic existential fear and insecurity in what has become known as the Nature Sermon. He refers to the “lilies of the field” and the “birds of the air” to illustrate how we should not be anxious about our lives for both of these creations of God are well looked after. The lesson is to focus on today and its problems and leave tomorrow’s problems for tomorrow. This is a beautiful lesson in mindfulness and serenity.

Leong's second element of Zen, ordinariness, is also reflected in Jesus' use of the lilies and birds. Each are very ordinary objects and were not used to dazzle and impress but to help those who heard him awaken to the wisdom and beauty that surrounds them. Leong introduces the notion of "ordinary magic", a concept that can also be effectively applied to a reconceptualist image of religious education and interpretation of scripture. Zen calls our attention to the wonders of the ordinary and the often hidden beauty and harmony found in the natural, everyday world. Zen attempts to heighten our sensitivity to the natural wonders surrounding us and awaken us to the deep wisdom that is to be found in nature. To do this is to recover a deep joy in our everyday lives (Leong 1995: 47-48). In such a tradition, the metaphysical speculation of the supernatural has less of a place. The underlying idea of ordinary magic is that the miraculous can be found in the most mundane, everyday events and ordinary human actions. He aptly points out that Jesus had ordinary magic: the very human abilities of an artist and master teacher. In contrast, the extraordinary and miraculous actions of Jesus have been frequently overemphasized in popular Christianity and used as vehicles to reinforce doctrine. The sayings of Jesus are also too often used to reinforce a mistaken perception of faith: that it involves the blind allegiance and acceptance of church teachings and doctrine. The truth is the most powerful and effective lessons taught by Jesus were through his use of "ordinary magic" rather than with miracles (Leong 1995: 46).

Leong's third element of Zen, zest, also has significant implications for Christian interpretation of scripture and applications to religious education. There is a strong tendency among many Catholics to approach the reading of scripture in a very solemn, serious manner to the point of not being able to appreciate its' poetic beauty. Too often, the result is a deadening of meaning and vitality that is supposed to infuse scripture. In Zen, fun and laughter are not merely permitted they are insisted upon. Zen masters make effective use of the nonsensical, which often leads to a deeper, more profound meaning (Ross 1960: 184). In Matthew 18:3, Jesus warns that unless we become as children, we can never enter the kingdom of God. It is a good reminder that children can teach adults much about appreciating the beauty and mystery of life. They have the ability to be open, carefree, and are not afraid to be silly. Zen calls this beginner's mind where the mind is free from preconceived, fixed notions of how things are or the way things should be. To have beginner's mind is also helpful when engaged in interreligious dialogue. It is always better to enter into discussion with a sense of humility and openness without being burdened by preconceived notions of truth and falsity.

The fourth element, insight, involves the ability to see deeply into the nature of things. Leong asserts that Jesus consistently maintained that liberation is a matter of spiritual insight. The path to salvation is dependent on it. He continues,

"In fact, given the prevalence of terms like "truth", "light", "eye", "ear", and "blindness" in the Gospels, it is difficult to conceive why the church has so far failed to recognize that liberation is a matter of discerning and not a matter of believing. Jesus praised his disciples for their spiritual insight and understanding:  
"Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear"

(Matt. 13:16)" (Leong 1995: 50).

In what has been called his Nature Sermon, Jesus convincingly displays how true spirituality is more a matter of seeing correctly, and less a matter of believing.

The fifth element, wu-wei, will be better covered in the section on meditation and contemplation. To gain this essential spiritual insight, we now turn our attention to an inclusive definition of incarnation and how Zen might shed some light on this subject.

### **Incarnation: A Zen Perspective on Revelation**

The question of revelation remains problematic for the Catholic Church. The issue of revelation will continue to grow in importance as the church expands into the East and Africa and becomes increasingly exposed to their cultures. The challenge of religious pluralism will only grow in the coming years. The rise of incarnational theology has been closely associated with this complex theological issue. This essay cannot give proper attention to these broad and complex issues. It will simply use them in a limited sense to illustrate Zen's potential as a guide for a pluralistic religious education in a Catholic way. For the author's purpose, the term revelation will simply refer to how the sacred can be experienced in the context of a pluralistic world. The author will also use an inclusive definition of the term incarnation to further illustrate Zen's potential to aid in Christian interreligious dialogue. Gabriel Moran's work on uniqueness will aid in illustrating the significance of these terms to the discussion.

