THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

William Johnston and Zen:

A Study in Inter-Ritual Participation

as a Mode of Comparative Theology

John Mark McLuckie

Submitted for the Degree of Master of Philosophy,

University of Edinburgh

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where it states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr David Grumett and Dr Ian Astley, for their patience, guidance, wisdom and encouragement throughout the course of this research. I also thank Ms Caroline Carney, owner and keeper of William Johnston's archive, for giving me generous access to his papers and for her kind permission in citing material contained there. I am very grateful for a generous grant made towards this research by the St Luke's College Foundation and for a three-month sabbatical at the beginning of 2018 supported by my colleagues at St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh. Finally, and above all, I thank my wife Sarah for her constant support and cheerful tolerance of my absences and obsessions during these years of part-time research.

John Mark McLuckie
Edinburgh, February 2023

Abstract

William Johnston was an Irish Jesuit priest who taught at Sophia University in Tokyo, having been sent to Japan by the Society in 1951. He wrote a number of works of mystical theology aimed at a wide audience. The majority of these works explored themes from Zen Buddhism as they relate to the practice of Christian spirituality, and especially contemplative prayer. He also drew extensively on the traditional canon of Catholic spirituality, especially the writings of St John of the Cross, and was strongly influenced by the new theological emphases of the Second Vatican Council, including reference to theologians of that time, especially Bernard Lonergan.

This thesis suggests that Johnston's work can be read as an approach to Comparative Theology which draws on ritual practices rather than texts. The thesis explores the following themes in his comparative theology: the understanding of nothingness, sunyata and kenosis across the two traditions; the place of embodied practice in the spiritual life and how this is explored as a theological theme; and the practices of reading Christian Scripture and of meditating on Zen koans. Additionally, it outlines major themes in Johnston's mystical theology and examines his understanding of dual religious belonging.

The thesis sets out the context of Johnston's exploration in relation to the growth of Zen practice in the West in the second half of the 20th century, the development of inter-religious dialogue and the theology of religions over the same period, the growing interest in mystical theology since the start of the present century and, above all, the growth in the practice of contemplative prayer and interest in the spiritual life by lay Christians.

The conclusion of the thesis is that Johnston did indeed find new perspectives on certain areas of Christian mystical theology through his sharing in aspects of Zen ritual practice, perspectives which give indications for further study in the realm of comparative theology. Johnston used the learnings in his own project to propose a Christian mystical theology fit for the new, globalised era of the 21st century, but respectful of its inheritance in the writings of the past.

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Introduction to William Johnston and His Work

> Zen seems to me to be something that will appeal to an elite only, and a very small one, yet it has great importance because it is so closely related to such movements as phenomenology and existentialism, besides responding to certain inarticulate spiritual needs of man today. It is important that we know about it, and also I add that I think a little Zen discipline is a very healthy thing. However, there will also be a lot of irresponsible talk floating around, and this too must be taken into account. But it will pass. Let us hope that the true substance remains even though from the Zen point of view there isn't any substance anyway.[1]

These words are from a letter written in May 1964 from one well-established Christian spiritual writer to another just about to embark on a writing career that would continue into the first decade of the 21st century. In many ways, it marks a significant point in a transition from an enthusiastic but largely theoretical encounter between Christianity and Zen Buddhism towards a more engaged, face-to-face interaction that would see many Christians adopt Zen practices in some degree. Thomas Merton's letter is in response to William Johnston's request for his comments on the manuscript of Johnston's doctoral thesis on the mysticism of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which would shortly become his first book.[2] Merton agreed to write a preface for it and the book remains in print to this day. Alongside a straightforward exposition of *The Cloud*'s theology, the book contains an analysis of the similarities and dissimilarities between Zen Buddhism and the mystical theology of the anonymous English medieval author. For Johnston, this was no mere thought experiment. He had been living in Japan since being sent there by the Society of Jesus in 1951 and encountered Japanese Buddhism first-hand. This introduction will locate Johnston's sustained engagement with Zen in the context of that transition in interreligious encounter and its theological foundations for Catholic Christians in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

William Johnston and his Works

To date, there have not been any book-length studies of Johnston's work, and only a few articles which directly critique his work. The most substantial was an article by John Teahan in *Studia Mystica* which concluded that Johnston's 'failure to produce works of major significance in either

[1] Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 440.
[2] William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unkowing* (New York: Desclée Co, 1967).

camp [scholarly or popular] is offset by his relatively successful harmonisation of the two'.[3] He notes a lack both of personal testimony and of critical engagement with secondary scholarly literature but his critique falls at an early stage of Johnston's writing career and we have the benefit of 25 more years of Johnston's output to consider the development of his ongoing engagement with Zen in dialogue with the Christian mystical tradition. We agree, however, at this early stage that Teahan correctly identified Johnston's unique attempt to offer popular works on mysticism that employed a degree of theological rigour. And while we may not regard his output as a lasting contribution to a growing scholarly corpus emerging from a re-engagement with mystical theology, we will explore the extent to which the insights he offered from his experiential standpoint might provide some useful raw material for that theological enterprise. In the field of inter-ritual studies, it is a key principle that 'our actions contain knowledge, not knowing that something is the case ("knowing-that"), but embodied knowledge ("knowing-how")',[4] and this knowledge of how one learns a manner of orienting oneself towards God and others through repeated ritual practice is at the heart of the study of mysticism.

More recently, Johnston has received brief, but largely positive references in works surveying the widening landscape of Christian spirituality as influenced by dialogue with Asian religions. Michael Barnes' article on Zen and Christianity in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* gives due credit to Johnston's contribution to 'a Zen-influenced Christian contemplation.'[5] Ursula King's pen-portrait of Johnston in *The Search for Spirituality* stresses his insistence on mysticism's engagement with the worlds of science and social transformation.[6] Paul Blée's study of the inter-religious dialogue fostered among monastics of Christian and Buddhist traditions places Johnston's contribution among those of other pioneers in the field, particularly as one of those who saw that 'the coming together of Eastern and Western spiritual practices could be just as significant for the development of the church as was the coming together of primitive Christianity and Greek philosophies two thousand years ago.'[7] As a final example, Harry Oldmeadow's survey of 20th century Western encounters with Eastern religious traditions sees Johnston as a key representative of those Christians 'whose writings grow out of the existential encounter with other religions and for whom dialogue was not primarily a matter of the intellectual discernment of doctrinal affinities and

[3] John F. Teahan, 'William Johnston's Writings on Mysticism: Analysis and Critique', *Studia Mystica* (1981) p. 72.
[4] André van der Braak, 'The Practice of Zazen as Ritual Performance' in Marianne Moyaert & Joris Geldhof (eds) *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 165
[5] Philip Sheldrake, *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 655.
[6] Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality* (New York: BlueBridge, 2008), p. 236.
[7] Paul Blée, *The Third Desert* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2011), p. 9.

divergences but the sharing of *spiritual experience*, the immediate enrichment of *religious practice* and the revivification of a vital *Christian Mysticism.'*[8]

These few references indicate that any theological value in considering Johnston's work must lie in a consideration of how such an experiential approach might yield fruitful insights for comparative theology that may not be readily available to other modes of inquiry. More specifically, we might ask whether Johnston offers a useful example of how ritual practice can operate as a key source of learning alongside the comparison of texts or doctrines. As we will see, Johnston has little to offer of lasting value in these latter areas. We will expand on this focus on embodied learning as the lens through which we will examine Johnston's contribution to comparative mystical theology in the next chapter.

The details of Johnston's early vocation, move to Japan and subsequent work are presented in his autobiography, the last book he wrote.[9] Johnston charts his developing interest in mystical theology and in the practice of contemplative prayer set in the context of a concern for world peace that came to dominate his later thought.[10] This concern grew out of a family history that was intimately connected with the Irish Troubles – his mother was involved as a member of the women's division of the Irish Republican Army[11] – and then found a renewed focus when Johnston moved to Japan only six years after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For Johnston, the relationship between his twin concerns for contemplation and for peace found a focus in the inter-religious event called by Pope John Paul II in Assisi in 1986, where representatives of world faiths prayed together for peace. He makes frequent references to this event throughout his work.[12] But the concern for peace was also an inward concern. He sought a reconciliation, or a coincidence of opposites,[13] within himself of some of the poles in his life: Ireland and Japan, celibacy and love, the academy and the church, Zen and Christianity. It is this final pair that will be the concern of this thesis and I shall propose that Johnston offered a distinctive, embodied approach to inter-religious encounter that was respectful of difference and sympathetic to those who sought a 'double belonging', but was ultimately concerned primarily with the project of constructing a new Christian

[8] Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), p. 433.
[9] William Johnston, *Mystical Journey, An Autobiography* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
[10] Indeed, as we shall see later, towards the end of his life he explicitly dedicated his remaining energy to this cause and made it his primary concern as a writer and teacher.
[11] Ibid. p. 2.
[12] Eg. William Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives,* (London: Harper Collins, 1991, p. 103), William Johnston, '*Arise, My Love…'* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000, p. 224), Johnston, *Mystical Journey, An Autobiography*, 2006, p. ix.
[13] Johnston, *Mystical Journey, An Autobiography*, 2006, p. 219 referring to the key idea of non-dualism found in Zen Buddhism and in Hinduism.

mystical theology that could make sense in a globalised world, and especially one that had a strong Asian focus. This project found its greatest and most explicit focus in his later works, most notably his *Mystical Theology*[14] and '*Arise, my love…'*[15] but also in works written for a more popular market such as *Being in Love*[16] and *Letters to Contemplatives.*[17]

Johnston's earlier work was more concerned with specific themes in the encounter between Zen Buddhism and Christianity, such as meditation,[18] the nature of mysticism[19] and the transformation of consciousness.[20] These works were preceded by his general introduction to Zen - Christian dialogue, *Christian Zen,*[21] and a collection of essays relating to that dialogue, *The Still Point.*[22] Between these earlier and later works, Johnston wrote a book on the sources of Christian mystical theology that largely avoided references to Zen Buddhism.[23]

In the course of my exploration of Johnston's personal archive, I discovered the manuscript for a book which was never submitted for publication. It is untitled but I will refer to it as *Dialogues* as it takes the form of a number of dialogues between fictional characters about sexuality and relationships. I will not make many references to this work because it does not address our central area of interest, comparative mystical theology. However, it does show some interesting examples of learning from Buddhist ethics. It is my supposition that Johnston decided not to publish this work because it addressed the controversial topic of artificial contraception and, in a climate where a number of Johnston's contemporaries had been censured by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he may not have wished to take the risk of publishing ideas that contradicted church teaching.

In addition to these books, Johnston wrote a number of journal articles and book chapters, which are listed together for the first time in the bibliography appended to this thesis. He also published translations of four other works, most notably Shusako Endo's novel, *Silence,*[24] but also a short work

[14] William Johnston, *Mystical Theology, the Science of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).
[15] Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'*.
[16] William Johnston, *Being in Love, The Practice of Christian Prayer* (London: Harper Collins, 1988).
[17] Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*.
[18] William Johnston, *Silent Music*, *The Science of Meditation* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1974).
[19] William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1978).
[20] William Johnston, *The Mirror Mind, Spiriuality and Transformation,* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1981).
[21] William Johnston, *Christian Zen* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971).
[22] William Johnston, *The Still Point, Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970).
[23] William Johnston, *The Wounded Stag* (London: Harper Collins, 1984).
[24] Shusaku Endo, *Silence,* Tokyo: Sophia University, 1969).

by Kakichi Kadowaki on *The Ignatian Exercises and Zen,*[25] Takashi Nagai's memoir of the aftermath of the Nagasaki atomic bomb, *The Bells of Nagasaki,*[26] and his own modern English version of *The Cloud of Unknowing.*[27]

The translations from Japanese writers reveal important details about Johnston's understanding of his Japanese context. Endo was a friend of Johnston, and, as Catholic writer, had significant doubts about the ability of Christianity to take root in Japan. Kadowaki was also a friend of Johnston and a fellow Jesuit, though unlike Endo, he was a convert to Christianity from Zen Buddhism. As we shall see, Johnston's first-hand knowledge of Zen owes a lot to his friendship with Kadowaki. Nagai was also a Japanese convert to Christianity and a devoted advocate for peace. In addition to these writers, Johnston's engagement with Japanese religious life centred on the Christian minority in the country and he acknowledged his debt to other Japanese Christians such as the Dominican Oshida Shigeto and the Carmelite Ichiro Okumura,[28] each of whom also had a deep familiarity with Zen. His first-hand experience of Zen came through practising meditation with his mixed body of students at Sophia University and, perhaps just as importantly, through his many and regular visits to temples. His most intensive immersion in the world of Zen practice came from the time he spent as a student of the Zen teacher, Koun Yamada.

The Japanese Buddhist Context: *Johnston and Yamada*

Koun Yamada was a Zen teacher in the Sanbokyodan lineage and dharma heir to Haku'un Yasutani. This lineage was novel in a three key respects: it combined elements of Soto and Rinzai Zen, the two main streams of Zen tradition emphasising seated meditation and *koan* study respectively; it was strongly lay rather than monastic in its composition; and, especially under Yamada, it was open to Western students, including many Christians. The list of Christian dharma successors to Yamada shows a thread of influence and exploration which closely parallels Johnston's life and work. It includes, in chronological order, Hugo Enomiya Lassalle (1898 – 1990), Elaine MacInnes (1924 -), Willigis Jaeger (1925 – 20020), Ama Samy (1936 -) and Ruben Habito (1947 -). All belonged to Roman Catholic religious orders and the first two were Jesuit contemporaries of Johnston in Japan. It was Hugo Enomiya Lassalle who introduced Johnston to Yamada, and Johnston recalls their

[25] Kakichi Kadowaki, *The Ignatian Exercises and Zen* (Jersey City: Program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises, 1974).
[26] Takashi Nagai, *The Bells of Nagasaki* (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1987).
[27] William Johnston, (trans) *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling* (London: Fount Paperbacks ,1997).
[28] Johnston, *Mystical Journey, An Autobiography*, pp. 117-118.

encounters in his autobiography.[29] Shortly after attaching himself to Yamada as his student, Johnston and he parted ways when it became clear that Johnston's continued use of the Jesus Prayer while sitting *zazen* was not acceptable to Yamada. In reflecting on this separation, Johnston felt that he could not ignore the 'living flame of love' that had begun to arise in him during his contemplation. He could not reconcile love for God with the renunciation of all attachments required by Zen meditation. However, he remained committed to continuing an engagement with Zen and I will suggest that this brief and intensive encounter with Zen practice was the bedrock of that ongoing engagement.

Johnston is unclear in his autobiography about the exact timing of this brief period under Yamada, but it must have fallen at some point between his book, *The Still Point*, and a trip to Australia in 1975. Before the early 1970s, Johnston had already participated in Zen retreats (sesshin) and had meditated in temples with a degree of rigour.[30] He wrote about these experiences in *Christian Zen.*[31] Therefore, his time under Yamada came after a significant level of exposure to the practice and teaching of Zen. It was clearly a decisive event in his own exploration of the possibilities of what would now be called 'dual belonging', but did not upset his longer-term project of a constructive encounter with Zen Buddhism with a uniquely experiential and ritual focus. We shall examine the question of dual belonging in more detail below.

Zen in the West in the Later 20th century

We can see, therefore, that the early Zen influences on Johnston's thought came mostly from Christians with a Zen background like Kadowaki, Zen teachers with a desire to reach out to the West like Yamada and first-hand encounters with practitioners in Zen temples. At this time, some Zen texts were being translated into English, with Yamada's own commentary on the *koan* collection, the Mumonkan, appearing in 1979.[32] A much wider selection of texts is available in English to the contemporary student of Zen, including the seminal work of Japanese Soto Zen, Dogen's Shobogenzo.[33] This process of careful translation of texts into English found an early champion in

[29] Ibid. pp. 133-136.
[30] Johnston, *Christian Zen*, p. 3 describes regular Sunday afternoon visits for meditation to Engakuji, a prominent Rinzai Zen temple in Kamukura, south of Tokyo. D.T. Suzuki had associations with the temple.
[31] Johnston, *Christian Zen*, p. 8 refers to an interview (dokusan) with a zen teacher during which he exchanged thoughts about God. He says this had happened 'some years ago'.
[32] Shibayama's commentaries on the same collection were published earlier, in 1974 Zenkei Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier* (Boston: Shambhala, 1974).
[33] Eihei Dogen, *Shobogenzo, The True Dharma-Eye Treasury* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2008).

Ruth Fuller Sasaki, whose painstaking work on *koan* literature introduced a generation of writers to this unique genre of Zen texts from the 1950s onwards.[34]

Johnston also had access to the considerable scholarship of his friend and fellow Jesuit, Heinrich Dumoulin, whose work on the history of Zen continues to enjoy prestige.[35] In addition to his two-volume history of Zen Buddhism, Dumoulin wrote a follow-up work, *Zen Buddhism in the 20th Century*, which did not aim so much to continue his historical account as indicate the main themes of Zen as it found its place in a global context, especially in the first two-thirds of the century.[36] His outline of these themes is also instructive for us in identifying the developments that would mark Johnston's developing engagement with Zen over the latter years of the century. Dumoulin discusses in some detail the conversations between Western philosophers and the so-called Kyoto school of thinkers including Kitaro Nishida, Shin'ichi Hiamatsu and especially Keiji Nishitani and his well-known work, *Religion and Nothingness.* We will return to this conversation in our chapter which considers the question of nothingness as Johnston explores it in the work of John of the Cross. Dumoulin next outlines various strands of academic research on Zen, beginning with new insights in the earlier history – including textual history – of Zen Buddhism. He also refers to psychological and physiological studies on the effects and therapeutic uses of meditation, an area which appears regularly in Johnston's writing and especially in *Silent Music*, which is subtitled 'The Science of Meditation'. Finally, Dumoulin sketches out the Christian engagement with Zen, especially in the fields of the practice of meditation, the experience of enlightenment and the understanding of the *koan*, an area in which he credits Johnston with a unique approach which both recognises the doctrinal content of the *koan* literature and the possibility of reading Christian scripture in a *koan*-like manner as an embodied practice.[37] We shall explore this question in chapter 5.

Dumoulin does not give much consideration to the significant development of Zen in the West in the later decades of the century. This context is also important for our understanding of Johnston's engagement with Zen. It is a context marked by intensification, diversification, and inculturation. The diversification of Zen and wider Buddhist practice in the West stems in part from the effects of globalisation and the migration of populations and qualified practitioners from different Buddhist

[34] An account of her work is found in Isabel Stirling, *Zen Pioneer: The Life and Works of Ruther Fuller Sasaki* (Berkeley: Shoemaker and Hoard 2006) and the fruit of her labours is most clearly shown in Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Zen Koan* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1965).
[35] See, for example, Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism* (Boston: Random House, 1963), Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Enlightenment, Origins and Meaning* (Boston: Shambhala, 1976) and his two volume history of Zen Buddhism, Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History (India and China)* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005).
[36] Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Weatherhill, 1992).
[37] Ibid. pp. 127-128.

environments. Whereas early Zen in the West owed a great deal to the psychologising and philosophising approach of D.T. Suzuki, later developments relied on the establishment of teaching and practice centres and monasteries, especially in the United States. These centres encouraged the growth of dedicated groups of practitioners, some of whom remained loyal to the national and sectarian traditions of their founders while others sought to develop new forms, including 'non-denominational' expressions of Buddhism.[38] One useful case study of this phenomenon begins with the arrival in California of a Japanese Soto Zen priest called Shunryu Suzuki.[39] Originally called to minister to an ethnic Japanese community in San Francisco, Suzuki gradually found a growing number of Westerners keen to learn the practices of Zen. He relished the opportunity to focus on the meditation practices and teaching at the heart of Soto Zen rather than the ritual observances expected by his Japanese community. In addition to his centre in San Francsicso, Suzuki founded a teaching monastery in Tassajara in the Los Padres National Forest in California, further establishing the intensification of practice that marks this period. His influence extended far beyond these centres through the publication of his widely-read *Zen Mind, Beginners Mind,*[40] a book cited by Johnston and recommended by him to his students.[41] Suzuki's legacy includes a continuation of the work of the centres he established through the leadership of several mostly Western dharma heirs, leading to a firmer implantation of Zen Buddhism in its new cultural context. Some aspects of this inculturation show a Western concern for a less hierarchical structure and for a greater emphasis on the equality of women and men. Additionally, a new concern for social and political engagement emerged as Buddhism took hold in the West.[42] We can see elements of this 'engaged Buddhism' in the work of some of the successors of another Japanese teacher in the United States, Taizan Maezumi, whose White Plum Asanga has spawned numerous branches and produced a significant number of teachers and writers such as Bernie Glassman, John Daido Loori and Fr Robert Kennedy, another Jesuit who knew Johnston well.[43] A similar pattern can be seen in other strains of Buddhism,

[38] Don Morreale, *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1998) lists Buddhist centres in the US under four categories: Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana and 'Buddhayana' – non-sectarian and mixed traditions.

[39] For a detailed account of his life and work, see David Chadwick, *Crooked Cucumber, The Life and Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki* (London: HarperCollins, 1999).

[40] Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen mind, Beginner's Mind,* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970).

[41] See, for example, Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 86. Suzuki's other works also enjoyed a wide readership and remain in print.

[42] Some of these aspects of inculturation are listed in Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), pp. 302-303.

[43] See Robert E. Kennedy, *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit* (New York: Continuum, 1995) and Robert E. Kennedy, *Zen Gifts to Christians* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

perhaps most notably in the French-based Vietnamese Zen community of the prolific author Thich Nhat Hanh[44] and in the many Tibetan Buddhist centres established in the West in the same period.[45]

Johnston's writing career spanned the establishment of these Buddhist networks in the West, but it is important to note that it began when they were barely known. In the course of this thesis, we shall consider the extent to which Johnston kept pace with this deepening acquaintance with Buddhism in the West, recognising that the primary audiences for his writing, retreats and addresses were located in mostly English-speaking Western countries such as the US, the UK and Australia.[46]

Christian Sources

Johnston was not systematic in his approach to mystical theology, though his eponymous book on the matter did attempt a structure of sorts. Broadly, his three-part structure outlined the relevant foundational sources before suggesting some fruits of the contemporary dialogue with science and with Asian religions, and then describing elements of the lived experience of a 'mystical journey'. In summarising his approach to mystical theology, I will adopt this general framework while seeking to distil some recurring themes.

The Documents and Theological Context of the Second Vatican Council

The significant changes in the profile of Buddhism, including Zen Buddhism, in the West in the second half of the twentieth century are paralleled by a decisive shift in Christian theology, crystallised in the Roman Catholic world by the Second Vatican Council. This shift exhibits many of the same emphases and contexts that took place in the development of Western Buddhism: diversification, inculturation, openness to secular and political concerns, increased emphasis on lay people, the renewal of monastic life and the priority of dialogue. In terms of the theological emphases of the Council, the question of the nature of revelation through scripture formed a significant thread through the proceedings, as did the nature and calling of the church in the modern world.[47] This renewed theology was to be expressed in a renewed liturgy with its greater emphasis on the gathered Eucharistic assembly and the reading and exposition of scripture. Less immediately

[44] https://plumvillage.org/
[45] In Scotland, https://www.samyeling.org/
[46] Some of his work was, however, translated into other European languages, such as German, Swedish and Finnish.
[47] See chapters 2, 3 and 4 of Christopher Butler, *The Theology of Vatican II* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981). Butler was a significant contributor to the theological work of the Council and is, therefore, an insightful guide to its considerations.

visible in liturgical change was a new priority for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. The latter was expressed in one of the Council's shorter texts, *Nostra Aetate*.

Before briefly considering this Declaration of the Council, we should note one the key theological shifts which, according to Butler, underpins the Council's emphasis on dialogue, and that is a shift in the balance between the Church's objective doctrinal claims and the claims of the individual human conscience. Butler notes that this turn towards subjectivity did not originate in the Council but can be traced through the twentieth century in such developments as the need to strengthen individual conscience in the face of political authoritarianism and, interestingly for our purposes, in the reviving interest in mystical theology.[48] This subjective turn can be seen, for example, in the shift from an emphasis on the Eucharist's effectiveness *ex opera operato* to an insistence on the importance of the cooperation of the faithful in working of divine grace through the Eucharistic assembly.[49] The nature of this interiority is well expressed in a short passage of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes,* which famously described the human conscience as a 'most secret core and sanctuary'.[50] Butler sees this interior 'shrine', present in all people, as the basis for dialogue. He does not consider that the Council had rejected the Church's objective claims to truth, but that it had emphasised the common human meeting point of the conscience as the starting point for meaningful human interaction:

> The depth of man's [sic] responsible subjectivity on one hand, and the Christian Gospel and the Church on the other, may thus be said to be on converging courses; and as they tend to meet, so they intend to embrace each other in a communion of which the expression is dialogue.[51]

Johnston made explicit reference to the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* on the human conscience and consciousness in his *Mystical Theology*, in a section on 'The Inner Voice'.[52] He likens this 'secret core and sanctuary' to the inner voice identified by the prophets, citing examples from Isaiah 40 and Jeremiah 1, and also to the locutions received by contemplatives who hear a 'substantive word'[53] from God. He also explored this area in an address he made to the Christian Meditation Community

[48] Ibid. p. 147
[49] Ibid. p. 148
[50] *Gaudium et Spes* 16, quoted in ibid. p. 152 I have chosen to use Abbott's; Walter Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966) translation of the Conciliar documents throughout this study because that is the version used by Johnston.
[51] Ibid. p. 168.
[52] Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love*, p. 316.
[53] He does, however, strike a note of caution, drawing on the teachings of St John of the Cross and the experiences of Zen meditators who underline the need for discernment and who recognise how easy it is to misunderstand the inner voice.

in Australia in 1995, entitled 'Prayer and Meditation in the Modern World'. Here, like Butler, he explicitly linked it to the Council's teaching on dialogue. One of his consistent themes is that a fruitful dialogue between the Church and other faiths and, indeed, between the Church and science, and the church and the modern world, must be conducted on the level of mysticism, at the point of shared interiority.[54] In this, as in so many other respects, Johnston was a faithful child of the Council. Indeed, a friend of his told me that he read from the texts of the Council every day and his own suggestion that they be read in the manner of *lectio divina*[55] indicates a thorough, embodied and prayerful immersion in the theological priorities set out by the Council fathers. It will be a primary contention of this thesis that Johnston represents a lived example of Conciliar spirituality and that this grounding, more than the influence of Zen, influenced the shape of the mystical theology he sought to construct. At the same time, the Council also gave him the permission to enter into a fruitful, respectful and living encounter with Zen, an encounter he embraced enthusiastically and productively.

The Council's teaching on dialogue with other world faiths is presented primarily, though not exclusively, in *Nostra Aetate.* The Declaration opens with a clear commitment to 'fostering love and unity among men' based on what human beings have in common. The main common ground is identified as the questions about ultimate purpose that arise in all cultures and religions.[56] As well as giving a primary emphasis to the church's relations with Jewish people, the text also includes short paragraphs relating to Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. The subtlety of the brief two sentences which refer to Buddhism is largely due to Heinrich Dumoulin's interventions. According to Johnston, he, along with Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle and Paul Pfister, reworked the original text to present a much more positive view of Buddhism, though he regretted not taking his positive presentation even further.[57] The original had repeated an older caricature of Buddhism as fundamentally pessimistic. Also reflecting the diversity of Buddhism, the text reads:

> Buddhism in its multiple forms acknowledges the radical insufficiency of this shifting world. It teaches a path by which people, in a devout and confident spirit, can either reach a state of absolute freedom or attain supreme enlightenment by their own efforts or by a higher assistance.[58]

[54] See, for example, Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'*, p. 37 which speaks of this wider dialogue founded on the Council's emphasis on the human conscience.
[55] Ibid.
[56] *Nostra Aetate* 1, Abbott, p. 660.
[57] Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'*, p. 48.
[58] *Nostra Aetate* 2, Abbott, p. 662.

These few words hint at the religious dimensions of many schools of Buddhism and at the significance of 'other-power' (*tariki*) in, for example, Pure Land Buddhism. Zen Buddhsim, by contrast, concentrates on 'self-power', or power of the mind (*joriki*).

Most significantly, the Declaration states that 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true holy in these religions',[59] thus refusing any notion of the inherent defectiveness of other religious traditions. Johnston also bases his commitment to inter-religious engagement on other significant texts from the Council. As a Jesuit in Asia, conscious of the missionary work of his forebears in the Society, he was particularly drawn to the Council's Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes).* Commending the 'treasures of mysticism' offered to missionary work by religious orders, the Council urged them to 'reflect attentively on how Christian religious life may be able to *assimilate* [emphasis mine] the ascetic and contemplative traditions whose seeds were sometimes already planted by God in ancient cultures prior to the preaching of the Gospel.'[60] Johnston urged caution in the complete adoption of Zen practices that may be suggested by this text, as he believed it impossible to separate Zen practice from Buddhist faith without doing violence both to Zen Buddhism and to Christianity.[61] However, he did consider that it mandated respectful dialogue and, indeed, parallel practice (Christians meditating alongside Buddhists, but in their own tradition).[62] Here, again, we see an indication of Johnston's deep intuition of the intimate connection between faith and practice, an intuition that would lead him to approach his dialogue through the medium of the embodied practice of ritual. Elsewhere in *Mystical Theology*, Johnston also refers to the another section of *Gaudium et Spes*, which urges a commitment to dialogue, even with those who might wish the church ill.[63]

In addition to these major textual sources, Johnston refers to *Lumen Gentium,* the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Ad Gentes*, the Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church; *Unitatits Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism; *Dignitatits Humanae,* the Declaration on religious Freedom; and *Apostolicam Actuositatem,* the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. These documents are a primary theological source for Johnston but, more than that, they provide the impulse and direction for a mystical theology that recognises a fundamental shift in the place of religious faith in the modern world and, in response, seeks dialogue with that world for its healing

[59] Ibid.
[60] Ad Gentes 18, Abbott, p. 607.
[61] Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love*, p. 133.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love*, p. 296 citing *Gaudium et Spes* 92 Abbott, pp. 306-7.

and its peace, focusses on the laity,[64] and engages confidently with its scriptural roots. Johnston frequently made much of the turn of a new millennium as a symbolic emergence of a new era. Many of the themes he draws on for his analysis of this new era are those of the Council, but with a focus on the mystical dimension of faith that owes more to Rahner's interpretation of the Council and his notion of a third cycle of Christian history that began there. This is characterised as the 'era of John', the Beloved Disciple, and follows on from the 'era of Peter', which was centred more on the institutional expression of the church.[65] The new expression of the church is turned towards the world and is focussed on inculturation. For Johnston, that inculturation would have an increasingly Asian dimension as the West declines in global importance.[66]

Scripture

As a theologian much influenced by the Second Vatican Council, it is not surprising that Johnston should look to scripture as a fundamental source for his mystical theology. He does so in a distinctive way. While respecting the insights of historical-critical method, he generally avoids it and prefers a mode of reading that is reflective, thematic and, to some extent, allegorical. His approach is self-consciously modelled on the hermeneutical style of ancient, medieval and early modern sources such as Origen, Bernard of Clairvaux and John of the Cross, especially in their treatment of the Song of Songs which, for Johnston, provides a recurring hermeneutical key for a biblically-rooted love-mysticism.[67] For example, in a talk given to the Australian Christian Meditation Community, he expounds chapters 3 and 5 of the Song with constant reference to John of the Cross's interpretations, suggesting that the call to the beloved to arise from bed is the invitation to go out from oneself, to transcend one's 'little ego' and reach out in love towards the Divine Lover.[68] Johnston also cites texts from other parts of the biblical canon which speak of the love between God and God's people, such as an extensive treatment of Moses in *The Wounded Stag*, where he considers the nature of Moses' encounter with God and the transformation that results from his 'friendship with God'.[69]

---

[64] His preface to the Fordham edition of his *Letters to Contemplatives,* title *Letters to Friends* in that edition*,* makes it clear that his choice of lay people as his imagined correspondents was deliberate and recognises the significant growth in meditation practice among lay people all over the world, William Johnston, *Letters to Friends* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), p. ix.

[65] Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'*, pp. 22-27 he cites Rahner's article, "Theological Interpretation of Vatican II" in *Theological Investigations* (London and New York, 1981), 20:82ff.

[66] Ibid. p. 3.

[67] Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love*, p. 19. He particularly appreciates Origen's insistence on the communal as well as individual dimensions of the loving relationship described in the poetry of the Song.

[68] William Johnston, *The New Mysticism*, 1994

[69] William Johnston, *The Wounded Stag* (London: Harper Collins, 1984), pp. 24-35. He also cites the intriguing Pauline reference to the 'baptism into Moses' experienced by the whole people of Israel in 1 Cor. 10:2 as an image of the extension of Moses' mystical encounter with God to all who are friends of God (ibid. p. 34).

In *The Mirror Mind,* Johnston offers a summary of his approach to biblical interpretation.[70] Firstly, it honours critical scholarship as a way of understanding the context and form of the texts. Secondly, he sees biblical interpretation as a creative endeavour, showing a 'delicate sympathy' with the text which is much like the way a musician inhabits and interprets of a piece of music. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, it is a mystical endeavour in which 'a passionately spiritual love for the Bible has carried [the interpreter] beyond the words of the text to a wordless silence and to a direct contact with the great reality to which the words point.'[71] Finally, Johnston suggests that there must be a Christological principle in biblical interpretation since Jesus' own interpretation of scripture was founded on a 'unique and extraordinary' knowledge of the reality towards which scripture points.[72]

The Canon of Christian Mysticism

Johnston's use of the writings of St John of the Cross is extensive, far exceeding *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the subject of his doctoral thesis and first book, in terms of cited written sources.[73] His approach to mystical theology is strongly shaped by St John's own approach[74] and his outline of the classic pattern of the mystic's journey into fuller union with God is essentially an exposition of Sanjuanist theology. A good, late example of his use of St John can be found in his *'Arise, my Love…'* where he discusses the discernment of God's activity in the world entirely through the lens of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel.*[75] As we have seen, and as one might expect, Johnston relies heavily on St John for his approach to apophatic theology[76] and, given his interest in the growth and transformation of the human person, it is also unsurprising that he makes much use of St John's ideas of the dark night of the soul.[77] He sees the 'dark night' as a common human experience, but one which sometimes is of such intensity as to be Christ-like in its redemptive possibilities.[78] And while he insists that St John of the Cross is always Christological in his description of the dark night, he also suggests parallels with Zen Buddhist experiences of 'the great death'.[79] It is fitting that one of

[70] William Johnston, *The Mirror Mind, Spirituality and Transformation* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1981), pp. 108-110.
[71] Ibid. p. 109.
[72] Ibid. p. 110, quoting Jn 1:18.
[73] He cites all the major texts: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, The Dark Night of the Soul, The Living Flame of Love* and *The Spiritual Canticle.*
[74] As he sets out in the introduction to his *Mystical Theology,* p. 11. Indeed, he notes his debt to St John in his use of the phrase 'the science of love', ibid. p. 12 citing *The Dark Night* 2.17.6 and 2.18.5.
[75] William Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…',* pp. 95-100.
[76] See above, chapter 3.
[77] E.g. Johnston, *The Mirror Mind, Spirituality and Transformation,* pp. 116-119, Johnston, *Being in Love, The Practice of Christian Prayer* (London: Harper Collins, 1988), pp. 117-120, Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love,* pp. 211-234.
[78] Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love,* pp. 232-233.
[79] Ibid.

the last works Johnston had published was an essay in a Festschrift for Kieran Kavanaugh, whose translations of St John's work were used by Johnston. That essay suggests some insights from Sanjuanist theology that have resonance in dialogue with Zen. The two areas he highlights from the famous diagram of the Ascent of Mount Carmel are the radical sense of detachment – 'In becoming nothing the mystic becomes everything' – and the priority of interior disposition over external ways – 'Here there is no longer any way because for the just man there is no law. He is a law unto himself.' [80]

While Johnston relies heavily on St John of the Cross for his apophatic theology, he turns regularly to his Carmelite contemporary, St Teresa of Avila for a more kataphatic mysticism. By way of example, in *Silent Music*, he discusses St Teresa's insistence that, at the height of mystical union with God, Christ is present in his humanity, though in his risen form.[81] Indeed, the dual emphasis on the presence of Christ in his humanity and active love for one's neighbour are, for St Teresa, 'the norms for judging the authenticity of Christian meditation.'[82]

Johnston also draws on these two Carmelite mystics for his discussions of bridal metaphors for mystical union though, as we have seen, he goes beyond them in seeking a positive evaluation of the role human sexuality in the mystical journey.[83]

To summarise Johnston's use of the wider canon of Christian mysticism, we also see significant references to *The Cloud of Unknowing*, though perhaps fewer than we might have expected, and these are largely used in his exploration of apophatic theology, though also in his major theme of love as the means by which God may be known.[84] Johnston's relatively limited use of this material from his earliest research may be due to his desire to move beyond the scholastic terms in which that exploration was framed. Nonetheless, *The Cloud* remained a constant companion and his translation of the work into direct and accessible English was a significant achievement of his writing career. His other sources from the canon of Western mysticism are much more occasional than the Carmelites or *The Cloud*. Perhaps most surprising by its near absence is any significant engagement with St Ignatius Loyola. Johnston's few references are often designed to justify this particular Jesuit's immersion in a contemplative tradition not normally associated with the Society's approach to the

[80] William Johnston, 'St John of the Cross and Interreligious Dialogue in Asia', in K. *A* Culligan, *Better Wine, Essays Celebrating Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications), p. 331.
[81] William Johnston, *Silent Music, The Science of Meditation,* pp. 88-89.
[82] Ibid. p.87-88.
[83] See the discussion in ch. 15 of Johnston, *Mystical Theology,* pp. 257-278. This is also a major theme of his unpublished *Dialogues*.
[84] See, for example, his discussion on the self in Johnston, *Being in Love,* p. 69.

spiritual life,[85] but it is clear that he also values St Ignatius's insistence on the outworking of spiritual conversion in the active life.[86]

Other sources that recur from time to time in Johnston's work include Augustine, Richard of St Victor, van Ruysbroeck and Eckhart. Perhaps more unusually, he also refers to the work of St Gregory of Nyssa and to St Symeon the New Theologian, though not in any real depth, and to St Gregory Palamas, whose theology of uncreated energies and divine light features in *Mystical Theology*.[87] Johnston brings this thinking into dialogue with his longstanding interest in the approaches to the body's energies that he finds in Asian religions, though he notes that this is an area requiring further dialogue and exploration.[88] As with so many other elements in his mystical theology, this interest is rooted in experiential rather than textual concerns.

Twentieth-Century Theologians and Thinkers

Having examined Johnston's Zen sources throughout this study, there remains one final category of significant sources for his theological project, and that is the diverse group of theological, philosophical and psychological thinkers whose works make repeated appearances throughout Johnston's writings. Given his commitment to a dialogue with Asian religions that focusses on the contemplative dimension, it is not surprising that we see frequent references to fellow Catholics in religious life who were part of that first wave of interfaith spirituality of which Johnston was also a part. Perhaps best known are Bede Griffiths and Abhishiktananda, and it is clear, as we have noted, that Johnston strongly favours the former's approach as offering a fruitful dialogue with Hinduism that does not strain to resolve tensions of belonging and identity.[89] We also note again Johnston's debt to fellow Jesuits in Japan, Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, Heinrich Dumoulin, Tom Hand and Kakichi Kadowaki. Additionally, Johnston greatly respected the Dominican and former Zen Buddhist, Oshida Shigeto,[90] and the Carmelite Ichiro Okumura,[91] both of whom contributed to the 'school of dialogue' alongside the aforementioned Jesuits.[92] But perhaps even more significant influences on his quest for an inculturated Asian Christianity came from the two lay Japanese Catholics we introduced above, Shusaku Endo and Takashi Nagai. Johnston had translated works by these two men –

[85] Eg. Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love,* p. 107.
[86] Ibid. pp. 329-340.
[87] Ibid. pp. 80-85.
[88] Johnston, *"Arise, My Love…",* pp. 114-116.
[89] We have previously referred to Johnston's comparison of the two Benedictines in Johnston*, 'Arise, My Love…',* pp. 120-123.
[90] Johnston, *Mystical Journey, An Autobiography,* pp. 116-117.
[91] Ibid. p. 118.
[92] Ibid. p. 137.

Silence,[93] by Endo and *The Bells of Nagasaki*[94] by Nagai – and he describes their impact on his understanding of the place of Christianity in Japan in his autobiography.[95] Endo was baptised into a Christian family but felt a constant struggle between his Japanese and Christian identities. Johnston's view of Endo's spirituality was that it was deeply kenotic, and that the main protagonist in *Silence* renounces his faith out of love for his fellow Christians, but also in weakness. It is in this weakness, this emptiness, that Christ is most truly present. Johnston regards Endo's final novel, *Deep River*, as a quest for an Asian, rather than narrowly Japanese approach to Christianity, though, once again, the priestly protagonist is a marginal misfit in the church. Endo led Johnston to an appreciation that an authentically Japanese approach to God would be one that found him 'present at the depths of the universe, giving existence to all things.[96]

Johnston's other sources in twentieth-century Catholic theology include three fellow Jesuits; Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. While he would not have claimed to have absorbed or even accessed all of the considerable output of these three theologians, their influence is clear, especially in the case of Lonergan as we have already discussed. Teilhard's influence on Johnston is as a scientist whose cosmic mysticism, driven by a love for all things, offers one possible mode of contact in the dialogue between science and faith. Johnston sees this most powerfully in Teilhard's mystical text, *Mass on the World.*[97]

Finally, another thinker whose influence can be traced throughout Johnston's work is C.G. Jung. We see this most notably in his works from the late 1970s and early 1980s such as *The Mirror Mind* and *The Inner Eye of Love,* though references to Jung continue throughout his work.[98] Johnston's primary interest in Jung relates to the understanding of the unconscious and to the process of individuation. *The Mirror Mind* has, as its subtitle in its British edition, '*Spirituality and Transformation'*[99] and that focus on transformation is where Johnston draws on insights from Jung, particularly around the idea of individuation as a harmonisation of the unconscious and conscious mind. This process of self-realisation requires, in Jung's thinking, a mythic or religious language with which to approach areas of the unconscious that are inaccessible to rational description.[100]

---

[93] Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1969).
[94] Takashi Nagai, *The Bells of Nagasaki* (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1987).
[95] Nagai also features in his discussion on peacemaking in Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love,* pp. 360-363.
[96] Johnston, *Mystical Journey, An Autobiography,* pp. 105-112.
[97] Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love,* p. 108.
[98] E.g. Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…',* pp. 187-188.
[99] The Fordham Press edition subtitles it '*Zen-Christian Dialogue'*.
[100] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind, Spirituality and Transformation,* pp. 31-32.

With such a diverse range of sources, we must ask whether Zen Buddhism is simply another one of these sources alongside the others, or whether it had a decisive role in shaping Johnston's mystical theology. To assess the impact of Zen, we will consider the strongly experiential character of Johnston's engagement that is at the heart of his theology.

Johnston's Experiential Approach and Comparative Theology – An Outline of the Thesis

We shall adopt, as a lens through which to analyse Johnston's work, the growing area of inter-ritual participation as a mode of Comparative Theology. Francis Clooney describes Comparative Theology in this way:

> *Comparative Theology* – *comparative* and *theological* from beginning to end – marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.[101]

For Johnston, as we will see, that learning is in the practice of prayer, or mystical theology, and the mode of learning is primarily the participation in the practices of Zen Buddhism. Marianne Moyaert describes a number of modes and settings in which such inter-ritual participation may happen, and the one that most closely describes William Johnston's participation in Zen practices is the embracing of the practices of another religious tradition in order to enrich one's spiritual journey:

> To engage in the worship practice of another tradition becomes a *means* to encounter the divine anew or to discover hidden or forgotten dimensions of the divine. From this perspective ritual participation may be an expression of the ongoing journey that religious life really is.[102]

We shall further explore this mode of inter-religious learning as a source for Christian theology in the next chapter. The remaining chapters will then look at the major themes in Johnston's exploration of Zen as examples of comparative mystical theology as primarily experienced through embodied ritual rather than textual comparison or the exchange of ideas. These themes are: nothingness and emptiness (ch. 3); the practice of meditation (ch. 4); reading koans and scripture (ch. 5). We will

[101] Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology, Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) p. 10
[102] Marianne Moyaert & Joris Geldof (eds) *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 5 [emphasis original]

consider both the extent to which the insights Johnston gained in this way gave him a deeper understanding of Zen Buddhism, and, more significantly, how they shaped his approach to a Catholic mystical theology remodelled for a new era, drawing out some of his key themes (ch. 6).