In a forthcoming article in *Living Light* (Fall 2002), Kieran Scott explores some of the premises surrounding the assumed uniqueness of adult education. Building on Moran's writings concerning the word unique, Scott uses the term as a heuristic frame to critique certain key assumptions within that field. The term deals with the paradoxical relation of sameness and difference (Moran: 1992: 19). For both Scott and Moran, the question of how things differ is vital. The issue of sameness and difference represent two very different ways of engaging the world and is relevant to our discussion on religious pluralism. Scott, who follows Moran, argues that the how of uniqueness runs in two opposite directions: what is unique differs from others by a process of either exclusion or by a process of inclusion. Scott points out that it is this movement in opposite directions that result in two contrasting meanings for the term. Therefore, an exclusive definition of unique will rest on the idea that a particular thing possesses characteristics not shared by anything else. The number 2 being exclusively unique from the series 111211 can represent such a definition. An inclusive definition of unique reflects a situation where a thing includes many similar characteristics but also has others. In the series a, ab, abc, abcd, each succeeding set is inclusively unique from the previous sets (Moran 1992: 20).

The place of Jesus the Christ and his unique role as the Redeemer of humanity is an essential belief for most Christians. Traditionally, such an assertion is problematic with regards to interreligious dialogue. When approached from an exclusivistic perspective the question of revelation through his person and the mystery of the Incarnation can be significant obstacles in acknowledging the possibility that other traditions may have a unique claim to human salvation or its equivalent. If the Incarnation of the Word of God in the person of Jesus the Christ is given an inclusive definition, numerous possibilities emerge. Zen can help the field of religious education

articulate such a vision and help the field to help the Catholic tradition overcome the challenges of religious pluralism.

The author would like to apply an inclusive definition of incarnation to help illustrate Zen's widespread application to the field. Such a definition is conducive to a Zen approach to finding the spiritual in the ordinary, everyday world. Some fine parallel work has been done under the name of incarnational theology. Calling for a more expansive "Lay" spirituality, Elizabeth Dreyer refers to what she describes as the church's narrow and grossly inadequate concept of a spiritual life. While the church's rich tradition should and must remain a valuable source of spiritual guidance, there is a pressing need for a creative new approach that can incorporate ordinary, everyday experiences (Dreyer 1994: 16). Again, Zen can help further develop this Christian trend that ultimately has far-reaching implications concerning ways of being in community and relating to the wider, non-Christian world.

Dreyer notes how those who have a profound religious conversion often tend to live for little else but the next prayer group, bible retreat, or Mass. The other parts of their life: job, family, and society, end up becoming unwelcome distractions (Dreyer 1994: 22). The other extreme is the more common view that one's family and social life are the "real life", and one's church and religious life are forever on the fringe. Again, this can be attributed to a deeply engrained Western dualism. But if one's daily experience can be seen more as the center of God's presence, something that regular Zen practice can aid in, such a dichotomy is no longer adequate (Dreyer 1994: 22). She continues,

"We are called to pay renewed attention to daily life, to see, hear, touch, smell, and speak with new awareness. This attention is supported by the conviction that one will meet God in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. We need to be on the lookout for the word of God in the world, a word that may be spoken in unlikely places, in experiences of simple joy and success as well as hardship and suffering", (Dreyer 1994: 22).

Such an incarnational perception of the world needs to be expanded upon within the field of religious education. Again, Zen can be helpful in giving new perspective and insight into how such programs may be developed. Such a perspective would facilitate both spiritual development and interreligious dialogue. In a compelling essay on the implications Zen Buddhist thought has on the ecological movement, Sensei Ven. Sunyana Graef outlines the basic premise underlying Buddhist ecology. She asserts that when we understand what we really are and what our relationship is to our surroundings, we will be at peace with our environment and ourselves (Graef 1990: 43). In Buddhist ecology, the way we relate to and interact with the environment through our actions is a direct reflection of our spiritual attainment. The goal of Buddhist ecology is more than just a clean environment: it is the cultivation of a life of simplicity, conservation and self-restraint (Graef 1990: 44). In such a spiritual discipline, mundane chores such as taking out the garbage, cleaning your house, and recycling, become infused with moral and religious significance that can be shared by all, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Such a perspective has direct application and insight to incarnational theology and religious education.

### **Faith: A Zen Perspective on Interreligious Dialogue**

In an increasingly pluralistic world the meaning of faith has too often been tragically misrepresented and misinterpreted. In a desire to maintain defining characteristics and distinguish itself from other religious traditions, the Catholic Church has turned the practice of one's faith into an exercise of submission to accepted doctrine. True faith should be and is much more. Like Zen, faith evades definition (Leong 1995: 134). A Zen reading of scripture can bring valuable new perspective on Jesus' teachings on faith. Like Zen, faith has little if anything to do with beliefs, dogmas, creeds, or theology. It has more to do with openness, receptivity, trust, and gentleness (Leong 1995: 134). In effect, it has a lot to do with "ordinary magic". As the Lord's Prayer tells us, faith is really about surrendering to God's will, not about making demands. It is to guard against putting our ego in front of God. The problem, however, is finding out what God's will is. The truth is we can never really know. True faith involves acknowledging and accepting our own limits and weaknesses, to develop a gentle approach to life rather than fighting it, and accept that, in the end, we can never fully know the truth or predict what will happen. Church tradition and doctrine are valuable assets to help give guidance and meaning to a confusing world and should be utilized in religious education. It also needs to be acknowledged that faith is not a matter of blind obedience. Robots cannot have faith, they just do. Only human beings, with all their doubts and ambiguities, can truly have faith (Leong 1995: 135). With regards to religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue, such a perception is helpful if not essential.

A total submission to church doctrine can never lead to genuine spirituality or to legitimate interreligious dialogue. Zen teaches us that faith is more a process of "enlightened surrender", involving the opening up of one's heart to God, the Holy Spirit (Leong 1995: 138). True faith involves our ability to love both others and ourselves. In Zen, the equivalent to faith is gentleness. Gentleness is an expression of the nonattached mind, free from distraction and worry. The Christian equivalent to the unobstructed mind is the pure of heart (Leong, p. 139). As Jesus says in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt, 5:8). To effectively engage in interreligious dialogue, one needs purity of heart, gentleness, and humility.

True faith is about letting go. It is truly sad when "religion" transforms it into the biggest attachment of all by clothing its' doctrine and rigid scriptural interpretation as being a matter of faith. Leong correctly identifies the characteristics of "false faith" by its overall militant stance. False faith is defined by stubbornness, inflexibility, and an overpowering need to be right (Leong 1995: 140). As September 11<sup>th</sup> has tragically shown us, and as those who bomb abortion clinics have demonstrated, those with false faith have a strong tendency to turn violent.

Faith is often linked with certain perceived "truths". Zen is not really concerned with truth. Buddha, who preached for over forty years, was credited with saying that he never uttered a single truth. This reflects a well-established Zen "truth" that believes saying "I know" is a reflection of a mind that is closed and stagnant. It is considered arrogant and the beginning of the path to ignorance. To say "I don't know" is to have a

mind that is open and full of possibilities (Leong 1995: 143). A similar ideal is reflected in the Gospel of Mathew where Jesus said that God revealed secrets to babes but kept them hidden from the wise and learned.

### **Contemplative/Spiritual Development**

The everyday practicality of Zen can provide significant insight for the field of religious education since it expands the spiritual into all aspects of life and helps express the mystical and the religious in multiple, everyday ways. Over the centuries, Zen Buddhist masters developed certain techniques to aid in novices achieving satori, or enlightenment. One of the most important and widely used techniques is that of the koan. Described as a formulation in words that cannot be solved by the intellect alone, the koan is a riddle of sorts, meant to be pondered upon, sometimes for years, during meditation sessions known as zazen. When the koan is “solved”, or more accurately, experienced, there is a sudden burst of awareness that is supposed to break the mind free from its rational, dualistic, ordinary state of awareness, and lead to a deeper awareness of the true nature of Reality (Ross 1960: 6). Often appearing irrational, nonsensical, and paradoxical, the koan is in fact something like a key that is meant to unlock the rational, dualistic mind so it can embrace the full richness and wonder of simply being conscious of oneself, others, and your surroundings.