In short, we will ask whether Johnston's theological learning from Zen ritual practices represents an instance, *avant la lettre*, of comparative theology conducted through the medium of inter-ritual participation. If so, what possibilities does this indicate for future work in this area? As well as exploring the specific areas of learning for Christian mystical theology set out above, we will see how Johnston's work also touched on a number of subsidiary questions of contemporary theological debate. The first is his contribution to the current debate on dual religious belonging (ch. 2). Secondly, we will assess Johnston's work as an example of post-Conciliar spiritual theology. Thirdly, we will consider his attempts to sketch out an inculturated vision of Christian mysticism in an East Asian context. Finally, we will ask what aspects of the current re-emergence of mystical theology he may have anticipated. These three areas will be summarised in ch. 6.

Chapter Two

Dialogue, Dual Belonging, Comparative Theology and Ritual Participation

The defining characteristic of Johnston's approach to inter-religious encounter is that it is seen, above all, through the lens of mysticism. Rather than conduct a comprehensive survey of Johnston's understanding of the term, I will refer, at this stage, only to his earliest and latest definitions of mysticism, which show a significant level of continuity. In the introduction to his *Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*, Johnston echoes Robert Zaehner's critique of assumptions about the comparability of mystical experiences and terms in different religious traditions. Zaehner had suggested that the absurdity of the claim that all mystical experiences were one and the same is shown by Aldus Huxley's description of 'mystical states' induced by drugs. Zaehner thought it manifestly improbable that the recorded experiences of mystics who are immersed in a complex tradition of patterns of thought could be straightforwardly compared with experiences caused by hallucinogenic substances.[1] Johnston introduces a key understanding that he repeats throughout his work, which is that 'Every great mystic … is like a huge iceberg with only a fraction of its bulk protruding from the waters. Below the surface lies the great mass of tradition upon which the whole thing rests.'[2] Nonetheless, Johnston does recognise a 'basic psychological similarity in all great intuitive experiences'[3] in different religious traditions which allows for the possibility of identifying meeting points between these traditions. Mysticism, then, is a species of wisdom, of intuitive knowledge common to human experience. Christian mysticism understands that wisdom to be motivated and penetrated by 'supernatural faith and love'.[4] Additionally, Johnston stresses that the mystical path is not, for Christians, an esoteric option for the few, but the intensification of 'ordinary' Christian life. The Christian mysticism of which he writes here is apophatic – beyond discursive reasoning – and highly introspective – reaching in 'blind stirrings of love' towards 'God, who by grace, is in secret and silence in that deeply mysterious part of the soul that is called "the sovereign point of the spirit"'.[5] We should also note, in passing, that Johnston identifies a phenomenological dimension to the comparison of mystical experiences. We will see how Johnston values the experiential aspects of his theological inquiry as we consider his emphasis on the embodied, practical exercise of contemplation or meditation in Christian and Zen Buddhist traditions.

---

[1] William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unkowing* (New York: Desclée Co., 1967), p. 8, citing R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (Oxford, 1957) p. xii
[2] Ibid. p. 9.
[3] Ibid. p. 13.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid. p. 3.

Turning to the last of his works on mystical theology (not including his autobiography), *'Arise, My Love…',* Johnston again describes mysticism in terms of a 'wisdom that goes beyond words and letters, beyond reasoning and thinking, beyond imaging and fantasy, beyond before and after into the timeless reality.'[6] He suggests that mystics of all religions agree that such transcendental wisdom is not acquired by human effort, at the same time as offering a path towards its attainment. That path involves disciplined practices but, more than that, love and emptiness (in Christianity) or compassion and nothingness (in Buddhism). Distinctively, Christian mysticism is also concerned with an 'inner fire' or 'living flame' of love. The Christian mystic answers the call of a divine lover while the Hindu or Buddhist mystic seeks the transformation of consciousness. Johnston sees these differences of emphasis as potentially complementary and suggests that the 'the twentieth century witnessed the first stages in the search for a marriage between East and West', echoing the title of a well-known work by Bede Griffiths.[7]

Here we see the twin foci of Johnston's endeavour: an account of Christian mysticism that draws on tradition but recasts it for a new age, and a commitment to inter-religious dialogue in the realm of mysticism that brings people together for the promotion of wider peace and wellbeing. Having established this focus on mysticism, we shall now consider how Johnston's approach corresponds to wider contemporary Catholic explorations of inter-religious encounter and how he handles the complex question of dual belonging or dual practice. For Johnston, was it possible that the marriage of East and West could be realised in one person?

We shall begin with a consideration of Johnston's understanding of *dialogue*, his preferred term, but will then propose that his approach is actually more accurately described as a form of *comparative theology,* a term he did not use. Johnston's only sustained reflection on the nature of dialogue is in his book on spirituality and transformation, *The Mirror Mind.*[8] In this chapter, he sets out an approach to dialogue based upon a common method rather than a common metaphysics.[9] This method draws heavily on Bernard Lonergan's transcendental method: The transcendental notions, that is, our questions for intelligence, for reflection, and for deliberation, constitute our capacity for self-transcendence.[10] For Lonergan, this capacity is actualised when one's being becomes being-in-love, an act of self-surrender, and one's love for God is a love beyond limits, without restriction. The precepts on which Johnston draws for his dialogical method precede this full actualisation. They are:

[6] William Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), p. xvi.
[7] Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West* (London: Collins, 1976).
[8] William Johnston, *The Mirror Mind, Spirituality and Transformation* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1981), pp. 1-25.
[9] Ibid. p. 10.
[10] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 105.

'Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible',[11] to which Johnston adds, 'Be committed.'[12] Dialogue, when conducted in the spirit of this self-transcending method, cannot rest at the level of exchange interesting propositions, but is always oriented towards the possibility of transformation of the self. This methodological approach is, in Johnston's estimation, well suited to a dialogue with Buddhism as it begins with mindful attentiveness, engages a spirit of enquiry, is realistic about one's processes of thinking, is open to the values of others and is committed to truth and to the integrity of a particular path towards that truth.

Johnston also draws on Lonergan's insights for his understanding of the vital place of conversion in the practice of dialogue. Citing words from Lonergan's *Second Collection*, he says:

> …it is a matter of conversion, of a personal philosophical experience, of moving out of a world of sense and arriving, dazed and disorientated for a while, into a universe of being.[13]

This is part an intellectual conversion, founded on a reflection on one's own processes of knowing, and partly a conversion of heart, a readiness to change. In relation to that other sense of conversion, the move from one religious belonging to another, Johnston seeks to promote the mutual sharing of each faith's convictions in love without the intention to coerce or persuade the other to adopt one's own standpoint. Above all, dialogue must take place in what Johnston regards as a fundamentally mystical stance of humble reverence for the other.[14] He attempts to retain the conviction that Christ is the saviour of all while rejecting the notion of 'anonymous Christians'. Indeed, he states clearly that Buddhism can lead to salvation on its own terms,[15] to a true enlightenment which is described, nonetheless, in different terms than the Christian enlightenment (Johnston frequently presents Christian salvation as a kind of enlightenment). He does not try to reconcile these apparently conflicting statements, but holds them in paradoxical tension, much in the way that a Zen Buddhist approaches a *koan.*[16]

In summary, Johnston's use of Lonergan's method could be said to focus more on the inner change of the participants in a dialogue than on their deepening understanding alone. The purpose of such dialogue is not the imparting of information but the transformation of one's ways of knowing and

[11] Ibid. p. 53.
[12] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind, Spirituality and Transformation*, p. 11.
[13] Ibid. p. 4.
[14] Ibid. p. 20.
[15] William Johnston, *Contemplative Prayer*, (1985).
[16] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind, Spirituality and Transformation*, p. 22.

the deepening of one's self-realization. In other words, it is oriented towards - and committed to - conversion.

By way of comparison, I will now consider the approach to inter-religious dialogue outlined by David Tracy in *Dialogue with the Other.*[17] Whereas Johnston, following Lonergan, begins with ways of knowing based on transcendental precepts – attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, responsibility – Tracy advances a dialogical paradigm of knowing based on analogy. Reflecting on the enduring insights of William James' work on religious experience, Tracy writes of seeking analogies within diversity, similarities-in-difference. Such analogies include reflections on experience and on the person to whom that felt experience belongs.[18] This corresponds quite closely to Lonergan's method as it is adopted by Johnston with its attentiveness to patterns of thought.

Tracy's next insight about the nature of dialogue concerns the character of religious truth as being 'the truth of manifestation'. In other words, religious truth is oriented towards revelation or enlightenment - 'to understand at all is to understand differently'[19] – and thus to the transformation of those who seek it. Tracy explains this transformative intention of dialogue further when he insists that one's encounter with the truth of the other must be founded on the genuine possibility of that truth becoming true for oneself. Such an endeavour requires the courage and commitment to risk one's present understanding in the presence of the other.[20]

Tracy also regards the act of dialogue as a sort of spiritual discipline, a practice of self-transcendence, of compassion and of relationality. In this process of converting conversation, whereby one ceases to cling to previously cherished constructions of the self, Tracy sees Buddhism as offering a particular insight through its notion of no-self,[21] an insight that also offers a radical critique of the kind of possessive individualism that pervades much Western culture. Like Johnston's use of Lonergan's method to offer 'skilful means' for self-transcendence, Tracy sees self-forgetting as the fundamental spiritual climate necessary for true dialogue.

So in the areas of epistemological transformation, of a commitment to personal change and of self-transcendence, Tracy offers a clear mirror to hold up to Johnston's approach to dialogue. This mirror both reflects and sharpens Johnston's vision of inter-religious dialogue that is oriented towards real spiritual growth.

---

[17] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990).
[18] Ibid. p. 32.
[19] Ibid. p. 44.
[20] Ibid. p. 73.
[21] Ibid. p. 76.

If Johnston's approach to the *spirituality* of dialogue could be said to be mystical and transformative, sharing much with Tracy, does his *theological* understanding of the nature of interreligious dialogue also find parallels in post-conciliar Catholic thought? In particular, how does his theological understanding of other religions handle the complex juxtaposition of the universal claims of Catholic Christian theology and its stated willingness to accept what is good and truthful in other religions?

Michael Barnes' essay in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*[22] offers a useful summary of the issues that have emerged since the foundational texts of Vatican II. Put simply, he argues for the subtly 'inclusivist' character of a Catholic theology of religions. In Alan Race's much-used taxonomy, approaches to inter-religious dialogue can be seen as exclusivist – religions possess rival and exclusive claims to truth – inclusivist – one religion sees the validity of another through the lens of its own universal truth claim – or pluralist – religions present equally valid truth-claims.[23] Catholic approaches have often tended towards an inclusive approach as a way of reconciling the fundamental theological position of a unique revelation of God in the paschal mystery of Christ as the only source of salvation with an understanding that the workings of God are not limited to one religious tradition. Barnes suggests that *Lumen Gentium* established a view of non-Christian faiths as 'oriented to' or 'related to' the Church through the 'single life-giving mystery of God's love' in which all participate.[24] But, he asks, 'How is such a relationship to be maintained without occluding one or other side?'[25]

Barnes sees in the work of Jacques Dupuis one such elucidation of an inclusivist approach that remains open to the distinctiveness and integrity of other faiths. Developing Karl Rahner's fundamental principle of the presence Christ in all things, Dupuis sees all religions as possible 'sacramental means' of unfolding God's providential purposes.[26] Taking this notion further, Barnes expresses the salvific potential of religions in this way: 'A human being's commitment to a particular religious tradition has a part to play in that person's entering into a salvific relationship with transcendence.'[27] Further, the work of a theology of religions 'begins to emerge as an enterprise directed towards similar existential issues – faith and reason, loss and tragedy, justice and mercy,

[22] Michael Barnes, *Catholic Theology and Other Religions* in Lewis Ayres, & Medi Ann Volpe, *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 931-942.
[23] This was first set out in his *Christians and Religious Pluralism* Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1983). Paul Knitter offered an expanded, fourfold model in *No Other Name* Paul Knitter, *No Other Name* (London: SCM Press, 1985), which he subsequently further elaborated in his *Theologies of Religions,* Paul Knitter, *Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).
[24] Op. cit. p. 931.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid. p. 932.
[27] Ibid. p. 938.

forgiveness and hope – and grapples with the same sorts of questions, even if the sources of reflection … are quite different.'[28]

Johnston's approach to the theology of religions, insofar as he articulates it, is broadly in keeping with such an inclusivist stance, though he is careful to insist that the salvific potential of other religions is expressed in terms that derive from that religion's own insights into the human condition and into the nature of a person's growth or transformation through the practice of that religion. His position is summarised well in a section of *'Arise, My Love…'* where he asks how one may reconcile proclamation and dialogue. Citing an article by Pope St John Paul II, he sets out a 'normative' and 'traditional' position for Catholics in which 'normally it will be in the sincere practice of their own religion that human beings find salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognise or acknowledge him as their Savior.'[29] He also affirms that 'the seeds of the Word (*semina verbi*) and the groaning of the Spirit are at work in all authentic religions.'[30] Johnston shows an awareness of the general territory of the theologies of religions that arose after the Council but admits that he has little patience for or interest in the precise theological categorisations that arise in this field. He prefers, instead, to concentrate on the mystical dimension of his inquiry, which he considers to be a more appropriate approach in the cultural context of East Asia. In particular, he feels that a Western emphasis on differentiation runs counter to a unitive Asian emphasis on creative harmony. He focusses on a controversy that arose around the Asian Synod of 1998, where Japanese bishops expressed deep concern about a phrase in the preparatory documents (*lineamenta*) which described Jesus Christ as 'the one and only Savior'.[31] The bishops sought to hold to a view of Jesus Christ as a loving and universal saviour while ensuring it was possible for the minority Christian community in Japan to maintain 'dialogue, common living and solidarity with other religions.'[32] In their '*Responses to the Lineamenta'* the bishops suggested that;

> The church, learning from the *kenosis* of Jesus Christ, should be humble and open its heart to other religions to deepen its understanding of the Mystery of Christ.[33]

In such an approach, suggests Johnston, a previous missionary model based on conquest is replaced by one which stresses humility and the willingness to learn from other religions. The conversion sought from such an encounter is the conversion of the church, not a proselytising of other faiths.

---

[28] Ibid. p. 940.
[29] William Johnston, *'Arise, My Love...'* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 234.
[30] Ibid. p. 235.
[31] Ibid. p. 236.
[32] Ibid. p. 237.
[33] Ibid. citing an article in the *East Asian Pastoral Review* of 1998, 35, no. 1.

Dual Belonging

There is a specific area of inter-religious encounter that Johnston explored, and that is the question of whether it is possible for someone to practice more than one religion without compromising the integrity of each of these religions. As we have seen, this was not an academic concern for Johnston. His colleague Hugo Enomiya Lassalle was one of the earliest adopters of a dual religious practice under the guidance of Yamada Koun, and we have already mentioned Johnston's short-lived attempts to follow his example. Johnston's own position on this complex question was, itself, complex. Intriguingly, he made this comment in a late conference address, which I shall quote at length as the text is not readily available:

> I cannot claim to have a "double belonging" *except in a wide interpretation of these words*. For me, the commitment to Jesus Christ and to the Gospel is my primary way to the Father. Perhaps Abhishiktananda tried to belong to both Christianity and advaita; and this caused him great suffering. Yet Ramakrishna, and Gandhi, and the Dalai Lama never make this claim. Much as they love Jesus Christ and Christianity, they are deeply rooted in their own tradition. And people who belong to both Buddhism and Christianity are not greatly appreciated by Buddhists in Japan.
>
> As for "intrareligious dialogue" I believe I have had something of this. I have come to some insight into Zen as different from Christian contemplation yet complementary. I would not claim to have the Zen satori (for this one must have recognition from a Zen teacher) but I have found the state of consciousness, quite widespread in Japan, wherein I am just present to reality – just there kono mama – without preoccupation with past and future. This does not reject Christian contemplation and is very, very valuable. Moreover, it opens the way for me to an Asian Christianity.[34]

This excerpt provides a good summary of Johnston's mature position on dual belonging as well as his vision for the kind of deep learning from Zen that would offer possibilities for an inculturated Christian mystical theology. It is notable that he does not entirely reject aspects of double belonging in his own practice and picks up on Panikkar's phrase, 'intrareligious dialogue', as a way of describing

[34] William Johnston, 'Mysticism and Interreligious Dialogue', *International Conference on Religious Spiritual Tradition* (Taipei: Fu Jen Catholic University 2002), p. 13 [emphasis mine].

an inner, experiential dialogue. Earlier in the address he revisited his experience with Yamada and set out his reasons for rejecting a full participation in Zen training at that time. He referred to a conversation he had with Oshida Shigeto, a Japanese Dominican with a background in Zen Buddhism. Oshida did not discourage Johnston from undertaking some Zen study, but remarked that he thought Johnston 'would find that they have a different faith'.[35] Johnston did, indeed, find himself uncomfortable chanting the three refuges: 'I put my faith in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha' when his own commitment was to 'Jesus, the Gospel and the Church'.[36] For Johnston, the faith with which one undertakes a meditative or contemplative practice is decisive. The practice may look similar – and, indeed, this very similarity of practice is the basis for Johnston's dialogue with Zen – but the underlying commitments and worldviews differ. This excerpt also identifies a significant area of learning for Johnston in the dialogue he had nurtured with Zen, and that is a particular kind of consciousness. We shall return to this area when we consider Johnston's approach to meditation below.

Johnston offered reflections on the dual belonging or dual practice expressed by a number of other Christian writers, most notably Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, Bede Griffiths and Abhishiktananda. In addition, he cites, with approval, the work of Sr Elaine MacInnes[37] and Ruben Habito,[38] a former Jesuit colleague, both of whom have received dharma transmission in Zen lineages. Johnston's understanding of Lassalle's position is, perhaps, the most important for our purposes, for it was Lassalle's engagement with Yamada that led Johnston to try out this path for himself.

Lassalle's own writings on the practice of Zen from a Christian perspective contain many references to the wider Christian tradition of contemplation and mystical theology. His concern is, in part, to establish common ground between Zen and Christianity by finding, in the writings of Christian mystics, an experiential, non-thinking approach to God. In particular, he draws on Bonaventure, Eckhart, the Victorines, Tauler, Ruysbroeck, *The Cloud of Unknowing* and John of the Cross.[39] Lassalle thus bypasses the issues raised by a comparison between the non-theistic character of Zen and the Christian prayer directed to a personal God. Lassalle's fundamental question is whether it is possible to find in Zen practice a modern '*Cloud of Unknowing*', a method for Christian meditation. He concludes that this is possible:

[35] Ibid. p. 4.
[36] Ibid. Elsewhere, Johnston uses this comparison positively – the Buddhist refuges reveal an archetypal pattern which can be expressed in Christian terms Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, pp. 184-185.
[37] Johnston, *'Arise, My Love...'*, p. 63.
[38] William Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives* (London: Harper Collins 1991), p. 86.
[39] Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, *Zen Meditation for Christians* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1974), p. 79.

> *Shikantaza* ['just sitting' - seated meditation without object] performed by a believing Christian becomes Christian meditation. By itself it is as clear as pure spring water, and its taste is refreshing, for nothing is mixed with it.[40]

This conclusion is not very far from positions that can be found Johnston's own writings. In *The Inner Eye of Love*, Johnston expresses a very positive view of the 'just sitting' that can, itself, be a realisation of enlightenment, and considers that the Christian undertaking such a simple, if difficult, practice from a position of Christian faith is practicing Christian meditation.[41] However, he offers a more complex assessment of Lassalle's approach elsewhere. On the one hand, he can welcome Lassalle's insistence on the celebration of the Eucharist at *sesshin* (Zen retreats) in his Zen centre outside Tokyo and affirm Lassalle's 'true Christian vision'. He considers that Lassalle 'was open to the marriage of Christianity and Zen in the depths of his own being'.[42] On the other hand, Johnston voices the concern of many Buddhists (without citing any specific examples) that Lassalle's Zen was *gedo* Zen, 'Zen outside the way of the Buddha' and, therefore, dependent on a separation of Zen practice from Buddhist teaching, a separation that he would strongly reject.[43] In Johnston's view, Lassalle was not merely adopting Zen techniques for Christian prayer, but also seeking an enlightenment such as Zen Buddhists claim, though from a position of Christian faith, a move only possible if Zen is detached from its Buddhist roots. For Johnston, the Christian does indeed seek an enlightenment, but one that is based on the Gospel and different in kind from the *satori* of the Zen Buddhist.[44]

Johnston's other concern about Lassalle's approach to combining Zen and Christianity was that the centrality of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God could not be accepted within the philosophical and religious framework of Zen Buddhism where, at best, Jesus might be seen as a 'powerful and inspiring symbol'.[45] The pattern of his dying and rising might be imitated by the Zen Buddhist, who might see in that pattern a type of Buddhist enlightenment where one 'may die the great death and rise to the highest enlightenment while remaining totally faithful to his or her basic commitment.'[46]

---

[40] Ibid. p. 160.
[41] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, pp. 193-4.
[42] Johnston, *'Arise, My Love...'*, p. 63.
[43] Ibid. p. 60 and William Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 133.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid. p. 62.
[46] Ibid.

For the Christian, however, Jesus' death and resurrection are historical events and the Christian dies and rises with Christ, not through imitation but through union with him.[47]

Johnston also considers the experiences of the French Benedictine, Dom Henri le Saux, later known as Abhishiktananda after his move to India and his adoption of an Indian form of spiritual life. His assessment of Abhishiktananda's attempt to live a fully Christian and fully Hindu spiritual life is made almost exclusively through the critical lens of Abhishiktananda's older colleague, Jules Monchanin,[48] with whom he had a very strained relationship. Johnston could not see how Abhishiktananda could fully give himself to both Hindu *advaita* and Christian faith at the same time and recognised the deep anguish caused by the attempt to reconcile two different kinds of approach to God. Johnston concluded that Abhishiktananda had not found a way to hold onto the paradox that one may 'become God by participation' but still call out 'Abba, Father'.[49] In part, Abhishiktananda's anguish seemed to come from a cultural dislocation (it was painful for him to set aside his French Benedictine life) and in part from the strain of maintaining both non-dualistic and relational notions of God at the same time. All the same, Johnston saw Abhishiktananda as a prophetic voice seeking a true and deep encounter between two great world faiths.[50]

Johnston was more positive in his assessment of Abhishiktananda's successor, Bede Griffiths, whom he saw as more capable of living with paradox. More decisively, he considered Griffiths' approach to have remained more squarely in the realm of dialogue than in any attempt to embody a dual belonging, a possibility Bede rejected.[51] While resisting this, Bede was insistent that Hinduism and Christianity were complementary and he was able to accept the Hindu experience of God fully. Johnston felt closer to Bede in his search for a unity in diversity, a unity found most fully in 'the silent, wordless, imageless wisdom of the sannyasi, the bodhisattva and the Christian mystic'.[52]

At this point, let us consider the views of those who offer a more positive account of dual belonging and their engagement with thinkers who share Johnston's hesitations. We have already noted

[47] Johnston cites Rom. 6:5 – 'For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.' Ibid.
[48] Ibid. pp. 121-124. Johnston relies almost exclusively on Monchanin's account of Abhishiktananda in Sten Rodhe, *Jules Monchanin, Pioneeer in Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1993).
[49] Ibid. p. 123.
[50] There are, of course, more sympathetic critiques of Abhiskiktananda's articulation of his Christian-Hindu approach, such as Donald Nicholl's conclusion that he did not, in the end, 'lose his balance' but, holding onto a Christocentric faith expressed eucharistically, he transcended 'cultural' forms of Christian and Hindu religion and lived a life 'in the Spirit' Donald Nicholl, *The Beatitude of Truth* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), pp. 219-20.
[51] Ibid. p. 125. Johnston cites a passage from Jesu Rajan, *Bede Griffiths and Sanyasa* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1988), p. 242.
[52] Ibid. p. 127.

Johnston's approving reference to the work of his former fellow-Jesuit, Ruben Habito. The two men lived together in a small Jesuit residence in Tokyo, away from the much larger SJ House. Habito left the Society in 1989, having been in Japan since 1970. He, too, studied Zen under Yamada and is now Director of the Zen centre he founded in Dallas, the Maria Kannon Zen Center. He was one of the interviewees for Rose Drew's study of Zen-Christian dual belonging and she records his subtle account of how he intends to follow a Zen Buddhist and a Christian path.[53] If asked whether he was a Christian or a Buddhist, Habito would reply not with an assertion of fixed identities in either tradition, but in terms of a dynamic aspiration to 'continue the path of awakening' in company with those who take refuge in the Buddha's teaching, and to 'live following the way of Jesus the Christ' in company with those who follow in the way of the Kingdom of God.[54] He is aware of the theological tensions involved in the attempt to describe reality in terms that are faithful to the respective grammars of Buddhism and Christianity[55] but ultimately sees a unity (or a non-duality) in his embodied practice rather than in an abstract, speculative approach:

> When I sit in Zen … there is no Buddhist there, there is no Christian either. There is just Mary, at the foot of the Cross of Jesus, bearing in herself all the pains of her own beloved Son, who in turn bears all the pains of our sinful world in his own body. There is just Kannon, Hearer of the Cries of the world, who hears the voices of suffering of all sentient beings … and who responds to these cries and voices, reaching out … to teach, to advise, to chastise, to console, to heal, or just to be there with the pain.[56]

Habito finds, therefore, a point of focus in the salvific intent of each religion and in the practice of attentive and compassionate silence that situates the practitioner in the midst of the world.

Another Jesuit known to Johnston, Robert Kennedy, is also a recognised Zen teacher and he expressed gratitude to Johnston for having introduced him to the temples of Kyoto and to the understanding of Zen as more a way of looking at life than a religion.[57] Kennedy acknowledges the differences between Zen and Christianity, quoting Thomas Merton's introduction to John Wu's study, *The Golden Age of Zen*, where Merton suggests that comparing the two religions was like

---

[53] Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 27-28.
[54] Ibid. quoting from Ruben Habito, *Being Buddhist, Being Christian: Being Both, Being Neither*, In J.D. May, *Converging Ways? Conversion and Belonging in Buddhism and Christianity* (pp. 165-180) (Klosterverlag Sankt Ottilien: EOS, 2007).
[55] Elsewhere, Habito articulates his hesitation about claiming to be both Buddhist and Christian because he does not want to compromise the integrity of either religion by suggesting that they can be mixed together in any simple way, eg. Habito, *Be Still and Know, Zen and the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), p. 176.
[56] Habito, *Being Buddhist, Being Christian: Being Both, Being Neither*, pp. 179-180.
[57] Robert E. Kennedy, *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit*, p. 12.

comparing tennis to mathematics.[58] He does not dwell on these differences but suggests that the gift to Christians from the practice of Zen comes in the form of a reminder of contemplative insights already present in Christianity. In particular, he finds in Zen a reinforcement of the Christian notion that contemplation is not so much a looking *at* Christ as a transformation *into* Christ: 'There is no contemplation without a great death, and it is especially in this death to self that Christian and Zen contemplation comes so close together … Finding our true selves before the eyes of God, we will discover in the end, with Augustine, that in reality there is only one Christ loving himself.'[59]

A closer focus on the nature of dual belonging can be found in the work of Paul Knitter who, though not a Zen practitioner,[60] offers some of the most sustained reflections on the challenges and opportunities of a dual Christian-Buddhist practice. In a book constructed as a dialogue with the Jesuit theologian Roger Haight, Knitter outlines his fundamental model for his dual practice or 'double nourishment', which is a dialogical process of 'passing over and passing back' between each religion.[61] Each time one passes over and passes back, one takes something from one religion into the other and each is, therefore, changed through the encounter. Knitter finds that this process is life-sustaining and that it expands his religious experience by offering fresh insights on each religion from the other. He insists that the two religions remain distinct and equal in this process – it is not a question of syncretism.

Knitter offered a more sustained example of that 'passing over and passing back' in his book, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian.*[62] In this more personal reflection, he presents a range of Christian theological problems for which he then seeks a dialogue with Buddhism before 'passing back' to Christian theology with the fresh insights gained from the dialogue. The problems he posits include the nature of God as personal and transcendent, life after death, the uniqueness of Christ as saviour, prayer and worship and 'the efforts to move this world towards the peace and justice of the Reign of God.'[63] It is clear that Knitter undertakes this process as a Christian presenting Christian theological problems in dialogue with Buddhism, though his identification with Buddhism and his daily practice of Buddhist meditation lead him to go so far as to describe himself as a Buddhist Christian (not yet a Christian Buddhist). He describes how a class of theology students with whom he shared the drafts of this book challenged him on the possibilities of dual belonging using analogies

[58] Ibid. p. 32.
[59] Ibid. p. 37.
[60] He has 'taken refuge' in Tibetan Buddhism but seeks to draw from a variety of Buddhist sources in his work.
[61] Paul Knitter & Roger Haight, *Jesus and Buddha* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), p. 223. This is an image he borrowed from John S. Dunne in his 1972 book, *The Way of all the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion.*
[62] Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009).
[63] Ibid. p. xiii.

from marital relationships – is dual belonging a form of 'spiritual polygamy'? We shall examine this analogy further below, but is interesting to note Knitter's response at this stage, which is that he prefers to talk in terms of 'hybridity' and suggests that such hybrid identity is far from unusual across the world.[64]

In a later edition of the book, Knitter offered a new final chapter in which he described a move towards a position in which he can describe himself now as a Christian Buddhist as well as a Buddhist Christian. He uses the Chalcedonian language of hypostatic union to suggest an analogy for the union in one person of two natures – Buddhist and Christian.[65] He further suggests an analogy between the union of two natures in Christ and the non-duality of form and emptiness (particularity and universality) in Mahayana Buddhism. For Knitter, the universal vision of Buddhism finds particular expression in the person of Jesus Christ in a way that is more than simply paradigmatic, perhaps even *necessary* – language that might cause problems for Buddhists. In introducing, albeit in a very preliminary way, these categories into the discussion of Christian-Buddhist dual belonging, Knitter expresses succinctly the challenge at the heart of the whole enterprise, which is a challenge that exists intensely on a personal level – can one belong to two religions simultaneously – and, no less intensely, on a theological level – must the significant theological differences between the two religions be reconciled in order for a hybrid identity to be possible?

These existential and theological dilemmas of dual belonging have been well-articulated in recent years, with theologians usually focussing on particular areas of concern. For example, Catherine Cornille expresses the view that multiple religious belonging is 'generally predicated on the belief in the unity of all religious experiences' and that the notion of a 'pure and universal' religious experience is problematic.[66] However, not all those claiming a dual belonging would accept the premise that 'all religions meet at the top' and some would even stress the positive role of differences between religious insights. For example, Williams suggests that the apophatic theologian 'affirms the existence of a Creator God and denies it, both centres her faith on it and empties her faith of it, in order to penetrate to a deeper realisation'[67] and that this 'via interrogativa' is a good model for Buddhist-Christian dual belonging.

---

[64] Ibid. p. 214.
[65] Ibid. p. 220. He also explores this idea in a journal article of the same year; Paul Knitter, 'A 'Hypostatic Union' of Two Practices But One Person?' *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (2012).
[66] Catherine Cornille, *Many Mansions?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), p. 5.
[67] Janet P. Williams, 'Going Beyond the Creator God', in Gavin D'Costa & R. Thompson (Eds.), *Buddhist–Christian Dual Belonging; Affirmations, Objections, Explorations* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), p. 231.

As noted above in relation to Knitter's explorations, other concerns focus on questions around loyalty and commitment, sometimes drawing on marital metaphors to suggest a kind of 'infidelity' inherent in multiple belonging. Cornille describes the nature of religion as, ideally, entailing 'the total commitment of will, feelings and intellect to the ultimate reality'. By contrast, 'selective and simultaneous belonging to various religions implies a discriminating and self-sufficient subject that is precisely what needs to be left behind in the pursuit of the highest levels of spiritual and religious attainment.'[68] Cornille draws on a long tradition in Christian theology that contrasts spiritual dissipation with the calling to chastity. She reflects Johnston's primary concern about multiple belonging as presenting an irresolvable tension between distinct sets of commitments – how can one follow the way of the Buddha, the Sangha and the Dharma as well as following Christ, the Church and the Gospel? Surely one would find the sort of internal fraction that caused Abhishiktananda such pain. Rose Drew argues that dual belongers do not attempt a commitment to two distinct objects, but to one ultimate reality expressed through a commitment to two traditions.[69] This does not necessarily support the accusation that dual belongers assume the unity of all religious experiences. Drew suggests that the unity is to be found in the *person* who undertakes a spiritual path that 'follows two maps' rather than in the two religions with their different modes of expression.[70] In response to Cornille's concern that the dual belonger risks a solipsistic approach to faith, Drew points to Roger Corless's experience that 'the "I" that does not choose [between Buddhism and Christianity] disappears and the process continues'.[71] The dual belonger is no less able to follow a path of self-forgetfulness than someone committed to a singular spiritual path and may, indeed, be able to draw on considerable resources from two traditions with significant strategies to 'forget the self'.[72]

We have identified Moyaert's work on 'inter-riting', the participation of the believer/practitioner in the rituals of her own and other religions, as the main lens through which we examine Johnston's embodied approach to comparative mystical theology. Moyaert's work also leads her to a critique of the phenomenon of dual belonging. She stresses the long and committed process of entering a religious tradition with one's body through rituals of entrance, socialisation and discipleship.[73] She notes that this process is developed through long-practised tradition and often serves to form a firm marker between those who do and do not belong. She questions whether a dual belonger can truly

[68] Op. cit. p. 3.
[69] Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*, p. 207.
[70] Drew, *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging; Affirmations, Objections, Explorations*, p. 30.
[71] Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*, p. 22.
[72] Mt 16:24 and parallels; Shobogenzo, Genjokoan.
[73] Marianne Moyaert, 'Dual Belonging, Ritual and the Spiritual Revolution', in D'Costa, & Thompson, *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging; Affirmations, Objections, Explorations,* p. 123ff.

accomplish such an embodied process in more than one religious context as it requires such a significant level of dedication. She suggests that dual belongers exhibit a marked turn to interiority that characterises much contemporary spiritual seeking, though she does acknowledge the ritual dimensions of most dual belongers' practice. In response to Moyaert's concerns, we may simply note that the experience of dual belongers is that they usually aim to embrace the ritual elements of each religion as wholeheartedly as possible, recognising the fundamentally embodied nature of spiritual practice.

A further area of concern about the feasibility of dual belonging relates to the compatibility of the underpinning 'theology' of each religion. This finds its focus in the areas outlined by Paul Knitter above but is perhaps clearest in the question of how one describes the brokenness of the human condition and its remedy in each tradition. Drew examines John Makransky's questions about the nature of 'salvation' or 'liberation' in each religion.[74] It is Makranksy's contention that Buddhism and Christianity define the problem differently and that they must, therefore, propose different remedies. He contrasts the Christian emphasis on sin and forgiveness with the Buddhist focus on delusion and enlightenment. He also suggests that where Buddhism offers a method (the eightfold path) for liberation, Christianity emphasises the reception of divine grace. In Buddhism, the goal is non-dualism, in Christianity it is loving communion with God, who is other. In response, Drew suggests that the difference is one of emphasis rather than substance, and finds common ground for Christianity and Buddhism in their concern for a loving involvement in the world born of non-attachment.[75] She also suggests that the distance between a Buddhist sense of non-dualism and a Christian mystical understanding of union with God may not be as great as Makransky supposes.

This brief survey of the theological territory surrounding questions of dual belonging, a territory that has expanded considerably since Johnston considered issues, indicates that Johnston had nevertheless identified most of the key areas that would form the substance of the current debate. While maintaining a scepticism concerning the possibility of a fruitful embrace of dual belonging, he welcomed the insights opened by those who choose to inhabit the lived experience of another religious tradition with respect, intelligence and commitment. Indeed, his commitment to shared meditative practice would prove to be a keystone of his comparative theological project.

[74] Drew, *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging; Affirmations, Objections, Explorations*.
[75] Ibid. p. 28.

Comparative Theology as a Description of Johnston's Dialogical Project

As we have seen, Johnston gave some consideration to the nature of the dialogue he was undertaking and commending to the church as it sought new insights into mystical theology for a new era. His focus was very much on the spiritual disposition of the Christian willing to engage with the lived experience of another faith. In a similar way, his reluctance to enter into anything close to a 'dual belonging' with Zen Buddhism shows him to be a Christian seeking fresh insight into his own faith through a direct encounter with the lived faith of a different religious tradition. So the problem with describing Johnston's approach as a 'dialogue' is that we hear very little indeed from the other party in that dialogue. They are almost completely silent. Johnston was indeed involved in some early dialogues between Buddhists and Christians, but his entire written corpus speaks not of exchange, but of one-way learning. He is committed to his own tradition and equally committed to a practical engagement with another tradition – Zen Buddhism – in order to learn from it. He did not seek a fusion of two religions but a respectful and attentive inquiry into Buddhist wisdom that might shed light on neglected aspects of Christian tradition.

This is precisely the endeavour described by Francis Clooney in his overview of the field of comparative theology.[76] Noting that all religions are near to us in a globalised world, Clooney proposes a mode of theology that takes both religious diversity and religious commitment seriously: 'Diversity becomes a primary context for a tradition's inquiry and self-understanding', and gives opportunities for 'making a deeper sense of ourselves intellectually and spiritually.'[77] This mode of theological inquiry demands the fullest possible account of another religion and progresses through the careful study of its particularities, not through generalisations. The aim is not simply to note comparisons between one religion and another as a matter of detached interest, but is 'a reflective and contemplative endeavour by which we see the other in the light of our own and our own in the light of the other. We see ourselves differently, intuitively uncovering dimensions of ourselves that would not otherwise, by a non-comparative logic, come to the fore.'[78] It is not evaluation for its own sake, but back-and-forth learning that focuses on one's own growth in faith and makes no claims on the other.

For Clooney, comparative theology is always participatory and, to some extent, autobiographical. It is 'a practical inquiry that traverses the path from the truth of own's tradition through the other,

[76] Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology, Deep learning across religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010)
[77] Ibid. p. 5
[78] Ibid. p. 11

most often ending in a return home.'[79] His own chosen mode of 'practical inquiry' is the study of Hindu texts, learning to hear their deep resonances within the communities in which they are read and drawing on that community's own traditions of interpretation and commentary. After a deep immersion in that text, one returns to the Christian source from which one intuited a likely comparison and re-reads it in the light of that modest learning. Clooney sees this enterprise as inherently limited and focussed on small engagements with particularities, making no sweeping claims to grand conclusions.

Although he concentrates on texts that might be regarded as partial or even elite expressions of a religious tradition, Clooney insists that reading is itself a religious practice and fully accepts that other kinds of religious expression and practice are legitimate materials for the work of comparative theology.[80] As we have noted, Johnston did not offer a careful reading of Zen Buddhist texts (with the possible exception of some of the *koan* corpus) but he did engage carefully in aspects of its ritual practice. Might these serve as reliable material for the kind of one-step-at-a-time, painstaking work of comparative theology as described and as exemplified by Clooney's work? This study will assess the degree of success achieved by Johnston in his chosen mode of comparative theology and, more specifically, examine the particular areas of learning he described.

Clooney encourages a widely based approach to this work and even commends non-academic approaches such as those undertaken by Bede Griffiths and Henri Le Saux. He suggests that such attentive enterprises can remind the more academic world of comparative theology that 'theology and interreligious study can produce a learning in harmony with the spiritual path.'[81] Johnston was not writing for an academic audience, but for people who wanted to learn to pray more deeply by seeing their own Christian practices of prayer in the light of Zen practices. Did this project, which Johnston intended to be theological as well as practical, offer significant material that invites further attention from those engaged in the academic discipline of comparative theology?

Comparative Mystical Theology through Embodied Practice – Towards a Methodology

We shall now set out some simple principles for our study of Johnston's use of his engagement with Zen Buddhism as a source for his comparative mystical theology. The recent publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*[82] indicates a renewal of the study of Christian traditions of

[79] Ibid. p. 15
[80] Ibid. p. 67. He does, however, consider the reading of texts to be the most fruitful line of inquiry.
[81] Ibid. p. 38
[82] Edward Howells & Mark McIntosh (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

prayer and mysticism from a theological perspective which is also alert to the experiential and phenomenological dimensions of this realm of religious practice. This is the approach that Johnston himself had attempted in his writings and which he stated most explicitly in the introduction to his *Mystical Theology.* His concern is primarily pastoral, but he also explicitly seeks to analyse and interpret the experience of prayer. He considers mystical theology to be 'the science that reflects on, and teaches, the secret wisdom that comes through love.'[83] In that introduction, he made reference to the interfaith context that was so central to his writing but made it clear that the theological insights that formed the basis of that particular work were drawn from John of the Cross, though heavily recast in the light of contemporary experience and founded on the principles of the Second Vatican Council. He spelled out the contours of his approach in a slightly earlier and more popular work, *Letters to Contemplatives*. He wrote there of a new mysticism that would have five characteristics: it would be strongly focussed towards the experience of lay people; it would adopt a new and holistic language attentive to the body and its energy and to consciousness; it would consider posture and breathing; it would be apophatic, with an emphasis on naked faith; and it would emphasise enlightenment and wisdom.[84]

This, in outline, was Johnston's theological and pastoral project and it is my intention to examine it on its own terms, but also in relation to the principles of inter-faith encounter, theology and experience that he set out. This examination will focus on the specific ways in which Johnston's engagement with the practices of Zen Buddhism yielded fresh theological insights for him. But before setting out, it will be useful to consider briefly some recent attempts to draw on experiential as well as textual material as sources for mystical theology. In particular, I will draw on the work of Michael Barnes in the area of comparative theology and of Kees Waaijman in the systematic study of spirituality.

I have already touched on Barnes' account of a nuanced inclusivist stance in inter-religious encounter and would like now to describe the ways in which his approach touches on mystical theology. In his *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions,* Barnes suggests that Christian mystical experience is not only a fertile subject matter for inter-religious dialogue, but a disposition that enables such dialogue; 'The action of Christ facing death is mirrored in the everyday experience of Christians learning how to relate to the other.' [85] More than that, the work of dialogue is an

[83] Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love*, p. 4.
[84] Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, pp. 3-6.
[85] Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 207.

outworking of the Christian mystical calling to 'be oneself as another'[86] and to 'search out traces of the homeless Christ'[87] in places far from what is familiar. Barnes explores how this mystical calling was expressed in the very differing approaches of Jules Monchanin and Abhishiktananda. He sees Monchanin as embodying the spirit of the early Jesuit missionary to India, Roberto de Nobili, in his approach to what we would now call inculturation. Monchanin, writes Barnes, sought 'to understand in order to be understood'[88] but not as a narrowly conceived missionary tactic. His intention was, rather, to be 'a witness to the eternal at the heart of Christianity and Hinduism.'[89] For Abhishiktananda, this act of witness took a step beyond inculturation as a 'translation of the language of faith' towards the translation of the subject himself.[90] For both men;

> What they both discovered is that there is no neat, predictable way in which Christian faith can be practised, let alone spoken about when facing the other, any more than the darkness and richness of our talk about God can ever be definitively spoken.[91]

Barnes suggests that inter-religious encounter mirrors mystical experience in significant ways; each is a response to otherness. For the Christian mystical theologian, then, dialogue in the field of mystical experience becomes a matter of 'listening for the Word of God wherever it is spoken',[92] a rich source of new insight in the enterprise that Johnston called 'the science of love.'

In terms of methodology, Barnes suggests a process of 'listening attentively for the mysterious echoes of the familiar in the unfamiliar' and describes Francis Clooney's careful comparison of religious texts from different traditions.[93] He offers an example of his own in a reflection on *The Cloud of Unknowing* alongside *The Mumonkan*, but insists that, in addition to the texts of religious traditions, the comparative theologian should also consider places, symbols and artefacts and, indeed, the actual encounter of persons, as material for theological reflection. The process of reflection on this material is intuitive and meditative as much as it is analytical and systematic, and depends on a keen awareness of just how situated it is in the concrete practices of a living community. The methodology for a comparative mystical theology, then, is none other than the methodology of the mystical life itself; dependent on the practitioner's 'inside knowledge', aware of

[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid. p. 218 and elsewhere.
[88] Ibid. p. 211.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid. p. 217.
[91] Ibid. p. 218.
[92] Michael Barnes, 'Interreligious Dialogue' in Howells & McIntosh (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology,* p. 644.
[93] Ibid. p. 635.

the limits on how one may articulate experiences of the eternal, respectful of long-established principles and metaphorical accounts of the inward journey, alert to newer insights into the nature of human knowing.

Waaijman adopts a similar approach; the very methods necessary to the practice of a lived spirituality are the methods that may be employed in the reflection on that practice. Specifically, he looks to the exercise of discernment, *diakrisis*, as 'the paradigm of critical reflection on lived spirituality.' It is 'the process of assembling and sorting out knowledge with respect to the way towards God. It tests the end and the means and creates a critical centre.'[94] With Barnes, he proposes a reflection in which the experience of God is of decisive importance and he offers a methodology to evaluate that experience. A methodology based on *diakrisis* is one that draws on scripture and tradition to consider the worth of a spiritual path in the way that a moneychanger examines a gold coin.[95] In the practice of the spiritual life, *diakrisis* is the skill (or *phronesis,* practical wisdom) by which one may discriminate between what is life-giving and what is detrimental to our path towards God. In the critical analysis of lived spirituality, the same skill is employed to assess, compare and describe various expressions of it. Although Waaijman is less concerned than Barnes with inter-religious dialogue, he does, nonetheless, insist that the process of discernment demands an interpersonal exchange. Quite simply, spirituality depends on being 'schooled' by others, whether in the context of monastic life, spiritual direction or the shared discipline of critical inquiry.[96]

Both Barnes and Waaijman point to Edith Stein's account of empathy as a vital tool in the evaluation of spiritual experiences, further underlining the essentially interpersonal nature of the enterprise. Waaijman articulates the structure of this empathic approach in this way:

> In my experience I enter into the experience of an alter ego who is present as a psychosomatic unity that is involved with a reality that is also mine.[97]

He suggests that an empathic mode of looking is, in principle, hermeneutic, systematically choosing the perspective of the alter ego which is always mediated through the many embodied dimensions of the human person. This fundamentally embodied means of knowing and interpreting is of vital importance to our inquiry which has, at its heart, the interaction of spiritual practices from different religious traditions. Johnston's approach to dialogue, as we will see, is not primarily textual or doctrinal, though these expressions are by no means absent. Rather, he gives central place to the

[94] Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality; Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), p. 484.
[95] This metaphor is based on a second-century extra-canonical saying attributed to Jesus. Ibid.
[96] Ibid. p. 501.
[97] Ibid. p. 936.

experience of contemplative prayer for Christians and meditation for Buddhists and draws significantly on autobiographical data.

Barnes also stresses this 'intersubjective' character of empathy and, with Waaijman, speaks in terms of the ability to see from more than one point of view. Indeed, he echoes Stein's insight that the living body is not a single entity but a network of points of view. He describes the empathic approach to interreligious dialogue in this way:

> Both cognition *and* affection are necessary in building up what I called earlier an *intentional relationality* that responds imaginatively to resonances of the known in the unknown but is yet wise to the impossibility of ever fully realizing the uniquely particular and mysterious experience of the other.[98]

Barnes draws attention to both the possibilities and the limits of his endeavour. He affirms that it is indeed possible to speak sensibly of the 'other's' experiences by drawing on our own and, by doing so, seeing things from their perspective. At the same time, we should be cautious of claiming too much insight into the experience of the 'other' whose worldview and religious sensibility may be formed by generations of influences and practices of which we know little, and hesitant in making over-confident assumptions about the comparability of different practices or doctrines.

To sharpen this focus on an experiential perspective, we now turn to the distinctive approach formulated by Moyaert which places inter-ritual participation at the heart of mutual understanding between religions, for this reflects Johnston's own priorities.

Inter-Ritual Participation

While we have noted the more familiar use of textual comparisons in the world of comparative theology, the use of inter-riting as a source of deep theological knowledge of another faith tradition remains comparatively under-explored. Andreas Andreopoulos expresses the pedagogical value of inter-riting (though he does not use this term) in his study on the sign of the cross in Christian devotional practice:

> Even in everyday life, we understand that *performing* an action (rather than just talking about it or thinking about it) offers a more complete perspective to a situation. Merely *understanding* a foreign liturgical tradition that includes the sensory practice (not exclusively

[98] Michael Barnes, *Waiting on Grace, A Theology of Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 183 [emphasis original].

> a textual experience) is only the first step toward appreciating the depth of a tradition. The second step in appreciating a liturgical expressive tradition is to perform some of its practices, allowing the faithful to observe their effect from the inside. How can a person understand an action or practice, if one does not assume the point of view of the person performing it?[99]

We earlier noted Moyaert's reluctance to accept the possibility of a dual religious belonging on the grounds that a deep immersion in the ritual life of a religion over time and throughout generations is not easily acquired by one who has not inhabited that ritual realm bodily and whole-heartedly. However, she does accept that this very dynamic also holds very fertile possibilities for dialogue:

> Ritual sharing holds the promise of giving access to the beating heart of another religion; it may touch people at a deep emotional level.[100]

As well as offering this emotional engagement, she is clear that one also acquires religious *knowledge* in ritual. Indeed, Zen Buddhism may be uniquely placed to serve as a test case for this approach, given its own insistence on the priority of practice as a means to such knowledge and its relative suspicion of primarily scriptural emphases.

Moyaert's work draws on ritual studies to consider how participation in religious ritual allows one to acquire a primary knowledge of one's own or another's faith: Believers learn to master this primary religious knowledge through ritual practice until they know through their own body.[101] This kind of knowledge is based on a familiarisation, through repetition and habit, with significant symbols and movements, but also through the kind of so-called 'muscle memory' whereby musicians and athletes acquire a wisdom about their discipline through practice and training. An example of this would be the way in which one might learn and embody the virtue of humility through the repeated practice of prostrations, such as are frequently recommended in the early Christian monastic texts associated with the desert traditions of Egypt and Syria.[102] And even where texts form a significant part of a religion's means of expressing and forming its insights, it is the ritual context of the reception of such texts that brings them to the heart of a believer's faith. Anyone attending a traditional Christian Eucharistic liturgy will be in no doubt about the centrality of the Gospels mediating the presence

[99] Andreas Andreopoulos, *The Sign of the Cross* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), p. 59 [emphasis original]
[100] Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof (ed), *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 3
[101] Ibid. p. 8.
[102] Tomas Špidlík, *Prayer: The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005), p. 78.

(veneration of the Book of the Gospels as an icon) and teaching (through exposition in the homily) of Jesus Christ. In Zen Buddhism, the participant in the rituals of temple or zendo will gradually come to get a feel for which texts become embedded in the practitioner's lived faith through repeated chanting, and may also grow to realise the communally ritualised context for koan study.

But it is primarily in the foundational ritual of Zen Buddhism, from which it takes its name, that Johnston's engagement as a participant-in-dialogue will prove to be most fertile. *Zazen* is not primarily practised as an individual meditation discipline separate from any religious or liturgical setting but is most fully seen in its communal and ritual expression in a temple or practice centre where it is usually accompanied by bowing, chanting, bells, the offering of incense, distinctive clothing, and possibly also by the formal and highly ritualised entry of the teacher into the *zendo*. Even if *zazen* is not always accompanied by all of these ritual elements, it remains a practice that easily falls within the scope of the growing area of ritual studies. Perhaps this obvious fact has, at times, been obscured by the sterile debates over whether or not one should consider Zen Buddhism to be a religion or by the growing phenomenon of the adoption of various forms of meditation as stand-alone therapeutic or spiritual practices.

Zazen is a body-and-mind practice usually undertaken alongside others in a structured, ritual manner, with each element of the practice contributing to its overall character, whether that be the arrangement of ones shoes outside the *zendo* or the manner in which one enters and leaves it, the reverent bow made to the *zafu* on which one will sit or to the altar on which a representation of the Buddha or a Boddhisattva is placed, the manner of ringing the bells before and after a period of *zazen*, the layout of the *zabuton*s in the *zendo*. And all of this is before we begin to describe the more familiar elements of sitting *zazen*, such as posture and *mudra*. Taigen Dan Leighton suggests that the point of *zazen* is 'to enact the meaning of the teachings in actualized practice, and the whole praxis, including meditation, may thus be viewed as ritual, ceremonial expressions of the teaching, rather than as means to discover and attain some understanding of it.'[103]

As Dale S. Wright puts it; 'Zen ritual actually does something to practitioners. It shapes them into certain kinds of subjects, who not only think certain thoughts but also perceive the world and understand themselves through the patterns impressed upon them by the repeated action of ritual upon their mind and body.'[104] This understanding shows Johnston's engagement with the practice of *zazen* to be a fitting example of the kind of comparative theology through inter-ritual participation

[103] Taigen Dan Leighton, '*Zazen* as Enactment Ritual', in Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (eds), '*Zen Ritual, Studies of Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice*' (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 169
[104] Ibid. p. 11

envisaged by Moyaert, not least because of his first-hand experience of its primary locus in the training temples he visited regularly. The possibility of acquiring inside knowledge of the perceptions and understandings of Zen practitioners through a sharing in the foundational ritual of *zazen* was one that Johnston grasped intuitively. Shared practice can offer a reliable source of theological knowledge at a level that may not be possible through the analysis of texts alone. More than that, the turn to embodied ritual as a way of understanding another religion's point of view would also prove, for Johnston, to be an invitation to explore the embodied nature of Christian mysticism. His dialogue would be a dialogue of insights gained through practice and reflected on theologically drawing on the deep sources of Catholic tradition.

Conclusion

The following inquiry, then, is one that follows Johnston's own methodology of examining religious experiences and practices as a committed practitioner who seeks to understand his own tradition in comparison with another, and who seeks to understand that other tradition in the light of his own experiential perspectives as one who has participated as a guest in its embodied, ritual life. We shall assess the effectiveness of that strategy by comparing Johnston's insights with those of more recent commentators who have built on a significant body of material generated by a more intense and detailed engagement Zen Buddhism, especially with its texts, than was available when Johnston set out on this project. We shall examine in turn a number of areas in which Johnston explored the possibility of Christian theological learning through a comparison of the practices of Christian mysticism with Zen ritual practices. In each of these areas, we will see an approach that draws on ritual practice rather than textual analysis.

Finally, we will suggest, modestly and tentatively, a way of engaging with a writer of popular texts as a source of insight for more rigorous academic debate. Given the extent to which a writer like Johnston influenced a generation of Christians in their practice of prayer and in their reflection on that practice, we might see his work not only as a source of information about the religious practices of 'ordinary' believers – raw material for a religious studies approach to popular spirituality – but also as a serious attempt to address matters of more scholarly theological interest in a wider milieu. Clooney is surely correct in his insistence on a real connection between the work of comparative theology and the committed, lived experience of a praying, worshipping community.[105] Johnston may represent one such line of connection. It is not the case that a popular writer like Johnston

[105] Op. cit. p. 8. Clooney suggests that the reality of reality of diversity compels us to 'attend with special care and a fresh eye to the wellbeing of our faith in our community, and to the quest to understand it.'

offers a level of engaged commitment absent in academic theology, far from it. Rather, he serves as a reminder that the *sensus fidelium* may offer both a kind of sifting of theological propositions in the crucible of lived faith, and a way of alerting the world of academic theology to the issues that give the greatest challenge to that lived faith.

If it is possible to read Johnston in this way, then there are many other popular writers in the field of spirituality whose work may be brought into a fruitful dialogue with academic mystical theology. If we remain in the realm of comparative mystical theology, Bede Griffiths, Henri Le Saux and Robert Kennedy immediately suggest themselves. More widely, academic mystical theology might also find strong themes for investigation in the widely-read works of such writers as Henri Nouwen or, more currently, Martin Laird. Offering rich insights into the ways in which Christians actually pray, works of popular spirituality may provide a kind of 'reception history' of mystical theology as it passes into catechesis from the materials that form the theological curriculum of pastors and popular teachers. Academic theology must surely benefit from an awareness of its impact on the lived faith of ordinary Christians who, in turn, provide theology with its most pressing agenda as that faith encounters the challenges of a changing world.

Chapter Three

Nothingness, *Sunyata* and Apophatic Theology

Gelassenheit:

> Desert and void. The Uncreated is waste and emptiness to the creature. Not even sand. Not even stone. Not even darkness and night. A burning wilderness would at least be 'something'. It burns and is wild. But the Uncreated is no something. Waste. Emptiness. Total poverty of the Creator: yet from this poverty springs *everything*. The waste is inexhaustible. Infinite Zero. Everything comes from this desert Nothing. Everything wants to return to it and cannot. For who can return 'nowhere'? But for each of is there is a point of no-whereness in the middle of movement, a point of noth-ingness in the midst of being: the incomparable point, not to be discovered by insight. If you seek it you do not find it. If you stop seeking, it is there. But you must not turn to it. Once you become aware of yourself as seeker, you are lost. But if you are content to be lost you will be found without knowing it, precisely because you are lost, for you are, at last, nowhere.[1]

This section from *Cables to the Ace,* Merton's late multiform poem, bears a title that makes direct reference to the spiritual lexicon of Meister Eckhart. Gelassenheit, the state of having let go of all things,[2] may be a notion that springs from Eckhart's Christian mystical experience, but Merton's words rely more substantially on another source; his understanding of Zen Buddhism. In particular, Merton's first source for his understanding of Zen, D.T. Suzuki, can be clearly seen behind his choice of language to describe this state of pristine spirituality. The phrase 'infinite zero' comes from Merton's interaction with Suzuki at the time when he asked Suzuki to write a preface for his collection of sayings of the Desert Fathers, an interaction that eventually found publication in *Zen*

[1] Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1967), p. 58.
[2] See reference to Gelassenheit and Zen in Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 178.

and the Birds of Appetite.[3] Merton uses it here to indicate the ultimate nature of reality and the ultimate Source of all things.

It is likely that the connection between Zen and Ekhart's *Gelassenheit* was first made for Merton in Jung's preface to Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* where he suggests a correspondence between Zen experience and the Christian mystical state of "letting oneself go" (*sich lassen)*, as described by Eckhart.[4] Suzuki also suggests a meeting of minds between Zen and Eckhart in the understanding of the nature of reality/God as a kind of emptiness and also in the shared understanding of the state of having realised this truth as a kind of emptiness:

> As I interpret Eckhart, God is at once the place where He works and the work itself. The place is zero or 'Emptiness as Being', whereas the work which is carried on in the zero-place is infinity or 'Emptiness as Becoming'. [5]

Merton's appreciation of the category of 'emptiness' as central to Christian and Zen experience is well expressed in this short passage from *Cables to the Ace*, which signals some of the themes that would be developed by others in the coming decades. In addition to the two areas mentioned – emptiness as ultimate reality, emptiness as the way to that reality – Merton also introduces the theme of *poverty* from Suzuki's consideration of Eckhart, and hints at some of the attempts to see correspondences between Zen emptiness and Christian apophatic theology ('The Uncreated is waste and emptiness to the creature'). All of these themes will be seen again in detail when we consider the sustained attempts by William Johnston to elucidate the character of emptiness as experienced by those who practise Christian contemplative prayer or Zen meditation. Before considering his contribution to this fertile area of Christian-Buddhist interaction, I will describe the context of emptiness as it is expressed in Zen Buddhism and as it became a central aspect of the burgeoning dialogue with Christianity in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Character of Emptiness in Zen Buddhism

In outlining the concept and experience of emptiness in Zen, I will draw mostly on those sources and insights referred to in Johnston's writings. I will then go on to consider the way in which he interacted with these sources to shed light on Christian contemplative experience. The first three sources have a textual dimension – the Heart Sutra, the *koan Mu* and the series of Ox-Herding Pictures. I will then consider the experiential aspects of emptiness as described in the practice of

[3] Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1968), p. 110f.
[4] D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism,* (London: Century Hutchinson, 1969),p. 19.
[5] Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 110.

zazen before considering the speculative and philosophical approaches of the Kyoto School. This does not represent an exhaustive account of emptiness in Zen tradition, but will allow for a full survey of Johnston's sources before addressing his treatment of them.

The term 'emptiness' will be used as the primary translation of the key notion of *sunyata* as it is apprehended by Zen Buddhism. This Sanskrit term is common to all Buddhists but has particular significance for Mahayana traditions, not least for Zen. Edward Conze relates the term etymologically to the notion of 'no-self' in Buddhism, with the root deriving from the word 'to swell':

> Our personality is swollen in so far as it is constituted by the five *skandhas*, but it is also hollow inside, because devoid of a central self.[6]

Thus, what we consider to be the human person is a constant interaction of the five 'aggregates' – consciousness, form, impulses, perceptions and feelings – none of which is permanent. This understanding of the true nature of reality is a 'middle way' between 'affirmation and negation, existence and non-existence, eternity and annihilation.'[7] Another expression of this position comes from an encounter with the Dalai Lama:

> Do not think of emptiness as nothingness (nihilism), and do not think of it either as somethingness (eternalism). And if you cannot do this, as soon as you think of it as 'nothing', make sure that you correct that by thinking of it as 'something'.[8]

Emptiness is a description not only of the nature of human persons, but of all reality. It then becomes an expression of what is ultimate or absolute, though not as a personified or definable entity. Emptiness is also related to the notion of 'non-duality' – the non-difference between subject and object from the point of view of emptiness, – and to the notion of 'suchness' – reality as it is without added interpretation.

The Heart Sutra

These understandings find fullest expression in the *Prajna paramita*, or Perfection of Wisdom Sutras and in their later refinement in the Madhyamaka School of Nagarjuna (c.150–250 CE). For many Mahayana Buddhists, this tradition is summarised most paradigmatically in the short Sutra, the *Maha prajna paramita hridaya* Sutra. In many of the Zen schools, it is chanted regularly in temples and cherished as a summary of their teaching. The text probably dates from the mid-seventh century

[6] Edward Conze, *Buddhism, its Essence and Development* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1951), p. 108.
[7] Ibid. p. 109.
[8] John S. Strong, *Buddhisms, An Introduction* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), p. 260.

in China[9] and is consists of an opening reference to the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, a small portion of a Chinese translation of the 25,000-line *Prajna Paramita* and a concluding mantra. In Tanahashi's translation, the opening lines are:

> Avalokiteshvara, who helps all to awaken,
> moves in the deep course of
> realizing wisdom beyond wisdom,
> sees that all five streams of
> body, heat and mind are without boundary,
> and frees all from anguish.[10]

The insights that liberate from aguish or, to use the traditional translation, suffering, are realised by the great bodhisattva of compassion not through reason, but in the meditative practice of deep wisdom. The sutra then goes on to its famous lines; 'form is not separate from boundlessness (traditionally rendered 'emptiness'); boundlessness is not separate from form. Form is boundlessness; boundlessness is form' and then offers a series of negations to declare that this boundlessness is free of sensory categories, of old age and death, of wisdom and attainment.

The many interpretations of the sutra include an early dharma talk by the thirteenth-century Japanese monk Dogen that was incorporated in his master work, the *Shobogenzo.*[11] This fascicle, Manifestation of Great *Prajna*, eschews some of the more esoteric interpretations of the sutra in favour of a simple exhortation:

> The manifestation of *prajna* is all things. All things are aspects of emptiness – not arising [beyond arising], not perishing, not defiled, not pure, not increasing, and not decreasing. To actualise the manifestation of *prajna* is to actualize the Buddha, the World-Honored One. Look into this. Study this.[12]

Positioned at the beginning of the *Shobogenzo*, Dogen offers this unadorned presentation[13] of the Heart Sutra as a summary of his teaching and practice.

---

[9] Kazuaki Tanahashi, *The Heart Sutra* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2014), p. 91.
[10] Op. cit. p. 3.
[11] Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2012), p. 25ff.
[12] Ibid. p. 28.
[13] Indeed, at times it reads as much like a paraphrase of the sutra as an interpretation of it. See Brad Warner, *Don't be a Jerk* (Novato: New World Library, 2016), p. 38.

More recent interpretations[14] of the sutra also propose it to be a summary of the teaching of Zen Buddhism. This, for example, is Ruben Habito's assessment:

> The way consists in divesting oneself of everything – that process of *emptying* that I have already dealt with. And now the *Heart Sutra* offers an additional hint in this process. It urges the throwing away of the view of our existence as 'substantial', in other words, that clinging to what we may call the 'phenomenal self' or 'ego', the root of all selfishness and avarice and envy and lust and what-have-you. It is this clinging that sets a human being in conflict with another, that alienates a person from others, from nature, from his or her own True Self; this is what must be emptied.[15]

This approach emphasises *emptying* as a process as much as *emptiness* as a way of understanding reality. Such a process view of Zen practice commends it as something that Christians might describes as an ascetical discipline, a means of letting go. This is an approach we see elsewhere in Habito's writing.[16] It has strong echoes of Christian practice and that also leads, for Habito, to an engaged Zen with consequences for how one interacts with the world's divisions and injustices,[17] offering the way to a liberation from the false constructs and ideologies that result in enslavement, alienation and exploitation

Habito brings us closer to Johnston, who was his former colleague at Sophia University, who recommended the above-quoted book as a good introduction to Zen.[18] Johnston's most notable use of the Heart Sutra was to include it in full as an appendix to his *Mystical Theology*,[19] having undertaken a substantial treatment of the sutra in his chapters on Wisdom and Emptiness[20] and Wisdom.[21] He sets it in the context of an exploration of wisdom in Buddhist thought, a wisdom he describes as 'formless, obscure, ineffable, empty.'[22] However, he regards the sutra not as an exercise in metaphysical speculation but as 'an exhortation or call to the compassionate emptiness and nothingness of the one who has gone to the other shore.'[23] This way of compassion is not a removal

[14] To name just three recent popular examples, Bernie Glassman's *Infinite Circle* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), Brad Warner's treatment of the Shobogenzo, Warner, *Don't be a Jerk ,* and another work by Kazuaki Tanahashi, KazuakiTanahashi, *Zen Chants* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2015).
[15] Ruben Habito, *Total Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), p. 30f.
[16] See his discussion on Emptiness and Fullness in Ruben Habito, *Living Zen, Loving God* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), p. 14f.
[17] Eg. Ruben Habito, *Healing Breath* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), p. 51.
[18] William Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives,* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 86.
[19] William Johnston, *Mystical Theology,* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 366f.
[20] Ibid. p. 155ff.
[21] Ibid. p. 300f.
[22] Ibid. p. 156.
[23] Ibid. p. 157f.

from the business of the world but a way of non-attachment that leads to a relief of the suffering of oneself and others and, in this emphasis, Johnston echoes Habito's interpretation. He bases this emphasis on the central paradox of the sutra, 'form is emptiness and emptiness is form':

> The point is this. To enter the void of transcendental wisdom is not to escape from everyday life. One need not, must not, escape from the world of forms. *One does not enter the void by blotting out all forms, but by being detached from all forms.* It is precisely by clinging to nothing that one enters the emptiness… Freed from anguish she [Kannon/Avalokitesvara] is filled with compassionate love.[24]

Although he avoids speculative interpretations, Johnston nonetheless discusses the experiential apprehension of a key Buddhist insight into the nature of reality. Non-dualism, or non-separation from the whole world, is expressed in the sutra's famous series of negations, negations which include the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.[25] Such apprehension is not achieved by reason but, crucially, is realised by the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara through sitting 'in silent meditation, losing the ego and finding true wisdom in the core of her being.'[26] This is a realisation of the second part of the sutra's key paradox; *emptiness is form*. Johnston sees this statement as an indication that the void, emptiness, is no mere absence but an appreciation of transcendent reality which comes to the practitioner through the embodied ritual of silent, seated meditation (*zazen*). I will discuss later how Johnston develops this insight in relation to Buddhist notions of absolute or ultimate reality in comparison with Christian understandings of God.

Beyond *Mystical Theology*, Johnston refers to the Heart Sutra in passing in his last two works, *'Arise, My Love…'* and *Mystical Journey*, which simply restate the insights of *Mystical Theology.*[27] He had made a more detailed reference in *The Inner Eye of Love*[28] where he relates an experience of the liturgical use of the text in Eiheiji, the main temple of the Soto school of Zen. This is not simply a piece of colourful narrative. Johnston appreciated that a text that is chanted repeatedly and solemnly is understood at a different level from one that is merely studied silently. It is not only

[24] Ibid. p. 160 [emphasis original]. Note that the Chinese and Japanese traditions usually refer to the bodhisattva as female although he is male in earlier traditions.
[25] In Tanahashi's translation; 'It [boundlessness or emptiness] is free of suffering, arising, cessation, and path, and free of wisdom and attainment.' Tanahashi, *Zen Chants*, p. 32.
[26] Ibid. p.161.
[27] William Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), pp. 101, 109 and William Johnston, *Mystical Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), p. 162 where, in a typically generalised statement, Johnston speaks of a mystical enlightenment that is able to embrace the coincidence of opposites. He sees such enlightenment in Hindu concept of *advaita,* in Buddhist *sunyata*, in the Heart Sutra and in *The Cloud of Unknowing*.
[28] William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1978), p. 110f.

memorised more effectively, it is also interiorised and given a formative place in one's religious knowledge. Furthermore, in the case of the Heart Sutra, the chanting of it is understood to be a *manifestation* of its core teaching. In his chapter on Oriental Nothingness, Johnston emphasised the sutra's expression of the liberation that comes through transcendental wisdom, the direct intuition of the nature of reality which is realised in the practice of *zazen*.

In summary, therefore, Johnston draws on the Heart Sutra as a key summary of the Mahayana teaching on *sunyata*. He praises its poetic eloquence, understands its place in the *Prajna Paramita* tradition, its resonances with the compassionate emphasis in Buddhist tradition, and its primary location for the practitioner in the shared rituals of repeated chanting. This is a clear example of the way in which Johnston's dialogue was founded on insights gained from shared ritual practice.

Joshu's Dog, or The *Koan* 'Mu'

I will examine Johnston's use of *koan* practice in detail elsewhere, but for the present exploration of his understanding of the Zen approach to the notion of emptiness, it is worth singling out his references to one of the most famous *koan*, the first in the collection known in Japanese as the Mumonkan, The Gateless Gate.[29] The text of the *koan* itself is simple: 'A monk asked Joshu in all earnestness, "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?" Joshu said, "Mu!"' The *koan* does not, of course, mean what it appears to say, which is to deny that a dog has Buddha nature, in contradiction to traditional Buddhist teaching. Instead, Zen teachers urge practitioners to focus on 'mu' with all their concentration. Mumon's original commentary on the *koan* introduces the vivid metaphor of swallowing a red-hot iron ball which one tries to expel but cannot.[30] He encourages the practitioner to extinguish all delusive thoughts and beliefs so that Mu may break through suddenly. Yamada's *teisho* on this case is typical:

> Mu has no meaning whatsoever. If you want to solve the problem of Mu, you must become one with it! You must forget yourself in working on it. Your consciousness must be completely absorbed in your practice of Mu.[31]

[29] See, for example, Koun Yamada, *The Gateless Gate* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004), p. 11. Other English versions include Zenkei Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1974), Katsuki Sekida, *Two Zen Classics* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995) and Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (London: Penguin Books, 1957). The Chinese title means 'the barrier that has no gate.'
[30] Yamada, *The Gateless Gate*, p. 11.
[31] Ibid. p. 13f.

The word 'mu', as a simple negative, can be seen to represent the entire teaching of emptiness and is, itself, the 'gateless gate' of Zen for those who use it in practice. It is not to be considered nihilistically or dualistically but points to an experience of oneness:

> Dog, Buddha nature and Mu are totally one. It is the perfect manifestation, the absolute command. By this, our true self is perfectly manifested with absolute authority to cut off all delusions. If you think that Joshu's answer means the dog does not have Buddha nature, you are quite wrong. For when Joshu answered 'Mu!' he was far removed from the world of dualistic concepts.[32]

In practice, the word is often repeated orally with the exhaled breath as an exercise in self-forgetting concentration.[33] The koan is not merely considered, but is *practised*, communally, ritually and energetically.

Johnston makes frequent reference to the word 'mu' as well as to this *koan*. In *The Inner Eye of Love*, he describes different levels of the understanding of 'mu'; cultural, ascetical and ontological or metaphysical[34]. The first sense refers to the 'mental state of one who submerges his ego or little self in order that the forces of life may begin to work within.'[35] He sees this as the state of mind cultivated in such activities as the tea ceremony, calligraphy and martial arts. The ascetical sense refers to the repetition of the word so that 'one drops all that superfluous baggage … thus attaining to inner liberty and poverty of spirit.'[36] This is the way of 'non-attachment, the abandonment of clinging and craving and inordinate desire'.[37] Finally, the ontological sense is the realisation of 'mu' in the moment of *kensho* or enlightenment, the total identification with the true nature of oneself and of all things in emptiness.

Johnston says more about this ontological sense in 'Arise, My Love…' where, as before, he notes the additional use of the character 'ku', which also means 'sky', as a Japanese translation for *sunyata.*[38] Although referring to the philosophical teachings of Nagarjuna, he underlines that in Zen practice, the focus is on the experiential or existential apprehension of the nature of oneself and all things as 'empty' through the ritual practice of *zazen*. This is also the realisation of nondualism as he described in his essay, 'The Zen Enlightenment', included in the early work *The Still Point*:

---

[32] Ibid. p. 16.
[33] See Habito's description of his own experience with this *koan* in Habito, *Living Zen, Loving God*, p. 2.
[34] William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1978), p. 109ff.
[35] Ibid. p. 109.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'*, p. 140.

> All this *technique* is aimed at the rejection of dualism, the repudiation of the subject-object relationship. I am identified with *Mu*; I am one with the rain pattering on the roof or the cloud floating in the sky. No longer 'I' and 'it' or 'I' and 'thou', but only 'is'.[39]

This realisation is the experience of *kensho*, of seeing into the truth of one's nature, an experience of enlightenment that is intensely joyful, positive and powerful yet which must then 'be translated into the daily process of living and integrated into all one does.'[40]

The final dimension of Johnston's use of Mu is his understanding that it is ultimately a *mystery*. This is related to his appreciation of the inadequacy of discursive reasoning in the apprehension of the nature of *sunyata.* In *The Inner Eye of Love*, he describes 'nothingness' as ungraspable:

> All the great religions point to a mystery which hovers over human life yet lies beyond a cloud of unknowing. It is precisely this sense of mystery and of the ineffable that we all have in common. If no one understands nothingness, neither does anyone truly understand God.[41]

He returns to the possibility of mystical sensibility as a meeting place for religions throughout his work, most notably as the key theme in *'Arise, My Love…'*.

In summary, Johnston's exploration of Mu as a concept in itself and in the context of the *koan* of Joshu's Dog has a twin focus on the process and practice of self-emptying (most fundamentally expressed ritually in *zazen* with *mu* or in *shikantaza*) and the enlightenment experience of non-dualism. It is both 'way' and 'wisdom' or, as is emphasised repeatedly in Soto Zen, practice is enlightenment.[42]

The Ox-Herding Pictures

For English speakers, some of the earliest texts to be made available for those interested in Zen Buddhism were those included in Paul Reps' 1957 compilation *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. As well as the *koan* of the Mumonkan, a series of ten pictures with brief commentaries was included. The Ox-Herding Pictures probably date in that form from the twelfth century CE at the latest, when Kuoan composed the accompanying poems.[43] As an allegory of the quest for enlightenment, they depict an ox-herder seeking, finding and taming the ox before riding it home. By the seventh picture, the ox is

[39] William Johnston, *Christian Zen* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970), p. 7. [emphasis mine]
[40] William Johnston, *The Mirror Mind* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1981), p. 3.
[41] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, p. 114.
[42] Eg. Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York, NY: Weatherhill, 1970), p. 43.
[43] Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, p. 135.

forgotten. In the eighth, all that is depicted is a simple circle, an expression of emptiness and infinity, but the sequence does not end there, though it may once have done so. It continues with a ninth picture showing the natural world as perceived by the natural mind which has returned to its source.[44] Finally, the mature ox-herder re-enters the marketplace 'barefoot and naked of breast'[45] in order to save all sentient beings.

These pictures have proved popular in the West and, in addition to the works already cited, they make an appearance in works such as Philip Kapleau's much-read *Three Pillars of Zen,*[46] in a different form in Shibayama's *A Flower Does Not Talk,*[47] and in *Zen Gifts to Christians* by Robert Kennedy.[48] It is not surprising that a visual presentation of the human quest for meaning should be appealing as 'journey' metaphors have an enduring attraction in this area.[49] John Daido Loori also maked use of the images as a way of marking stages in his programme for Zen training at the Mountain Monastery in the Catskill Mountains, New York.[50]

In addition to this pedagogical use, the pictures offer a *koan*-like reflection on emptiness. Shibayama's commentary on the fifth picture (the eighth in the ten-picture series, the empty circle) explores the experience of a complete collapse of the distinction between the man and the ox, between reason and act. He considers how this experience may be likened, to use a common metaphor, to a 'thoroughly polished mirror, bright and pure',[51] but even this immaculate mirror must be shattered: all technique, all self-consciousness is lost in this experiential state of emptiness. He likens this state to that described by Dogen:

> When Dogen returned from China, where he had studied Zen for years, he was asked, 'What kind of noble teachings have you brought back?' He answered, 'I have returned empty-handed!' This means that he came back to Japan with nothing whatsoever. This is the state worthy of the utmost respect.[52]

---

[44] As described by Loori in his reflection on the pictures John Daido Loori, *Riding the Ox Home* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1999), p. 62.
[45] Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, p. 147.
[46] Philip Kapleau, *Three Pillars of Zen* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 313ff.
[47] In a six-picture series Zenkei Shibayama, *A Flower does not Talk* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1970), p. 152ff.
[48] The book is structured around the text pictures Robert E. Kennedy, *Zen Gifts to Christians* (New York, NY: Continuum 2004).
[49] Note the recent and significant rise in interest in pilgrimages in the West, especially in the Camino to Santiago da Compostela.
[50] John Daido Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1992), p. 39ff.
[51] Shibayama, *A Flower Does Not Talk*, p. 196.
[52] Ibid. p. 197.

Emptiness is not an overarching concept, but a state of conceptless realisation of the true nature of things in their common emptiness, in their suchness, free from interpretation or an externally imposed, substantial identity. Considering the same picture, Johnston said:

> The drama reaches its climax with the eighth picture where not only the ox but also the man disappears and nothing remains. Not a thing is. And this is represented by the famous and powerful symbol of nothingness in the form of a circle. Thus ended the original set of Oxherding pictures, with the last stage depicting a state of consciousness beyond subject and object in which it is impossible to make a statement or judgement about anything. This is the undifferentiated or non-discriminating consciousness about which Zen talks so much.[53]

Johnston describes a three-stage process in which this undifferentiated consciousness, this intuition of the oneness of all things, is preceded by the discriminating consciousness whereby one perceives things in a dualistic way. This is the consciousness marked by imagery and rational thought. He suggests that this stage is perceived as illusory in Zen thinking, but valued as a stage in the progression towards non-discriminating consciousness in Western Christian thinking. He does not give an example at this point in his argument, but it his understanding of Christian mysticism is in keeping with such schemas as Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, in which the approach to God through his 'vestiges' in creation is seen as a positive 'first step on the ladder' towards union with God.[54] By contrast, Johnston argues that Zen could benefit from a 'Western' respect for rationality and suggests that Nishida goes some way towards achieving this more balanced approach.[55] However, his later reflections on the Heart Sutra appear to correct this view by recognising the new appreciation of the world of 'forms' by those who have seen their 'emptiness'.[56] In Zen thinking, it is not illusory to acknowledge the multiplicity of 'forms', only to imagine that they have substantial reality. If Johnston had attended to the earlier pictures of the ox-herding series, he might have noticed the essential role of reasoned observation in the second picture, where the oxherd sees the traces of the ox in its footprints (vestiges). Johnston concludes his consideration of the images with a reflection on the tenth picture in which, with the return to the marketplace, the oxherd (here used by Johnston to represent the meditator) grows to a loving and compassionate consciousness, which

[53] William Johnston, *Silent Music* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1974), p. 80f.
[54] Ewert Cousins, *Bonaventure, The Soul's Journey into God* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 59ff.
[55] Op. cit. p. 84.
[56] In *Mystical Theology*, he acknowledges that one remains in the world of forms, but is not attached to them William Johnston, *Mystical Theology* (1995, London: Harper Collins) p. 160.

he describes as the 'highest form of activity'[57] in Buddhism. We shall return to this key aspect of Johnston's exploration of emptiness below.

Having considered Johnston's primary textual sources for his understanding of emptiness, we shall now turn to two further dimensions of this theme. The first is less related to texts used in Zen practice than to aspects of that practice itself. The second relates to an area of philosophical exploration that proved fertile in early Buddhist-Christian dialogues at an academic level, namely the work of the Kyoto School and its Christian interlocutors.

The Experiential Dimension of Emptiness

It is not surprising that Johnston should give such sustained consideration to the experiential or practice-based aspects of Zen. Given Zen Buddhism's own claims to a 'special transmission outside the scriptures',[58] preferring instead a 'direct pointing' to one's own experience, it is reasonable to take it on its own terms, however hyperbolically stated, and examine the claims of those who have experienced this kind of insight. Philip Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen* sought to do precisely this through the presentation of a number of experiences of *satori* by practitioners.[59] Zen teachers repeatedly emphasise that emptiness is not a proposition to be accepted through reasoned argument, but an experience of realising one's true nature and the true nature of all things. For Soto Zen, one of the classic statements of this central tenet of its practice is Dogen's *Genjokoan*, an early fascicle of his *Shobogenzo.* The following is its famous and concise formulation of this tenet:

> To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualised by myriad things. When actualised by myriad things, your body and mind, as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly. When you first seek dharma, you imagine you are far away from its environs. At the moment when dharma is authentically transmitted, you are immediately your original self.[60]

Enlightenment, therefore, is not seen as a state to be attained but a reality to be actualised. The 'dropping away' of mind and body is a description of this actualised state in experiential language and this language is derived from the fundamental Zen focus on *practice*. This practice is to be

[57] Johnston, *Silent Music*, p. 86.
[58] The full text of this stanza, attributed to the first Zen patriarch, Bodhidharma, is 'A special tradition outside the scriptures; no dependence upon words and letters; direct pointing to the soul of man; seeing into one's own nature, and the attainment of Buddhahood.' Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism* (Boston, MA: Random House 1963), p. 67.
[59] Kapleau, *Three Pillars of Zen*, p. 215ff.
[60] Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, p. 30.

undertaken with no goal or purpose, but simply as the expression of one's Buddha-nature.[61] The use of the term 'practice' is not restricted to its most obvious sense of the disciplined, ritual practice of *zazen*. It also refers to the daily practice of life in the same spirit of attentiveness that is expressed in *zazen*.[62]

It is worth adding a note of caution here, as there has been a tendency of some Western interpreters of Zen to imagine that, because of this emphasis on practice, the study of scriptures, attention to the ethical precepts, liturgical services or commitment to the *sangha* are absent from, or at least unimportant to, Zen Buddhism. At times, Thomas Merton came close to this misinterpretation, partly due to his heavy reliance for his early understanding of Zen on the writings of D.T. Suzuki. Thus he could say:

> Zen is outside all particular structures and distinct forms … it is neither opposed to them or not-opposed to them… Zen is consciousness unstructured by particular form or particular system, a trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-formed consciousness.[63]

And in writing to Johnston, he could say:

> Honestly, I don't think it matters a bit whether one can sit cross-legged or not. But perhaps in the peculiar situation where Fr Lasalle wants (himself and you, too, implicitly) to be as much as possible the real article in the eyes of the Japanese, it may have accidental import.[64]

Following Suzuki, Merton sees Zen as a state of consciousness that only accidentally inhabits the particular 'cultural' or religious expression of a particular form of Mahayana Buddhism. His dismissive view of the particularities of how one sits *zazen* is at odds with the care taken in the detail of sitting by most schools of Zen.[65]

William Johnston did not make this mistake. With his direct experience of Zen practice in Japan, he was fully aware of the rich traditions of practice in the temple as well as the deeply appreciated

---

[61] See, for example, Okumura's reflection on an earlier section of the *Genjokoan* in Shohaku Okumura, *Realizing Genjokoan* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010), p. 45.
[62] Loori also includes such areas as koan study, ethical precepts, work and art. Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen*.
[63] Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 4.
[64] Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 442. This was in a letter of 5 July 1967 replying to Johnston's of 14 June 1967 similar in which Johnston describes his participation in a *sesshin* (Zen retreat) during which he 'disgraced himself' by shifting around due to the pain in his legs from sitting in the lotus position. The main purpose of the letter was to seek Merton's thoughts on the possibility of a Christian attaining *satori*.
[65] See Dogen's detailed instructions, sometimes chanted liturgically in the *zendo*, in the fascicle *Zazen Gi*, Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, p. 570ff.

underlying Buddhist commitments and thinking[66] that inform the Zen practitioner. He also made repeated use of the practical instructions relating to *zazen.*[67] In relation to our current concern, though, it is Johnston's understanding of the nature of the practitioner's insight into emptiness that is of interest. He sums up this understanding best in the following words from *Mystical Theology:*

> Avalokitesvara does not reason from effect to cause; she makes no use of the discriminating intellect; her knowing is not a compound of experiencing, understanding and judging. Instead, she sits in silent meditation, losing the ego finding true wisdom at the very core of her being. She at the same time finds the true self, the universal self which embraces the whole world. Indeed, through compassion she *becomes* the whole world in an experience of non-dualism.[68]

In this reflection on Avalokitesvara as depicted in the Heart Sutra, Johnston suggests that it is in a process of self-forgetting in silent meditation that one realises the true empty or boundless self. The insight is not something to be gained, but actualised through a renunciation of discriminating thought in order to allow what is already there to be awakened. In *Letters to Contemplatives*, Johnston expresses the same insight:

> I believe that the experience of nothing is the same as the experience of everything. That is why we can say that all is nothing and zero equals infinity: 'Not a thing is' and 'All is' are the same experience. And in both one experiences the loss of the ego.[69]

Johnston's colleague, Heinrich Dumoulin, gives a fine account of this experiential or intuitive understanding in his work on Zen enlightenment:

> According to the philosophy of the Madhyamika school, to which Dogen adheres, the phenomenal world and absolute emptiness are identical. But the operation of thought that uncovers the non-substantiality of phenomena, demolishes false appearance, and shows the phenomenal world to be empty is insufficient in its exclusively negative formulation. Absolute emptiness is known in the enlightened intuition of reality. In this supreme view of

[66] He acknowledges the importance of Buddhist scriptures in Zen in e.g. Johnston, *Mystical Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 119.
[67] Johnston, *Christian Ze*n, p. 105ff, Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 49ff, William Johnston, *Being in Love* (London: Harper Collins, 1988), p. 25f.
[68] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 161.
[69] William Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 73.

> wisdom, the being of Buddha-nature and the emptiness of Buddha-nature are perfectly one.[70]

Johnston's understanding of the 'practice' dimension of Emptiness brings to the fore a fundamental dilemma in his use of Zen insights when considering contemplative or mystical Christianity, which will come into even sharper focus when we consider his synthesis of Zen and Christian insights below. At times, he seems to value Zen practice as an ascetical methodology preparatory to a metaphysical appreciation of ultimate reality. At other times, he comes closer to Zen's own insistence that there is no separation between the practice and the metaphysical realisation of Buddha-nature. It may be that Johnston's dilemma is that of a Christian who at times is considering the use of Zen-inspired practice within a Christian framework, at times is considering Zen Buddhism on its own terms, and at times is concerned with a mutually illuminating dialogue. Despite this frustrating inconsistency, Johnston was always clear about the centrality of embodied practice in his dialogical approach.

The Speculative Dimension of Emptiness

In William Johnston's letter to Thomas Merton of 13 January 1967, he mentions some of his own articles on Zen and seeks Merton's opinions on these. He also mentions an article about which Merton had expressed an interest, which introduces the notion of 'oriental nothingness'. Johnston offered to supply Merton with a copy. The article, 'The Characteristics of Oriental Nothingness',[71] was written by Shin'ichi Hisamatsu and represents a significant contribution to an important area of inquiry that is strongly associated with the Kyoto School, which attempted to bring together Western (notably Heideggerian) and Mahayana Buddhist philosophical traditions. A key area of inquiry was the question of nothingness or emptiness. Hisamatsu was a student of Nishida, considered the founder of this school of thought, and although he held posts at Kyoto University, he considered himself more a 'man of religion' than a scholar.[72] Merton's interest in his article is unsurprising, given his interest in comparing Zen thought with Western existentialist philosophy. He had already obtained from Johnston[73] a copy of Schinzinger's book on Nishida's *Philosophy of Nothingness* and continued to explore this area of interaction between Buddhist-inspired Eastern philosophy and Western thought on his Asian travels in 1968.[74]

---

[70] Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Enlightenment* (Boston, MA: Shambhala 1976), p. 118.
[71] Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, 'The Characteristics of Oriental Nothingness' *Philosophical Studies of Japan* (II, 1960).
[72] Masao Abe, 'Note on the Life of Shin'ichi Hisamatsu' *The Eastern Buddhist* (14(1), 1980).
[73] Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 5.
[74] He was, for example, reading Murti's work on Madhyamika, T. R. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955) as he travelled.