The koan is not solved by reason but by a process of identification. Like life, the koan is not something to be understood, but experienced. To rationally struggle for some recognizable deeper meaning is to miss the point. The koan is meant to be something of a catalyst to help the aspirant break through to a more real perspective of Reality which, as much as the Western mind would like to believe, is not discernable through reason alone (Johnston 1997: 60). It is filled with the pain and paradox of life itself. Three of the more famous koans are:

What was the shape of your face before you were born?  
What is the sound of one hand clapping?  
And, Mu, or Nothing.

Each is meant in their own way, to break down the various dualistic ideas that so often become barriers to deeper prayer. For our purposes, the challenge is to apply the method of Zen’s use of the koan to the religious education of adults and to gain deeper insight into the uses of the non-rational and the paradoxical. This is consistent with a reconceptualist ideology of religious education as it acknowledges the mystery of the Sacred as well as the limits of words in articulating it. Through the use of koan-like exercises a greater appreciation of the more-than-rational and the paradoxical will ultimately lead to a mature religious personality more capable of accepting ambiguity and a pluralism of thought.

There are numerous examples of koan-like situations within scripture, the greatest of which is Jesus the Christ, the Divine God come down from heaven and crucified on a cross (Johnston 1997: 62). At first it makes little sense, but it is at the heart of the Christian story of death and resurrection. Johnston suggests that Christianity itself can be viewed as one great koan that, “Makes the mind boggle and gasp in astonishment; and

faith is the breakthrough into that deep realm of the soul which accepts paradox and mystery with humility” (Johnston 1997: 63).

The koan can be a tool to help quiet the endless noise of rationalizations so many adults have come to accept as a consequence of modern living. Koan-like meditation on particular scriptural passages could help adults turn gently inward and back towards a more mindful, peaceful time when they were more in tune with the mystery and the more than rational aspects of their religious tradition and life itself.

The fifth element of Zen mentioned above, wu-wei, can also be of significance. Literally translated as “doing nothing”, in many ways it is the direct opposite of inaction. This highlights a problem in our modern world that can just as often be applied to the field of religious education. There is far too much emphasis on achievement. Leong, who continually compares Zen to art, makes the point that like art, Zen meditation is not a matter of achievement but of simply appreciating the joy of the experience (Leong 1995: 52). It is from the “uselessness” of Zen that is derived its greatest use: to allow us to relax and enjoy life as it is, and be receptive to the endless forms of incarnation that always surrounds us waiting to be experienced.

The practice of zazen, Zen meditation, consists of little more than becoming profoundly conscious of one’s breathing and one’s sitting. It is meant to cultivate a state of mindfulness that allows the practitioner to become truly aware of his or her surroundings and more conscious of whatever activity he or she is doing at the time. Faithful practitioners eventually develop a deep stage of concentration known in Japanese as sanmai ((Johnston 1970: 7). It is described as a process where the personality becomes more and more unified through regular meditation until one’s awareness is focused to a single point. There are numerous benefits to practicing zazen, the most obvious being an increased awareness of one’s surroundings and one’s relationship to it, increased overall health, and greater capacities for concentration. Zen has a wealth of wisdom concerning the mind/body/spirit relationship that can greatly improve a Christian’s spiritual life. There is a growing trend among Catholics both lay and cleric, who have found regular Zen meditation helpful in deepening their own religious practice.

One of the best illustrations of the Zen disciple’s journey towards enlightenment is found in the Ten Ox-Herding paintings. Traced back to the middle 12<sup>th</sup> century in China to a Zen master named Kuo-an, these paintings were accompanied by a series of poems meant to illuminate the student’s path and struggles (Trevor 1969: 26). The spiritual journey reflected in these paintings can be considered a universal one that has multiple applications to the religious educator interested in artfully transforming his or her student towards a deeper, more meaningful religious outlook. In the first picture we see the herdsman who is symbolic of the Zen student. He is looking for the ox that has run away. It is recognized that the ox represents the herdsman’s Original, or Buddha, Nature. This is considered to be Big Mind, the universal ground of ultimate being, something that everyone shares and is a part of. Comparisons to Buddha-Nature and the Holy Spirit have been made, highlighting some interesting parallels. Cultivating a sense of mindfulness through regular meditation and prayer can be viewed as an uncovering of the Holy Spirit both within and without. Many Christians seem to forget that inherent in their Trinitarian view of the divine is the recognition of the plurality of God that can be found in endless varieties throughout the human and natural world. An inclusive definition of the incarnation increases an appreciation of this and can lead to multiple

forms of religious education inside and outside of the classroom. In the Gospel of Luke the baby Jesus is seen being born in a manger amongst the animals, interpreted by some to mean that the Incarnation was and is not simply for humanity but for the entire world, both human and non-human.