Hisamatsu's understanding of 'oriental nothingness' is well summarised in these two excerpts:

> Oriental Nothingness is not the passive, contemplative state, but is rather the active, contemplating mind. It is not, however, simply active contemplation. It is rather Subject-Nothingness, in which active and passive are one, and in which the duality of mind and object is left behind.[75]

> The creative nature of Oriental Nothingness is to be illustrated by the relation between water and the waves, in which the water is forever and in every way the subject. If one were to make a subject of the waves which are produced and disappear, this would be the ordinary self of man. It is in such an ordinary subject's reverting back from waves to water – that is, returning to their source – and re-emerging as the True-Subject or True-Self that the characteristics of Oriental Nothingness must be sought and are to be found.[76]

Hisamatsu acknowledges that the conceptualisation of Nothingness is not to be identified with true Nothingness. However, he also suggests that the attempts to articulate it are not merely academic, but also arise from a religious desire to lead others into Self-realisation (the capitalisation of 'self' is used in the English translation by Richard De Martino in consultation with Abe and hints at the 'big self' or Buddha nature indicated by these passages from Hisamatsu).[77]

The concern for articulating a reasonable approach to religious insight and transformation for the modern person is also to be found in Masao Abe's approach to Emptiness in dialogue with Christian understandings of God.[78] For Abe, this is an essential collaboration in the face of increasing pressures on religions from secularising tendencies. All the same, the dialogue around Emptiness that Abe helped to initiate with Christians and with Jews[79] was more speculative than practice-based in its focus. In particular, Abe's dialogue is centred on Emptiness and *kenosis* as a way of reimagining the possibilities of Buddhists and Christians finding common language to speak of the Absolute. He suggests, for example, that '*Kenosis* or emptying is not an attribute (however important it may be) of God, but the fundamental *nature* of God himself.'[80] This is God's nature because God, as love, is self-

[75] Hisamatsu, 'The Characteristics of Oriental Nothingness', p. 72.
[76] Ibid. p. 97.
[77] The same soteriological emphasis can be found in Streng's influential work on Emptiness, particularly in his understanding of Nagarjuna's use of the term Frederick Streng, *Emptiness, A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 155ff.
[78] Roger Corless & Paul Knitter, *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity,* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1990) p. 5.
[79] J. Cobb & C. Ives, *The Emptying God, A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation,* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).
[80] Corless & Knitter, *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity*, p. 18.

sacrificing. Abe also writes of how this language offers a way of understanding Buddhist 'not-self' and Christian humility as the means by which one realises one's participation in ultimate reality.[81]

It is not my intention to engage in a detailed critique of this fruitful area of ongoing inquiry in Buddhist–Christian dialogue, [82] but to see how Johnston uses it in his own exploration of the interaction between Christian and Zen Buddhist experiences of emptiness. He does this most notably in his *Mystical Theology.* Broadly, Johnston appreciates Abe's attempts to find common ground between Christians and Buddhists through the exploration of *sunyata* and *kenosis*. He welcomes Abe's insistence that *sunyata* is dynamic rather than static, more of a verb than a noun, because it indicates compassion as well as wisdom.[83] He is also keen to stress that Abe's approach is not only a matter of abstract philosophy, but is rooted in the practice of *zazen*: 'Consequently, when he speaks of emptiness he is talking about something that he has experienced in the depths of his own being.'[84] Whether or not Johnston was qualified to make such a judgement (he bases this assumption on his experience of having attended *sesshin* with Abe), it is interesting that he thought it important to mention this dimension; underlining his repeated concern with the experiential aspect of insight into emptiness.

Johnston notes Abe's suggestion that the *kenosis* of the Son must be rooted in the *kenosis* of the Father, a suggestion challenged by Hans Küng, who found no biblical basis for such an understanding.[85] Küng insisted that self-emptying should not be seen as a permanent aspect of the divine nature, but was a historical reality relating to the crucifixion. Johnston, by contrast, finds language in St John of the Cross which speaks of the Father in the language of humility:

> The Father himself becomes subject to [the humble soul] for her exaltation, as though he were her servant and she his Lord. And he is as solicitous in favouring her as he would be if he were her slave and she his God. So profound is the humility and sweetness of God.[86]

However, although Johnston is willing to talk of the '*kenosis* of the Father', he modifies this by suggesting that it is the inability of the human mind to grasp the love of God, which appears as foolishness, that allows us to speak in such a way. Whether or not this makes Christian talk of the

[81] Ibid. p. 15 The 'not-Son-of-God' of the kenotic Jesus relates to the not-self of the Christian as 'two aspects of one living reality, that is, faith in Jesus Christ.'
[82] See, for example, Babka's recent article examining Zizioulas' category of koinonia as a further interlocutor in this dialogue Susia Paulik Babka, 'Sunyata and Otherness' *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (35, 2015).
[83] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 164 and see Abe's proposal in Corless & Knitter, *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity*, p. 22.
[84] Ibid. p. 165.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid. p. 166 quoting *The Spiritual Canticle, 27, Introduction.*

'emptiness' of God a metaphorical device rather than a metaphysical insight will be considered later in this chapter.

Elsewhere in Johnston's writing, exploration of this speculative dimension of emptiness is less evident. He cites, but does not quote, Waldenfels' book *Absolute Nothingness*[87] in *The Inner Eye of Love,*[88] a work in which he gives significant consideration of the nature of Emptiness. In his autobiography, *Mystical Journey*, he returns to the insights of Abe and notes his appreciation of Abe's participation in the Buddhist–Christian dialogues that he had also attended. In considering once more the *kenosis* hymn from Philippians 2, Johnston recalls:

> Now Professor Masao Abe says that this text is a beautiful expression of the Zen experience wherein one recites *"mu"* ("nothing") again and again and again, leaving everything and coming to utter emptiness (*ku* in Japanese or *sunyata* in Sanskrit) and to the immense joy of *satori.* In this way, Abe points to a remarkable similarity between Buddhist and Christian mysticism.[89]

However, Johnston then goes on to suggest that the historical context of the Philippians hymn, and the Christian's prior commitment to its subject as his or her saviour, gives it an entirely different significance for the Christian than for the Buddhist, who might regard it more simply as an insightful text. Here, as in so many other places, Johnston affirms both the commonality and the distinctiveness of Buddhist and Christian experience. Indeed, Abe would make a similar affirmation.[90]

While it could hardly be said that Johnston was a conspicuous participant in the extensive dialogue between the insights of the Kyoto School and Christian theology, he does recognise the value of this dialogue to his primary enterprise, which is a dialogue with Buddhist practice that allows new light to be shed on Christian mystical experience. In this instance, the new light shed by the engagement of Christians and Buddhists over the notion of emptiness as it relates to the nature of God, is an exploration of the self-humbling of God in terms more radical than most traditional Christian accounts would allow. For Johnston, seeing 'God' in the light of '*sunyata'* means a way of talking about God's emptiness as an expression of God's unknowability in terms of recognisable human characteristics, but also of God's fundamental character as 'empty' in the sense of being boundlessly open in humility towards God's creatures. This insight is encountered experientially when the

[87] Hans Waldenfels, 'Absolute Nothingness' *Monumenta Nipponica*, (21(3/4), 1996).
[88] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, p. 109.
[89] Johnston, *Mystical Journey*, p. 153.
[90] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 171.

believer is also open, self-emptied and humble towards God. In other words, Johnston moves freely between the language of emptiness to refer to a speculative approach to the nature of the divine and as a description of the fundamental disposition with which the human person must approach the divine. His significant contribution to this area is to bring the language of humility into dialogue with the language of *sunyata*, as each expresses both the nature of the Absolute and human participation in the Absolute. What makes his contribution interesting and distinctive is that it comes from the perspective of an embodied and practical mystical theology rather than a philosophical approach to dogmatic theology.

Emptiness in William Johnston's Mystical Theology

Having now surveyed the primary sources for Johnston's understanding of Emptiness in Zen, I shall continue to explore the extent to which his engagement with this concept gave a distinctive shape to his Christian practical mystical theology. I shall use three traditional terms from the mystical theology of the Western Christian tradition to organise this exploration. The *via purgativa* will serve as a category with which to examine the use of emptiness as an ascetical practice. To consider emptiness in terms of the *via negativa* will give space to explore this language as a way of understanding apophatic mystical theology and the suspicion of language in the practice of prayer and meditation. Finally, the notion of the *via unitiva* will allow for further consideration of the usefulness of the language of emptiness as it relates to the human encounter with the Absolute, with a particular focus on how the Christian language of union in love relates to the non-personal language of Buddhism. In each of these areas, Johnston's principal Christian sources are Scripture and the writings of St John of the Cross.

The *Via Purgativa*

As will be clear from our consideration of Johnston's appreciation of the *koan* 'mu', one of his overriding concerns in engaging with this Zen source is ascetic. He sees the practice of meditation where the word 'mu' is uttered with the exhalation of the breath as a practical exercise in detachment, or non-clinging.[91] He develops this idea of non-attachment as, among other things, a letting go of anxieties.[92] He sums up his approach to this question in a section of his *Letters to Contemplatives* in which he contrasts the Japanese notion of small self (*shoga*), which is a separated self, an isolated ego, with the big self (*taiga*) which is also the cosmic self. The small self is illusory, the big self is;

[91] See his recording, Prayer and Meditation in the Modern World (William Johnston, 1995).
[92] He considers this in connection with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, p. 98f.

> …an expanded consciousness which embraces all. When I lose the consciousness of separation and isolation in order to embrace the consciousness of the all, I am reaching a state that Buddhism calls emptiness and Christianity calls humility. Both spiritualities claim that emptiness or humility is the cornerstone or basis of the whole building. If you would come to enlightenment, you must be empty or humble. And this is a process. One must let go![93]

This is one of Johnston's most direct comparisons of emptiness and humility. His concern is to explore the Christian notion of losing one's life in order to find it and he seems to suggest that this process of 'coming to oneself' has the same character in Christianity and in Zen Buddhism. In the same passage, he goes on to speak of being free from addictions, whether these be material or religious. Drawing from John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mount Carmel,* he describes such non-attachment as 'the royal road to freedom, to joy, to enlightenment and to the true self. "Now that I least desire them", writes the Spanish mystic, "I have them all without desire."'[94] He introduces the paradox that personal effort is both essential and insufficient in this process:

> I call this the way of non-action because in it you must give up all effort in order to surrender to the process. Let the process take place. Let growth take place. Don't fight against God.[95]

He seems reluctant to suggest that the agency of God in this process is extrinsic. Here, as elsewhere, he insists that human effort is needed simply to free us from the attachments that otherwise inhibit the action of what is already present in us, the realisation of the union between the human person and God: 'The Christian Spirit, open to God, moves *spontaneously* towards mystical states of consciousness'[96] [emphasis added]. In theoretical terms, Johnston's language clearly differs from Buddhist notions of the 'big self', but in practical terms, it is difficult to see how, in his account, the ascetical processes of each religion differ. I will explore the relationship between 'self-power' and 'other-power' elsewhere, but it is sufficient for present purposes to note that Johnston recognises a fundamental similarity for Christians and Buddhists in their *practice* of non-attachment but also in what results from that non-attachment, that is, a realisation of the true self. This movement from emptying to fulfilment is clearly stated in a passage from *The Wounded Stag,* which is significant as it occurs in a work which Johnston largely intended to be free of explorations of Zen:

---

[93] Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 68.
[94] Ibid. p. 69.
[95] Ibid. p. 70.
[96] William Johnston, *The Wounded Stag* (London: Harper Collins, 1984), p. 41. He makes a similar point about the spontaneous action that follows self-emptying in Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 204f.

> The Christian, like the Buddhist, can pray with *mu*. His or her prayer can be a total self-emptying while awaiting the joyful enlightenment of resurrection.[97]

This 'ascetical' dimension of Emptiness is certainly present in contemporary Zen literature. As one example, in a chapter on 'Emptiness' in his book, *Returning to Silence*, Dainin Katagiri focuses almost entirely on this aspect.[98] His particular concern is to urge the practitioner not to have any expectation of the outcome of their practice. Again, the emphasis is on non-attachment. Similarly, Robert Kennedy, a Jesuit priest and Zen teacher, can say; 'Practically speaking emptiness can be considered a strategy for negating confrontational patterns of knowing.'[99] Here, he shifts the emphasis away from compulsive patterns of thought and behaviour and towards the question of dualistic, oppositional patterns, but the point is the same: emptiness can be seen as a spiritual discipline, a means of renouncing such unhelpful habits.

Once again, Johnston is in the mainstream of interpretation of Zen practice and teaching when it comes to the 'practice' dimension of emptiness. His significant contribution in this area lies not in the novelty of his interpretation, but in his willingness to incorporate this aspect of Zen practice into his teaching on Christian mysticism. In this he differs from Dumoulin, whose primary concern was to deepen Christian understandings of Zen, and from Enomiya-Lassalle, who was concerned with the practice of Zen in a Christian context. Johnston was clear that his exploration was of the Christian mystical experience but with a commitment to an illuminating dialogue with Zen. In this area, it is clear to me that he learned from Zen a practical approach to the renunciation of attachments to complement a rich Christian vocabulary of renunciation and detachment. Once again, we see a clear example of Moyaert's proposals for learning based on ritual participation. Johnston knew well that the practice of which he wrote was largely communal (as was his own regular practice at Sophia with his meditation group) and that it had many formal, ritual elements. His reflections would have been richer if had addressed these dimensions more directly.

The *Via Negativa*

Perhaps the most instantly appealing aspect of the language of emptiness or nothingness to a Christian mystical theologian is the promise of a fruitful dialogue between Christian apophatic traditions and the distinctive approach to language found in Zen traditions. We have already noted Hisamatsu's insistence that there is an ineffability about *sunyata* and it is unsurprising that those engaged in Christian–Buddhist dialogue should see this as an opening to consider the extent to

[97] Johnston, *The Wounded Stag*, p. 130.
[98] Dainin Katagiri, *Returning to Silence* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1988), p. 49ff.
[99] Kennedy, *Zen Gifts to Christians*, p. 86.

which the Christian apophatic traditions run in parallel to Zen suspicion of discursive reasoning when it comes to questions of what is absolute or ultimate. For Johnston, this exploration finds its most fertile ground in the exploration of one his primary sources for Christian mystical theology, St. John of the Cross. His article 'All and Nothing'[100] gives an extensive survey of nothingness in the work of John of the Cross with a much briefer section relating this to his understanding of emptiness or *mu* in Zen. He begins with one of his most frequently quoted phrases from John of the Cross, a phrase which appears in his diagram of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* where the mystic's journey towards God is an experience of nothingness: 'Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the mount, nothing.'[101] Johnston is clear that, in the first instance, John of the Cross speaks of the experience of the divine as an experience of nothingness in relative terms:

> For St. John of the Cross God is all. But *the experience of God* can be like nothing. Indeed, at a higher stage in the mystical life, faith is like thick darkness of like night; and God also is like night to the soul. In other words God is light in himself but darkness to us; God is all in himself but nothing to us.[102]

He then goes on to show how John of the Cross presents the way of nothingness as the way towards the 'all'. This way is the path of letting go of the 'desire for things, the clinging to things, putting one's security in things' that we have already explored above. Johnston likens this process to St. Paul's notion of 'having nothing yet possessing all things' (2 Cor. 6:10). And the process for the believer is a process of identification with the crucified Jesus – the ultimate pattern for self-emptying which leads to ultimate fullness of life.

Johnston notes that, for John of the Cross, the way of nothingness includes a renunciation of the desire for knowledge:

> In doing so, one enters into a cloud of unknowing and becomes nothing in a cognitive or spiritual way. And yet one gives up this knowledge for a more sublime knowledge which can be called faith or wisdom or enlightenment or awakening.[103]

This way of not-knowing leads to John of the Cross's famous elaboration of the 'dark night of the soul', a state of emptiness in which one is purged of attachment and in which 'God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how it

[100] William Johnston, 'All and Nothing, St. John of the Cross and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue' *The Eastern Buddhist*, (21(2), 1988).
[101] Ibid. p. 128.
[102] Ibid. p. 127.
[103] Ibid. p. 131.

happens.'[104] I will consider Johnston's approach to the 'dark night' as it corresponds to Zen experiences elsewhere, but it is important in this context to see it in Johnston's understanding as a process of liberation from attachment by way of a renunciation of rational thought.

Although this account of John of the Cross's mystical theology sounds remarkably close to Zen practice, Johnston's article is clear about one significant difference, and that is the fundamentally Christological and, therefore, relational, nature of the transformation that occurs. He quotes John of the Cross's reflection on Gal. 2:20 (*Vivo autem, iam non ego; vivit vero in me Christus)* as a vision of union with God in Christ in which there is a mutual indwelling in love.[105]

This brings us once more to the most significant area of divergence between Christians and Zen Buddhists as they describe the liberation they seek and experience: for Christians this experience is described using the language of love and union, whereas for Buddhists it is cast more characteristically in the language of wisdom and emptiness. The question of whether, for Johnston, this difference is essential or secondary will be addressed in our final conclusions.

Johnston's article was given a thorough critical consideration by Vélez de Cea in his article, 'A New Direction for Comparative Studies'.[106] He is careful to highlight the danger of assuming that Christian mystical writers of differing times and temperaments meant the same thing when using the language of not-knowing. He suggests that John of the Cross's apophaticism was an ascetical method, whereas the *via negativa* of Thomas Aquinas was a 'theological method to intellectually know God's names and attributes'[107] through negation. He argues that Johnston is incorrect in suggesting that John of the Cross could conceive of a state whereby one could simultaneously know God as both all and nothing. His Aristotelian assumptions could not allow this as there can be no void in nature. Therefore, the emptiness of the Christian soul is *preparatory* to being filled by God. I have already suggested that Johnston is careful to show how the 'nothingness' of God in John of the Cross is a matter of the perception of the human mind rather than a metaphysical statement. Inasmuch as the notion does refer to the nature of God in John of the Cross, Johnston would suggest that it does so in the sense of God's loving humility.[108]

[104] Ibid. quoting *The Dark Night* 2.5.1.
[105] Ibid. p. 135-6.
[106] Abraham Vélez de Cea, 'A New Direction for the Comparative Study of Buddhists and Christians: Evidence from Nagarjuna and John of the Cross' *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (26, 2006).
[107] Ibid. p. 143.
[108] As I have previously suggested in my consideration of the passage from *Mystical Theology* quoting *The Spiritual Canticle*. See above, note 86.

He also criticises Johnston and others for omitting the ethical dimension of understandings of Emptiness[109] and focussing instead on the metaphysical dimension. However, as we shall shortly see, Johnston embraced this aspect fully in a number of places. It is unfortunate that Vélez de Cea did not examine Johnston's other writings in this area.

Johnston was consistent in his approach to apophatic theology, a frequently addressed area in his work. His interpretation of *The Cloud of Unknowing* was always that God is unknowable by human reason but 'can be grasped directly by the loving power'[110] of human beings. God is ineffable because of the limitations of thought but may be approached through a very different faculty, that of love. This is a category that does not easily translate into terms that are recognisable in Zen teaching and marks, for Johnston, the key difference in approach between the two spiritual traditions. However, Johnston did not completely close off the possibility that the Zen insight into absolute reality as emptiness might have its parallel in Christian experience of the nature of God. It is to that area that we now turn.

The Via Unitiva

For Johnston, as a fairly classic exponent of Christian mystical traditions, the ultimate expression of Christian mystical experience is the union of the human soul with God. This is nothing less than a participation in the divine nature and Johnston explores it both through the work of John of the Cross[111] and, to a much lesser extent, the Orthodox Christian tradition.[112] He is careful to avoid saying that the human being 'becomes God' and draws on Thomas Aquinas' language of analogy to maintain the distinction between God and the human soul. However, he also writes of the human experience of union with God, insofar as this is possible during one's earthly life, as being so overwhelming that it is possible to speak of an 'immersion' in God and, to echo John of the Cross's language, that the soul 'appears to be God more than a soul.'[113]

Johnston insists that it is impossible to speak of 'union with God' without using the language of love. This love is mediated through Jesus, the incarnate Word:

> We can pray intimately to the Jesus who walked by the Sea of Galilee and died on the cross, while knowing by faith that the same Jesus, cosmic and glorified, communicates with all men

[109] Op. cit. p. 149.
[110] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 22.
[111] See, for example, the quotation from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.5.7. in ibid. p. 282.
[112] Ibid. pp. 74ff.
[113] Ibid. p. 282.

> and women who have existed or will ever exist. Such is the richness of mystical union with Christ, the Word Incarnate.[114]

It is a simple step for Johnston to see that this sense of union with all people leads to a Christian commitment to compassion for all and for a sense of human community which may overcome the alienation and separation that lie at the heart of so many human problems.[115] There can be no union with God that does not include a unity within the human family. This language seems to be a long way from non-dualistic Buddhist categories, in which the notion of a separately existing self is denied and the idea of a 'personal' deity is absent and, therefore, the language of union is unnecessary. However, there is a place where the language of union and the language of emptiness meet, and that is in the understanding of compassion.

In a number of places, he describes the condition of 'emptiness' as necessary to the exercise of compassion. For example, in *The Inner Eye of Love*, Johnston says that 'when I am humbly and totally empty I can receive others into my heart; when self is forgotten, I have room for all men [sic] and for God.'[116] Similarly, in *The Wounded Stag* he meditates on the beatitude, 'blessed are the poor' and concludes that evangelical poverty is the emptying of self that leads to compassion for others.[117] Putting this movement from compassion to emptiness the other way round, Johnston looks to its centrality in the Mahayana tradition, and once again he expresses it in embodied terms, not as mere metaphor, but as an indication of the compassionate state realised in ritual practice, not generated by mental dispositions alone:

> Through compassion one becomes empty, abandoning any kind of attachment. One becomes so empty as to receive the whole universe into one's belly.[118]

In the same passage, he explicitly relates this insight back to the Heart Sutra, saying that 'since formlessness equals form, the enlightened person is not torn away from the world of suffering and distress but remains in the humdrum world with its daily chores.'

So Johnston is clear that there is a fundamental similarity between the Christian who experiences union with the divine and the Buddhist who realises the 'suchness' of reality at the point where each is thereby open in compassion towards others. Love, for the Christian, is inherent in the nature of ultimate reality; compassion, for the Buddhist, is inherent in the 'empty' nature of all things. We

[114] Ibid. p. 285.
[115] Ibid. p. 297.
[116] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, p. 114.
[117] Johnston, *The Wounded Stag*, p. 131.
[118] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 300.

have already seen that Johnston is unwilling to talk about God using the language of 'nothingness' except as an expression of the limitations of human comprehension. However, he is willing to use the language of 'humility' in relation to God who is lovingly self-emptying. Does this, therefore, bring him close to a position where he can begin to see a correspondence between the Mahayana understanding of ultimate reality and the Christian understanding of God? I believe that it does, though, again, this is on the level of human experience rather than metaphysical speculation.

In considering comparisons between John of the Cross and Nagarjuna, Johnston affirms the Christological dimension of emptiness for the Christian mystic:

> The nothingness of St. John of the Cross is always rooted in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. Yet Nagarjuna has a mystical message for Christians and the world, reminding us that the ultimate and unutterable mystery can be *experienced* as emptiness. [119]

Johnston never falls into the trap of suggesting that a Buddhist's experience of *sunyata* is an experience of God because that this is not the way a Buddhist would describe or understand such an experience. What he is prepared to say is that a Christian's experience of the divine, which is arrived at through a similar ascetical endeavour to that which he sees in Zen practice, can be enriched through a deeper appreciation of the notion of 'emptiness' that is at the heart of Buddhist understanding.

Conclusion

Put simply, Johnston consistently argues that an engagement with Zen Buddhism helps Christians appreciate their own experience of divine self-emptying in a new way. Such an engagement can rescue the Christian language of 'humility' from its more negative, self-destructive connotations and give it some of the positive associations that 'emptiness' has for Zen Buddhists. He sees clear parallels between Zen and Christian practice both in terms of the movement from renunciation to fulfilment and in terms of the actual practices that allow the practitioner to be free from unhealthy attachments. Indeed, he recognises the benefits that may come to Christians from an encounter with Zen through participating bodily in some of the ritual practices[120] whereby one may realise a state of having let go (*Gelassenheit*). He remained convinced of the significant differences between the two traditions in terms of the use of personal or impersonal language to describe the emptiness of ultimate reality but was careful not to make so much of these differences as to suggest that

[119] Johnston, '*Arise, My Love..'*, p. 141 [emphasis added].
[120] We shall explore this in detail in another chapter, but such means include the practice of sitting *zazen*, the control of breathing, dealing with distracting thoughts etc.

meaningful and transformative comparison was impossible. It would be reasonable to conclude that, for Johnston, the exploration of *sunyata* through embodied practice gave a distinctive shape to his account of a Christian mystical theology founded on the love-mysticism of St. John of the Cross. In that account, the humility of God meets the humble human soul in a place of ineffable simplicity which gives birth to a life of compassion and joy.

Chapter Four

The Practice of Meditation

> Thank you for your good letter of June 14. Interested to hear about the Zen retreat. Honestly I do not think it matters a bit whether one can sit cross legged or not. But perhaps in the peculiar situation where Fr. Lasalle wants (himself & *you* too implicitly) to be as much as possible the real article in the eyes of the Japanese, it may have accidental import.[1]

This casually dismissive sentiment from Merton was written in response to Johnston's brief account of a Zen retreat in which he confesses to having 'disgraced myself because I had such pain in my legs that I kept shifting around.'[2] Another piece of correspondence from Johnston refers to the physical exactions of a Zen retreat, this time in Hiroshima but also under the direction of Enomiya-Lassalle:[3] 'We squatted nine times each day for forty minutes with only a little rice and vegetables to eat. Fr Lasalle[4] is a ruthless, if holy man!' The principal theme of the earlier exchange of letters was, in fact, the question of whether and how a Christian may practice Zen, particularly with a view to the attainment of *satori*, but the secondary, and apparently minor conversation about posture is also revealing. Anyone familiar with Merton's work will recognise his reluctance to address questions of 'method' in prayer,[5] especially when it comes to questions relating to the use of the body. Indeed, in his 'Day of a Stranger', a short piece written in response to a question about his 'typical' day in the hermitage and later reworked as a monograph, he writes:

> This is not a hermitage – it is a house. … What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe. Who said Zen? Wash your mouth out if you said Zen. If you see a meditation going by, shoot it. Who said "love"? Love is in the movies. The spiritual life is something that people worry about when they are so busy with something else they think they ought to be spiritual. Spiritual life is guilt. Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it.[6]

---

[1] Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux ,1985), p. 442.
[2] Unpublished letter from Johnston to Merton, 14 June 1966, courtesy of The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University.
[3] Postcard dated 29 July 1966, also courtesy of the archive in Bellarmine.
[4] Note the spelling used by Merton and Johnston is incorrect. Johnston corrected this in later works.
[5] One exceptional letter to Abdul Aziz hints at his own practice, Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 63f and he makes some references to specific practices in his novice conferences, but his principal works on contemplative prayer are not much concerned with questions of practice.
[6] Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs M. Smith Inc, 1981), p. 41.

There is more than meets the eye to Merton's ironic rejection of the formalities of the 'spiritual life', including any concern with methodology or technique in prayer. For example, he is clearly referring to the much-quoted Zen *koan* about killing the Buddha if you meet him on the road, a rejection of all prior formulations about the nature of the path or its goal. This theme occurs repeatedly in the Zen *koan* corpus and we will return to it later in this chapter. However, the thrust of his writing is clear; he does not consider that questions of methodology or practice have much relevance in the contemplative life. This may be, in part, a reflection of his concern not to become a 'guru' who would offer a reliable path to spiritual fulfilment. He did not want to gather disciples around him.

On the other hand, for Johnston this exchange with Merton hints at a significant dimension to his writings on mystical theology, and that is the question of the embodied and disciplined practice of prayer in the Christian tradition. I aim to show that his writing in this area draws on the specifics of Zen practice to a considerable extent and that he incorporates these insights into an orthodox Christian account of the practice of the spiritual life. Furthermore, I intend to show how this dialogue with Zen practice brought a different focus to questions of effort and grace in Christian contemplative practice, specifically in relation to the traditional distinction between acquired and infused contemplation.

Practice in Christian Ascetical Tradition

In the contemporary Western world, it has become common to hear of people who do not follow any particular religious tradition adopting 'spiritual practices' such as meditation, yoga, the walking of labyrinths, pilgrimages or silent retreats as an expression of a quest for meaning or as a form of therapeutic activity. This phenomenon has received significant scholarly attention. In a survey of the landscape of this flourishing of spiritualities, Ursula King points out that 'paths' of spirituality as practical means of transforming ourselves and the world are well known to world religions[7] but recognises that the relationship between such practices and the religions from which many of them sprang is changing in the contemporary context. Many reject the wider religious context, but not the practices themselves, while the practice of religion is not in retreat in the way that earlier secularisation theorists had predicted. Similarly, in her detailed study of those who, in the United States, identify as 'spiritual but not religious (SBNR)', Linda Mercadante observes the 'free market' adoption of spiritual practices as both a rejection of traditional religions and a rejection of a

[7] Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality* (New York, NY: BlueBridge, 2008), p. 33.

particular kind of 'scientific' secularism.[8] Thus, it is not simply a matter of declining religiosity, but of a reconfiguration of the interactions between beliefs, religious communities, rituals and practices.

There has been a corresponding movement within Western Christianity, which has seen an increasing focus on spiritual practices. This is not the place to consider the general question of whether this is a response to the current trend or a product of similar forces, but it is clear that the latter part of the twentieth century saw a significant increase in the attention given by Western Christian writers on spirituality to the practical dimensions of the spiritual life, particularly the practice of prayer.

Some of this renewed attention came as a result of the direct encounter between Christians and practitioners of Eastern religions, notably Hinduism and Buddhism, and a work such as the Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello's *Sadhana, A Way to God*[9] is a good example, emerging, as it does, from a similar context to Johnston's. Closer to Johnston, and some years earlier, Enomiya-Lassalle's writings also represent a turn towards the technical aspects of imageless, contemplative prayer and meditation.[10] However, Johnston was conscious that such a focus on practice was not novel in the Christian ascetical literature, so we shall briefly consider some aspects of that tradition, including an indication of its place in contemporary theological refection, before returning later to Johnston's treatment of it in relation to the insights he gained from Zen practice.

Evagrius of Pontus was writing out of a long tradition of the ascetical practices of desert monasticism when, in his *Praktikos*, he set out a programmatic approach to such practices as 'the spiritual method for cleansing the affective part of the soul'.[11] Included in this 'method' are such activities as readings, vigils, prayer, Psalm singing, fasting, toil, solitude and almsgiving.[12] The immediate aim of such practices is *apatheia* or control of the emotions, but the practices in themselves are only the first part of a fuller process in the spiritual life which leads next to contemplation, or *theoria.* Activities of the body prepare the practitioner for activities of the mind. In this sense, Evagrius sets out an understanding that will later find expression in the threefold movement from purgation to illumination to union.[13] The practices, then, are purgative, ascetical disciplines and not ends in

[8] Linda Mercadante, *Belief without Borders* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 34.
[9] Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana: A Way to God* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1978).
[10] See, for example, Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, *Zen Meditation for Christians* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1974) published in German in 1968, or the earlier work by Aelred Graham, *Zen Catholicism* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1963) or, from a more cautious Anglican perspective, Herbert Slade *Meeting Schools of Oriental Meditation* (London: Lutterworth Educational, 1973).
[11] *Praktikos* 78 Evagrius, *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1972), p. 36.
[12] *Praktikos* 15 Evagrius, p. 20.
[13] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 192.

themselves. Commenting on Evagrius' approach to *praxis* and *theoria*, Špidlík notes that other writers, such as Gregory Nazianzen, have a wider notion of *praxis* as being not only those 'negative' activities aimed at the overcoming of vice, but also of the positive ones aimed at the cultivation of the virtues.[14]

In examining the development of this dynamic approach to the spiritual life in the Christian East, Špidlík notes that:

> In Palamite terminology, *energeia* (activity, operation) is a general term for the divine gifts. It brings about human *synergeia* (co-operation). Prayer is therefore also an *ergon, opus,* work. The intelligent person works with prudence and *according to certain methods*. [15]

St Gregory Palamas offers an exceptional attempt by a Christian theologian to both justify and describe an embodied, methodical approach to prayer within a broad understanding of the spiritual life, though his approach was strongly opposed by those on the other side of the fourteenth-century Hesychast controversy. In his *Triads*, Gregory says:

> Can you not see, then, how essential it is that those who have determined to pay attention to themselves in inner quiet should gather together the mind and enclose it in the body, and especially in that "body" most interior to the body, which we call the heart?[16]

For Gregory, this embodied approach to prayer can include such practices as the control of the mind by controlling the flow of the breath.[17] This attention to breathing is taken up in more recent writers such as Lev Gillet writing in the 1950s.[18] Hesychast tradition adds further instructions concerning the use of the body, including the preference for sitting on a low stool with the head bowed.[19] The body, created as good, can be restored to its created goodness by participation in the divine glory through the practice of prayer. Johnston shows some familiarity[20] with the Hesychast tradition as championed by Gregory and we shall consider his use of it below, including the question of 'energies' to which Špidlík makes reference.

---

[14] Tomas Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications 1986), p. 178, also Alfeyev's discussion of the writings of Isaac the Syrian, where he notes that, for Isaac, 'Prayer with all its outward forms is the fulfilment of all the virtues', Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Collegeville, MA: Cistercian Publications 2000), p. 160, giving such examples as acquiring compunction and concentration of thought by praying with outstretched hands.
[15] Špidlík, *Prayer: The Spirituality of the Christian East*, p. 361 [my emphasis].
[16] John Meyendorff, *Gregory Palamas, The Triads* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 43.
[17] Ibid. p. 46.
[18] A Monk of the Eastern Church, *The Jesus Prayer* (New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), p. 107.
[19] Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus* (Liberty, TN: Saint John of Kronstadt Press, 1995), p. 101.
[20] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, especially in ch.5 on Eastern Christianity, pp 74-85.

Until the twentieth century, Western Christianity offers comparatively fewer instances of this attention to method in relation to the use of the body in prayer. Technique is hardly absent from such traditions as the *lectio divina* of Benedictine monasticism,[21] the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius,[22] St Theresa's *Life*[23] or, indeed, *The Cloud of Unknowing,*[24] the subject of Johnston's doctoral thesis. However, these methods are almost exclusively concerned with the mental dimension of prayer and not its somatic dimensions.

The move towards a more considered and disciplined use of the body in prayer by modern writers in the field of Christian spirituality has been accompanied more recently by scholarly interest in this area. Sarah Coakley's work on religion and the body has included a consideration of ascetic practice[25] and the relationship between grace and disciplined effort in the life of faith. She charts a movement from specific external practices (purgation) aimed at the fostering of virtue as an expression of baptismal commitment to belief, to a sustained life of formation in the ways of love (illumination) and finally a responsiveness to God which is more than passive and which allows a direct infusion of divine grace (union).[26] She summarises this spiritual dynamic in this way:

> 'Contemplation' in the Carmelites may be termed a 'practice', but strictly speaking it is done ('infused') by God in the believer: it is, from the human side, the *purest* act of willed passivity. The contemplative, however, does not then give up 'practices' of more mundane sorts that have formed and shaped her in the earlier stages of 'ascent'; ostensibly trivial decisions about modest dress, or habits of hospitality to the poor, continue to be taken for granted, yet they get taken up and further transfigured.[27]

We shall return to the vexed question of 'infused' and 'acquired' contemplation later, as it recurs frequently in Johnston's exploration of the role of embodied practice in the spiritual life. For now, it is sufficient to note the renewed interest in specific acts of Christian *ascesis* in Coakley's theological

[21] The brief references to *lectio* in chapters 8 and 48 of the Rule of St Benedict are, by the twelfth century, expanded into a more elaborate method of prayer by Guigo in his *Ladder of Monks*, resulting in the now familiar fourfold pattern of *lectio–oratio–meditatio–contemplatio*. See Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p. 58.
[22] These nonetheless offer a few indications of a concern with physical matters, e.g. the question of posture in the Ten Additions of the First Week, Robert Blackhouse, *The Spiritual Exercises* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 22 and, most interestingly, the praying of one syllable of the Our Father with each breath in the Third Method of Prayer ibid. p. 60.
[23] For example, the emphasis on human effort in her first of four means of watering the garden, J.M. Cohen, *The Life of St Teresa* (London: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 78f.
[24] See, for example, the 'two spiritual devices' recommended for beginners in contemplation in chapter 32 William Johnston, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1997), p. 52.
[25] Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015).
[26] Ibid ch. 4, *Deepening Practices* pp. 101ff.
[27] Ibid p. 122.

project which signals a wider willingness to explore the theological implications of a renewal in contemplative *praxis* among contemporary Western Christians.

Another example of such theological reflection is offered by Mark McIntosh who, in his *Mystical Theology*, suggests that the physicality of a Christian's identification with the crucified Jesus leads to a vital form of theological knowledge about the believer's transformation in Christ He suggests that the sensations resulting from a sharing in the bodiliness of Jesus' sufferings are:

> …the very structures of a new creation. They are the patterns of a new, emergent reality which is fully noetic and intelligible, but which cannot be known apart from the practical, bodily commitment of one's whole being.[28]

Thus, embodied aspects of Christian discipleship and formation offer the theologian not only material for detached reflection, but communicable sources of theological insight.

In summary, it is clear that, while it is possible to find examples within the Christian mystical traditions of a concern with matters of practice or method in relation to the use of the body in prayer, these examples are relatively rare in the West until the latter half of the twentieth century and, where they do occur in the Christian East, they are not always uncontested. However, the significant increase in interest in the somatic, practical and methodical dimensions of Christian prayer in the last 50 or 60 years forms the immediate context for Johnston's writing. To what extent, then, was his thinking also shaped by his participation in Zen ritual practices?

Practice in Zen Tradition

If Christian examples of practice and method in the bodily aspects of prayer occur exceptionally, the same cannot be said for Zen. In the Soto tradition of Japanese Zen, the foundational writings of Dogen, as collected in his *Shobogenzo,* offer very specific instruction on the physical aspects of *zazen*, and it is vital to remember that, this refers to a communal and ritualised practice, not primarily an individual one. In fascicle 58, *Zazengi* or 'Rules for *Zazen*',[29] Dogen sets out his instruction in direct language. In a few lines, it addresses issues concerning the ideal location for *zazen*, the correct way to sit, the placing of the hands, the alignment of the head, what one should do with one's eyes and mouth and, briefly, what to do with the mind. Similar instructions, in an expanded form, are contained in a key text by Dogen which does not form part of the *Shobogenzo,* 'Recommending *Zazen* to all people' *(Fukan Zazen Gi),*[30] Furthermore, Dogen writes extensively on

[28] Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), p. 82.
[29] Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, p. 579f.
[30] ibid. p. 907ff.

the nature of practice,[31] including the significance of the bodily nature of practice, which is inseparable from practice with the mind. Practice is not to be seen as a discrete 'spiritual' activity but the totality of daily endeavour centred on, but not confined to the regular practice of *zazen*. In another fascicle with an uncertain place within the *Shobogenzo,* On the Endeavour of the Way (*Bendowa),*[32] Dogen engages in a justification for the way of practice-realisation through *zazen* in the form of questions and answers. His central argument here is that the practice of *zazen* is not ascetic preparation for a more advanced stage, but is itself the realisation of enlightenment. The body is not a problem to be overcome, but a vehicle for the teaching and, though he writes often of the 'falling away'[33] of body and mind, this represents a relinquishing of self-consciousness, not a dualistic rejection of corporeal or conscious existence.

Dogen's understanding is strongly echoed in recent ritual studies of *zazen*. For example, Dale S. Wright, in his introduction to a significant collection of essays in this area, suggests that 'we might say that these forms of Zen meditation ritual are essentially the exercise or practice of attention in which abstracted states of mind, including important states like purposes, are set aside.'[34]

A further example of Dogen's approach to Zen practice is found in his *Instructions for the Zen Cook*, which sets out his understanding of practice as it relates to the work of the monastery cook, an office held by many revered Zen teachers:

> Both day and night, allow all things to come into and reside within your mind. Allow your mind (Self) and all things to function together as a whole.[35]

The embodied practice that expresses this understanding includes the care exercised in ensuring that not one grain of rice is lost when it being cleaned of any particles of sand that might be present. The same attention is given to the details of daily work as to the details of *zazen*.

In more recent Zen literature, the detailed practice of *zazen* continues to receive considerable attention. Texts that first introduced Zen to the West, such as Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen*, which was first published in 1965, began a familiar pattern of instruction in aspects of sitting *zazen,* including illustrations of postures and abdominal breathing, precise instructions regarding the length

[31] See fascicle 28, *The Point of Zazen,* Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, p. 303ff, fascicle 31, *Continuous Practice* (ibid. p. 332 ff) and fascicle 38, *Body-and-Mind Study of the Way* (ibid. p. 422ff).
[32] (ibid. p. 3ff).
[33] Most notably in the key text, '*Actualising the Fundamental Point' Genjo Koan* (ibid. p. 29ff).
[34] Steven Heine & Dale S. Wright, *Zen Ritual, Studies of Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 14
[35] Kosho Uchiyama, *How to Cook your Life* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2005), p. 6.

of periods of sitting, suggestions for how to maintain concentration on inhalations and exhalations and diagnoses of various common issues such as pain in the knees and stiffness in the neck.[36]

The detailed instructional writings of John Daido Loori insist on the centrality of *zazen* and offer compendia of writings from the tradition concerning detailed aspects of the techniques of sitting. An essay by Jiyu-Kennett in *The Art of Sitting* draws attention to techniques of natural breathing in *zazen*:

> There is no form that gives greater spiritual comfort, and deeper understanding and awareness, than serene reflection meditation [*zazen*] as far as I am concerned; however, these benefits can only be achieved if one breathes naturally.[37]

Such 'natural breathing' through the nose is synchronised with the natural state of one's own body and is not strained. However, Loori is equally insistent that *zazen*;

> …is not meditation, contemplation, visualisation, or mindfulness. It is not to be found in the mudra, chakra, mantra or *koan*. Neither in its stillness nor is functioning, its seated nor its active form, can *zazen* be said to be meditation. *Zazen* is not single-pointed mind, no-mind, aware-mind, or trance-mind.[38]

Rather, it is, itself, 'the miraculous manifestation of supreme enlightenment.'[39] *Zazen* is not separable from detailed practice, but neither is it mere technique.

The practice of abdominal breathing is given even more detailed consideration by Sekida in his *Zen Training*[40] where he describes the muscular functioning of the diaphragm and offers breathing techniques to intensify energy and concentration in order to deal with distracting thoughts during *zazen.*[41] He also offers a detailed description of one of the techniques offered to beginners as a way of dealing with distractions during *zazen*, namely the counting of the breaths. Like other aspects of Zen practice, this technique is not considered essential but is offered as an aid to those in the early stages of practice.

---

[36] Philip Kapleau, *Three Pillars of Zen* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), e.g. pp. 52, 56, 326ff.
[37] John Daido Loori, *The Art of Just Sitting* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004), p. 97.
[38] John Daido Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1992), p. 83.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Katsuki Sekida, *Zen Training* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2005), especially chapter 4.
[41] Ibid. p. 65.