### **Religious Educational Theory: Moran and Zen**

In reality the work of numerous religious educators suggests a place for Zen Buddhist thought within the field of religious education. The work of Gabriel Moran, however, is particularly effective in illustrating how Zen may contribute to the field's development within a pluralistic and relativistic world.

Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran have identified two aims of religious education: 1) teaching how to practice a better religious life, and 2) teaching religion (Harris & Moran 1989: 30). Often competing, these aims have been the source of a significant amount of confusion and disagreement among religious educators regarding appropriate content and goals. Both assert that a curricular design that can effectively maintain the distinction of these aims without sacrificing one for the other is essential. What is needed to accomplish this is an identifiable, organizing principle that can provide the necessary form and direction that honors both of these necessary goals. They argue that accepting the two-part name of the field-religious and education-is the best way to accomplish this (Moran 1989: 84). It is through the dynamic interplay of the two that religious education occurs. It is here that Zen can aid in this vision of religious education for adults.

The Tao symbol with its entwining yin and yang halves is an effective representation of these two sometimes antagonistic and conflicting aspects of the field. Like yin and yang, the religious and the education need to be balanced. One helps define the other. The fire and passion of the religious drive needs to be tempered by the cooler, more restrained forces of education. Education needs the mystery and awe of religion to prevent it from becoming too dry and analytical. Neither aim can be sacrificed for the sake of the other. Both are essential if effective religious education is to occur that is meaningful and relevant to those adults in search of increased religious meaning in their lives.

Meaningful interreligious dialogue not only requires openness and the willingness to engage other religious traditions; it requires an active engagement with one's own. For interreligious dialogue to have meaning and educational value, people must be familiar with their own religious traditions. As Ingram poetically says, "We need to hear the 'music' of our own religious Way if we are to hear the 'music' of the religious Ways of others" (Ingram 1997: 16). Zen can help many re-discover, or discover for the first time, the beauty and depth of their own tradition's music.

While most parishes and local churches in this country engage the first aim quite well the overwhelming majority largely ignores the second. What eventually happens is a form of Catechesis, or Christian education that masquerades as religious education. The tragic result is a simplistic, sectarian view of one's religious tradition that is incapable of effectively engaging the wider culture in an intelligent, constructive way. This inevitably leads to problems when intelligent, mature people of faith wish to broaden and deepen their religious identity but cannot find an adequate venue where they

can question and explore the meaning of their religious life within the context of the broader, pluralistic world.

Moran points out that the first aim of religious education has a singular objective: the development of one's religious identity within the context of a religious community (Moran 1989: 85). The primary function of the parish should be the cultivation of better ways of living a religious life. In contrast, the second aim has a plural objective: teaching people to understand their own religious tradition in a critical and reflective manner. It attempts to create some intellectual distance so people can get a better sense of who they are and who they are not (Moran 1989: 85). This inevitably involves comparison with other religious traditions.

Much of the writings of Moran suggest a compatibility with Zen Buddhism. Moran's theory of education centers on a creative interplay between life's major forms: family, school, work, and leisure. Each of the forms need to be engaged with end (meaning) and without end (lifelong). This educational model can be an effective vehicle to illustrate Zen's practical, everyday spirituality that views all of nature, both human and non-human, as potential vehicles for education and personal enlightenment. His theories on the nature of teaching also suggest a number of similarities. Moran has given an alternate, more comprehensive definition of the verb to teach than is generally accepted in Western education. He argues that ultimately, teaching consists of showing people, regardless of age, how to live and die more meaningfully (Moran 1997: 38). As Moran's broader, more comprehensive vision of teaching unfolds a number of parallels with Zen Buddhist themes emerge.