Abdominal breathing is also described in some detail by a Rinzai teacher, Koryu Osaka, who gives precise instruction about the least strained use of the diaphragm in order to achieve peaceful, natural breathing in the *hara* (belly):

> When you sit, your body, breath and mind become harmonized, and when your breath slows down, the mind also calms down. This integration … is the fundamental condition of *zazen*.[42]

This concentration on the focus of breathing in the *hara* became, as we shall see, a recurring theme for Johnston in his consideration of the practice of contemplative prayer. His interest went beyond concerns about breathing technique to include an exploration of the *hara* as the centre of a person in some Eastern thought, and in the question of the body's energy. For these themes, he drew on the writings of Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, who described his exploration of the concept of *hara* in spiritual terms:

> The realizing of the possibility of a living faith rests on three pillars – experience, insight and practice. Our task today is to help the man who has come to the end of his tether, by revealing to him the latent content of his deepest and most essential experiences, by opening the door to the basic truths and laws of life, and above all by showing him a way to achieve by practising a lasting attitude in consonance with them.[43]

The practice to which he refers is based on sitting and standing in a correct posture, breathing abdominally and in the realisation of the fundamental integration of one's true self with Being. This realisation is achieved through liberation from the psychological burdens that separate the human person from their unity with all that is. These burdens are manifested in tensions that are overcome with the relaxation that comes through practice.

Johnston also drew on the material from Japanese teachers he included in Dürckheim's work.[44] These Japanese texts are not from the mainstream of Zen practice but gained a certain currency in the West thanks to Dürckheim's association with other popularisers of Zen, such as Eugen Herrigel[45] and D.T. Suzuki. The first set of writings in Dürckheim's *Hara* is by Okado Torajiro who also introduces the notion of the *tanden*, a position just below the navel that is thought to be the true centre of the person. Torajiro describes it as 'the shrine of the divine' and the focus for the stable breathing that is at the heart of his 'sitting' practice (for which he uses the more general term, *seiza*

[42] Taizan Maezumi & Bernie Glassman, *On Zen Practice* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2002), p. 42.
[43] Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, *Hara, The Vital Center of Man* (Rochester, NY: Inner Traditions, 1962), p. 2.
[44] Ibid. three appendices on p. 160ff.
[45] Best known for his popular work, Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953).

rather than the more specific Zen Buddhist term *zazen*). He sees this practice as an exercise in human liberty, in deep insight into the nature of reality and in correct behaviour.[46]

Johnston's Approach to Embodied Practice

From the beginning of Johnston's work exploring the nature of Christian contemplative prayer in dialogue with Zen Buddhism, he emphasised the embodied nature of meditation and contemplation and examined questions of method. His clearest early formulations of these dimensions are in *Christian Zen*[47] where he describes his own experience of a degree of training in Zen practice[48] and begins to explore the points of context and mutual enrichment between the two traditions of meditation. His concern was primarily, of course, to enrich Christian contemplative prayer by giving attention to a tradition more acquainted with the physical aspects of the practice of meditation. Indeed, between the first and second editions of *Christian Zen* (1971 and 1979), Johnston notes an increase in interest in the West in the practice of meditation to such an extent that he incorporated a practical appendix in the later edition. In that appendix, he affirms an insight similar to that noted above in relation to Dogen's understanding of Zen practice:

> …oriental breathing and posture are regarded as warming-up exercise, preparations for the real thing. Now this is an abysmal misunderstanding. What we can learn from the East is not just preparatory devices but the art of praying … After all, God created the whole person, not just the mind; and he should be adored by the whole person, not just the mind.[49]

He goes on to give a fuller theological exploration of this embodied praying:

> Furthermore the word "body" may speak more and more powerfully if you are aware (but again in a non-discursive way) of the mystery of the body of Christ. This is the body which has become one with my body. "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him (Jn. 6:56). This is the body which is "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Ephes. 2:23). Just as the breath of Jesus is the breath of the universe, so the body of Jesus is one with the universe. "Is the body not more than clothing?" There may come a time when body and breathing and ego are forgotten and our true self cries out with St, Paul: "I live, now not I but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).[50]

[46] Dürckheim, *Hara*, p. 174.
[47] Johnston, *Christian Zen*.
[48] He describes his Sunday afternoons learning how to sit *zazen* in the Rinzai temple of Engaku-ji in Kamakura Johnston, *Christian Zen*, p. 3 and, later, how he participated in *sesshin* (ibid. p. 5).
[49] Ibid. p. 118.
[50] Ibid. p. 121.

Here, Johnston relates the cosmic body of Christ with his eucharistic body and with the praying body of the believer who is 'in Christ'. His language has echoes of Dogen's 'falling away' of body and mind as one enters self-forgetfulness of prayer or meditation. Johnston further considers the cosmic and Eucharistic body of Jesus in a section on divinization in '*Arise, My Love…'*

> …we become members of the body of which Christ, not the historical Jesus but the glorified Jesus, is the head. Yet it would be more faithful to Paul to say that through baptism we *are* members of the body of Christ and that Christian enlightenment is a growing understanding of who we are.[51]

Although there are moments in this section when Johnston appears to say that divinization comes about *as a result* of a life of prayer and love, his fundamental position is that it is a gift of God to all Christians[52] who, nonetheless, 'have a role in work of salvation'.[53]

Johnston develops his thinking about the body in prayer as a participation in the Body of Christ in *Being in Love*. Here, he talks of a vital 'conversion to the body'[54] which is, at the same time, a conversion to honouring the material universe,[55] respecting one's own body and respecting the life of the community. He insists that the Christian's praying body is not a perfect exemplar of physical prowess but may be a broken body. Indeed, he notes that there are many instances of wounded bodies among the mystics.[56] Johnston sees an intimate connection between the love and care one shows for one's own body and the love one shows both to the incarnate Christ and to the human community. Thus, the attention given to the use of the body in prayer is not merely a matter of comfort or technique, not is it of secondary concern to the mental aspects of praying. Rather, Johnston justifies this bodily awareness as an integral part of the transformative work of prayer. Elsewhere, he spells this out as a 'spiritualization of matter' which culminates in a final transformation through death and resurrection[57] as intimated by St Paul in 1 Cor. 15:43 ('What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable'). He also draws this theological insight from his consideration of the Hesychast tradition, noting how St Gregory Palamas defended the bodily aspects of prayer by appealing to the dignity of a body made in the image of God: Furthermore,

---

[51] Johnston, *'Arise, My love…'*, p. 154.
[52] Ibid. He cites *Gaudium et Spes* 22 in support of this view.
[53] Ibid. p. 254n.
[54] Johnston, *Being in Love*, p. 29.
[55] He draws, again, on the Second Vatican Council as exemplifying an ongoing conversion towards incarnational faith.
[56] Ibid. p. 28. Among these, he includes Takashi Nagai, who suffered leukaemia after working in nuclear medicine and after surviving the nuclear bomb in Nagasaki. Johnston translated his *The Bells of Nagasaki* (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1987).
[57] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 57.

divinization or *theosis*, the climax of the hesychast practice, transforms both body and soul.[58] As we can see, Johnston's appeal for a focus on the body in prayer draws from several theological sources, but to what extent was this rationale also guided by his dialogue with Zen? As we go on to examine the detail of Johnston's engagement with the specifics of the embodied practice of imageless prayer, it will become clear that the attention he gave to this area was stimulated by his participation in aspects of Zen practice and that he sought, in retrospect, to establish theological criteria for the practice in which he was engaged. It will also become clear that this practice-led exploration yielded some specific theological understandings, especially in his consideration of the balance between gift and effort in prayer.

Aspects of Practice: Body and Posture

The appendix to *Christian Zen* is useful for an understanding of some of Johnston's sources for his insights into Zen, as he gives fuller references than in other works to the writings on which he has drawn, especially on the influential work by Shunryu Suzuki from a Soto Zen tradition, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (Suzuki, 1970), a work he also recommends as an introduction to Zen elsewhere.[59] He quotes Suzuki as he advocates a practice of letting go of anxious preoccupations[60] and in promoting the use of the lotus posture.[61] He reflects on the symbolic meaning of this posture as a rising 'out of the illusion of the world into the serene beauty of truth'[62] just as the lotus arises out of the mud of a pond. He also depicts other postures for those who find the lotus difficult but emphasises the common feature in each of these, which is a straight back to allow unrestricted breathing. He also advocates having the eyes half open to avoid distraction and drowsiness, an aspect of Zen practice not found in other meditation traditions.

In *The Mirror Mind,* Johnston further elaborates the Buddhist understanding of the lotus posture in this way:

> Buddhist tradition agrees that the lotus posture, properly assumed, reveals the true self, speaks of the true self. Not the little ego that is the subject of my desires but the self of the universe, eternal and serene.[63]

[58] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 81.
[59] For example, in, Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 86.
[60] Johnston, *Christian Zen*, p. 111.
[61] Ibid. p. 117.
[62] Ibid. p. 105.
[63] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 59. A similar sentiment can be found in *Letters to Contemplatives:* 'Sit! Your true self will come to the surface and you will be enlightened beyond all subject-object duality.' Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 74.

He goes on to focus on the centre of gravity that becomes firmly established in the belly when one sits in the lotus and gives particular attention to the area called the *tanden* in Sino-Japanese tradition. He describes this point is a 'sea of energy' and a 'field of mercurial power'[64] in that tradition. In a passage that then goes on to echo words we earlier quoted from Dürkheim's writings, though not cited, Johnston describes the belly or *hara* as 'a womb that gives birth to great and liberating enlightenments, profound religious experience, artistic insights, epoch-making scientific discoveries'.[65] We shall pick up this latter assertion when examining Johnston's approach to knowledge below. To Durkheim's general comments about the *hara*, Johnston adds a brief biblical comparison in a quotation from John 7:38: 'He who believes in me, as the scripture says, out of his belly shall flow rivers of water.'[66] He is clear that this physical 'location' of one's 'centre' is not to be taken too literally and shows awareness of the Zen tradition of a centre that is not a centre, an understanding of the true self that is also no-self and, therefore, transcends a narrowly individualistic and introspective self-concern.[67]

Johnston is aware that much of the embodied practice of meditation or prayer is found across religious and non-religious traditions and, in *Silent Music: The Science of Meditation,* he explores these inherent human capacities. He interacts considerably with the research of Tomio Hirai, a psychiatrist who was working in Tokyo at the same time as Johnston. In the early 1970s, his research on neurophysiology and meditation was published in *The Psychophysiology of Zen*[68] and Johnston worked with him on his experiments on charting the brain waves of proficient meditators. His results showed a significant increase in more 'restfully alert' alpha brainwaves in regular meditators and an increased capacity to resist the kind of habituation that renders certain stimuli 'invisible' to the normal waking consciousness.[69] In other words, meditation fosters a detachment from self-interest that allows for a more direct awareness of the world around. Johnston gives a fuller explanation of this process further on in *Silent Music* where he suggests that the deeper level of intuitive consciousness is achieved by abandoning conceptual thought, leading to 'a sense of wellbeing and interior integration'.[70] He links this process to the kind of attentiveness to breathing found in Soto

[64] Ibid. p. 61.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Some translations, such as the NRSV, render *koilias* as 'heart'. Johnston's preference for 'belly' is more accurate.
[67] He cites a koan from the *Mumonkan*, case 12,Sekida, *The Gateless Gate*, p. 53 where Zuigan speaks to himself each day to remind himself of the need to be awake – there is no external 'master', only pure awareness. Mumon's commentary urges the disciple not to cling to a deluded way of consciousness. This is a rare instance of Johnston engaging in detail with the Zen literature.
[68] Tomio Hirai, *The Psychophysiology of Zen* (Tokyo: Igaku Shoin, 1974).
[69] Johnston, *Silent Music*, p. 38f.
[70] Ibid. p. 57.

Zen and we shall explore this shortly. In terms of posture, *Silent Music* explored further aspects of clinical research focussed on the lotus posture, which found that significant physiological benefits were linked with this practice, notably a reduction in blood pressure. Johnston notes that these benefits come from a passive, not a willed volition, i.e. the meditator does not 'produce' these effects by thinking about them, but as a by-product of self- forgetting meditation.[71] He is clear that the effects are not, in any immediate sense, religious, and the physical control practised in meditation can be used for good or ill, but he does suggest that when the energy created by willed passivity is combined with a nobler purpose, it can be a force for good on earth.[72]

Aspects of Practise: Energy

This brings us to a further significant area of exploration for Johnston in the practice of meditation, which is the understanding of the body's energy. Beginning, this time, at the end of Johnston's writing career, his autobiography contains an account of a profound experience which lay at the heart of his interest in Eastern (not specifically Zen) understandings of energy. He recounts a period of his life in which he was having trouble sleeping. One night, he had a powerful experience like being struck on the chest by a column of smoke accompanied by the clanging of a bell:

> After some years, I came to see this incident as an awakening of my true self which, hard and brittle, had to be broken open violently with the crash and the clang of the bell. The smoke, I now see, came from a fire that came to burn within me. The smoke seemed to come down from above but perhaps it was like the serpent power rising up from below.[73]

This 'serpent power' is *kundalini*, an inner energy in Indian thought which rises through the body's *chakras* and awakens the adept to an experience of non-dualism, often through a traumatic process. It is an energy not only associated with religious practice and experience, but also with human creativity – a control of the energy of the universe in which one participates.[74] Johnston also finds resonances with this concept in other descriptions of bodily energy associated with mystical experience or meditative practice in the East, such as the 'zen sickness' encountered by Hakuin[75] after his experience of enlightenment. This physical experience of weakness, distress and

[71] Ibid. p. 112.
[72] Ibid. p. 113.
[73] Johnston, *Mystical Journey*, p. 185.
[74] See his summary in Johnston, *Mystical Journey*, p. 115.
[75] Discussed in Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 140ff.

hallucination was thought to result from an imbalance in bodily energy through excessive meditation, which could be remedied by relocating that energy lower down in the body.[76]

Through these examples, Johnston explores the association between the body's energy as it participates in the energy of the universe with the energy required to attain a spiritual awakening. However, he is unwilling to import the language of *kundalini* into Christian mystical theology and prefers to hold it in dialogue with Christian explorations of divine energy and the Holy Spirit. In *Mystical Theology,* he also cites Christian examples of intensely physical experiences of spiritual awakening.[77] In particular, he considers the 'stirrings' of *The Cloud of Unknowing* that become an inner fire, and the 'weaknesses' experienced by St Teresa as recounted in *The Interior Castle* and which he describes as an overwhelming 'divine energy'. Above all, he draws once more on the language of St John of the Cross – a 'sweet cautery and delightful wound', a 'violent flame that kills him, only to awaken him to eternal life' and a final serenity once the flame has concluded its consuming work.[78]

In considering the energy of the Holy Spirit, he turns both to scripture and to Conciliar documents. Citing *Gaudium et Spes* III.38 – 'Christ is now at work in the hearts of men and women through the energy of his Spirit' – Johnston sees the operation of the Holy Spirit in the world as the continuation of Christ's healing and transfiguring energy.[79] He quotes Song of Songs 4:9 to suggest that this energy is also the inner, fiery energy of mystical experience which would later be elaborated so fully by John of the Cross. Finally, in the section of *Mystical Theology*, he touches on a theme that appears in several places in his writing, and that is the uncreated energies of God experienced as Taboric light as developed by Hesychast theology of the Byzantine Middle Ages. We have previously made reference to this Eastern Christian tradition in relation to embodied prayer, and it is of particular significance that this theology of divine energies found its clearest expression in the context of an embodied practice of contemplative prayer in the tradition of St Gregory Palamas. In his *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Lossky writes of

[76] In his autobiographical description of zen sickness, Hakuin quotes an old Chinese master, Wu Ch'i-ch'u, as saying: 'When the mind focuses in the ocean of vital energy or field of elixir located an inch below the navel, the vital energy gathers there [and] the physical frame is strong.' Hakuin, *Wild Ivy* (Boston, MA: Shambhala 2010), p. 75.
[77] Chapter 7, op. cit. 147ff.
[78] Ibid. p. 148.
[79] Ibid. p. 137 The translation of the Conciliar text is that of the Abbott edition, Walter Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 236, Johnston's preferred text. The Flannery edition uses the word 'power', Austin Flannery, *Vatican II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1987), p. 937 to translate the Latin *virtus.* As mentioned earlier, Tanner, *Decrees* gives parallel Latin-English.

> …the divine energies, the 'rays of divinity' of which Dionysius the Areopagite speaks: the creative powers which penetrate throughout the universe, and make themselves known, not through any created being, as the unapproachable light wherein the Holy Trinity dwells. The energies, bestowed upon Christians by the Holy Spirit, no longer appear as exterior causes, but as grace, an interior light, which transforms nature by deifying it.[80]

The uncreated light is 'both that which one perceives, and that by which one perceives in mystical experience.'[81] This interior light also bestows 'the ineffable benefits of the world to come' on the body of the believer in this world. It is not a merely intellectual 'enlightening' but a transfiguration of the whole person, filling both the intellect and the bodily senses. The transfiguration is nothing less than a deification and it extends beyond the human person to the whole cosmos.[82]

Johnston's handling of this Orthodox tradition is unique in its attempt to correlate the experience of the Christian contemplative and her experience of the energy of uncreated divine light and the experience of a Buddhist or Hindu meditator who is 'in touch the energy of the vast cosmos.'[83] He suggests, though with frustratingly little detail, that 'Eastern Christianity has elaborated a theology of uncreated light that is of great significance in the dialogue with Indian and Tibetan mysticism.'[84] His most substantial treatment of the theology of uncreated light and of divine energies comes in chapter 5 of *Mystical Theology*. Johnston recognises the significance of this strain of thought in Orthodoxy and fully appreciates that it is fundamentally oriented towards the articulation of mystical experience which, in turn, is directed towards *theosis.*[85] The Palamite distinction between divine energies and divine essence offers a way of talking about the knowability of God without compromising the simplicity of the Godhead and without resorting to a species of pantheism. The divine energies, experienced most characteristically as light, are nothing less than God, yet the distinction allows for an insistence of the unknowability of divine *essence* by human consciousness. Johnston goes on to suggest parallel experiences of divine light in Western mystical theology in Augustine's *Confessions,*[86] where he saw God's immutable light with the 'eye of his soul', in

---

[80] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co Ltd, 1957), p. 220.
[81] Ibid. p. 218.
[82] Špidlík, *Prayer: Spirituality of the Christian East*, p. 268 See also a discussion of this theological insight in relation to Orthodox approaches to ecology in Bruce Folz's entry on this topic in John A. McGuckin, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), p. 162: 'the divine energies surround us everywhere at all times, permeating all creation, accessible in all things to those prepared to receive them.'
[83] Johnston, *Mystical Journey*, p. 54.
[84] Ibid. p. 186.
[85] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 84.
[86] *Confessions 7.10.16* quoted in ibid. p. 85.

Hildegaard's *Scivias*[87] and in a number of places in Teresa's writings.[88] He does not, however, develop either these promising parallels or the tantalising suggestion that parallels can also be found in Eastern depictions of religious experiences.

In indicating the potential for exploring these parallels, Johnston does not draw attention to areas of possible difficulty in a dialogue between non-theistic understandings of an impersonal energy and Christian language about divine energies or about the operation of the Holy Spirit. It would be difficult to draw close parallels without suggesting that the non-Christian meditator is, in fact, experiencing the presence of God without knowing it or, indeed, but suggesting that Christian language of divine energies is a theological over-interpretation of a natural phenomenon. At times, Johnston appears to be saying something close to the former in suggesting that the Holy Spirit is the source of all cosmic energy, including that described as *kundalini.*[89] In affirming the importance of the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to the work of a renewed mystical theology, he also makes reference to 'the cosmic Christ who vivifies our universe' before going on to state once more that human energy is linked to cosmic energy: 'This, in turn, is joined to the Source of All Energy, the Ultimate Reality that Christians call God'.[90] A more satisfactory approach may be to see these accounts as complementary descriptions of phenomena that share certain characteristics, especially from the viewpoint of the human experience of being transformed by an openness to energies that transcend the individual person. Johnston seems, at times, to leave behind the work of dialogue in favour of a Christian theology that draws on certain points of reference from Asian religious philosophy. His work may have benefitted from greater clarity about which of these approaches he was adopting at any given time.

Aspects of Practice: Breath

To take a further example of Johnston's use of insights drawn from his direct experience of Zen practice, we shall now consider his explorations of the use of the breath in meditation. One of his most sustained accounts of this dimension of embodied prayer and meditation is to be found in *The Mirror Mind.*[91] He sets out, first of all, a description of a simple practice of meditative breathing as outlined by Tomio Hirai in his book, *Zen and the Mind.*[92] This slow, rhythmical, abdominal breathing is not 'controlled' as such; one simply 'follows' the breath and finds that, in doing so, it slows down

[87] Ibid. quoting *Scivias* 1.
[88] Ibid. quoting her *Life, Interior Castle* and *Spiritual Testimonies.*
[89] Johnston, *Mystical Journey*, p. 116.
[90] Ibid. p. 164.
[91] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, pp. 50-58.
[92] Tomio Hirai, *Zen and the Mind* (Tokyo: Japan Publications, 1978).

of its own accord. The fruits of this kind of breathing are peace, attentiveness and a heightened capacity for discernment. Furthermore, Johnston suggests that this kind of breathing also assists an 'inner unification', a unification that then extends to the wider cosmos as one realises the illusory distinction between inner and outer worlds.[93] However, he also suggests that there is a difference between breathing that is done for the development of human potential and 'breathing with faith', a distinction that he frequently makes throughout his writings on the practice of meditation. He also suggests that Zen Buddhists make such a distinction between those who sit in meditation 'to develop their human powers' and those who do so 'in order to find salvation through total commitment to the *dharma.*[94] He is, however, reluctant to make this distinction too sharply and believes that many who begin on a path of meditation for self-improvement find that faith begins to develop.

For Johnston, breathing with faith entails a commitment to and an awareness of the 'great mystery that dwells in them and in which they dwell',[95] but he also counsels against a fixation on the meditative act of breathing or on feats of psychic power that may be thought to flow from control of the breath. Drawing on St John of the Cross's insistence on the way of renunciation, he suggests that one should 'transcend' the breath in meditation and suggests a Zen *koan* to support this idea. Frustratingly, he does not cite his source for the *koan*, but a version of it is found in the commentary to the 42nd case in the Hekiganroku[96] and in the recorded sayings of Layman P'ang.[97] The dialogue between Basho and his student begins with the question, 'What transcends everything in the universe?' to which Basho answers, 'I will tell you after you have drunk all the waters of the Western river in one gulp.' Johnston's version adds a further exchange, where the student replies; 'I have already drunk up all the waters of the Western river in one gulp' and Basho concludes; 'Then I have already answered your question.'[98] Johnston quotes a Masters thesis of one of his students on the subject of the breath in contemplative prayer.[99] She reworked the *koan* with the opening question framed as 'What is the breathing of man that is not breathing?'[100] and the reply, 'I will tell you when I have breathed in the spirit of the universe in one breath'. Johnston suggests that 'the breathing

[93] For this he quotes Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), p. 25, who likens the throat to a swinging door through which air passes.
[94] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 53.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Sekida, *Two Zen Classics*, p. 263.
[97] Ruth Fuller Sasaki et al., *A Man of Zen* (New York: Weatherhill, 1992), p. 50.
[98] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 55.
[99] Diana Mary Law, Sophia University 1979, reference ibid. p. 71.
[100] It may be that Law is also referring here to another koan in which Basho features: Case 73 in the Hekiganroku talks of 'the preaching that is non-preaching' and 'the hearing that is non-hearing' Sekida, *Two Zen Classics*, p. 336.

that is not breathing' can be likened to Augustine's consideration of spiritual senses in Book 10 ch.6 of his *Confessions*, a knowledge of God who is beyond our senses and yet can be loved with transfigured senses ('an aroma that no wind can scatter, food that no eating can lessen' etc.). Breathing, transformed in the power of the resurrection (see 1 Cor. 15:43f – sown in weakness and raised in power), is not rejected but transcended as a bodily means of knowing God in prayer.[101] In this sense, breathing can be, for Johnston, a vehicle for growth towards God or, to use language that he does not employ, a sacramental act. His reference to this same dynamic in Augustine is a creative attempt to relate Zen insights with Christian ones. Following a reflection on I Cor. 15:43f, he concludes this meditation on breathing with another passage from St John of the Cross:[102] 'And in your sweet breathing / filled with good and glory / how tenderly You swell my heart with love'. Johnston summarises St John of the Cross's reflection on these words in this way:

> At the apex of the mystical life, the Spirit breathes in me and, united with Jesus, I cry out: "Abba Father!" It is now that the transformation is approaching completion, a completion that will only be reached when the veil of mortal life is torn away and I am face to face with God in the eternal mirror.[103]

This Trinitarian movement whereby the Spirit transforms the human soul by rousing it to love and then drawing it into the Godhead[104] seems to be a long way from the reflection on breathing in Zen practice with which Johnston began. However, Johnston recognises that Zen does speak of a transcending of the sensible world and does not remain simply at the level of 'technique' or therapy, even if it does not permit the language of union with the divine. This section on breathing is a good example of Johnston's method at its best. Beginning with experience and practice that has been brought into sharper focus through his participation in Zen ritual practice, he goes on to consider texts from Zen tradition. These, in turn, lead to a dialogue with aspects of Christian mystical theology, in this case Augustine, the Pauline epistles and John of the Cross. What results is not exactly a synthesis of these insights, but rather a fresh reading of Christian tradition in the light of the dialogue with Zen thought and practice. In this instance, Johnston has brought an embodied practice of prayer with the breath to his consideration of Christian texts so that language which might otherwise have been read metaphorically is profoundly related to that practice.

---

[101] Ibid. p. 57.
[102] Ibid. The passage is from *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 4 and its commentary.
[103] Ibid. p. 58.
[104] This movement is described by St John in the final paragraph of his commentary on Stanza 4 Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), p. 715.

Effort and grace in contemplative prayer – Acquired and Infused Contemplation

I have referred above to Sarah Coakley's consideration of the balance between the activity of the individual Christian in the practice of contemplative prayer and the activity of God upon or within the one praying. This is a facet of traditional mystical theology that Johnston returned to frequently during his four decades of written reflection on the life of prayer. Indeed, his first and final books both address the question.[105] Uniquely, however, he brought this vexed question into dialogue with Buddhism. As we shall see, he considered other expressions of Buddhist belief and practice in addition to the Zen traditions as he sought insight into the question of how the active and passive dimensions of meditation interact. The issue of active and passive dimensions is related to other theological considerations, not least the question of whether the Christian considers God to be active in the spiritual life of one who does not acknowledge God's existence and whether there is a distinction to be made between 'natural' activity available to all as a path to human flourishing and the activity of divine grace in perfecting the believer. Within Christianity, this also raises the question of whether there is a hierarchy of spiritual attainment, including a special vocation to contemplative life, or a contemplative path that is 'ordinary' and available to all. It is not, therefore, surprising that Johnston should be so concerned with this matter as it touches both on fundamental questions of inter-religious dialogue and of a Conciliar concern with a 'universal call to holiness'.[106]

At the outset, it is important to note that Johnston's own position on acquired and infused contemplation developed over time so it will be important to offer an overview of his thought. In *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*, Johnston sets out many of the traditional theological issues behind the question as he explores this key medieval text. He describes how the author of *The Cloud* understands the move towards contemplation as a vocation from God to the believer who has already acquired virtue through the living of an active Christian life.[107] This call 'impedes the ordinary use of the faculties' as one moves away from discursive prayer (which may, indeed, become impossible) and towards silence. 'From all this', says Johnston, 'it can be seen that contemplation, far from being a mere technique, is a call from God.'[108] However, he considers that 'it can scarcely be called an extraordinary gift insofar as it is the climax of the normal path by which God leads His chosen ones to perfection.'[109] In Johnston's view, the writer of *The Cloud* sees the supernatural gifts

[105] i.e. William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Desclée Co, 1967) and his autobiography, *Mystical Journey*, 2006.
[106] Johnston cites *Lumen Gentium* ch 5 in *The Wounded Stag*, p. 40 where he extends this thinking to include a universal call to mysticism.
[107] Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 42.
[108] Ibid. p.43.
[109] ibid. p. 88.

of faith and love in the mystic as essentially the same as those of the newly baptized, though present in greater strength and depth. However, he differs from the view presented in that work in one important respect, which is that, for the Christian in the modern world, the opportunity to respond to the call to contemplation is available to all and not just to those in the religious life.

Johnston also goes into some detail about the process by which reason gives way to non-discursive contemplation. It is brought about by the gift of wisdom, a light which comes from within from abundance of love and not from without, an understanding which reveals the Thomistic thought underpinning *The Cloud*: 'Love unites us to God, making us one with Him in spirit and enabling us to judge about divine things with an intuitive accuracy.'[110] The Christian achieves a unification of the personality when, through grace, 'reason is in tranquil command of the other faculties.'[111] This is the gift of contemplation.

Finally, Johnston considers that the 'ordinary' mysticism of *The Cloud* follows a phenomenological pattern of though beyond conceptuality that can be found in other religions and thought systems. He makes specific reference to insights from Zen Buddhism to which I will return, but he is making a clear case in this, his first work, for 'vertical or existential thinking' as a place of encounter between faiths and belief systems. It is an 'ordinary' human phenomenon which God can use with those who love him to bring them into closer union with him. The gift is not the psychological process of non-discursive reasoning, but the motivation of faith and love.[112]

Johnston developed the phenomenological dimension of his exploration of this area in his collection of essays, *The Still Point*. He considers William James' classic definition of mystical experience and affirms his description, which stresses 'the ineffability and noetic quality, and suggests that transience and passivity are often present' in mystical states.[113] The quality of passivity is, of course, key to any notion of an 'infused' state of contemplation and need not imply the agency of what James refers to as a 'superior power'. Johnston again asserts his conviction that all dimensions of mysticism can be seen in disparate religions, whether or not they understand the phenomenon to have its origins in divine action. Interestingly, however, he contrasts the movement from active to passive contemplation in the Christian mystical experience with Zen meditation which, he says,

[110] ibid. p.131.
[111] ibid. p. 156.
[112] ibid. p. 273.
[113] Johnston, *The Still Point*, p. 145.

begins in passivity.[114] Whether or not this is an accurate account of Zen practice will be considered below.

Johnston returns to this theme of a universal experience of mysticism in *The Inner Eye of Love*, beginning with a defence of his belief in a universal call to contemplation for the Christian. He sees this as 'the ordinary development of the grace of baptism' and cites Rahner in support of this position.[115] He does, however acknowledge that this call may come at different stages of the Christian life and that the manifestation of mysticism will vary considerably for each person. Using traditional categories, he affirms the presence of *concomitant phenomena* for each (fruits of the Spirit such as inner peace, love, a sense of divine presence) and *charismatic phenomena* for a few (visions, revelations, psychic powers), and thus he suggests again an element of selective giftedness (infusion) while affirming the universality of the call to mystical life.

Expanding the range of his consideration of the dimensions of acquired and infused contemplation, Johnston explored these categories in his *Mystical Theology* as categories of knowledge. He describes the acquired knowledge of 'common sense, philosophical reasoning and scientific research' as against the mystical knowledge of wisdom, a formless, obscure knowledge which 'wells up from the dark depths of one's being or flows into these depths life a river from without.'[116] In this later work, Johnston maintains the distinction between these two modes of knowing but equivocates about whether the latter is of divine origin. For Christians, however, he is clear that it is God who infuses the passive believer and draws on St John of the Cross's *Spiritual Canticle* to elaborate this process:

> This communication is not brought about through any means but through a certain contact of the soul with the divinity. This contact is something foreign to everything sensory and accidental since it is a touch of naked substances – the soul and divinity.[117]

By the time Johnston wrote his final substantial work on mystical theology, '*Arise, My Love…'* he was clear that he was now willing to accept the traditional distinction between acquired and infused contemplation: 'Acquired contemplation is the consequence of human effort aided by ordinary grace. Infused contemplation, on the other hand, is all gift.'[118] Infused contemplation 'just happens' and has no sensible cause. It is received by one who waits humbly and is undeserved. However,

---

[114] Ibid. p. 29.
[115] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, p. 31.
[116] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 304 citing Karl Rahner (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Theology* (London: Burns and Oates, 1975), p. 1010.
[117] Ibid. p. 306, quoting The Spiritual Canticle 20 and 21.4.
[118] Johnston, *Mystical Journey*, p. 92.

Johnston continues to insist on the universality of this phenomenon, invoking the problematic category of 'the perennial philosophy' to suggest the ubiquity of experiences of the unsolicited endowment of wisdom in, for example, Hindu and Buddhist experience. I shall return to Johnston's analysis of Buddhist accounts of attained and received enlightenment or wisdom, but first let me summarise the development of his understanding of the Christian tradition.

From the outset, Johnston insisted on the following aspects of active and passive mysticism: firstly, there is a progression in the practice of contemplation or meditation which can be seen in many religious traditions in which the practitioner moves from an active engagement with techniques to still and focus the mind to a passive state in which intuitive, supraconceptual knowledge arises. Secondly, for Christians, the grace of God is active in every stage of this progression.[119] Thirdly, this experience is not reserved for adepts or monastics but is open to all. Fourthly, the final, passive stage is characterised by a sense of gratitude and for what is experienced to be a gift rather than an attainment. Although Johnston made a point of noting his late change of mind towards accepting the traditional division in mystical theology between acquired and infused contemplation,[120] he did not seem to change his position on the theological insight that, in any Christian account of this phenomenon, God is understood to be giver of the gift of mysticism or 'higher' states of contemplation in which the one praying is passive. Neither did he weaken in his conviction that the experiences of practitioners from other religious traditions were comparable to those of the Christian and a significant point of meeting in interfaith dialogue. It may be that his change of mind was little more than an acceptance of traditional categories to describe what he had observed. He had previously indicated his preference for the term 'mystical contemplation' to 'infused contemplation' and part of his hesitation was that he was reluctant to isolate the particular action of God in one area of contemplative prayer.[121]

One cannot help but speculate whether he might have been less preoccupied with this area of questioning if he had explored his interest in Eastern Christian understandings of energy and *synergy* a little more deeply. In simple terms, Lev Gillet notes that 'it is grace that achieves in us both the willing and the doing' and that 'Origen had already taught that grace reinforces voluntary energy without destroying freedom.'[122] In Clement of Alexandria's thinking, *synergy* was the conjoining of the two energies of grace and human will. This kind of approach might have spared Johnston the

[119] In Johnston, *Being in Love*, p. 47, he stresses his conviction that all prayer is gift and expresses discomfort at notions of 'ordinary and 'extraordinary' states of prayer – all are open to everyone.
[120] Johnston, *Mystical Journey*, p. 247 note 5.
[121] Johnston, *Being in Love*, p. 48.
[122] Lev Gillet, *Orthodox Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1945), p. 24 In this reference and the following one referring to Clement, Gillet does not cite his sources.

anguish of delineating human and divine activity in the realm of contemplation in quite such specific terms. However, his constantly evolving thinking in this area is a clear example of his insistence on faithfully interrogating traditional Western Christian categories of mystical theology in his quest to bring it into dialogue with Eastern religious traditions, notably Zen Buddhism.

We shall now consider the extent to which Johnston's engagement with Zen on this matter influenced his understanding. His main sources were the notion of 'sudden enlightenment' as it developed in the 6th Zen Patriarch, Hui-neng; an exploration of *gyo* or 'ways' as something akin to ascetical formation, and examinations of the 'giftedness' or non-attainment of enlightenment in Dogen and Hakuin.

The place of Hui-neng, the Sixth Zen Patriarch, in establishing the principle of 'sudden enlightenment' in the major schools of Zen is well known. Johnston briefly discusses the incident related in the Platform Sutra[123] which secured Hui-neng's succession in his Letters to Contemplatives.[124] The incident concerns a test set by the Fifth Patriarch, Hung-jen to his students in order to identify who his successor would be. He asked each one to write a *gatha* in order for him to see which student truly understood what was important in the great matter of life and death. One revered teacher, Shen-hsiu, composed the following *gatha*, which Hung-jen judged to be insufficient:

The body is a Bodhi tree
the mind is like a standing mirror
always try to keep it clean
don't let it gather dust.

Hui-neng, illiterate and of low status in the monastery, composed these *gathas* in response:

Bodhi doesn't have any trees
the mirror doesn't have a stand
our Buddha nature is forever pure
where do you get this dust?

The mind is the Bodhi tree
the body the mirror's stand

[123] Red Pine, *The Platform Sutra* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2006), pp. 5-9.
[124] Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 72.

the mirror itself is so clean
dust has no place to land.

These verses secured his succession as they revealed his insight that enlightenment is not attained by the strenuous effort of clearing the mind but is realised suddenly as being ever-present. In Dogen's treatment of this incident, he recounts a similar *koan* which speaks of the futility of polishing a tile in order to make it a mirror.[125] The same futility is found in the one who aims to become a buddha by doing *zazen*.

Johnston's reference to Hui-neng's gatha is given as an example of how one loses oneself in a metaphysical sense, letting go of a notion of the separate self and allowing the true self to emerge. He compares this Buddhist insight with the Christian notion of dying to self and the realisation of unity with the Father through the 'Eucharistic Jesus'.[126] Although he is not using the example to address the specific question of acquired or infused contemplation, he does, nonetheless, recognise that the Sixth Patriarch's insight about sudden enlightenment speaks directly to the comparative value of action and non-action, of attainment and realisation, of effort and receptiveness and, perhaps, of the 'constructed' self and the non-self.[127] For Johnston, dying to self is comparable to the relinquishing of effort in Zen Buddhism.

However, we have already noted Johnston's indebtedness to Zen in his exploration of the disciplined techniques of contemplation. So we turn to his consideration of how such techniques relate to the question at hand. The key passages here are in *The Inner Eye of Love*.[128] He describes the Sino-Japanese tradition of spiritual training called *gyo*, a word which means a way or path and which can refer to detailed monastic rules for eating, cooking, sleeping, walking, meditating and fasting, or to other areas of discipline including martial arts and calligraphy. He acknowledges the risk of such carefully prescribed actions descending into formalism or legalism and notes the emergence of Shinran's faith-based Buddhism with its emphasis on the recitation of the name of the Buddha Amida as a response to self-reliant forms of practice. Here, he describes the conventional opposition of Buddhism which relies on another (*tariki*) and that which proposes self-reliance (*jiriki*). However, Johnston does not consider that Shinran's path is any less ascetically demanding in its need for detachment than the apparently more strenuous demands of monastic Zen practice. Johnston

[125] Fascicle 21 of the *Shobogenzo*, Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye,* pp. 205-221
[126] Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 72 He often uses this term as a shorthand for the 'indwelling Christ'.
[127] Again, Johnston calls on St John of the Cross to speak of the value of non-action, or not desiring. (ibid. p. 69).
[128] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, pp. 179-195.

seems content to live with the paradox that arises in both Christian and Buddhist approaches to asceticism:

> On the one hand, some training or education is necessary; on the other hand, all depends on grace. On the one hand, we must strive; on the other hand, our striving is itself a gift. On the one hand, asceticism is necessary; on the other hand, it is spiritually dangerous.[129]

Johnston goes on to point out the dangers of an ascetical practice that is inattentive to the training of human feeling and affectivity and commends Teilhard's essay, 'The Evolution of Chastity',[130] as a welcome corrective to this danger. He also affirms the devotional dimension of all Buddhist practice, which is fundamentally based on the refuge taken in the triple jewel of the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha. He considers that this affirmation is equivalent to the 'living flame' or 'blind stirring' of love that is the motivation for Christian ascetical training.[131] Johnston explores how, in Buddhist understanding, the attainment of one-pointed concentration through disciplined effort is neutral and can be used to heal or destroy. Therefore, the faith and commitment with which practitioners undertakes their practice is decisive.[132]

Zen meditation is not, therefore, mere technique but an expression of religious conviction and a means of realising that religion's principal insights into the nature and meaning of life. Johnston is surely correct to identify the appeal to Christians of an approach to religious practice that pays close attention to matters of how that practice is embodied physically in its daily exercise. This is a dimension which has not always featured prominently in Christian ascetical theology, which has tended towards a focus on the cerebral or interior aspects of prayer over against its concrete manifestations in practice. In this regard, *zazen* is best understood as a liturgical or ritual act and we shall consider below how recent studies have emphasised this aspect. However, he also shows how this attention to detail does not necessarily result in an imbalance in the complex question of how the passive and active dimensions of religious expression interact.

Johnston's final, and less developed area of exploration with Zen Buddhism is his consideration of the 'giftedness' of meditation in Dogen and, from a later period and from the perspective of Rinzai Zen, Hakuin.

Johnston's references to Dogen are brief and tantalising. He does not cite any sources and the extent of his engagement with Dogen's extensive written output is not clear. At the time of his writing,

---

[129] Ibid. p. 182.
[130] in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,*Toward the Future* (London: Collins, 1974), pp. 60-87.
[131] Ibid. p. 184.
[132] Ibid. p. 191.

there would have been limited access to Dogen's writing in English, though contemporary Japanese versions would have been available to him and an English version was published in Japan in 1983.[133] It is not clear whether he had the linguistic capabilities to read the original text.

In his essay on the definition of mysticism in *The Still Point*, Johnston cited Dogen in support of William James' identification of passivity as a quality present in most mystical experiences. He said:

> It would probably not be accepted by some Zen masters who determinedly reject all suggestions of being grasped by "a superior power" but others, such as Dōgen, assert that in the greatest moments of enlightenment they were grasped by something greater than themselves.[134]

The lack of any reference to this assertion (unfortunately, not untypical in Johnston's writing) makes it difficult to know what part of Dogen's writing Johnston is referring to here and it is possible that he is relying either on a secondary source which refers to Dogen or, indeed, to statements made in the context of his first-hand encounters with Zen practitioners. It is certainly the case that there are aspects of Dogen's writings that suggest this 'something greater' and a good candidate for Johnston's source, either first or second hand, might be the fascicle, *Immo* from the *Shobogenzo.*[135]

The fascicle concerns 'thusness' or, in the Nishijima and Cross translation, 'it'. 'The matter that is it' is often referred to as 'the great matter', 'supreme truth'[136] or 'ultimate reality'[137] and refers to the realm which, in other religious traditions, might be called the transcendent. Warner's exploration of this fascicle deals with the question of how such language compares with language about God. He underlines the incomprehensibility of the truth of the way things are in Dogen's thought. He also suggests the 'beyondness' of this truth by rendering a line that Nishijima translates; 'We ourselves are tools that it possesses within this universe'[138] as 'we ourselves are just tools that it uses to experience itself'.[139] Warner admits that his paraphrase is highly interpretive but the notion that we are 'possessed by' the 'great unnameable *it*' does seem to be a notion that is present in Dogen. The human person is not capable of comprehending or describing the totality of existence and is neither

[133] Such as that prepared by Wafu Nishijima and published by Kanazawa Bunko, Yokohama, in 1978. This multi-volume edition also contains the 13th century text. The English translation was by Kosen Nishiyama and John Stevens, published by Japan Publications, Tokyo.
[134] Johnston, *The Still Point*, p. 145.
[135] In the Tanahashi version, chapter 30; 'Thusness' Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, pp. 324-332.
[136] Brad Warner, *It Came From Beyond Zen* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2017), p. 5.
[137] For example, in the preface to this fascicle in Dogen, *Shobogenzo* (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007), p. 364.
[138] Dogen, trans Nishijima and Cross, *Shobogenzo, The True Dharma-Eye Treasury* (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2008), p. 151.
[139] Warner, *It Came from Beyond Zen*, p. 12.

separate from nor completely to be identified with it. However, we can respond to the awareness of this existence that is aroused in us and this response 'is not at all self-doing'.[140] Warner is reluctant to over-identify this distinctive Buddhist notion with Christian language about God and there is clearly no sense in Buddhism of anything existing 'outside' what we experience of the universe. He summarises his interpretation of Dogen in this way: 'The universe is more you than you could ever be. There is nothing in this universe that isn't you.'[141] So even if talk of a God who is 'person' has no place in Buddhist understanding, there is a powerful sense in Dogen that the universe transcends our thoughts about it and yet, at the same time, it somehow acts through us. This is a reasonable approximation to Johnston's statement about Dogen's sense of 'being grasped by something greater than ourselves'.

Johnston's second reference to Dogen is equally brief and equally enigmatic as it also lacks any specific reference. In relation to the question of whether enlightenment is achieved by personal effort or by 'the grace of another', he states that 'Dogen, founder of the Soto sect of Zen, held that the very sitting is in itself an enlightenment.'[142] This refers to the key concept in Dogen of 'practice-realisation', which contradicts the idea that enlightenment is gained incrementally through a process of self-improving exercises. Sitting (*zazen*) is an expression of the Buddha-nature that already exists and there is, therefore, nothing to attain. The *Shobogenzo* opens with a very clear statement of this principle: 'To suppose that practice and realisation are not one is a view of those outside the way.'[143] Kim explains the distinction in Dogen between 'practice based on enlightenment' and 'practice prior to enlightenment'. Practice is held to be pure 'when it is not defiled by the dualism of practice and enlightenment in the means-end relationship' though this does not mean that there is no distinction between the two:

> Confronted with thought and reality, the mind is every vigilant, deconceptualizing and deontologizing them as circumstances demand, and thereby attaining a state of spiritual freedom and purity.[144]

Elsewhere, Kim explains that practice and enlightenment are not causally linked in either direction but exist together in a 'dialectical nondualilty'.[145] This is expressed in what he describes as 'the

---

[140] Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye,* p. 325 or, in Nishijima's version, 'this is not solely something of our own doing.' Dogen, *Shobogenzo,* p. 152.
[141] Warner, *It Came from Beyond Zen*, p. 25.
[142] Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, p. 143.
[143] From first fascicle, *Bendowa*, or On the Endeavour of the Way, Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye,* p. 12.
[144] Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dogen, Mystical Realist* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), p. 88.
[145] Hee-Jin Kim, *Dogen on Meditation and Thinking* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2007), p. 24.

prototype for the unity of practice and enlightenment', *shikantaza* (*zazen* only) and Johnston hints at this in his brief comment. Kim offers a summary of four key aspects of *shikantaza*, which are: a) it is objectless and imageless but is a heightened awareness of self and the world, b) it seeks no outcome, c) it is a state of ultimate freedom, and d) it requires single-minded resolve.[146] This last aspect echoes Johnston's recognition of the necessity of faith and commitment for the Zen Buddhist engaging in the practice of *zazen* and is an area that will find fuller exploration when we come to look at Hakuin.

In summary, then, Johnston made very brief references to Dogen when discussing effort and passivity in meditation, but these references touch on significant areas of common concern for Christians and Zen Buddhists. He did not elaborate on these references and gave no indication of his level of knowledge of Dogen's written corpus, but his instincts and insights provided an indication of a potentially fruitful area of future research and dialogue. It is clear that Christian mystical theology benefits from closer comparison with this tradition by giving sharper focus to the question of human and divine agency in the life of prayer and by opening up questions about the universality of mystical experience as something more 'received' than 'achieved' but which, nonetheless, demands great application from the seeker. Johnston gave a little more consideration to Hakuin as a dialogue partner in this project, and we turn to him now.

Hakuin Zenji (1689–1769), a notable figure in the later development of the Rinzai school of Zen in Japan is, in many ways, more accessible as a writer and as a person with an engaging story than Dogen thanks, in large part, to his autobiographical writings and closer proximity to modern sensibilities. Johnston recognised the appeal of this saintly figure, living in complete simplicity and dedicating himself to sharing with others the gift of the dharma. Hakuin also offers a strong appeal for wholehearted dedication, effort and commitment to the Buddha way, as is exemplified by these words from his spiritual autobiography:

> The practice of Zen requires three essentials: a great root of faith, a feeling of great doubt, and a great, burning aspiration. The most important of the three is the great, burning aspiration.[147]

Johnston refers to this 'great, burning aspiration' in relation to Zen, though he does not explicitly cite Hakuin as representative of this position. In *The Mirror Mind*, he refers to the commitment of the Zen practitioner who resolves to pursue the Buddha way 'even if I die' and quotes the Four

[146] Ibid.
[147] Hakuin, *Wild Ivy*, p. 61.

Bodhisattva Vows to underline this statement of complete resolve.[148] Elsewhere, Johnston makes reference to another notion found in Hakuin but, again, does not cite Hakuin as a source. This is the notion of the 'great death', a powerful experience at the earliest stages of enlightenment when the practitioner, who has been practising secretly and assiduously, breaks through to an 'emptiness' in which passions and thoughts of attaining enlightenment disappear.[149] Johnston's exploration of the 'great death' focusses on a spiritual 'dying to self', a willingness to lose all in order to gain freedom, which mirrors the words of Jesus about the grain of wheat which falls into the ground (John 12:24).[150] If Johnston had been aware of Hakuin's approach to the 'great death', he might have shown interest in its place in a description of spiritual growth, an area which he addresses regularly in his writings.[151] Nonetheless, he recognises that there is, in this experience, a profound 'letting go of self' which corresponds to the passive state described in Christian understandings of infused contemplation. Once again, in Hakuin, this passivity is preceded by intense effort.

Johnston shows familiarity with Hakuin in two other related areas. The first is a further description of the intense moment of his initial enlightenment, which he recounts in a full footnote in *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* and again in a shorter reference in *Mystical Theology*.[152] However, each time his reference is to Dumoulin's *History of Zen Buddhism* and not to the primary source.[153] Once again, we must note Johnston's unfamiliarity with many of the key textual sources for Zen Buddhism, though his secondary source in this instance is reliable. Johnston cites the autobiographical account of Hakuin's initial enlightenment experience to describe some common psychological dimensions of mystical experience in different traditions. In this case, he is interested in the sudden breaking through of a new awareness which is often accompanied by intense joy and indicates that this new state is suddenly received rather than gradually attained. The second area concerns the body's energy and we addressed this matter above.

In summary, Johnston's appreciation of Hakuin in the dialogue with mystical theology was fruitful in bringing to light further examples of the passive-active dialectic in Zen Buddhism. Hakuin's specific contribution includes a keen awareness of the accessibility of a great awakening for anyone who is

[148] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 170.
[149] This description comes in Hakuin's comments on the 'five ranks', Hakuin, *Poison Blossoms from a Thicket of Thorn* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2014), pp. 108-9.
[150] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 185.
[151] For example, in Johnston, *Being in Love*, ch. 12, pp. 90-99 and in part III of Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, pp. 87-152.
[152] Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 207 and Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 140.
[153] The above citations come, in fact from two different editions of Dumoulin's history. The first is from his 1963 work and the second from his expanded, two volume history published in 1990. His exploration of Zen sickness in *Mystical Theology* (ibid.) does, however, use primary sources in translation.

committed to the practice of the way. His rhetorical flair was put to good use in rejecting moribund expressions of Zen and commending the simple practice of a way that 'is not far from man'.[154] In this latter regard, Hakuin may appear to have been rejecting the 'passivity' of certain Zen practices and he certainly speaks of a 'pride' in reaching a place of enlightenment. However, his purpose in attacking such 'passivity' is to undermine the complacency that prevents practitioners from giving themselves wholeheartedly to their endeavour and, more importantly, from helping others do the same.[155] Johnston recognised in Hakuin a life of simplicity and the compassionate service of others as well as a 'mystic' (to use Johnston's word) who had penetrated to the depths of the Great Matter.[156] Put simply, Hakuin provides an 'active' emphasis to balance Dogen's 'passive' one, while each recognises the need for the other.

The insights drawn from Zen in Johnston's exploration of acquired and infused contemplation lie in the areas of the common aspects of mystical experience across religious traditions, the value of concentrated effort in the spiritual life and the nature of grace. He was clear that there were commonalities in the described experiences of religious practitioners from both traditions and that these shared experiences might suggest both a common structure for the human psyche and for its maturation, and also a realm of common concern that might offer fruitful learning across traditions. We saw how the specific practices of Zen meditation influenced Johnston's approach to the practice of Christian contemplative prayer. In all of this, however, Johnston was careful not to talk of these experiences as the activity of God in the life of practitioners who would not describe their experiences in theological terms.

The rich language of effort found in many accounts of Zen practice provided Johnston with a valuable mirror with which to reflect the Christian tradition's own insistence on singleness of heart in the spiritual life. Indeed, this emphasis in Zen may well have further convinced Johnston of the importance to him of remaining committed to his own Christian path rather than exploring any kind of 'dual belonging'. The language of Zen offered him a way of describing the value of concentrated effort, of single minded *ascesis* in the spiritual life which steers clear of merely formal attachment to external forms of practice. What he did not explore so deeply, however, was the language of 'merit' in both Zen and Christian traditions, an exploration that might have led him into more complex questions of the 'salvific' efficacy of human endeavour in the life of prayer or meditation.

[154] Hakuin, *Wild Ivy*, p. 76.
[155] Ibid. p. 34.
[156] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 141.

Perhaps Johnston avoided this question because he was content to explore that third area of common concern – the place of grace or gift in the contemplative life. He recognised the Zen insistence that there is nothing to be attained when one practises *zazen* and that the realisation of one's true nature comes suddenly and unbidden, often leading to expressions of gratitude and joy. He attends carefully to the distinctive Christian insight that this gift has a giver and does not seek to eradicate this fundamental difference between the two faiths. His later acceptance of the traditional language of acquired and infused contemplation is, perhaps, an indication of the confidence he found in expressing both the comparable and distinctive approaches of Zen and Christianity. In keeping with the principles *Nostra Aetate*, he found value in Zen Buddhism, with its nuanced understanding of self-reliance, and he allowed his interaction with another tradition to bring sharper focus to his appreciation of his own.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this study, we noted Harry Oldmeadow's observation that Johnston's whole mystical-theological project was one that derived from the 'sharing of *spiritual experience*' and was directed towards 'the immediate enrichment of *religious practice*'.[157] In no area is this clearer than in his practice of meditation and his reflection on that practice as something much richer than 'mental prayer' narrowly defined. His appreciation of the bodily aspects of that prayer – breath, seated posture, bodily energies – derives almost entirely from his participation in Zen ritual practices and offers a unique perspective when he turns back to Christian mystical theology with its traditional concerns about 'acquired' and 'infused' contemplation, nature and grace. This is a clear example of how inter-ritual participation can provide rich material for the work of comparative theology. Johnston's own 'conversion to the body', was one in which he found personal fulfilment and theological insight.

[157] Above, p. 7.

Chapter Five

The *Koan* in William Johnston's Dialogue with Zen

> This is elementary student Zen. So you sit. You've got to work this out. You meditate on this and nothing else. Don't get any other ideas. Just solve this problem, then you can go to the next thing. So you sit, and sit, and sit some more. And every day or two, you go in to the Zen master and give him a solution to the problem. You say, 'I've got something figured out.' He looks at you and says, 'Don't tell me that. Go back. Work this thing out. Stop kidding.' When you really do this, after a while you're about ready to go crazy. But the master is merciless with you. And if you fall asleep, there's a fellow who comes around with a stick and hits you over the head to wake you up. You're sitting in a room with others, it's very intensive, eight hours a day. So you wake up and start again.
>
> *That stick would really make you get serious!*
>
> That's right. Really, the fellow's doing you a favour. You also have to thank him. And you have to make a deep bow.
>
> *Is that actually Zen, the clapping thing?*
>
> Yes, that's one of the standard *koans*, or questions.[1]

This exchange comes from a conference Merton held for local contemplative religious sisters at his hermitage in May 1968 and he goes on to suggest that the purpose of the Zen *koan* study he is describing (not altogether accurately) is to show through insoluble 'nonsense' problems that life does not consist of problems to be solved. He did not refer particularly to *koan*s in his correspondence with Johnston, but these recorded words from the months before he headed out to Asia show that he was very interested in these perplexing Zen texts. Johnston, as we shall see, had a lot more to say about how an understanding of how *koan*s function could be of great use to a Christian seeking a deeper prayerful engagement with the words of the Bible.

[1] Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992), p. 137f. Merton does, of course, exaggerate slightly in this off-the-cuff account. The stick is applied to the shoulder blades and not the head!

What is a *koan*?

For a religion that professes to possess a 'special transmission, beyond scripture',[2] Zen Buddhism has produced a remarkable quantity of writing. Best known, and perhaps most characteristic, is the substantial body of material contained in the principal *koan* collections. It is usually reckoned that the total number of *koan*s to be found across these collections is 1700, though this number is almost certainly incorrect. Heine considers that there are 'at once far fewer and many more than 1700 cases'.[3] Fewer, because the number in use in Chinese and Japanese temples is probably 'several hundred', more because there are *koan*-like exchanges recorded in the primary source material of the 'transmission of the lamp records' which have not found their way into the main recognised collections. This imprecision should not lead one to believe that the definition of a *koan* is equally imprecise. Foulk proposes a description of this unique religious literary form that takes account of its origins, character and religious use. In its etymology, the *koan* is 'public case', somewhat like a legal test-case used to establish precedent. In other words, it is a literary form that carries authority in establishing authentic teaching. In origin, the core of a *koan* is the record of an exchange between an enlightened teacher and an unenlightened student, usually taken from one of the records of the Ch'an Buddhist ancestors known as the aforementioned 'transmission of the lamp records'. The recorded words are usually 'brief sayings, dialogues or anecdotes' which are 'held up for some sort of special scrutiny'.[4] This scrutiny comes in the form of comment or interpretation 'which is assumed to be an especially profound expression or encapsulation of the awakened mind of the Patriarch'.[5] These 'old cases' were gathered into collections beginning in China in the latter part of the Song dynasty. The three most widely used of these collections are the Blue Cliff Record[6] (Hekiganroku)[7], the Gateless Barrier[8] (Mumonkan) and The Book of Equanimity[9] (Shoyoroku). Dogen's collection of

[2] This is the *kyoge-betsuden* of the Zen tradition which emphasises mind-to-mind transmission above the study of the traditional canons of scripture and is attributed to the first Zen patriarch, Bodhidharma.
[3] Steven Heine, *Like Cats and Dogs, Contesting the Mu Koan in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 8.
[4] T. Griffith Foulk, 'The Form and Function of Koan Literature' in S. Heine, & D.S. Wright, *The Koan, Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 16.
[5] Ibid.
[6] T. Cleary & J. Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2005).
[7] I use the Japanese titles because I am concentrating on the use of koans in Zen Buddhism.
[8] Many translations and editions exist, including a recent edition by David Hinton, *No-Gate Gateway* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2018) and classic editions with commentaries (*teisho)* by Shibayama (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1974) and Yamada (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004).
[9] G.S. Wick, *The Book of Equanimity* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005).

300 *koans*[10] and a collection of Miscellaneous *Koans*[11] used by the Sanbokyodan lineage[12] also feature in our considerations. The collections may have little added interpretation (Mumonkan), interpretations added by the original editor (Hekiganroku) or interpretations added by later Zen teachers.[13] The only Japanese collection, the *Entangling Vines* (Shumon Kattoshu),[14] presents a compilation of *koan*s mostly from the older Chinese collections and probably dates from the mid-seventeenth century. It does not contain any commentary.

The *koan* collections form a clear body of literature that has a particular range of uses within Zen practice and I will hold to a relatively precise definition of *koan*s as those cases which appear in the major collections and are used in Zen practice. Foulk warns against an imprecise use of the word '*koan*' to suggest any short piece of text that defies rational explanation – an enigmatic puzzle with a religious intent – as this general usage is not known in the classic literature.[15] While this does not preclude an investigation of the possibility of a comparative study between *koan* practice and the practice of reading Christian scripture, it is a useful reminder that the *koan* tradition has a precise locus and draws on a finite range of sources. That locus was originally monastic training and it will be useful to consider the way in which *koan*s have been used in that training context and, by extension, in the post-monastic Zen practice now common in the Western world.

In the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, Merton correctly identified the primary mode of engaging with *koan*s as a central part of Zen training, especially in the Rinzai schools. What he describes is the combination of *zazen* and meditation on *koan*s along with regular private interviews with a teacher. Yampolsky describes how the modern system was essentially established under Hakuin's reforms of the early eighteenth century.[16] *Koan*s are given to a student progressively as part of an intensive programme of study after their initial awakening. The initial task was to 'see into one's own true nature (*kensho)*' and this was achieved with the use of the *mu koan* or, later, with Hakuin's own *koan* referred to by Merton, the sound of one hand clapping. For Hakuin, the context of regulated monastic life provided an essential opportunity to learn how to continue practice in the midst of activity. This was important for lay practitioners – a major concern for Hakuin – so it was

[10] The Chinese language *Shobogenzo* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2005).
[11] Included in Elaine MacInnes, *The Flowering Bridge* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2007).
[12] A Zen tradition that began in Japan in 1954 under the teacher, Hakuun Yasutani. He and his successor, Koun Yamada, had a strong influence on American Zen. It is in this lineage that Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle SJ, Johnston's colleague, trained and Johnston was, for a while, a student of Yamada.
[13] See note 8 above.
[14] Thomas Yuho Kirchner, *The Entinagling Vines* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2013).
[15] Heine & Wright, *The Koan*, p. 26.
[16] Philip Yampolsky, 'Hakuin Ekaku and the Modern Koan System' in John Daido Loori, *Sitting With Koans* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications 2006), pp. 185-189.

vital that trained monastics should learn that 'for penetrating the depths on one's own true self-nature and for attaining a vitality valid on all occasions, nothing can surpass meditation in the midst of activity.'[17] In modern practice, Hakuin's system remains largely unchanged, though different Zen lineages use different 'curricula' of *koan*s.[18]

What is most interesting for our purposes, however, is the range of understandings of *how* the study of *koan*s works as a meditative practice. For those influenced by the writings of D.T. Suzuki, the *content* of the *koan* has little relevance. What matters is its *function* in 'opening up the secret chamber of the mind' by leading the student to 'the edge of a mental precipice'.[19] It does this by presenting a problem that cannot be solved by the rational mind. Thus, it 'arouses doubt and pushes it to its furthest limit' until rational processes are left behind and a 'hitherto unknown region of the mind' is opened up.[20] This is clearly the understanding put forward by Merton, whose debt to Suzuki is considerable. Dumoulin offers a similar account when he suggests that there is no inner relation between the episode recounted in the *koan* and the enlightenment experienced by the student.[21] Rather, the purpose of *koan* study is to lead to an 'immediate perception of reality'.[22] This is achieved as follows: 'Only when the attentive mind is relaxed, free from purpose and the ego, and fully devoted to the task, can it open up as of itself.'[23] The task here is the examination of the *koan* but the same principle is at work in, for example, the art of archery. However, Dumoulin insists that one cannot ignore the system of Mahayana Buddhist thought behind the *koan* in favour of a purely psychological account of its function. Other modern commentators elaborate this concern. Ford puts it this way: 'On the one hand, it is an invitation into the intimate truths of our ancestors – and on the other hand, it calls us directly into our own experience.'[24] This insistence on the 'truths of the ancestors' resonates with the definition of the *koan* as an authoritative 'public case' used to establish true teaching. As Foulk point out, why would one use these particular words if one was only interested in raising existential doubt?[25] Furthermore, the level of linguistic and philosophical skill required to master these subtle texts is considerable. All the same, the student's interpretation is offered in language that is indirect and attuned to the symbolic language of the *koan*, not in direct, expository language.[26] Foulk recognises the traditional Buddhist insistence on a balance between

[17] Quoted in ibid. p. 188.
[18] See, for example, the list of koans used in Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Temper, New York, ibid. p. 3.
[19] D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (London: Century Hutchinson, 1969), p. 106.
[20] Ibid. pp. 108 and 109.
[21] Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism* (Boston, MA: Random House, 1963), p. 130.
[22] Ibid. p. 287.
[23] Ibid. p. 131.
[24] James Ishmael Ford, *Introducing the Koan* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2018), p. 81.
[25] Heine & Wright, *The Koan*, p. 23.
[26] Ibid. p. 41.

'calm' and 'insight'[27] which reflects the twofold practice of *zazen* (silence) and *koan* study (words). Williams, in her comparative study of apophasis in Dogen and the Christian Patristic writers Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor, locates *koan* study within this balance between silence and words:

> This overwhelming Zen concern, the tension between the recoil from language and the accommodation with it, is consistent with the Mahayana emphasis on the ineffability of the real, and the Zen strategies for using language to further progress on the Way might be seen as skilful means operating at a new level of sophistication.[28]

Finally, Yamada offers a way of understanding the tension between a *koan*'s seeming illogicality and the insight which its study fosters:

> To the person whose enlightened eye has not been opened, Zen *koan*s seem impractical, illogical and against common sense. Once this eye has been opened, however, all *koan*s express natural matters and relate the most obvious of realities.[29]

Contemporary literary-critical studies of the *koan* and reflections from practitioners alike challenge Suzuki's emphasis on the function of the *koan* over its form and content. He is surely correct in identifying the 'great doubt' that lies at the heart of *koan* practice and its role in destabilising language and rational thought, but the carefully crafted literary form of the *koan* also carries Mahayana Buddhist teaching for those who learn how to respond to it from a place of silent, non-verbal meditation. The teaching or doctrinal aspect is further underlined through the practice of Zen teachers offering *teisho* on *koan*s. These formal addresses to students are not regarded as explanatory exegeses as much as encouraging presentations of the awakened state.[30] They do not, however, lack doctrinal content.

William Johnston and the *Koan* Tradition

> A Buddhist monk once told a friend of mine that Christians would get enlightenment if only they knew how to read their own scriptures.[31]

[27] Ibid. p. 23.
[28] Janet P. Williams, *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 58.
[29] Yamada, *The Gateless Gate*, p. xvii.
[30] Ibid. p. xxi.
[31] William Johnston, *Christian Zen* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971), p. 57.

I shall now consider Johnston's understanding of the *koan* tradition in the light of what we have explored above before considering in some detail his reading of specific cases. We shall then turn to his approach to scripture in order to assess the influence of his understanding of *koan* study on meditative biblical reading.

Johnston considered the nature of the *koan* from his earliest writings and continued to explore its relevance to a Christian mystical theology in most of his subsequent works. His earliest references seem to reflect the influence of Suzuki's understanding. In his work, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*, he sees the *koan* as a device for 'destroying our reasoning powers'[32] or 'smashing the intellect'[33] and questions whether the content of the *koan* has any connection to the enlightenment to which it leads.[34] However, in an essay of 1966, later reproduced as chapter 5 of *The Still Point*, he clarifies his position on what he terms 'mystical knowledge' in relation to 'sense-knowledge'.[35] He considers that the 'extraordinary statements' of mystics are 'consonant with the ordinary logical laws of human thinking' and that they transcend rather than contradict reason. [36] He also acknowledges the *koan*'s role in fostering doubt but insists that this is not a denial of reason. We will consider Johnston's understanding of mystical knowledge in our next chapter but it is interesting to note in relation to our current concern that he questions Suzuki's extreme position with regard to the *koan*'s supposed fundamental irrationality. He suggests that, like Christian mystical theology's use of the paradox of God's knowability and ineffability to explore its metaphysical bases, Zen too could profit from such metaphysical explorations of its own paradoxical language as found in *koan*s. However, it is to the Kyoto School of philosophers rather than to the classic texts of Mahayana metaphysics that he looks for such explorations.[37] In the late 1960s, he may be forgiven for seeing Zen through the narrow lens of its Western appropriation, coloured by the dominating figure of D.T. Suzuki, and we see a deeper appreciation of the philosophical underpinning of Zen Buddhism (if not a profound knowledge of it) in his later work.[38]

Elsewhere in *The Still Point,* Johnston describes the use of the *koan* in Zen training, its use alongside the practice of *zazen* and its purpose in attaining 'the rejection of dualism, the repudiation of subject-object relationship.'[39] One achieves this by *identifying with* the *koan* rather than speculating

[32] William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Desclée Co, 1967), p. 90.
[33] Ibid. p. 209.
[34] Ibid. p. 23.
[35] William Johnston, *The Still Point* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970), pp. 87-100.
[36] Ibid. p. 91.
[37] Ibid. p. 95.
[38] For example, in his consideration of the Heart Sutra in William Johnston, *Mystical Theology* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 300f.
[39] Ibid. p. 7.

rationally about it so that when the trainee goes to the master for *dokusan*, she responds 'spontaneously, like a ball bouncing back from a wall.'[40] Such identification comes about when the trainee keeps the *koan* 'before the mind's eye night and day, at all times and places'.[41] This description of the practice is a clear reflection of Mumon's commentary on the *koan* '*mu*', the first case in the *Mumonkan*: 'Concentrate yourself into this "Mu", with your 360 bones and 84,000 pores, making your whole body one great inquiry. Day and night work intently at it. Do not attempt nihilistic or dualistic interpretations.'[42]

At around the same time in his writing career, Johnston wrote an article for *Cistercian Studies*, which elaborates his understanding of the Zen *koan* and of his own developing approach to reading Christian scripture[43] and published his third book, *Christian Zen*, which adopts a more popular tone than the essays that made up *The Still Point. Christian Zen* devotes a chapter to the *koan* and opens with a familiar description of its paradoxical nature. Again, Johnston notes that it is not solved by reason but by *identification* and restates his understanding of the importance of 'embodying' the *koan* – holding it in the 'pit of the belly',[44] which refers explicitly to the practice of *zazen*. He also begins to hint at the different kinds of insight that may be reached through different *koan*s, with some leading the practitioner to an awareness of 'unification' beyond the 'dispersion of dualism' and others to a sense of one's 'core of existence'.[45] This twofold understanding reflects Ford's insight, quoted above, that the *koan* leads to an appreciation of the 'truths of the ancestors' as well as to one's own experience. In both cases, however, Johnston insists that it is not the discursive intellect that is at work, but a different level of awareness; 'mystical faculties' or 'deeper wisdom'. He likens this to the appreciation of a poem like Eliot's 'The Waste Land', which may communicate before it is understood. In this regard, he challenges the notion, which lies behind Suzuki's understanding, of the *koan* as a *sui generis* form of literature. It may indeed be examined critically, as many modern scholars do,[46] but more than that, it may also be appreciated in its spiritual functioning by analogy to other forms of reading, religious and secular. For Johnston, a *koan* is a means of awakening new understandings by learning how to engage a wider range of cognitive strategies than are normally at work in our practice of reading, but which are not entirely unfamiliar to us. It is not devoid of content, but that content is not accessible to readings which concentrate only on rhetoric, grammar

[40] Ibid. p. 6.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier*, p. 19 and, indeed, Johnston quotes this very passage in William Johnston, *The Mirror Mind* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1981), p. 35.
[43] Johnston, *Christian Zen*.
[44] Ibi. p. 57.
[45] Ibid. p. 60.
[46] See, again, Heine's work on the *mu* koan Heine, *Like Cats and Dogs*, and on the *Hekiganroku* , S.Heine, *Chan Rhetoric of Uncertainty in the Blue Cliff Record* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

and philology. Johnston may not have been fully appreciative of the highly refined literary quality of the *koan* collections and their generations of interpreters, though his reference to Eliot suggests he may have been thinking along these lines.

Written at around the same time, the *Cistercian Studies* article does not add much to what Johnston wrote about the *koan* in *Christian Zen*, though we shall return to it when considering his approach to the Bible. One dimension that he touches on, however, is his appreciation of the thinking of Jung and other pioneers of depth psychology, an appreciation that stayed with him throughout his writing and, indeed, his own experience of psychological turmoil. He relates his understanding of 'deeper wisdom' with the realm of the unconscious though he is careful not to make a simple equation of the two. This would account for his willingness to see the appreciation of art as comparable to the experience of 'solving' *koan*s. The viewer or reader is not engaged solely at the level of description, conceptuality or interpretation, but more significantly at the level of awakening.

Johnston's next work, *Silent Music,* elaborates this further where he juxtaposes conceptualisation with the 'intuitive consciousness' that is nurtured in Zen practice, including *koan* practice.[47] He quotes the Chinese writer, Garma Chang, who suggests that conceptualisation becomes the principal means of apprehending the world for intellectual persons and that this poses a danger for those who seek a more direct, intuitive, natural and spontaneous experience of reality.[48] Johnston does, however, stress the usefulness of rational capacities in the earlier stages of Christian mystical practice, a theme to which we shall return in the next chapter.[49]

Johnston's most sustained engagement with *koan*s comes in his next book, *The Mirror Mind*, which is based on a series of eight lectures he gave in honour of his late confrère, Martin D'Arcy, in Oxford in 1980. In his reflection on the *koan mu*, he quotes Shibayama in describing the breakthrough to enlightenment as an awareness of the true self as 'absolute subjectivity' which is beyond artificiality.[50] This is the 'beginner's mind' spoken of by Shunryu Suzuki in his eponymous book,[51] a fresh and natural mind, uncluttered by conceptual thinking, which exhibits the kind of spontaneous responsiveness described above. Johnston also elaborates on a somatic approach to reading

[47] William Johnston, *Silent Music* (London: William Collins and Sons, 1974), p. 57.
[48] G.C. Chang, *The Practice of Zen* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 86.
[49] Ibid. p. 58.
[50] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 35. Johnston also recounts here an encounter with Shibayama whom he considered to embody the kind of freshness he described, having a 'youthful timelessness' despite his advanced age. The term, 'absolute subjectivity' also indicates a key Mahayana teaching regarding the Buddha nature, i.e. that it has the quality of universality as well as particularity.
[51] Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970).

scriptures that he previously only hinted at by quoting Nichiren's 'Dungeon Letter'.[52] This talks of a reading with body and mind (*shindoku*), and Johnston equates this with the practice of taking a reading into one's belly and sitting with it meditatively. He does not give a citation for his quotation from Nichiren, but he does cite Kadowaki's book, *Zen and the Bible* in connection with this matter and it seems likely that this is his source.[53] Again, we will examine how he elaborates a Christian somatic reading of scripture below.

The other, perhaps more significant, insight into the nature of the *koan* that appears in this book clearly for the first time in Johnston's thought is the affirmation that *koan*s do 'enshrine the Buddhist myth'[54] and that the one who has studied them 'can fairly claim to have imbibed the essentials of Buddhism'.[55] This marks a yet more significant departure from the earlier influence of D.T. Suzuki's account of the *koan*.

William Johnston's Reading of *Koan*s

This now leads me to consider how Johnston interprets a number of *koan*s and uses them as sources of comparative spiritual or theological insight. I have previously examined Johnston's understanding of the *koan mu* and will not elaborate on that here.[56] As I have already noted, it is not unusual for *koan*s to be used in this way by Buddhist and Christian commentators and by those who profess a dual belonging.[57] In some of the cases that follow, Johnston is clear that he has used them in the embodied, meditative way he describes above.

The Original Face

I shall begin with a *koan* that Johnston referred to frequently. It is atypical in that, although it features prominently in Zen practice and teaching, it does not appear straightforwardly in any of the classic *koan* collections. Rather, it is taken from a tradition reaching back to the sixth Zen Patriarch,

[52] Johnston,*The Mirror Mind*, p. 93
[53] Kadowaki quotes the same passage in Kakichi Kadowaki, *Zen and the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 117, though, curiously, the translation is not identical. Like Johnston, he does not give a source for his version of the text. Johnston wrote the preface to this edition of the book though he cites the first edition of Joan Rieck's English translation, published in 1980. The text and pagination are identical. Kadowaki was a fellow Jesuit and friend of Johnston. His influence on Johnston's understanding of Zen, and especially of the koan, is considerable, as we shall see below.
[54] The word 'myth' is not used pejoratively here.
[55] Op. cit. p. 96.
[56] See chapter 3 on Nothingness.
[57] An example of the tradition of Buddhist *teisho* on koans has already been cited in Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier*. Kadowaki, *Zen and the Bible,* writes as a Christian with a significant level of Zen training. Habito, a former Jesuit priest, and Kennedy, a practising Jesuit priest, both write as recognised Zen teachers; Ruben Habito, *Be Still and Know* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017) and Robert Kennedy, *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

Huineng, and a version of his *Platform Sutra.*[58] It does, however, feature in Case 23 of the *Mumonkan* ('Think Neither Good nor Evil'). It is part of a comparatively long narrative about Huineng (J. Eno) who has fled from his monastery and is pursued by the head monk (J. Myo), who is attempting to retrieve the robe and bowl, symbols of the teaching authority transmitted to him, from Eno, who lays them down for Myo who is then unable to pick them up. Myo, humbled, then seeks his instruction. On being asked for the Dharma, the Patriarch responds, 'Without thinking good or evil, what was the primal face of monk Myo?' Myo attains a deep realisation but asks if the Patriarch has anything more for him in addition to this 'secret' teaching. The Patriarch says it is no secret: 'If you reflect on your own true face, the secret will be found within yourself.'[59] It is here that Shibayama describes one's true self as 'Absolute Subjectivity': 'The True Self is one's original True Nature, in which not a thought of discrimination is working. It is the True Self awakened to the Buddha Nature. It is the True Self that is one with Reality.'[60]

As we saw above, Johnston is clearly aware of this interpretation of the *koan*. He cites it in *Christian Zen* in this form: 'What was the shape of your original face before you were born'[61] and elsewhere in a version that speaks of one's original face before one's parents were born,[62] the version found in the Japanese collection, *Entangling Vines*.[63] He uses it in his own explorations of the true self and considers it along with the image of the 'mirror mind' in his book of that title. He suggests that the enlightened mind described using these images is 'completely receptive and filled with wonder, seeing everything as if for the first time.'[64] In this passage, he sets this *koan* alongside biblical images of a child in relationship to its father and especially in the distinctively Christian understanding of the human person finding fullness in the call to be a child of God:

> It is truly an extraordinary thing to become a child of God. It is truly an extraordinary thing to be a mirror that is totally open to receive love. For in this way I become an image of the Father (just as Jesus was an image of the Father) and in this way I realise my true self. This is the self-

[58] Red Pine, *The Platform Sutra* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2006) p. 120. The translator notes that the reference found in the later koan to the exchange between the two monks concerning one's 'original face' appears in later editions of the text from the late eighth and mid-tenth centuries CE.
[59] Yamada, *The Gateless Gate*, p. 111.
[60] Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier*, p. 173.
[61] Johnston, *Christian Zen*, p. 57, and in the same form in his Cistercian Studies article of the same year, William Johnston, 'The Mystical Reading of Scripture', *Cistercian Studies* (6, 1971) p. 58.
[62] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 37, Johnston, *Being in Love*, p. 72, Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'*, p. 184.
[63] Kirchner, *The Entangling Vines*, p. 34.
[64] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 36.

realisation that can be expressed in the words of John: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."'[65]

Referring more specifically to the 'original face' *koan*, he then goes on to refer to Jeremiah's call (Jer. 1:5) in which God says to the prophet: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you'. Using language borrowed from Zen, he describes this self as 'spaceless and timeless' and yet 'a self that is uniquely loved and chosen.'[66] There then follows a reflection on the biblical tradition of God calling people by name and thus 'awakening in them the true self'. In particular, he refers to how God addresses Abraham and Samuel by name, and how the risen Jesus addresses Mary Magdalene in the garden in John 20:16. He notes how Mary 'turns' to Christ and sees this as a metanoia comparable to Zen enlightenment: 'Only through a profound enlightenment could Mary recognise Jesus and find herself as uniquely loved.'[67] Finally, Johnston considers Biblical texts referring to the 'face of God'. In particular, he recalls Moses' encounter in Ex. 33:20, the longing for God's face found in Ps 42:2, and the fulfilment of that longing when Paul sees the Glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6, though reference not given by Johnston): 'And here is where we see the original face, the face of God – we see it in Jesus and in the members of Jesus and in ourselves.'[68]

Johnston's treatment of this *koan* is a good example of his comparative method. He begins with an appreciation of a mainstream Zen interpretation of the *koan* and goes on to use it as a lens through which to see Christian texts which address the same theme. Here, the theme is one's fundamental identity and nature. Johnston brings in a significant Buddhist approach to the hidden and eternal aspects of human identity and finds it echoed in Christian theology, which understands that identity as only coming to its fullness when seen in relation to the unseen, eternal Father. He does not, however, ignore the distinctiveness of a fundamentally relational aspect of Christian anthropology, which does not have a simple counterpart in Zen Buddhist understandings of human nature.

Johnston does treat this case elsewhere in similar terms. In *Being in Love*, he recalls Thomas Merton's dialogue with Buddhism and his diagnosis of humanity's problems as lying in 'this experience of ourselves as absolutely autonomous individual egos.'[69] As a remedy, Buddhism proposes a way out the illusion of a separate ego through, for example, a meditation on the 'original face' *koan*. In Zen meditation, one can awaken the 'unconditioned and liberated self' spoken of in

[65] Ibid. p. 37.
[66] Ibid. p. 38.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid. p. 39.
[69] Johnston, *Being in Love*, p. 72.

this *koan*, a self which is free from 'historical and cultural conditioning'.[70] Johnston suggests a meditation on the question 'who am I?' which may one day lead to the profound realisation that '**I am!**' .[71] Again, he goes on to consider what this means in the context of a Christian understanding of the self in relationship to God:

> Augustine says that God is closer to me that I am to myself, that my being depends on God's presence and closeness. Influenced by Augustine, mystics like Meister Eckhart will say that God is unseparated from things, for God is in all things and is more inwardly in them than they are in themselves.[72]

He then considers John of the Cross's language in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (11:5) of the soul appearing to be God himself by participation. Finally, he describes how the enlightened person can lose any sense of separation between God and the self, but he is careful to insist that the true self is not simply to be equated with God, for the true self 'goes beyond the mystery of the self to the mystery of One who knows no limits.'[73] Again, this use of the *koan* builds on an understanding of the Zen Buddhist insight to which it points – that human identity, the true self, lies not in the conditioned aspects of our historical existence alone but in an awakening to the universal Buddha nature – and draws in insights from Christian tradition to explore the distinctive Christian aspects of the concern that is fundamental to both traditions. Here, he emphasises the central paradox of there being no separation from God for the one whose true self is awakened in Christ, and yet it is still essential to avoid a simple equation of the self and God. This is a recurring theme in Johnston's work and he often expresses it in terms he borrows from Teilhard, who uses the language of union but insists that within this fundamental union there is differentiation.[74]

Nansen Kills a Cat

The next *koan* we shall consider is found in four of the major *koan* collections.[75] It appears in different forms in the Mumonkan and the Hekiganroku with the latter treating the story as two

---

[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid. p. 73 [emphasis original].
[72] Ibid. He does not provide references for Augustine or Eckhart, partly, I presume, because this book is intended more for pastoral than academic use. He does give a precise citation, however, for his John of the Cross quotation in the same passage, further underscoring his strong attraction to and reliance on the Carmelite's thought.
[73] Ibid. p. 74.
[74] See, for example, Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 296 where he draws on the paradigmatic example of the Trinity, where there is a unity of distinct persons.
[75] Mumonkan Case 14, Shibayama, *The Gatelelss Barrier*, pp. 107-113, Hekiganroku Cases 63 and 64 , Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, pp. 358-363, Book of Equanimity Case 9, Wick, *The Book of Equanimity*, pp. 31-33 and Dogen's 300 koans Case 181, Dogen, *The True Dharma Eye, Three Hundred Koans*, p. 243f.

separate cases. Perhaps due to the story's gruesome vividness, it has received a lot of attention from commentators.[76] In the Mumonkan version, the main case is recorded thus:

> Once the monks of the Eastern Hall and the Western Hall were disputing about a cat. Nansen, holding up the cat, said, "Monks, if you can say a word of Zen, I will spare the cat. If you cannot, I will kill it!" No monk could answer. Nansen finally killed the cat. In the evening, when Joshu came back, Nansen told him of the incident. Joshu took off his sandal, put it on his head and walked off. Nansen said, 'If you had been there, I could have saved the cat!'[77]

The case catches the attention because of its apparent transgression of Buddhist ethics in the protection of living beings. However, Shibayama is typical in pointing away from ethics and towards Zen awakening. In the face of the students' speculative dispute about the cat (perhaps whether it has Buddha nature), Shibayama suggests that Nansen's 'irresistible compassion as their teacher burst forth to open their spiritual eye to the Truth of Zen.'[78] Nansen's act is intended to invoke a spontaneous response, without hesitation, from his students and a Zen teacher will use the *koan* in the same way, challenging the student to see the cat held aloft before their eyes within a hairsbreadth of its life. The true response comes from no-self: 'Is there a distinction between the cat killed and Nansen the killer?'[79] The case is used to force the student away from speculative thought, to 'cut off' delusions and provoke intuitive, selfless, life-saving action. Zen is not studied apart from one's actual self, so speculative responses to the *koan* are not adequate. An adequate response is, however, offered by Joshu who removes his sandal and wordlessly places it on his head. Although less violent, this episode is no less puzzling than the preceding events. Shibayama interprets it with a fascinating reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Citing Dogen, he suggests that the truth of Joshu's action lies in dying completely while alive and therefore transcending all life and death. 'In this new world', he says, 'the old provisional names lose all their significance.'[80] Here, the 'old names' are 'up and down', foot and head, hat and shoe': Joshu confounds all these distinctions by placing his sandal on his head and thus demonstrating his freedom in the new, awakened life. Shibayama likens this to Jesus' death and resurrection which 'means to die in human flesh, and to revive as the Son of God transcending life and death', thus creating the new world of the Kingdom of God where 'everybody, everything lives in God, and all the provisional names and defilements of this

[76] Kadowaki, *Zen and the Bible*, pp. 171-179, Heine, *Like Cats and Dogs*, p. 24f, Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism* (Boston, MA: Random House, 1963), p. 99.
[77] Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier*, p. 107.
[78] Ibid. p. 109.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid. p. 111.

earth are never found in the least.'[81] Shibayama admits that he does not know the orthodox interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection, but his insights offer a useful counterpoint to Johnston's reading of the *koan*.

This comes, again, in *The Mirror Mind*, and he quotes the main case of the *koan* in full.[82] Adopting similar language to Shibayama, he sees the *koan*'s meaning not in theoretical ideas, but in the identification of the student with the *koan*, including the hapless cat (and, of course, the hatless Joshu). Thus, one so identifies with the cat as to undergo a 'total death' of self. However, the sword that slays the cat is a compassionate, life-giving sword, for in dying to self, one is reborn to a life that transcends dualism, signified by Joshu's repurposed sandals. 'From all this', says Johnston, 'it will be amply clear that the aim of the *koan* is not to give information but to lead to enlightenment and to an existential conversion.'[83] Although he does not here make any explicit connection between this *koan* and the death and resurrection of Jesus, he does elsewhere see these key mysteries of the Christian faith as *koan*-like. Referring to a Zen retreat given to a group of American Trappists, he reports how the retreatants sat for hours in *zazen* wrestling with the '*koan*' of Jesus' death and resurrection.[84] Again, he emphasises the importance of identifying with the '*koan*' in a very embodied way, so that one may 'come to make sense of the enigmatic words of Paul who speaks about carrying in his body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be visible in his body.'[85] He then quotes 2 Cor. 4:11 (being given up to death for Jesus' sake) and 1 Cor. 15:55 ('O grave, where is thy victory?'). This section of the book begins with a reflection on the Zen notion of the Great Death, which Shibayama also saw in the *koan* of Nansen and the cat. For Johnston, the Christian also undergoes this Great Death and suggests that Jesus also underwent this spiritual death and resurrection before his death on the cross as is shown by his acceptance of the Father's will in Gethsemane (Jn. 18:11).[86]

We recognise, once more, Johnston's method of seeing the spirit of a Zen *koan* reflected in the spiritual life of a Christian who encounters its truth in the embodied practice of prayer. His interpretation leads to a dialogue with Christian texts and insights, in this case the foundational pattern of dying and rising shown in Jesus' life and teaching such as the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies (Jn. 12:24, quoted in the same passage of *Mystical Theology*). But more than a dialogue of ideas, Johnston suggests a dialogue of deep practice in which the Christian or Buddhist

[81] Ibid.
[82] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 99f though he erroneously gives the reference of Case 63 of the Hekiganroku for whole account – the episode with Joshu is case 64.
[83] Ibid. p. 100.
[84] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 186.
[85] Ibid. p. 187.
[86] Ibid. p. 186.

practitioner lives the truth of the Great Death, the dying to self that is necessary for one who seeks to transcend death. Again, he does not blur the distinction between Christian and Buddhist engagements with these things, but seeks to give each its proper place while allowing a rich cross-fertilisation to occur.

Gutei's Finger

A further exploration of similar themes comes in Johnston's reflections on the *koan* of Gutei's finger, another story which makes use of gruesome images to awaken new insight.[87] This is also a *koan* which features in more than one collection[88] and concerns the Zen master Gutei, who didn't answer any question posed to him in words, but with the simple gesture of raising one finger. When his houseboy was found to be mimicking the teacher's method in response to a question asked by a visitor about his master's teaching, Gutei cut his finger off with a knife. As the boy ran away in pain, Gutei called him. He turned round and Gutei raised a finger. At this point, the boy was enlightened.