One area where Moran's theories on teaching parallel Zen is found in the area of who and what can teach. If one accepts this comprehensive vision of "to teach", both human and non-human teachers begin to emerge everywhere. Certain animals can be profound teachers, as can non-animal forces of nature. Moran proposes there can be a dialectical relationship between sea, mountain, forests, etc. and persons that can result in effective teaching for understanding what he calls teach-learn (Moran 1997: 47). Even the smallest natural phenomena such as the flower, or snowflake, and the raindrop, can be valuable teachers. This reflects both an inclusive view of the incarnation that can be found throughout the natural world, as well as an incarnational approach to teaching. It reflects the assumption that the divine can be found in the most mundane and unexpected of places and can be approached and engaged in a religiously educational manner.

Zen has a long tradition of using nature and the arts as teaching and learning tools to promote enlightenment. The paradoxical and non-rational are used to great effect. Zen painting has a subtle, deceptively simple style that is not so much concerned with depicting beauty or reality, but with the ever-present fusion of spirit and matter (Ross 1960: 98). Many of the natural scenes favored in Zen paintings—a waterfall, snow weighing down the bamboo, the rainy mist moving over a lake or river— are all meant to reflect the paradoxical forever-changing, forever-remaining "Isness" of life on the planet (Ross 1960: 90). The Zen student has an infinite number of teachers, the most powerful being the natural world itself.

A reconceptualist conception of religious education as a life-long journey fits well with a Zen Buddhist perspective. In a very real sense the path towards enlightenment, or satori, can be imagined as a journey ever deeper into the ordinary, everyday world. The regular practice and cultivation of mindfulness can enhance Moran's first aim of religious

education. One can become a much more active and committed member of one's community and be better able to immerse oneself in the commonly held rituals, traditions, and beliefs through the cultivation of mindfulness. The second aim, teaching-learning religion can be aided by Zen being a grounding force in such intellectual pursuits, making sure the academic language used remains connected to the body and the real world.

One of the strongest parallels between Christian and Zen Buddhist teaching is their use of paradox. The Christian message and Christian tradition are filled with paradoxical lessons. Jesus, called rabbi (the teacher) used the parable to great effect. The stories Jesus told always had a surprising twist at the end, hinting that at the heart of the Christian message was a paradox. In many ways, the Christian message can be boiled down to "Love thy neighbor as you love thy self. But Jesus asks the trick question, "Who is thy neighbor?" It turns out that your neighbor is your enemy. Your neighbor is the postmodern Other that is different from you: it is the Jew, the Muslim, the African American, the homosexual. To keep one's life, one must lose it. The last is first and the first is last. Jesus the Christ is the ultimate paradox: fully divine, yet fully human. Zen masters employ the use of paradox unceasingly. As mentioned above, the koan is a favorite learning tool meant to help the rational mind break free from its dualistic limits to better perceive and experience the mystical, paradoxical core of our being. They do not do this out of a desire for cheap mystification, but because of the impossibility of describing the Supreme Experience (Ross 1960: 67).

Peter R. Hobson and John S. Edwards describe a holistic paradigm for religious education that stresses the emotional, social, creative, aesthetic, spiritual, as well as the rational components of a religious education program (Edwards & Hobson 1999: 12). This is held in contrast to an overly rational, systematic, and reductionist paradigm that has long dominated Western theories of education, both secular and religious. Hobson and Edwards argue that holism is particularly appropriate in today's multi-cultural, multi-faith world due to its encouragement of openness to new possibilities and experiences. Rather than seeing different views as threats to their position, students are encouraged to interact positively for the sake of social harmony and the chance of new insight to their own beliefs and assumptions (Edwards & Hobson 1999: 12). Central to Hobson and Edwards' thesis is the need for a philosophical shift in how religious doctrine and religious belief are perceived. They note that while in the past virtually all religion's doctrines were typically held in exclusivist ways, it is not a necessary feature of religion (Hobson & Edwards, p. 36). They propose the notion of "degrees of beliefs", that allows proponents of a particular religious faith to go beyond the simple true/false dichotomy that too often dominates interreligious dialogue. In effect, this would involve sacrificing a certain degree of certainty and literalness surrounding people's religious beliefs. This is neither to say one cannot believe what one has been taught, nor to slip into an amorphous postmodern relativism. It means developing a sense of humility and openness concerning the ultimate truthfulness of one's faith, and an acknowledgement that no one can have the monopoly of the truth (Edwards & Hobson 1999: 59). Many Catholics tend to forget that religious truth is an illusive thing. As Robert Kennedy beautifully puts it,