Given that the incident with the boy and the knife is absent from the earlier version of the story in the *Hekiganroku*, it is clear that the core of the *koan* is simply the 'one-finger Zen' of Gutei. Yamada describes it in this way:

> When Gutei saw Tenryu [his teacher] holding up one finger, he clearly realised that the one finger and the whole universe are one. There isn't anything else that remains. There is nothing outside it. That is enlightenment.[89]

Shibayama further suggests that this realisation was not the result of seeing the teacher's raised finger but the culmination of his great spiritual quest which has been intensified to a breaking point. At that moment, anything could have served as a means of awakening. Gutei's own subsequent use of this image is his way of embodying the awakening he experienced. The problem with Gutei's houseboy is that when he raises a finger, he does so merely in imitation of his master, not as a result of his own enlightenment. When Gutei then cuts off his finger, and the boy sees Gutei's finger raised in its characteristic pose, the boy is enlightened through his own experience of the pain of the whole

[87] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 85f.
[88] Mumonkan Case 3, (Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier*, pp. 43-48, Hekiganroku Case 19 , Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, pp. 123-128. In the latter, the main case refers only to Gutei's 'one-finger Zen'. The cutting of the boy's finger occurs only in the commentary of Yuan Wu (1063-1135 CE) and does not appear in the translation included in Sekida, *Two Zen Classics*.
[89] Yamada, *The Gateless Barrier*, p. 25.

universe.[90] Gutei's action is, therefore, a merciful and life-giving one. The boy has lost a finger, but gained his life.

In Johnston's reading of the *koan*, he stresses the 'body language' of Gutei's raised finger as a form of direct, 'intersubjective' communication:

> So enlightened is the master that conceptual words will not express what is in his mind. And so he has resort to another kind of word: he throws his whole body, his whole self, into the uplifted finger.[91]

When it comes to the severing of the boy's finger, Johnston refers (without citation, but it is possibly Kakichi Kadowaki) to a friend who was a Zen practitioner and who saw in this episode a reflection of Jesus's words about cutting off one's right hand if it causes one to sin (Mt. 5:30). For Johnston, this only becomes clear when seen in the light of Jesus' own self-sacrifice on the cross, through which 'he showed compassion towards the whole human family and pointed the way towards that great enlightenment which is resurrection.'[92] In other words, Johnston sees this part of the *koan* as a further dramatic presentation of Jesus' teaching about dying to self, shown more powerfully in his body on the cross than would be possible in words. This touches once more on Johnston's long-standing theme of recovering an embodied approach to faith and spirituality.[93]

Every Day is a Good Day

This next *koan* is one which Johnston used in the practice of his inter-faith meditation class at Sophia University.[94] It is Case 6 of the *Hekiganroku* and in Sekida's translation, and reads:

> Ummon addressed the assembly and said, 'I am not asking you about the days before the fifteenth of the month. But what about after the fifteenth? Come and give me a word about those days.' And he himself gave the answer for them: 'Every day is a good day'.[95]

This *koan* has a very different feel from the previous two and fits into the threefold categorisation proposed by Ford as a *koan* that explores 'various aspects of boundlessness and particularity in the great dance that is our lives.'[96] In Hakuin's five-fold categorisation, it is a *gonsen koan* concerning the

[90] Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier*, p. 46.
[91] Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 86.
[92] Ibid.
[93] As explored in chapter 4 concerning the body in prayer. See especially chapters 2 and 3 of Johnston, *Being in Love* pp. 18-34 and chapter 8 of Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, pp. 120-136 in which he draws on Asian practices to recover a more positive asceticism for Christians.
[94] As described in Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'*, p. 64.
[95] Sekida, *Two Zen Classics*, p. 161.
[96] Ford, *Introducing the Koan*, p. 114.

skilful use of words. Sekida suggests that the 'days before the fifteenth of the month' refers to things that have already happened and 'days after the fifteenth' to the present moment and the future. The attitude suggested by the phrase 'every day is a good day' is, in his view, a childlike, positive, carefree attitude like that expressed by Jesus in his saying, 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof' (Mt 6:34).[97]

For Johnston, this *koan*, like all *koan*s, is not realised intellectually, but meditatively and it may contradict the actual experience of a particular time. He suggests that the phrase (not the whole *koan*) may be repeated or held in silent meditation ('chewed on', 'turned over') until the realisation dawns that there could be no such thing as a bad day if all days are created by God, whatever the external circumstances.[98] This use of the key, summarising phrase of the *koan* in meditation is consistent with Zen practice. He offers a fuller and more theological exploration of the *koan* in '*Arise, My Love…'* along with an image of the Japanese characters and a transliteration of the phrase.[99] He sees the internalisation of this *koan* as a profound act of faith. For Buddhists, it is faith in the universal presence of the Buddha nature, for Christians in God who created each day 'and saw that it was exceedingly good' but he also sees the possibility of an 'atheistic' affirmation of the *koan* as a simple expression of human hopefulness.[100] He suggests that shared meditation with a *koan* like this one can 'lead to a universal wisdom without weakening individual commitment', as he experienced in his own meditation group consisting of people of many faiths and none. He does, however, suggest that 'seemingly atheistic mysticism can lead to transformation of consciousness and ultimately to God.'[101]

This is another repeating theme in Johnston's engagement with Zen. He makes no claim to practice Zen himself, but sees fruitful possibilities in sharing in aspects of ritual meditative practice. The outcome of such practice depends on the faith of the practitioner and will vary according to the religious understanding and faith commitment with which one undertakes it. He does not see Zen practices such as *koan* introspection as neutral, given that they are often infused with a Buddhist worldview, but recognises that dialogue can allow a 'translation' of some of these practices into a Christian contemplative path. He consistently allows his examination of *koan*s to open up comparisons with Christian texts and doctrines, in this case, an exploration of divine providence and human trust in it.

---

[97] Op. cit. p. 162.
[98] Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 60.
[99] Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'*, p. 64.
[100] Ibid. p. 65.
[101] Ibid.

The Sea of Ise

My final example of Johnston's engagement with a *koan* concerns one that does not appear in any of the traditional collections but is found in a selection of miscellaneous *koan*s used by the Yamada lineage. It is reproduced in the Catholic Sister Elaine MacInnes's book, *The Flowing Bridge*:

> In the sea of Ise, the thousand feet down, lies a single stone; I wish to pick up that stone without wetting my hands. On the stone a name is inscribed. What is the name? On one side of the name it reads, "Cannot get wet." On the other side of the name it reads, "Cannot get dry." [102]

MacInnes's interpretation of the *koan* is that it concerns the 'diving down' through layers of ego to reach an awareness of the true self, the single stone. That true, essential nature is 'empty' in Zen Buddhist terms, and that emptiness is infinite. It cannot, therefore, be touched, cannot wet our hands.[103] MacInnes does not stop there but goes on to describe how Zen practice is 'sensitizing' in that it leads to a realisation of our 'essential oneness' with our fellow human beings and to a spontaneously compassionate response to their needs.[104]

Ruben Habito, also trained in the Sanbo Kyodan tradition, offers a similar interpretation of this *koan* but adds that the essential, 'empty' nature is 'impassible', beyond suffering and pain and this reflects the impassible nature of God, who is 'unaffected by anything that is not God'.[105] This is the 'dry' quality of the *koan*. The 'wet' quality is the quality of compassion – the stone never gets dry because 'it is always flowing with tears of compassion'. The image is of immersion in a bottomless sea where one is at one with all sentient beings.[106]

Johnston introduces the *koan* in one of his *Letters to Contemplatives* in the context of a similar discussion of how one 'loses oneself' in two ways; firstly in love for God and others and secondly in a metaphysical sense. The first sense, following Teilhard, entails not an absorption but a union that is perfectly demonstrated in the experience of receiving Christ in the Eucharist where we may lose ourselves while remaining ourselves.[107] In the second sense, Johnston sees the *koan* as offering a

---

[102] MacInnes, *The Flowering Bridge*, pp. 72-76.
[103] Ibid. p. 74.
[104] Ibid. pp. 75f.
[105] Ruben Habito, *Living Zen, Loving God* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004), p. 107.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 72. Note that this examination of the koan precedes Habito and MacInnes, both of whom were friends of Johnston. Habito was a colleague for many years at Sophia. There is no evidence of direct influence, but it is reasonable to assume a certain shared environment of Zen-Christian interaction between the three where a discussion of this koan would not be surprising. Johnston describes it as one of his favourite koans.

way to allow the true self – the stone – to emerge as one descends through the depths of consciousness in meditation. This true self is 'beyond all subject-object duality',[108] which is another way of expressing its essential 'emptiness'. But he follows his characteristic pattern of offering a Christian response to this Buddhist insight:

> It is clear that the Christian loss of self through love and the Zen metaphysical loss of self are not the same. But they are complementary. I think the ideal for Christians is to have both religious conversion by which we are divinized through love, and intellectual conversion by which we are united with all in wisdom.[109]

It is interesting that Johnston reverses the pattern we saw in MacIness's and Habito's interpretations. For him, it is love that leads to the realisation of the true self and wisdom to the awareness of our interconnectedness. For them, insight into our true nature leads to a compassion for all sentient beings.

_Koan_s and The Bible

Having looked in detail at some examples of Johnston's use of *koan*s in his mystical theology, we shall now consider the influence his reflection of *koan*s had on his approach to reading Christian scripture. We have already noted how, early in his writing career, Johnston explored the possibilities for a fertile dialogue between Zen Buddhism and Christianity in their respective approaches to religious texts. In the case of Zen Buddhism, he concentrated primarily on the *koan*. In the *Cistercian Studies* article to which have already referred, Johnston presents an argument, which he consistently held to throughout his writings, for an interior reading of scripture to extend and deepen the 'exterior' reading offered by exegesis and historical-critical approaches:

> The traditional doctrine speaks of an interior and an exterior word, declaring that unless God speaks from within, enlightening the mind and heart, all books and teachers are useless.[110]

However, he suggests that the Zen practice of *koan* introspection offers a psycho-physiological reading technique to go alongside a more theological insistence on the inner workings of the Holy Spirit. This technique involves the practitioner 'identifying with' or 'living with' the text until deeper levels of wisdom are awakened and the more superficial levels of discursive reasoning are left behind. The process in Zen involves a sustained and regular discipline of communal meditation accompanied by meetings with a recognised teacher who will assist the student in the identification

[108] Ibid. p. 74.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Johnston, *The Mystical Reading of Scripture*, p. 58.

of 'readings' that remain at a superficial level. Once initial *koan*s have been 'passed', subsequent ones may open up more quickly as the practitioner benefits from these newly awakened 'psychological and mystical faculties'.[111] In Christian terms, he suggests that the approach to scripture taken by John of the Cross offers an example of how the 'solution' of one '*koan*' opens up a whole new way of reading scripture. In his case, Johnston suggests that the '*koan*' is the marriage between Yahweh and Israel – the Infinite with the particular – which then becomes a key to understanding the Bible's exploration of the loving dealings of God with humankind. However, this key is not perceived logically but mystically – in contemplative prayer and through intense spiritual quest. In such a mode, one reads scripture with an openness to its capacity to 'astonish' us and with an acceptance of paradoxes where 'light is darkness, all is nothing and sadness is joy'.[112]

He also proposes the repetition of short biblical phrases (or the Jesus Prayer, Rosary or litanies) as a way of internalising them, and likens this process to the recitation of the *nembutsu* in Shin Buddhism.[113] The recitation may accompany the rhythm of the breath or the heart until the words take root within the person who then embodies their truth. It is clear from Johnston's writings that this practice was his own preferred pattern of prayer. He suggests that its psychological dimension is not dissimilar to that of *koan* introspection in that it facilitates a purification of the superficial levels of consciousness by lessening the mind's reliance on thoughts and images. He suggests that the emphasis in such a reading is not 'what does it mean?' but 'what does it do to me?', in other words, does it lead to an experience of faith and, perhaps, to a response like that of Thomas before the risen Christ: 'My Lord and my God.'[114] Again, he suggests a psychological component to this which may been seen in the reading of a poem such as Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. However, he is clear that for a person of faith to adopt such psychological strategies in the reading of scripture, the result is not simply an aesthetic one, but a religious one. It is another recurring theme in Johnston's writing to say that the faith with which one undertakes such practices determines the character of their outcome. He finishes the article by appealing for a more concentrated focus by Christians on the prayerful reading of their scriptures in order to 'incarnate' the enlightenment they contain in a dawning information age which competes for the full attention of our psychic lives.

Aspects of this approach to the practice of 'spiritual reading' recur frequently in Johnston's subsequent writings, but with some significant additions. His theology takes a particularly significant turn in his 1984 book *The Wounded Stag*, which temporarily sets aside his life-long dialogue with Zen

[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid. p.60.
[113] Ibid. p. 61. The phrase is 'Namu Amida Butsu' or 'Honour to the Buddha Amida'.
[114] Ibid. p. 62.

in order to establish the specifically Christian roots of his mystical theology. These roots lie in Word and Sacrament, and especially in the theology of the Word of God expressed in the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. Explicitly, he describes the approach he took in his previous works to the universal phenomenon of mysticism as an approach founded on assumptions about the universal character of the human psyche. To supplement this subjective focus, he sets out in this book to describe the 'objective' nature of Christian faith in Christ. In using the language of 'objectivity', however, he does not intend to describe God as 'an object' and maintains the fundamental insights of his other works concerning the common religious quest for truth and transformation.[115]

His understanding of the theology of the Word in scripture is summarised in these words from *Dei Verbum*:

> For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the Word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her children, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life.[116]

He goes on to say that Scripture and sacrament are the nourishment of all spiritual life and that the word of Scripture has carried the mystics 'into the cloud of unknowing, into the silent darkness where God dwells in inaccessible light. It has pointed the way to the deepest realm of the interior castle.'[117] In addition to the Word in Scripture and the sacraments, Johnston adds a third source, the Word of God in the community called church.[118] He reiterates his understanding of the operation of Scripture as a word which comes to life within the Christian, 'penetrating the deepest layers of [the] unconscious'.[119] Again, he suggests that this happens not through rational understanding alone, but through faith and love which carry the Christian 'beyond words to the Reality, the mysterious Reality to which the words point.'[120]

It is clear from the opening chapters of this book that Johnston regarded the Scriptures as indispensable for the Christian mystical life in a way that other ascetical or spiritual practices,

---

[115] Johnston, *The Wounded Stag* (London: Harper Collins, 1984), p. 22. Indeed, he cites another Constitution of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, (C.1,122) in support of this universality, albeit founded on a notion of 'hidden Christianity' which allows for an 'association with the Paschal Mystery' for those who do not profess a Christian faith.
[116] *Dei Verbum* 21, quoted in ibid. p. 7. As always with Johnston, the translation is Abbott.
[117] Ibid. p. 8.
[118] Ibid. p. 9.
[119] Ibid. p. 10.
[120] Ibid.

including silent, seated meditation, were not. Throughout the book, he reflects on biblical themes relating to the experiences of the people of Israel in the desert, especially the notion of covenant (the book was written immediately following a stay in the Holy Land), while not neglecting his recurring concern with the fundamental character of human life and the shared characteristics of religious quests to live that life more fully. At times, there is a tension between these particular and universal dimensions. Again, he cites Conciliar support for his insistence on inter-religious unity as an outworking of the transforming work of *metanoia* but he does so with a quotation from *Lumen Gentium* which sees the basis of such unity in the fact that 'all are called to salvation by the grace of God.'[121] Another instance of this tension is seen in his discussion of symbols in the context of prayer or meditation.[122] His argument appears to be that, for the Buddhist in meditation, the symbol is simply a point of focus in order to bring the conscious and unconscious mind to a state of total presence. For the Christian, a symbol – which may be a text of scripture or the Eucharistic host – may also be a meditative focus to instil a complete sense of presence, but the one praying is present 'not to an object, but to a person, to a loving person who has died for us.'[123] As we have repeatedly seen, this personal aspect of Christian faith remains one which presents challenges to Johnston throughout his dialogue with Zen.

Johnston's sustained reflection on scripture in this atypical work led him to articulate a position that showed little dependence on the dialogue with Zen that had preceded and, indeed, that followed its publication. He takes a position that is entirely consistent with that of Vatican II in focussing on the life of the world while seeing that world through the lens of the paschal mysteries of Christ: 'Indeed we are united with the whole human family each of whom is related to the risen Lord in a way that surpasses human understanding.'[124] He does, however, allow himself one reference to a *koan*-like reading of Scripture which draws on Buddhist thought as well as practice. In meditating on the Beatitude, 'blessed are the poor' Johnston describes in some detail the way in which its truth might be realised:

> Entering into a deep state of consciousness, I take the words 'blessed are the poor' into the very depths of my being. I become present to them. This is not a question of rationalization but presence. And as I turn them over in contemplative fashion I begin to feel the wonder of it

[121] Ibid. p. 79 quoting *LG* 13, Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II,* p. 32.
[122] Ibid. pp. 106-7.
[123] Ibid. p. 107.
[124] Ibid. p. 111.

> all: I even experience shock. … Now I grasp the text not because I understand it rationally but because I live it.[125]

He understands poverty in Zen Buddhist terms as a radical non-attachment, a liberation from clinging to possessions, thoughts and the poisons of anger and lust. He understands the fundamental relation between poverty (emptiness) and compassion in Buddhist practice and likens this to 'the salvation of the human race [which] is rooted in the poverty of the Son of God.' This reading brings us back to more familiar territory in Johnston, where he seeks to hold together both a learning from aspects of spiritual practice in Zen – *koan*-like reflection on texts – and a theological dialogue that respects the distinctive positions of each tradition while allowing fresh illumination of Christian doctrines.

Despite the occasional tensions of this work, *The Wounded Stag* is a clear statement of a thoroughly Conciliar approach to scripture as 'the pure and perennial source of spiritual life'. Johnston's particular contribution to this statement of the centrality of scripture in the life of faith is to place it at the heart of meditative practice and not simply exegetical theology or homiletics. From Zen, he takes both a methodology for meditative reading and an emphasis on understandings that transcend rational interpretation. For the latter, his reflections on inner poverty or non-attachment are interesting. When the reader is not attached to his or her particular interpretive filters but is willing to approach a text with radical openness, fresh insights develop as one 'understands the text through life'.[126] This process of internalisation is not, for Johnston, separable from the embodied practice of contemplation and this insight also owes much to his understanding of *koan* introspection.

Being in Love, written shortly after *The Wounded Stag*, reiterates these fundamental principles. First, Johnston stresses that the scriptures 'should be the ultimate source of your religious experience' and that the word should 'live in the subliminal areas of your mind, giving birth to the mystical silence'.[127] He proposes a constant recitation of scripture so that 'your deepest mind may be a storehouse of archetypal images from the Bible.'[128] Drawing more overtly on Zen *koan*s, he also suggests a 'struggling' or 'wrestling' with paradoxical passages of scripture 'until he can identify with it and make it his own. In the same way you can take some of the shocking paradoxes of the Gospel and

[125] Ibid. p. 131.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Johnston, *Being in Love*, p. 32 The second person form here is used throughout the book, which is written as a long letter of advice or spiritual direction to a young man ('Thomas') at the early stages of his contemplative journey.
[128] Ibid.

turn them over and over until the inner meaning reveals itself not to your intellect but to your life.' This kind of meditation 'brings about a conversion, a revolution of consciousness, a joyful enlightenment.'[129] He suggests this method as one that may be used with a parable, repeating it over and over, including before sleep so that the unconscious mind may work on it through the night. The idea of 'identification' with the words accurately reflects the Zen practice of seeking a spontaneous, intuitive response to a *koan* such as we saw in the case of Nansen's cat.

To complete our consideration of Johnston's meditative approach to scripture, we shall look at his final two works, each of which restates his dependence on *Dei Verbum*. In *Mystical Theology*, he sets out to recast the mystical theology of John of the Cross in the light of Vatican II and notes that the Carmelite saint also stated his explicit reliance on scripture in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel.*[130] Turning then to *Dei Verbum*, he stresses the Council's contention that 'there is a presence of Christ in the Scriptures.'[131] However, he says that this presence will not be discerned through critical readings, but contemplative, or mystical readings: 'In this way one is open to receive the secret wisdom that comes through love.' Through repetitive, internalised, prayerful reading, one 'opens one's heart to the Holy Spirit, the Divine Teacher, who dwells in the sacred books and in the human heart.' Again, he contrasts the apparent 'foolishness' of mystical readings of scripture with the 'reasonableness' of more rational readings. Again he draws on John of the Cross who, in the *Spiritual Canticle*, writes of the Holy Spirit who, 'unable to express the fullness of his meanings in ordinary words, utters mysteries in strange figures and likenesses.'[132]

Finally, in *'Arise, my Love…'* Johnston highlights a key phrase of *Dei Verbum* which we have already encountered in his own frequent repetition of the notion of 'turning over' the words of scripture in the heart. The Conciliar document speaks of 'the contemplation and study of believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (cf. Luke 2:9, 51)'.[133] And once again, Johnston compares this process of spiritual investigation with Zen *koan* practice and urges a renewed sense of Christian dogmas as 'dazzling mysteries to be explored by prayer, by faith and by study'. Rejecting a dogmatic certainty which offers a settled answer to questions, Johnston urges a recovery of the 'spiritual search' as the necessary mode of being for faith in a contemporary context.[134]

---

[129] Ibid. p. 40.
[130] Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 7 where he quotes the Prologue (2) of that work.
[131] Ibid. citing *Dei Verbum* 24 and 25.
[132] Ibid. p. 8 The citation is from *The Spiritual Canticle,* Prologue 1.
[133] Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'*, p. 29 quoting *Dei Verbum* 8.
[134] Ibid. p. 30.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that Johnston found much support for his meditative approach to scripture in the documents and principles of Vatican II. His entire writing career took place in the aftermath of the Council and was strongly shaped by it. However, some particular aspects of his approach owe more to his dialogue with that embodied practices of Zen than to the Council and I will enumerate these shortly. From the Council, Johnston took a mandate for a mystical theology firmly grounded in Scripture. The lack of indexes of biblical references in his books makes this grounding less visible than it ought to be, but he refers very frequently to biblical texts throughout his work. Recordings of his lectures also reveal a great familiarity and a certain ease with handling biblical texts in a contemplative manner.[135] But more than simply offering a mandate, the Council offered Johnston a particular theology of scripture which allowed him to speak of a divine presence in the text which is accessible to the Christian who reflects on it meditatively. Indeed, Johnston is keenly aware that the Council, promoting a universal call to holiness, encouraged all Christians and not just clergy and religious to reflect on scripture in this way. To give a little more shape to the underlying theology, Johnston acknowledges the working of the Holy Spirit in the person reading scripture as well as in the words of scripture (*Dei Verbum* 5) and is clear that the presence of God to be encountered there is personal, specifically the person of Christ (*Dei Verbum* 25). He insists that the reading of scripture must be undertaken with faith, both the faith that one will indeed encounter God through the reading and the faith that allows the Holy Spirit 'to open the eyes of the mind' (*Dei Verbum* 5), which entails a certain letting go of one's autonomous, rational control of the reading process.

The quotations from Luke 2, which *Dei Verbum* used as an image of the process of meditative reading – turning things over in one's heart – give some of the background to Johnston's somatic approach, but his more fully formed insights came from Zen Buddhism and its *koan* practice. It is likely that, to some extent, he drew on the writings of his colleague Kakichi Kadowaki as well as drawing on his own familiarity with Zen through years of dialogue. Johnston wrote the preface to the 2002 edition of Kadowaki's book, *Zen and the Bible*, and this short text summarises well his understanding of a somatic reading of scripture influenced by Zen *koan* study:

> 'Just as the Zen person comes to enlightenment, so the Christian comes to a conversion of heart – not just with the mind but with the whole body-and-mind.'[136]

[135] For example, in his 1995 lecture in Australia for the Christian Meditation Community, he offers a creative, koan-like reflection on Matt. 6:25, suggesting that Jesus' saying about life being more than food and the body more than clothing can be internalised or 'incarnated' if one prays with full attention to one's breath (life) and posture (body).
[136] Kadowaki, *Zen and the Bible*, p. ix.

> 'For [Kadowaki], the principal *koan* is the death and resurrection of Jesus. The meditation he teaches will enable Christians not just to *believe* in the resurrection, but to *live* the resurrection. In this way, Christianity becomes not just a teaching but a lived experience.'[137]

The book was first published in English in 1980 and Johnston refers to it in a few places.[138] It sets out a striking theology of the reading of scripture in which the Christian 'follows Christ' not as an exemplar, but as an indwelling presence:

> To follow Christ's life you must put your body and soul into walking with Christ and have the 'living body-mind' of the suffering Christ press upon you, urging your whole 'body' towards the same way of suffering, until at last you realise that the 'living body-mind' of Christ is living your 'body'. The, for the first time, you will be able to say, as Paul did, 'Now, not I, but Christ lives in me'.[139]

He proposes a 'new scriptural hermeneutic' which entails reading with the whole body and mind, but insists that it is firmly rooted in Catholic tradition, not least by analogy with the Eucharistic presence of Christ whose body is united with the believer's in the reception of Holy Communion. However, he is clear that the origin of this hermeneutic is his experience as a Zen practitioner. He gives as an example of an embodied reading Jesus' injunction to love one's enemies in Lk. 6:35. He shows the embodying of this command in Jesus' washing of Judas' feet and invites the Christian to do the same, not by mimesis but by a fully warm-blooded giving of oneself even to one's enemies. He explains; 'In order to do this one must do *zazen* with the resolve to die the Great Death and, completely forgetting one's self, become the sacred passage itself.'[140] This bears striking similarities to Johnston's notions of inhabiting the text and 'understanding it through life'. Equally striking is the use of Nichiren's Dungeon Letter noted above to introduce the idea of 'body reading' and a remarkably similar reading of the case of Gutei's Finger alongside the very same text Johnston used from Matt. 5:29f.[141]

Kadowaki offers a useful summary of the ways in which he regards *koan*s and New Testament texts as being 'structurally similar'. First, he sees the New Testament texts as an invitation to walk the same path as Jesus, the teacher. Second, the words of Jesus are a call to 'existential conversion' in the same way that the *koan*'s question seeks to turn the student from delusion to enlightenment.

---

[137] Ibid. p. x.
[138] Eg. Johnston, *The Mirror Mind*, p. 110, Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 78, also in the 1995 talk given in Australia mentioned above.
[139] Kadowaki, *Zen and the Bible*, p. 114.
[140] Ibid. p. 116.
[141] Ibid. p. 10.

Third, he suggests the New Testament's words are always only 'pointing to an incomprehensible mystery'. Fourth, *koan*s and biblical texts alike are for the purpose of looking into and then realising the Original Self. Finally, the process of spiritual direction fulfils the same role as *dokusan* for the Zen student.[142] This again shows a significant overlap with Johnston's understanding of how scripture might be read in a *koan*-like manner, particularly in his stress on how the process of reading goes beyond rational analysis of texts and focusses on conversion of heart.

Conclusion

At the very least, Kadowaki helped Johnston shape his own somatic hermeneutic by offering a first-hand experience of zen *koan* study. Nevertheless, Johnston took the method to heart and employed it in his own creative reading of Christian Scripture, often in response to zen *koan*s, as we have seen. What Johnston added to Kadowaki's approach was a grounding in the theology of *Dei Verbum* and a deep acquaintance with Scripture, including an ability to see it through the lens of one its more creative mystical interpreters, John of the Cross. He offers a good paradigm for the comparative reading of *koan*s and scriptural texts which takes account of the Buddhist underpinnings of the *koan*s, thus making the process theological and not merely textual. But above all, Johnston's distinctive approach to reading scripture insists on its fundamentally embodied, incarnated character. This immersive approach to reading leads to a genuine transformation of life through a true inhabiting, body-and mind, of the biblical texts. I find it difficult to imagine that this approach would have emerged without a careful engagement with Zen *koan* practice, a further example of how a comparative mystical theology might fruitfully draw on the insights gained through inter-ritual participation.

[142] Ibid. p. 121.

Chapter Six

Conclusion: Zen in Johnston's Mystical Theology

> A good theological commentary on the Cloud is something very welcome indeed. You provide one which does not do violence to the essential simplicity and directness of the book. In other words, you do not bury the plain intuition of the contemplative author under conceptual and verbal exegesis. Perhaps there are places where you did not develop the resemblances with Zen.[1]

Merton's warm words in response to the drafts of Johnston's first book[2] express rather well the heart of the work that Johnston was to produce in books, articles and lectures over the decades that were to follow. His approach to theology has a 'simplicity' and a 'directness' about it and is not driven primarily by previously formulated concepts but by reflection on the experience of contemplation. It may also be fair to say that, while Johnston is explicit from the start of his writing career that he seeks an engagement with the Zen Buddhism that surrounds him in Japan, there are many areas of that engagement that remain undeveloped. We shall consider now what the fruits of that encounter were as Johnston sought to express an experiential and comparative mystical theology for changing times and indicate some areas where he may have intuited fresh discoveries as a pioneer, but did not attempt the depth of analysis that later explorers would achieve.

What is Mystical Theology?

> The present writer believes that the time has come to rewrite mystical theology for men and women of the twenty-first century. The time has come to restore its honoured place in the curriculum of theological studies. However, it cannot be taught to the twenty-first century just as it was taught to the fourth and to the sixteenth centuries. The challenge confronting us is to be true to the Gospel and tradition while facing the unique problems that have arisen in the twentieth century.[3]

Johnston believed that the discipline of mystical theology had largely lapsed in the period following the Second Vatican Council and that the teaching of this subject in the way that he had experienced in his own priestly formation in the 1950s was no longer fit for purpose. The four specific 'twentieth

[1] Letter to Johnston from Thomas Merton, 25th January 1965. Copy provided by Thomas Merton Center, Bellermine University. [underlining original].
[2] William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unkowing* (New York: Desclée Co, 1967).
[3] William Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 3.

century questions' he sought to address in his own *Mystical Theology* of 1995 were the lay character of contemplative practice,[4] dialogue with Asian religions and their attractiveness to contemporary seekers, the 'new sciences' including quantum theory and the vital importance of connecting mystical theology with engagement on social issues, including poverty and environmental degradation.[5]

There can be no doubt that the second half of the twentieth century was a very fertile time for the exploration of traditions of Christian Spirituality, with significant publishing projects like the series *Classics of Western Spirituality,*[6] *World Spirituality*: *An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*[7] and Bernard McGinn's magisterial *The Presence of God* series.[8] Alongside initiatives like these, the publication of works on Christian spirituality, including many which introduced the practice of contemplative prayer to a wide readership, give weight to Johnston's insistence that the lay character of much modern spiritual practice must be taken into account by those who seek to formulate a mystical theology for the twenty-first century. This popularisation can, of course, be traced back further to the writings of Evelyn Underhill[9] and others in the first part of the twentieth century, but it gained momentum later in the century when the writings of Thomas Merton could be said to mark a new phase in that development.[10] Throughout this thesis, I have linked Johnston's and Merton's contributions to this realm of spiritual writing aimed at a wide audience. Although their styles could hardly be more different, they are linked by a common concern to bring Asian spirituality into dialogue with classical Western mysticism, a concern that brought them together in the correspondence that has provided a loose connecting thread throughout the present work.

Where Johnston's contribution is distinctive is in his insistence that those engaged in popular spiritual teaching should have a theological as well as a pastoral focus in their enterprise. In this regard his approach stands out, however we might judge its success. There were, without doubt, some significant contributions to the theology of the spiritual life from Catholic theologians in the

[4] Interestingly, he included in this area the important question of sexuality and relationships, which he explored in his unpublished *Dialogues*.
[5] Ibid. pp. 10-11.
[6] Published by Paulist Press, the first volumes were published in 1978 and the series now contains more than 130 volumes.
[7] Under the general editorship of Ewert Cousins, the first of the three volumes on Christian spirituality was published in 1987, B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff & J. Leclerc, *Christian Spirituality, Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1987).
[8] Currently comprising six volumes, the sixth being divided into three parts, and spanning the years 1991-2020. A further volume is planned.
[9] E.g. Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1911).
[10] *Seeds of Contemplation*, for example, was published in 1949, and its revision, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, in 1962.

twentieth century, but fewer attempts to present a mystical theology to the kind of audience that would naturally engage with more pastorally focussed works on spirituality. In that former category, we might look to theologians of such stature as Karl Rahner,[11] Romano Guardini[12] and Hans Urs von Balthasar, and may also include the historical theology of Bernard McGinn.[13] In the theological appendices to his introductory volume in The Presence of God series, McGinn expresses similar views to Johnston on the relative scarcity of theological reflections on mysticism in post-war theology, though he does note Merton's considerable, if unsystematic, contribution.[14] He also alludes to Johnston's suggestion that Bernard Lonergan's theological method offers 'significant new possibilities in the theology of mysticism', given that his central insight concerns a 'knowledge born of the love experienced in religious conversion'.[15] However, the return of mystical theology to the wider theological landscape in any concentrated way would have to wait until the present century.

The first intimations of a consistent attempt to reflect theologically on the experience of Christian contemplative prayer can be seen somewhat earlier than that, in the work of Rowan Williams, whose *The Wound of Knowledge* first appeared in 1979.[16] Although Williams' primary focus is, in common with McGinn, an exposition of key figures in the history of spirituality, he does hint at the necessity for such an exposition to be rooted in the lived faith of both expositor and subject:

> The pages which follow are meant as an introduction to the ways in which a succession of Christian saints attempted to articulate their vision of the Christian calling, the diverse ways in which they responded to the call towards wholeness. In the life and work of each of them, we may see the conflict and puzzlement which follow inevitably from the nature of their data. But it is a conflict supported and made bearable by one thing: every Christian thinker, if he or she at all merits the designation, begins from the experience of being reconciled, being accepted, being held (however precariously) in the grace of God…
>
> The study of the Christian past should properly be an exercise in living more seriously *in* the

[11] See, for example, Karl Rahner, *Encounters with Silence* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1938).
[12] Most notably, Romano Guardini, *The Art of Praying* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1957).
[13] Although beyond the scope of the present study, it should be noted that the consistent presence of mystical theology in the Eastern churches may have had an impact on Western mystical theology, such as through the writings of the Russian diaspora and, notably, Vladimir Lossky's *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co Ltd, 1957). Lossky was engaged in ecumenical exchanges with English-speaking theologians through the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius.
[14] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1991), p. 282.
[15] Ibid. p. 284.
[16] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979).

> church and *into* the historical corporateness of its tradition - not passively or uncritically, but with enough commitment to find it in nourishment and hope.[17]

Some decades later, a more systematic approach to these experiential data had become integral to theological reflection on Christian spirituality and this turn can be seen in the work of Mark McIntosh, Kees Waaijman and, indeed, Williams himself. McIntosh is careful to frame this interrogation of the experiential dimension of the spiritual life in terms of a dynamic interaction between the work of theology and the work of prayer:

> The critical function which spirituality serves for theology is not a matter of simply adding one more source for theology to consider; it is not a matter of judiciously taking people's *experiences* seriously along with supposedly more 'rational' thought, but a matter of exposing theology to the profound questioning that animates the very heart of the community's struggle to be faithful.[18]

He goes on to explore the nature of these 'experiences' and, with McGinn, prefers to speak in terms of mystical 'consciousness' rather than mystical 'experience' so as to avoid overtones of exceptional states of ecstasy or intense sensations. Rather, the focus on consciousness allows for an exploration of a full range of modes of perception and, while the experience of the one who prays may be of an encounter with God in inexpressible silence, this does not render the work of theology redundant:

> Mystical consciousness is the impression in human existence of infinite coherence, expressivity and meaning, namely the trinitarian life of God. Mysticism bears this speech of God, God-talk, theo-logy, within it and is therefore inherently theologically fruitful.[19]

McIntosh surely has expressed this in the correct order: the work of mystical theology flows from that persistent impression in human existence, although there can be no doubt that the systematic reflection on these impressions in turn shapes their future character. For example, Johnston's heavy reliance on the insights and emphases of John of the Cross coloured his own expression of his encounters with the ineffable God.[20] It is, therefore, of little surprise that more recent developments

[17] Ibid. p. 2, 3 [emphasis original].
[18] Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), p. 17.
[19] Ibid. p. 32.
[20] For example, his description of an intense experience one night to which we referred in connection with his exploration of spiritual energies William Johnston, *Mystical Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), pp. 184-5.

in mystical theology show twin foci on the lived experience of human encounters with the divine and on the theological interpretations of these experiences, historical, contextual and systematic.

The work of Kees Waaijman emphasises the first of these foci and draws on a wide range of experiential data such as religious moments in the normal life-cycle of human societies, organised schools of spiritual life, counter-movements beyond the structures of religious authority, language used to describe the spiritual life, spiritual biographical works, modes of spiritual reading and the practice of spiritual accompaniment. He also examines the intradisciplinary approaches to reflection on spirituality, such as mystical or ascetical theologies, and those interdisciplinary studies that are more evident in contemporary approaches, such as the human sciences of psychology and sociology. But for Waaijman, the whole endeavour must have, at its heart, a fundamentally theological question, for, at least in relation to the Abrahamic faiths, the central reality of the spiritual life is the human encounter with the divine and the transformations that result from this encounter.[21]

The multi-faceted task of mystical theology, then, cannot be reduced to the description of phenomena relating to the spiritual life but implies an engagement of the faith of the theologian in its task and a clear theological intent. At the same time, it cannot evade the critical task of interrogating the very practices and somatic insights that the mystical theologian brings from personal and observed experiences. It does so not to dismiss these as mere psychosomatic constructions masquerading as intuitions of the divine, but in order to respect the diverse modes of knowing that human persons employ in their spiritual endeavour. Rowan Williams describes mystical theology as 'both the condition and the result of a certain style of Christian living'.[22] This pattern of life offers a way of knowing that is 'the process not of mastering an object but of orienting ourselves in a territory' and being 'redirected towards the strangeness both of God and the finite other, the neighbour.'[23] Williams sees the practice of liturgical worship as central to this process as it 'provides us with the roles we must learn to occupy as contemplators of God and sharers in the adoring attention given by the Word to the Father.'[24]

While mystical theology might require a certain critical distance from its objects of investigation, it can only ever be an enterprise conducted 'from the inside' of a community of practice and as a

[21] See chapter 3 of Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality; Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002) pp. 426-482). Waaijman describes the divine-human relational process in broad terms, interrogating such notions as 'theism' and the 'personal' nature of God.
[22] Rowan Williams, 'Mystical Theology and Christian Self-Understanding' in E. Howells & M.A. McIntosh, *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 9-24), p. 16.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid. pp. 16-17.

reflection on that practice, which instils the kind of orientation described by Williams through repeated and committed participation. It is interesting in this regard that, while it is deeply concerned with practices and the lived embodiment of the Christian spiritual path, the new *Oxford Handbook* does not devote much space to the human sciences, preferring an account that trusts theological modes of expression formed in spiritual praxis.[25]

We can see, then, a trajectory in the more recent evolution of mystical theology that handles traditional texts with confidence, that regards the embodied expression of a committed spiritual praxis as foundational to its content, that employs critical methods with respect to these texts and practices and that has, as its primary concern, the transformative interaction between God and human beings. I have suggested that Johnston's own enterprise began in the very early phase of this recent trajectory and that aspects of his approach are consistent with what was to develop, most particularly in his key focus on the knowledge that comes from embodied practice. Indeed, in some cases, his intuitions anticipated trends that received fuller treatment as the contemporary recovery of mystical theology matured. I shall now elaborate the content of his own mystical theology before examining those aspects of it that appear to have emerged from his engagement with the ritual practices Zen Buddhism as a comparator.

Three Characteristics of William Johnston's Mystical Theology

Johnston offered more than one overview of his approach to mystical theology, but perhaps his most concise and helpful is contained in an essay he contributed to a volume in honour of his fellow Jesuit, Bernard Lonergan.[26] He repeated his fundamental concern to present a renewed approach to mystical theology that departed from the scholastic foundations of previous centuries and took account of certain contemporary challenges, such as the encounter with Asian religions, with a more practical approach to the mystical, the insights into the human mind found in modern psychology, scientific methodologies which explore a less 'mechanistic' view of the structures of the universe and the constant presence of hunger, poverty and violence. In response to these challenges, he suggested a mystical theology that would focus more modestly on methodology than on fixed doctrines, and for such a methodology, he turned to Lonergan's transcendental precepts. These are fundamentally directed towards a transformation of the human person, an intellectual, ethical and

[25] This is explored in the editors' introduction Howells & McIntosh, *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, 2020, pp. 2-3.
[26] William Johnston, 'Renewal in Mystical Theology', in T.P.Fallon, & P.B. Riley, *Religion and Culture, Essays in Honour of Bernard Lonergan SJ* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987, pp. 31-41).

religious conversion, 'a fundamental change in the human reality that a theologian is.'[27] I will now suggest three broad themes that emerge within this overall project.

Christocentric

It may seem to be a tautology to say that a particular Christian mystical theology is Christocentric, and perhaps it is especially striking that one such as Johnston's, with its keen sense of interfaith dialogue, should have such a focus on Jesus Christ, but Johnston insists that the person of Jesus makes his mystical theology more appealing in his Asian context. He notes how Yamada Koun regarded Jesus as a guide for all who seek enlightenment and how many Hindu teachers have looked to him as 'a mystic and a saint'.[28] Johnston goes on to describe how Asian theologians such as Aloysius Pieris have described Jesus in liberationist and inculturated terms as 'the guru, the liberator and the wisdom of God.'[29] Jesus shares in the poverty of the people through his own *kenosis* and, through this same movement of self-giving, lives a mystical life that consists in '*communion and intimacy with his Father, with his friends and with humanity*'.[30] Johnston's Jesus is the divine lover who seeks us out and draws us into intimacy with God and one another. He is also the indwelling Jesus, Eucharistic in the sense of St Paul's 'no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2:20) and who dwells equally in the Eucharistic community.[31] Johnston also gave great emphasis to prayer in the presence of the reserved sacrament, where Christ is present in body as in spirit.[32] The indwelling Eucharistic Christ also the one who transforms us, lovingly uniting us to the Father through his gift of himself to us.[33] Johnston's approach to Christ-centred prayer was not to 'entertain a picture of Jesus' in the mind while entering contemplative silence:

> Indeed, you need not objectify him at all; for he is there dwelling secretly in the depth of your consciousness; and all imageless though He is, He is your intimate friend and your tender lover.[34]

Although such contemplation is 'non-objective', Johnston insists that it is still the divine-human Christ who is present in his glorified body. Using terms from the Heart Sutra, Johnston describes this depth of contemplative silence as 'void' or 'emptiness', but one that becomes a refreshing

---

[27] Ibid. p. 36, quoting Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 270).
[28] Johnston, *'Arise, My Love...'*, p. 179.
[29] Ibid. p. 181 citing the bishops of the Asian Synod held in Rome in 1998.
[30] Ibid. p.183 [emphasis original].
[31] Johnston, *Being in Love, The Practice of Christian Prayer*, p. 32.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid. p. 77.
[34] Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, pp. 12-13.

limitlessness whose source is 'Jesus, the Word Incarnate, the Inner Guest.'[35] He also finds no tension between this deep void and a simultaneous consciousness of the 'mysteries of the earthly life of Jesus' for the experience is non-dual – 'form is emptiness and emptiness is form.'[36]

For all that he can find such possibilities for shared language to describe comparable phenomena in the contemplative life of Christians and Zen Buddhists, Johnston is always conscious that there are significant aspects of Christology that have no real counterpart in Zen. Ultimately, the language of a loving and personal relationship with Christ and of the union of Father, Son and Spirit does not translate easily into Buddhist categories. All the same, Johnston does find language in Zen that may offer ways to inculturate the mystic's experience of Christ for an Asian context, language which also brings to the foreground aspects of Christology that may be less visible in Western theology.