"We Christians have devised wonderful philosophies and theologies;  
we have scriptures and dogmas and truths, some of which we

believe to be infallible. We have centuries old religious civilization that offers moral and artistic inspiration. Indeed we have much. But if we understand the writings of St. Gregory of Nyssa and other fathers of the church, we realize we do not have the truth, not even in a dream. We realize that we cannot grasp any truth as a finality to which nothing can be added and that this not grasping at truth is the path to human and spiritual development” (Kennedy, 2000, p. 21).

Zen Buddhism can be an invaluable guide to help reconcile the opposing needs of theological integrity and certainty with the need for legitimate interreligious dialogue and meaningful, personal religious experience. While Zen acknowledges the need for the intellect it has a profound awareness of the limits of word-dominated academic discourse. A Zen story tells of a master being asked by his disciples how they were to reach enlightenment. There was a brilliant full moon out and the master simply pointed to the moon and smiled. The disciples stared at the master’s finger thinking it held the secret to enlightenment when in fact all it was doing was pointing the way to the beauty of the brilliant moon. As Moran has shown through his work on educational forms, words, even words of scripture, though important, are in the end little more than fingers pointing at the moon. Moran’s work on educational and teaching theory are essential to realizing the value and compatibility of Zen teachings with the field of religious education.

## **Conclusion**

In the case of educating religiously within a Catholic way, problems are inevitable. As mentioned above, becoming a good Catholic is for many, not about doubt but certainty. The goal is ultimately to become a “true believer” (Eisner, 2002, p. 58). The strong promotion of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the General Directory for Catechesis as essential guides to any Catholic curriculum is a good example of this. While the Catechism and General Directory can be valuable, even necessary sources in developing effective catechetical programs, by themselves they are inadequate guidelines for a truly religious educational curriculum for adults. Conservative minded Catholics would likely disagree, calling for greater adherence to the tenets spelled out in these documents. In the end, to do so would not be religious education and would not be adequate in meeting the challenges of religious pluralism. Too often these guides tend to be used as instruments of domination and control, imposing rigid standards to the point of offering catechetical instructors and religious educators little freedom to adapt and adjust the core meaning of these texts to people’s contemporary lives. Sadly enough and far too often, the result is increasing numbers of Catholics becoming disillusioned by the church’s inability to more effectively convey its religious and spiritual traditions in a more meaningful, relevant way that resonates with their mature life experiences.

Religious educators working within a Roman Catholic tradition need to become guides to those struggling to reconcile their cherished traditions and doctrines with the multiple arrays of alternate belief systems available in this pluralistic, postmodern world. To focus exclusively inward in an attempt to clarify how one’s tradition is right and different from all others is bound to fail. It is still possible to honor one’s religious tradition without denying the possibility of alternate religious truths or revelations to be

found elsewhere. Zen Buddhism's ambiguous nature as a religious/philosophical tradition and its artful blend of the ordinary and mundane with the spiritual can become the bridge needed to begin reconciling these beliefs held in tension to one another. Applied to a reconceptualist approach to the field as well as the educational and teachings espoused by Moran, Zen Buddhism can reinforce the positive trends already underway. Religious educators need to outline options that can help those in search of a mature faith that is both firmly grounded in their tradition yet concedes and embraces the mystery and paradox that lies at the heart of all religious traditions. Not to engage the multiplicity of religions in a spirit of true faith and humility is to deny intelligent, mature adults the chance deepen and enrich their own religious identities, whether Catholic, Protestant, Jew or Muslim.

The face of the postmodern Other is more present and visible than ever before. The question is whether or not we as Christians will meet this Other in the spirit of true openness, humility, and cooperation, thereby enriching our own spiritual grounding and understanding, or with only token gestures of goodwill. It could be argued that these postmodern trends possess the seeds of a new and resurrected form of church with its consequent transformation of its pastoral and spiritual practices. Religious educators have a duty to aid in this transformation, however painful at times, on both a personal and communal level, and Zen Buddhism can be a valuable asset in this vast and challenging undertaking.

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