Experiential, Practical and Ascetical

We have noted throughout this study that Johnston's approach to mystical theology is practical, both in the sense of seeking to assist others in their spiritual lives and in the sense of being fundamentally grounded in the theologian's own lived practice of contemplation. However, it is worth re-emphasising here that Johnston himself presents this approach as one he has learned from his engagement with Japanese religious practice and which marks a significant break with his own theological formation, which saw mystical theology as proceeding from metaphysics. Drawing on the Buddhist notion of skilful means (*upaya*) and on the more general Japanese understanding of spiritual practices as *gyo,*[37] or disciplined paths, Johnston proposes a mystical theology which, as we noted above, begins with embodied practice rather than the construction of an elaborate metaphysical framework,[38] and any metaphysical insights emerge from and are refined by that practice. We see this very same move in his unpublished *Dialogues*, which suggested an approach to human relationships that is more concerned with pragmatism and the avoidance of harm than with *a priori* natural law ethics or rules-based systems.[39]

Although Johnston's approach can be described as practical and ascetical in the sense of offering embodied disciplines for shaping a holy life, this does not mean that he is uninterested in matters of

[35] Ibid. p. 14
[36] Ibid.
[37] See the discussion in ch. 19 of Johnston, *The Mirror Mind, Spirituality and Transformation*, pp. 179-186.
[38] In a short article in the *Japan Mission Journal* entitled 'Christianity as a Way' (Winter 2002), he also refers to the language of *Nostra Aetate,* which suggested that there were many 'ways' with a common goal. He was concerned to play down any Christian claims of exclusivity in favour a practice-based approach to the life of faith.
[39] In his 11th *Dialogue*, Johnston noted a reluctance in Asian thought to accept the notion of intrinsic evil, considering this concept to be too abstract.

faith. As we have seen, he repeatedly insists on the necessity of faith as a precondition and motivation for undertaking the spiritual path. And while Johnston does not use the word 'faith' as a shorthand for 'the' faith, or for the system of dogma, it is not, however, free of all content. He discusses this matter with some subtlety in *Mystical Theology* where, following St John of the Cross, he describes how the contemplative 'leaves behind all distinct knowledge in order to enter into the vague, obscure and loving knowledge that is the cloud of unknowing. This vague, general and loving knowledge is nothing less than a dark vision of God. It is the happy night of faith.'[40] He is clear that this 'silence and emptiness' differs, depending on the faith with which one enters it, so that 'the Zen mystic is entering into a supra-conceptual grasp of the Buddhist sutras just as the Christian mystic is entering into a supra-conceptual grasp of the truths of Christian faith.'[41] It was, ultimately, the recognition of this difference in the nature of the faith of the Buddhist and the Christian that caused Johnston to hold back from a fuller practice of Zen.[42]

Transformative

Johnston is concerned with a mystical theology that has, at its heart, the commitment to the transformation of the human person and, indeed, of the whole cosmos. We have described how he uses many images for this process of transformation, including the traditional threefold path of purgation–illumination–union,[43] the Jungian language of individuation we mentioned above and the language of conversion, especially as found in Lonergan and finding its culmination in the religious conversion that is marked by one's being becoming 'being-in-love'.[44] Johnston explores how this unrestricted love must extend not only to all people, but to the earth itself[45] and that it must be concerned with establishing peace and overcoming poverty and division. In a private letter, Johnston revealed to a lifelong friend that he intended to devote the final years of his life to the cause of peace, and especially to the abolition of nuclear weapons, whose destructive capabilities he saw so powerfully in the testimony of Takashi Nagai. In his foreword to the *Bells of Nagasaki*, Johnston holds up Nagai as an exemplar of the kind of conversion of which he wrote, 'a conversion of heart

[40] Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love*, p. 183.
[41] Ibid. p. 182.
[42] He recounts a conversation with Shigeto Oshida where he asked Oshida for advice about studying Zen under Yamada Koun. He recalls Oshida saying 'Go if you want. But I think you will find that their faith is different from yours.' Johnston, *Mystical Journey, An Autobiography*, p. 177.
[43] Ibid. p. 192 He also explores traditional language of bridal mysticism to speak of union with God, and suggest that this need not be merely metaphorical, but that erotic love can also be seen as a path to fuller human flourishing (ibid. pp. 271-274).
[44] Eg. in Johnston, *'Arise, My Love...'*, p. 214. The previous two conversions in Lonergan's outline are intellectual and ethical.
[45] Drawing on Teilhard's Ignatian sense of God's presence in all things ibid. pp. 162-163.

and mind', 'a profound enlightenment', 'a revolution in consciousness that transforms the whole person'.[46]

Although Johnston describes the ultimate union of the human person with God as being accomplished only through Jesus Christ, he affirms the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes,* which says that 'by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself with all men and women.'[47] Therefore, the scope of the transformative work of God is universal, establishing communion to overcome the isolation suffered by all:

> And the mysticism of all religions points to a union and a communion that is part of the journey of life. Assuredly in the journey one passes through periods of loneliness and isolation and apparent separation (for Gethsemane is an inescapable part of the human adventure) but it is a journey of love that brings union with the Ultimate Reality that Christians call God.[48]

Johnston also described union or communion in the language of nondualism, or the integration of opposites that would free the human person from self-seeking in order to be open in love towards all.[49] He explores the Hindu notion of *advaita*, especially in relation to Bede Griffiths and Abhishiktananda, and suggests that, if a Christian were to use this language, it would be 'an *advaita* of love and communion',[50] again stressing the irreducibly interpersonal nature of Christian faith.

The Influence of Zen Buddhism on Johnston's Comparative Mystical Theology

Johnston offered a helpful summary of insights he had gained from a lifelong engagement with Buddhism in a Margaret Beaufort Lecture he gave in 2002. He first described his own experience of attempting to deepen his experience of Christian contemplative prayer by adopting Zen practice but found that he could not reconcile the dimension of love towards God with a practice that did not seem to have a place for such language. He then committed himself to a path of dialogical learning, which allows each religion to be expressed in its own terms but, through a conversion of heart, opens up new insights for the one who is prepared to be changed by an encounter with the other. In his lecture, he then went on to describe how he moved from a position of dialogue to the practice of inter-religious meditation in the group he founded in Sophia University, which was also inspired by

[46] Nagai, *The Bells of Nagasaki,* p. xxii.
[47] *Gaudium et Spes,* 57 cited in Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love,* p. 283.
[48] Ibid. p. 298.
[49] Ibid. p. 258. He refers to Jung's fascination with the Chinese notion of *yin* and *yang*.
[50] Johnston, '*Arise, My Love...'*, p. 199.

the gathering of representatives of world faiths in Assisi in 1986, which was a seminal event for him, as we have previously noted. He summarised what he had learned from his encounter with Zen practice as: an appreciation of emptiness as an expression of the true self, the notion of karma as a law of life expressing the connectedness of all things, and an enriching of the understanding of conscience as expressed in *Gaudium et Spes* 16 as being equivalent to Zen understandings of the true self. Finally, he suggested that Buddhism offered not only an equivalent theory of the human conscience, but a true and embodied path towards its discovery as the 'inner room' described by Jesus in Mt. 6:6. In addition to these three insights, he offers a further reflection on what he describes as the deepest enlightenment, the greatest realisation of the true self in Jesus' words 'I AM'.[51]

This framework largely coincides with my own findings on Johnston's learning from Zen Buddhism, which I will now summarise under the following headings: *Apophasis, Ascesis, Love* and *Inculturation*. In each of these areas, the theological learning was achieved largely through the comparison of ritual practices in which Johnston participated.

Apophasis and Compassion

In Chapter 3, we concluded that Johnston's engagement with the Buddhist notion of *sunyata,* as expressed in The Heart Sutra or in the Zen *koan mu,* was highly significant. He brought these concepts and practices into dialogue with the apophatic strain of Christian mysticism, especially as found in the writings of St John of the Cross and in a kenotic Christology founded on the great hymn of Philippians 2. He observed that such a Christology resonated strongly with the experience and inculturated theology of Asian Christians, as expressed in the Asian Synod in Rome in 1998, where Jesus is '"the enlightened one", the one who shares the *kenosis* of the Asian people.'[52] Such a theology, notes Johnston, is concerned both with the liberation of the poor and with mystical encounter. He had rightly understood that *sunyata* in Zen Buddhism also encompasses both a deep intuition of the nature of all things and a compassionate response to the cries of the world.[53]

It is reasonable to conclude that Johnston's explorations of apophatic and kenotic theology were decisively shaped by his comparison of Zen ritual practice and Christian mystical theology. This is exemplified by his inclusion of the text of the Heart Sutra as an appendix to his *Mystical Theology*[54]

[51] A theme had explored in Johnston, *Christian Zen,* p. 13.
[52] Johnston, '*Arise, My Love...',* p. 181.
[53] See his discussion of Kannon in Johnston, *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love,* pp. 157-161.
[54] Ibid. pp. 366-367.

but is prominent throughout his entire work.[55] Although it could be argued that this would have been a significant element of his mystical theology even without his engagement with Zen, especially given his devotion to St John of the Cross,[56] there can be no doubt that the character of his explorations was strongly coloured by Zen practices. While he maintained a resistance to the notion that the two traditions could be equated in a straightforward way, not least because the inherently personal character of God in Christian apophatic experience is never completely discarded, he greatly valued the insights he gained from Zen practice and thinking. The distinctive character of Christian apophatic experience came into sharper focus for him through his dialogue with Zen and, paradoxically, elements of Zen practice[57] may have led him to this awareness more significantly than his consideration of ideas such as those formulated in the Kyoto School. He could appreciate the way in which a respectful encounter with Zen at the level of shared practice could purify Christian notions of God, which might otherwise succumb to erroneous dualistic assumptions of God as one being among others, albeit a more powerful one.[58] He articulates this with particular clarity in *Letters to Contemplatives,* where he describes a personal experience of 'the void', with reference to the Heart Sutra, but goes on to suggest that 'the void has a source: and the source is Jesus, the Word Incarnate, the Inner Guest. … As one grows in maturity, there is no tension between the void and the mysteries of the earthly life of Jesus.'[59]

Ascesis

I have frequently emphasised the experiential foundations of Johnston's mystical theology and it is in inter-ritual participation that we find his greatest influence from Zen. In chapter four, we outlined the areas of his exploration; body and posture, breath, and energy. We also discussed his more theological explorations that flow from embodied practice around the themes of effort and grace, acquired and infused contemplation. And for all that Johnston found some echoes of these themes in Christian tradition,[60] there can be no doubt that Zen was the decisive influence in shaping this

[55] We can see this strain of thought in early works such as the extensive discussion in Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love,* pp. 106-125, or the description of nothingness as 'an ocean of indescribable wealth' in Johnston, *Silent Music, The Science of Meditation*, p. 64, as well as later references such as those noted above or Johnston, *'Arise, My Love...'*, pp. 100-102.
[56] See, for example, his essay on apophasis in Johnston, 'The Experience of God in Christian Apophatic Mysticism', 1982, which contains only one passing reference to Zen.
[57] I think particularly of his observations of the practice of the koan 'mu', for example in (Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love*, pp. 112-113, and his advocacy of the practice of the breath, for example in Johnston, *Silent Music, The Science of Meditation*, p. 57.
[58] Johnston, *Christian Zen*, p. 8.
[59] Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, pp. 14-15. He compares this to the experience of the disciples in Gethsemane or on the Emmaus road.
[60] We noted, for example, his fruitful suggestion of bringing St Gregory Palamas into dialogue with Chinese and Japanese understanding of the body's energies.

area of his mystical theology. Photographs in Johnston's archive[61] show how assiduously he adopted Zen forms of seated meditation:

However, he repeatedly insisted that he did not practise Zen, but Christian contemplation formed in comparison with Zen because he was clear that the faith with which one undertakes the practice of meditation or contemplation is decisive.

At times, although Johnston affirms the integrity of a Zen path towards awakening, he appears to suggest that it may only reach a 'lower' or 'natural' level of insight, failing to reach the mystical heights of a Christian contemplation directed towards God in his holiness.[62] In this way of thinking, he can value Zen practice as a preparatory ascesis for Christians, settling the mind with its distractions, but does not regard it as equivalent to Christian contemplation. This emphasis is perhaps most present in his later writings. He tries to strike a balance in his assessment, suggesting that,

> Perhaps it is the vocation of Jews and Christians to bring the sense of the holy to Kyoto and Kamakura without destroying the lofty spirituality that is there. The consummation of the marriage between the sacred and the spiritual is the great ideal in the meeting of East and West.[63]

As we noted in Chapter 4, however, Johnston is not consistent in this matter and sometimes offers a more balanced view of the delicate interaction between the emphases of self-reliance and gift that

[61] Used with the kind permission of the keeper and owner of the archive. Photographers unknown.
[62] This is particularly overt in Johnston, *'Arise, My Love...'*, p. 57. where he cites his Carmelite friend, Ichiro Okumura: "the Oriental sages climb the lofty mountain of detachment from the world; they breathe the pure air of the heights" – 'but', adds Johnston, 'true holiness is beyond all this and belongs to God.' Okumura contrasts the 'spiritual' with the 'sacred' – the latter being the realm of the divine, I. Okumura, *Awakening to Prayer* (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1994), p. 87.
[63] Ibid.

are present in both Christian and Zen traditions. This kind of oscillation is characteristic of Johnston's desire to engage in a conversation with Zen where he attempts to offer as well as receive insight and expresses a fluidity rather than a set of settled conclusions. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that Johnston was in debt to Zen for training him in embodied practices of contemplative prayer and in giving a theological, rather than merely practical, value to the 'praying body' that has been largely absent from Western mysticism. His key notion of a 'conversion to the body … whereby one comes to love and accept one's body', is also a conversion to the material world and to a full appreciation of the Body of Christ as a fundamentally communal reality.[64] It is a direct apprehension of the doctrine of the incarnation through the practice of embodied prayer.

Finally, we reaffirm the findings of Chapter 5 of the centrality of Johnston's engagement with the *koan* tradition as an *embodied* practice of reading scripture. His creative combination of his own meditative practice, insights into the theology of scriptural hermeneutics from Vatican II and the rich *koan* tradition of Zen Buddhism led to the distinctive approach to scripture which characterises his work. Again, while remaining within Catholic traditions of scriptural interpretation, it is clear that Johnston's approach was decisively shaped by his dialogue with Zen, where the *koan* is not interpreted as an abstract mental exercise, but is apprehended, body-and-mind, in a direct and existential manner. Johnston understood that this did not mean that the *koan* literature is devoid of core Buddhist teaching – on the contrary, it is full of such teaching – but that the means of receiving it are, to use a favourite term of Johnston's, supra-conceptual and firmly based on embodied practice. Johnston adopted this approach in his 'reading' of the Christian Scriptures alongside his colleague, Kakichi Kadowaki.[65]

Inculturation

These three themes may be characterised as being part of a larger project of inculturation of mystical theology in an Asian context. As we have already said, Johnston's later work shows an increasing concern for this wider framework. The contextualisation he has in mind is of a deep sort and is not only concerned with outward cultural forms. Rather, he understood that the fundamental philosophical worldviews of Christians who inherit European theological traditions and those from

[64] See, e.g. Johnston, *Being in Love, The Practice of Christian Prayer,* p. 29. This is a rare instance of Johnston's debt to his Ignatian formation, centred, as it is, on conversion.

[65] While it is almost impossible to discern which of the two pioneered this approach, it is notable that Kadowaki cited *Christian Zen* as a source for explaining the nature of the koan in his work on, Kakichi Kadowaki, *The Ignatian Exercises and Zen,* (Jersey City, NJ: Program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises, 197), p. 21, assuming, of course, that it was not Johnston himself who inserted this footnote in his translation of the work from Japanese into English!

the rich intellectual cultures of India, China and Japan are significantly different. Put in very broad terms indeed, he suggested that a theological approach that was more incarnational, mystical, nondualistic and 'feminine' would be more in keeping with many strains of Asian thought than the typically more abstract doctrinal tendencies of Western theology.[66] He was candid about the likely timescale for a deep inculturation of the Gospel in Asia – 'It takes a millennium for a religion to penetrate the unconscious and activate the archetypes of a people'[67] – but he saw this task as vital not only for the Christian communities of Asia, but for the whole Christian church as the geopolitical centre of gravity moved Eastwards in the third millennium.[68] He described an Asian approach to Christian mysticism as something like a new 'school', taking its place among the classic schools of Catholic mysticism like those of the Benedictine, Ignatian, Franciscan, Dominican and Carmelite traditions. He regarded his own contribution to be within this new 'school'.[69]

If we consider such a school to include among its early pioneers such writers as Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, Aelred Graham and Abhishiktananda, and among its later exponents writers committed to a more thorough immersion in Zen practice such as Ruben Habito, Elaine MacInnes and Robert Kennedy, we might see Johnston as occupying a transitional phase where a closer engagement with practices and texts was growing, if not yet at the level of detailed exploration we see in Frank Clooney[70] or Janet Williams.[71] Where he remains a distinctive representative of this 'school' is in his consistent attempt to offer a Christian mystical theology founded on practice and directed towards the deepening of that practice through accessible, pastoral and intelligent writings.[72]

Areas for Future Research

Johnston's work remains largely unresearched, and I would suggest that a number of areas for further exploration might include a more detailed examination of his unpublished *Dialogues*, a more

[66] Johnston, *'Arise, My Love...'*, pp. 230-231.
[67] Ibid. p. 231.
[68] Ibid. p. 40.
[69] Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*, p. 2.
[70] E.g. Francis Clooney, *His Hiding place is Darkness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).
[71] E.g. Janet P. Williams, *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[72] Among the many contemporary writers exploring the Catholic traditions of contemplative prayer, I would see Martin Laird OSA as one who follows a similar path to Johnston, though his influences from Eastern practice are very much more hidden than Johnston's. His approach is similarly pastoral and popular, yet also attempting an intelligent approach to the theology of contemplative prayer for a wide audience. His works include Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006).

systematic consideration of his understanding of St John of the Cross and a more contextual reflection on his place among Japanese Christian theologians of his era.

Johnston's work also raises interesting possibilities for the growing field of comparative theology in which Zen Buddhism is the principal comparator. I have already noted the significant increase in the availability of original texts in translation thanks, in large part, to the maturing of Zen centres in the United States over the last two decades. This makes a corpus of work available to a wider range of Christian mystical and ascetical theologians who wish to explore the fertile dialogue between Zen and Christian traditions of practice and discourse. Johnston's own work introduces, in a very general way, themes that would merit considerably more detailed textual and phenomenological or experiential comparison. On the textual side, we have already seen a sophisticated analysis of *apophasis* in Dogen and the Christian patristic writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor.[73] It might be interesting to apply this comparative approach to Christian texts more contemporary with Dogen's output, such as the Victorines or Bonaventure, to consider how questions of 'mind' are addressed in each. In a similar way, the work of Hakuin might find interesting comparisons with Ignatius of Loyola or, indeed, John Wesley. The former might offer a comparison of systematic approaches to spiritual growth based on a method of reading (cf. Hakuin's systematisation of *koan* study) and the latter an understanding of the motivations of the human heart and the deep need for popular religious revival.

In the area of comparative theology based on praxis or inter-riting, recent work on the ritual aspects of *zazen* can be explored alongside studies in Christian ritual participation, as indicated in van der Braak's work.[74] Given the extraordinary rise in the number of Christians practising contemplative prayer over the last generation, it is surely possible to examine the forms and embodied character of these practices in a comparative way. In the same way that Johnston examined the 'bodily grammar' of meditative practice as a source of learning for his Christian mystical theology rooted in the practice of contemplative prayer, a comparative study of such 'grammatical' commonalities and variants should yield as fertile material for theology as a textual study, perhaps especially when this is accompanied by textual commentary. Areas for exploration might include some of those addressed in an initial way by Johnston, like posture and breathing and others he did not address like the communal dimension of meditative practice.[75]

[73] Williams, *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*.
[74] André van der Braak, 'The Practice of *Zazen* as Ritual Performance' in Marianne Moyaert & Joris Geldof (eds.), *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 156-165.
[75] In Zen Buddhism, *zazen* is principally communal in character, deriving from its monastic origins. This is less developed in the Christian practice of contemplative prayer, but is not entirely absent. For example, the

It is perhaps surprising that he does not make more use of the Christian tradition of *lectio divina* in his consideration of an embodied, spiritual reading of scripture.[76] It may be that he is less familiar with, or simply less interested[77] in, the monastic traditions from which it derives. Additionally, he preceded a more contemporary revival of the tradition by such writers as Basil Pennington and Enzo Bianchi.[78] There are, however, many overlaps between the approach described by Johnston of regularly repeating words of scripture in a prayerful manner, praying with the body in a disciplined way, and the ancient monastic practice of lectio, stretching back to the earliest desert monastics. Jasper describes is well:

> Hardly to be described as interpreters of the texts of scripture, the desert monks were engaged in a process of appropriation, a 'conversion' with its words whereby they sought to digest them and transform their bodily existence into a form of holiness that was both practical and a lived metaphor in the world.[79]

He describes a process whereby these monastics 'internalised and devoured' words of scripture and 'projected from the text of the Bible a 'world of meaning'' which yields 'a surplus of spiritual energy in their lives' and transcends mere understanding of the text. The similarities with Johnston's approach are notable, built on a somatic appropriation of the text leading to conversion of heart – a reading 'from life'. The body of literature associated with the desert monastics and the later medieval traditions of lectio is vast and could profitably be read in comparison with the Zen *koan* tradition.[80] These areas for exploration are supported by a recovery of confidence in handling the embodied nature of lived faith as a principal source of theological material (as in Coakley's *théologie totale*), a confidence which Johnston exhibited right through his work.

Staying within the realm of Christian ascetical and mystical theology, Johnston's work may also be complemented by a consideration of traditions of 'spiritual reading', both historic and modern. Although less interested in the embodied character of meditative reading, Harvey explores the

---

Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist in Tolleshunt Knights, Essex, has developed a communal practice of the Jesus Prayer.

[76] There are passing references in his later works; Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 63, Johnston, *'Arise, My Love…'*, p. 17.

[77] In his autobiography, Johnston, *Mystical Journey*, p. 173, he recounts how, when visiting Bede Griffiths in his Ashram, Bede was very keen to introduce Johnston to the 'Indianized' daily offices of which he was very proud. Johnston declined and was content to join him at mass, suggesting a basic difference between Benedictine and Jesuit piety.

[78] Enzo Bianchi, *Praying the Word* (Collegeville, PA: Cistercian Publications, 1999), Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998).

[79] David Jasper, *The Sacred Body* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009) p. 50. He also addresses the theme in David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 15,16, where, again, he speaks of the meditator 'living within' the biblical text.

[80] An example of the later tradition is Guigo's *Ladder of Monks* (Collegeville, PA: Cistercian Publications, 1981).

'spiritual readings' of Barth and de Lubac. With the latter, she notes an appeal for a return to a classical Christian framework for addressing four senses of meaning in the text – history, allegory, morality and anagogy – drawing significantly on the highly influential hermeneutical approach formulated by Origen.[81] Johnston rooted his spiritual reading in the theology of the Second Vatican Council and, though he acknowledges the value of historical-critical readings, his work could benefit from a more sophisticated consideration of how such approaches might work alongside more 'spiritual' hermeneutics. Harvey's dialogue with biblical scholarship and systematic theology offers one possible model.

In the Zen Buddhist world, we note a deepening of scholarly appreciation of the *koan* form in the West. Johnston's approach suggests a potentially fertile field of comparative theology based on nuanced readings of the *koan* corpus and its history of interpretation. In the realm of a comparative mystical theology, the interpretation of Christian scriptures by mystical writers would offer an appropriate comparison.[82]

Johnston's Contribution to Comparative Mystical Theology

At the outset, I indicated my intention to examine Johnston's work on its own terms as a pastoral response to the increasing desire for 'ordinary' Christians to learn how to pray and to grow in the spiritual life in a globalised context that brings experiences and insights of world faiths to everyone's doorstep. He sought to do so in a way that respected the ability of non-specialists to engage with serious theological concerns and a wide range of sources. It is clear that he was successful in this endeavour in the simple sense that his work was widely read and appreciated and that his teaching was regularly sought out by individuals and communities across the world.

But I also asked whether Johnston offers any insights of lasting value to current scholarship, especially in the field of comparative theology. The answer to that question is less clear. Johnston did not write texts that stand the rigours of academic inquiry in this field – neither did he intend to – and the majority of his writings predate the rise of comparative theology as a distinct approach. Nonetheless, I have suggested that, at the very least, Johnston anticipated some of the themes and methods of comparative theology by suggesting an approach to Zen Buddhism as another standpoint from which to see one's 'home' tradition. In Clooney's terms, Johnston took part in this to-and-fro work of comparison as a committed participant in a 'reflective and contemplative

[81] A.L. Harvey, *Spiritual Reading* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 2015), p. 127.
[82] The sermons of Meister Eckhart come to mind.

endeavour'[83]. But did he discover material that contemporary practitioners of this theological method will still find to be valuable?

I think it is unlikely that many scholars in the field of comparative theology will turn to Johnston's work for fully-formed theological conclusions, but they may find it worthwhile to see his explorations as tentative first steps into areas that will prove fruitful if interrogated more rigorously. Clooney does regard the work of comparative theology as modestly focussing on small engagements rather than constructing ambitious theological systems and Johnston might have found it gratifying if someone were to take his suggestions about the experience of *sunyata* in contemplation, or koan study as a mode of scriptural meditation, or the nature of spiritual growth through ascetical practice and delve into these areas in depth, more fully examining their contours and connections with the textual traditions in order to present fresh insights for Christian mystical theology.

Concluding Thoughts

There can be no doubt that there were deficiencies in Johnston's understanding of Zen Buddhism, not least a relatively limited acquaintance with its vast literary content, and his work can tend towards generalisation and repetition at times. His later work contains little fresh material for his ongoing sense of a dialogue with Zen. Nevertheless, he can be credited with introducing key insights from Zen Buddhism to a wide audience of Christians committed to a disciplined life of prayer and to a thoughtful theological reflection on such disciplined practice. William Johnston was keenly aware of the conflicts and tensions in his life: an Irishman, born amidst the Troubles, living in a Japan emerging from the trauma of war in all its nuclear horror; a Catholic formed in neo-scholastic tradition yet energised by the insights of Vatican II; a celibate priest seeking a reconciliation with his sexual identity; a Jesuit schooled in Ignatian spirituality yet always drawn to a Carmelite approach to contemplative prayer; a lover of Buddhism yet cautious about a wholehearted embrace of Zen practice. These tensions led to his embrace of a path of dialogue, reconciliation and peacemaking, a path that began with his own inner explorations and that led to him generously offering his hard-won insights to a growing number of Christians who were open to the contemplative way. To those who knew him, he was a wise spiritual guide and a man of keen intelligence, yet also someone painfully aware of his inner restlessness. To the many thousands who read his books and attended his talks, he offered new ways of understanding and practising a transformative life of prayer. To the world comparative theology, he suggested an approach that was fundamentally faithful to Catholic teaching yet willing to learn from insights born of a reflection on praxis across religious traditions. He

[83] as quoted above, p. 39

understood the need for a renaissance of mystical theology as a core theological emphasis for the twenty-first Christian century, a century that in a world of shifting geopolitical dynamics, recasts Christian theology in the light of patterns of thought and practice far removed from the European traditions that had previously been so dominant. He took seriously Karl Rahner's suggestion that a credible Christianity must, in this new context, be mystical. His contribution may have been modest, but it was undoubtedly prophetic and continues to stand as a bold, if imperfect, attempt at comparative mystical theology founded on disciplined practice, spiritual authenticity and humble openness to what is 'true and holy'[84] in all religions.

[84] *Nostra Aetate* 2

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works by William Johnston – A Complete Bibliography

Johnston, William. Seven letters to Thomas Merton (13.5.64, 19.11.64, 28.2.65, 29.6.66, 30.11.66, 13.1.67, 14.6.67). Unpublished. Used courtesy of Thomas Merton Archive, Bellarmine University.

– *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing*. New York: Desclée Co., 1967.

– 'Defining Mysticism – Suggestions from the Christian Encounter with Zen' (pp. 94-110) *Theological Studies* vo. 28, no. 1, 1967.

– 'The Zen Enlightenment' (pp. 167-184) *Thought – Fordham University Quarterly* vol. 42 no. 165, 1967.

– *The Still Point, Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1970.

– *Christian Zen*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971.

– 'The Mystical Reading of Scripture, Some Suggestions from Buddhism.' *Cistercian Studies*, 6, 57-64, 1971.

– 'Superthinking: An Introduction to Christian Zen' (pp. 28-30) *America* July 24 1971.

– *Silent Music, The Science of Meditation*. London: William Collins and Sons, 1974.

– 'Ecstasy' (pp. 176-183) *The Way* July 1974

– 'Pure Land Buddhism and Nembutsu'. *Studia Missionalia*, 25, 43-64, 1976.

– *The Inner Eye of Love*. London: William Collins and Sons, 1978.

– *The Inner Eye of Love*. New York: Harper and Row, 1978.

– 'Zen – The Present Situation' (pp. 6-10) *Asian Forms of Prayer – A Pastoral Seminar, Jesuit Conference of East Asia,* date unknown but post 1978.

– *The Mirror Mind, Spirituality and Transformation*. London: William Collins and Sons, 1981.

– 'The Experience of God in Christian Apophatic Mysticism' in Sontag, F. & Bryant, M. *God, The Contemporary Discussion* (pp. 363-373). Barrytown, NY: Rose of Sharon Press, 1982.

– *The Wounded Stag.* London: Harper Collins, 1984.

– Contemplative Prayer (1985). [Motion Picture]. Ireland.

– 'Renewal in Mystical Theology.' In Fallon, T.P. & Riley, P.B., Religion and Culture, Essays in Honour of Bernard Lonergan SJ (pp. 31-41). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.

– ‘All and Nothing, St. John of the Cross and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue’. *The Eastern Buddhist*, 21(2), 124-144, 1988.

– *Being in Love, The Practice of Christian Prayer*. London: Harper Collins, 1988.

– ‘Jesuit Spirituality Today’. (pp. 228-231) *Religious Life Review* vol. 28, 1990.

– *Letters to Contemplatives*. London: Harper Collins, 1991.

– *The New Mysticism*. Tape recordings of talks given to the World Community of Christian Meditation in Australia, 1994.

– ‘The New Mysticism’ (pp. 4-9) *The Journal of Sophia Asian Studies* no. 12, 1994.

– ‘Wisdom and Emptiness’, *Studia Missionalia* vol. 43, 261-274, 1994.

– *Mystical Theology, The Science of Love*. London: Harper Collins, 1995.

– *Prayer and Meditation in the Modern World*. Tape recordings by Christian Meditation Company, 1995.

– *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling.* London: Fount Paperbacks, 1997.

– *‘Arise, My Love...’.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000.

– *Dialogues.* Unpublished manuscript, William Johnston Archive, 2001.

– Margaret Beaufort Lecture. Cambridge, 2002.

– ‘Christianity as a Way’ (pp. 244-246) *Japan Mission Journal* vol. 6 no. 4, 2002.

– ‘Mysticism and Interreligious Dialogue’. International Conference on ‘Religious Spiritual Tradition’ (pp. 1-15). Taipei: Fu Jen Catholic University, 2002.

– *Letters to Friends*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003.

– *Mystical Journey, An Autobiography*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006.

– ‘Has Mysticism a Future?’ (pp. 82-89) *Japan Mission Journal* vol. 60 no. 2, 2006.

– ‘Can the Religions Bring Peace?’ *International Religious Studies Conference – Mystical Experience, Spirituality and Social Responsibility*, Sogang University Institute for Religion, 2006.

– ‘St John of the Cross and Interreligious Dialogue in Asia’. In Culligan, K. *A Better Wine, Essays Celebrating Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D.* (pp. 327-336). Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2007.

– ‘Religions Prayer Together’ (pp. 244-247) *Japan Mission Journal* vol. 61 no. 4, 2007.

Works in Translation

Johnston, William. *Spiritualität und Transformation*. Munich: Kosel-Verlag GmbH & Co (translation of *The Mirror Mind* by Susanne Schaup), 1986.

– *Naan Een Niewe Mystick*. Ghent: Carmelitana (translation of *Letters to Contemplatives* by Wilfried Stinisson), 1994.

– *Rakkauden Kutsu*. Helsinki: Kirjapaja Oy (translation of *The Wounded Stag* by Kai Takkula), 1999.

– *Mystik För En Ny Tid*. Stockholm: Veritas Förlag (translation of *'Arise, My Love…'* by Ylva-Kristina Sjöblom), 2003.

General Bibliography

A Monk of the Eastern Church. *The Jesus Prayer*. New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987.

Abbott, Walter. *The Documents of Vatican II*. New York: Guild Press, 1996.

Abe, Masao. 'Note on the Life of Shin'ichi Hisamatsu'. The Eastern Buddhist, 14 (1), 142-149, 1980.

Alfeyev, Hilarion. *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*. Collegeville, PA: Cistercian Publications, 2000.

Babka, S. P. 'Sunyata and Otherness', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 35, 73-90, 2015.

Barnes, Michael. *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

– 'Catholic Theology and Other Religions' in Ayres, L., & Volpe, M. *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology* (pp. 931-942). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

– 'Interreligious Dialogue' in Howells, E. & McIntosh, M.A., *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology* (pp. 626-645). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

– *Waiting on Grace, A Theology of Dialogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Bianchi, Enzo. *Praying the Word - An Introduction to Lectio Divina*. Collegeville: Cistercian Publications, 1999.

Blackhouse, Robert. *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989.

Blée, Paul *The Third Desert.* Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2011.

Brianchaninov, Ignatius. *On the Prayer of Jesus*. Liberty, TN: Saint John of Kronstadt Press, 1995.

Butler, Christopher. *The Theology of Vatican II*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981.

Chadwick, David. *Crooked Cucumber; The Life and Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki*. London: HarperCollins, 1999.

Chang, G. C. *The Practice of Zen*. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

Cleary, T. *The Blue Cliff Record*. (T. Cleary, Trans.) Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1977.

Cleary, T., & Cleary, J. *The Blue Cliff Record*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2005.

Clooney, F. X. *His Hiding Place is Darkness*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014.

Coakley, Sarah. *God, Sexuality and the Self, An Essay on the Trinity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

– *The New Asceticism*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015.

Cobb, J. B., & Ives, C. (Eds.). *The Emptying God, A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991.

Cohen, J. M. *The Life of St Teresa of Avila by Herself*. London: Penguin Books, 1957.

Conze, Edward. *Buddhism, its Essence and Development* (Windhorse 2001 ed.). Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1951.

– *Buddhist Thought in India*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1967.

Corless, Roger, & Knitter, Paul (Eds.). *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990.

Cornille, Catherine (Ed.). *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002.

Cousins, Ewert. *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St Francis*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.

de Mello, Anthony. *Sadhana, A Way to God*. New York: Doubleday, 1978.

Dogen, Eihei. *The True Dharma Eye, Three Hundred Koans*. (Loori, John Daido Ed.) Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2005.

– *Shobogenzo*. Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007.

– *Shobogenzo, The True Dharma-Eye Treasury*. (Nishijima, W. & Cross, C. Trans.) Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2008.

Drew, Rose. *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging.* Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.

– In D'Costa, G. & Thompson, R. (Eds.), *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging; Affirmations, Objections, Explorations*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2016.

Dumoulin, Heinrich. *A History of Zen Buddhism.* Boston, MA: Random House, 1963.

– *Christianity Meets Buddhism*. LaSalle, PA: Open Court Publishing, 1974.

– *Zen Enlightenment, Origins and Meaning*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1976.

– *Zen Buddhism in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Weatherhill, 1992.

– *Zen Buddhism: A History (India and China).* Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005.

– *Zen Buddhism: A History (Japan)*. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005.

Dürckheim, Karl Graf. *Hara, the Vital Center of Man*. Rochester, NY: Inner Traditions, 1962.

Egan, Philip. *Philosophy and Catholic Theology*: A Primer. Collegeville, PA: Liturgical Press, 2009.

Endo, Shusaku. *Silence*. Tokyo: Sophia University1969.

Evagrius. *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*. (Bamberger, J.E., Ed.) Collegeville, PA: Cistercian Publications, 1972.

Fallon, T. P., & Riley, P. B. *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honour of Bernard Lonergan SJ*. Albany: State University of New York Press1987.

Flannery, Austin. *Vatican II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1987.

Fleming, Kenneth. *Asian Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Buddhism*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2002.

Ford, James Ishmael. *Introducing the Koan*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2018.

Gillet, Lev. *Orthodox Spirituality.* London: SPCK, 1945.

Glassman, Bernie. *Infinite Circle, Teachings in Zen*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2003.

Graham, Aelred. *Zen Catholicism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963.

– *Conversations, Christian and Buddhist*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968.

– *The End of Religion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1971.

– *Contemplative Christianity*. London: Mowbray, 1974.

Griffiths, Bede. *The Golden String*. London: The Harvill Press, 1954.

– *The Marriage of East and West*. London: Collins, 1976.

– *A New Vision of Reality*. London: HarperCollins, 1989.

Guardini, Romano. *The Art of Praying*. Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1957.

Habito, Ruben. *Total Liberation, Zen Spirituality and the Social Dimension*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

– *Living Zen, Loving God*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004.

– *Healing Breath*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2006.

– 'Being Buddhist, Being Christian: Being Both, Being Neither.' In May, J.D. *Converging Ways? Conversion and Belonging in Buddhism and Christianity* (pp. 165-180). Klosterverlag Sankt Ottilien: EOS, 2007.

– *Zen and the Spiritual Exercises*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013.

– *Be Still and Know, Zen and the Bible*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books2017.

Hakuin. *Wild Ivy*. (Waddell, Norman, Trans.) Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2010.

– *Poison Blossoms from a Thicket of Thorn*. (Waddell, Norman, Trans.) Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2014.

Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Zen Keys*. New York: Doubleday, 1974.

– *The Heart of Understanding, Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*. Berkley, CA: Paralax, 1988.

– *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*. London: Random House, 1998.

Harvey, A. L. *Spiritual Reading*. Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 2015.

Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhism, Teachings, History and Practices* (Second ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Heine, Steven. *Like Cats and Dogs, Contesting the Mu Koan in Zen Buddhism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

– *Chan Rhetoric of Uncertainty in the Blue Cliff Record*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Heine, Steven & Wright, Dale S. *The Koan, Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

- *Zen Ritual, Studies of Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2008

Heisig, J. W., & Maraldo, J. C. (Eds.). *Rude Awakenings, Zen, the Kyoto School and the Question of Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994.

Herrigel, Eugen. *Zen in the Art of Archery*. New York: Vintage Books, 1953.

Hinton, David. *No-Gate Gateway, The Original Wu-Men Kuan*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications2018.

Hirai, Tomio. *The Psychophysiology of Zen*. Tokyo: Igaku Shoin, 1974.

– *Zen and the Mind*. Tokyo: Japan Publications, 1978.

Hisamatsu, Shin'ichi. 'The Characteristics of Oriental Nothingness'. *Philosophical Studies of Japan*, II, 65-97, 1960.

Holder, Arthur. *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

Howells, Edward, & McIntosh, Mark A. (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Jasper, David. *The Sacred Desert*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

– *The Sacred Body*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009.

Kadloubovsky, E., & Palmer, G. *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*. London: Faber and Faber, 1951.

Kadowaki, Kakichi. *Zen and the Bible*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.

– *The Ignatian Exercises and Zen*. Jersey City, NJ: Program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises1974.

Kapleau, Philip. *Three Pillars of Zen* (Revised ed.). New York: Doubleday, 1980.

Katagiri, Dainin. Returning to Silence. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1988.

Kavanaugh, Keiran, & Rodriguez, Otilio. *Teresa of Avila, The Interior Castle*. London: SPCK, 1979.

– *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1980.

– *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991.

Kennedy, Robert. *Zen Gifts to Christians*. New York: Continuum, 2004.

– *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit*. New York: Continuum, 1995.

Kerr, Fergus. *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Kim, Hee-Jin. *Eihei Dogen, Mystical Realist*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003.

–. *Dogen on Meditation and Thinking: A Reflection on his View of Zen*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007.

King, Ursula. *The Search for Spirituality*. New York: BlueBridge, 2008.

Kirchner, Thomas Yuho. *Entangling Vines.* Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2013.

Knitter, Paul. *No Other Name*. London: SCM Press, 1985.

– *Theologies of Religions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books,2002.

– *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2009.

– 'A 'Hypostatic Union' of Two Practices But One Person?' *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 19-26, 2012.

Knitter, Paul, & Haight, Roger. *Jesus and Buddha*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015.

Laird, Martin. *Into the Silent Land*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006.

Lassalle, Hugo Enomiya. *Zen Meditation for Christians*. LaSalle, PA: Open Court, 1974.

– *Living in the New Consciousness*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1988.

Lonergan, Bernard. *Method in Theology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971.

– *A Second Collection*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974.

Loori, John Daido. *The Eight Gates of Zen*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1992.

– *Riding the Ox Home*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1999.

– *The Art of Just Sitting*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004.

– *Sitting with Koans*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2006.

Lossky, Vladimir. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (1991 ed.). Cambridge: James Clarke and Co Ltd, 1957.

MacInnes, Elaine. *The Flowering Bridge*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2007.

Maezumi, Taizan, & Glassman, Bernie. *On Zen Practice*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2002.

McGinn, Bernard. *The Foundations of Mysticism*. London: SCM Press, 1991.

– *Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain*, 1500-1650. New York: Crossroad, Herder and Herder, 2017.

McGinn, Bernard, Meyendorff, John, & Leclerc, Jean (eds.). *Christian Spirituality, Origins to the Twelfth Century*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1987.

McGuckin, John A. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014.

McIntosh, Mark. *Mystical Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998.

Mercadante, Linda. *Belief Without Borders*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Merton, Thomas (). *Thoughts in Solitude*. London: Burn and Oates, 1958.

– *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions, 1962.

– *Life and Holiness*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1963.

– *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. New York: New Directions, 1965.

– *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. New York: Doubleday, 1966.

– *Cables to the Ace* (1986 ed.). Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1967.

– *Mystics and Zen Masters*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1967.

– *Selected Poems* (Enlarged ed.). New York: New Directions, 1967.

– *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. New York: New Directions, 1968.

– *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. New York: New Directions, 1968.

– *Contemplative Prayer*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1969.

– *A Thomas Merton Reader* (Revised ed.). New York: Doubleday, 1974.

– *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. New York: New Directions, 1977.

– *Day of a Stranger*. Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs M. Smith Inc, 1981.

– *The Hidden Ground of Love*. (W. H. Shannon, Ed.) New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985.

– *Honourable Reader", Reflections on my Work*. New York: Crossroad, 1989.

– *The Springs of Contemplation*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992.

– *The Courage for Truth*. (C. M. Bochen, Ed.) New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1993.

– *A Search for Solitude*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1996.

– *Dancing in the Water of Life.* San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1997.

– *Learning to Love*. san Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997.

– *Turning Towards the World*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1997.

– *The Other Side of the Mountain*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1998.

Meyendorff, John. *Gregory Palamas: The Triads*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983.

Morreale, Don. *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1998.

Moyaert, M. 'Dual Belonging, Ritual and the Spiritual Revolution'. In D'Costa, G. & Thompson, R. (Eds.), *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging; Affirmations, Objections, Explorations* (p. 123ff). Farnham: Ashgate, 2016.

Moyaert, Marianne, & Geldof, Joris. *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

Murti, T. R. *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955.

Nagai, Takashi. *The Bells of Nagasaki*. (Johnston, William trans.) Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1987.

Neng, Hui. *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*. Burlingame, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2002.

Nicholl, Donald. *The Beatitude of Truth*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997.

O'Donoghue, Noel. *Mystics for our Time*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989.

– *Adventures in Prayer*. London: Burns and Oates, 2006.

Okumura, Ichiro. *Awakening to Prayer*. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1994.

Okumura, Shuhaku. *Realizing Genjokoan*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010.

Oldmeadow, Harry. *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions*. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005.

Peers, E. Allison. *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus, Volume III*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1946.

Pennington, M. Basil. *Lectio Divina*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998.

Pieris, Aloysius. *Love Meets Wisdom, A Christian Experience of Buddhism*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.

Race, Alan. *Christians and Religious Pluralism; Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*. London: SCM Press, 1983.

Rahner, Karl. *Encounters with Silence*. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1938.

Rajan, J. *Bede Griffiths and Sannyasa*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1988.

Red Pine. *The Platform Sutra*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2006.

Reps, Paul. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. London: Penguin Books, 1957.

Rodhe, S. *Jules Monchanin, Pioneer in Hindu-Christian dialogue*. New Delhi: ISPCK, 1993.

Ross, Maggie. *Silence, A User's Guide*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014.

Sasaki, Ruth Fuller. *The Zen Koan*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1965.

Sasaki, R. F., Iriya, Y., & Fraser, D. *A Man of Zen, The Recorded Sayings of Layman P'ang.* New York: Weatherhill, 1992.

Sekida, Katsuki. *Two Zen Classics*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1995.

– *Zen Training, Methods and Philosophy.* Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2005.

Shannon, William H. *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981.

– *Silent Lamp.* London: SCM Press, 1993.

Sheldrake, Philip (ed). *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. London: SCM Press, 2005.

– *A Brief History of Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

– *Explorations in Spirituality*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010.

Shibayama, Zenkei (1970). *A Flower Does Not Talk*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle.

– *The Gateless Barrier, Zen Comments on the Mumonkan.* Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1974.

– *The Gateless Barrier.* Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2000.

Slade, Herbert. *Meeting Schools of Oriental Meditation.* London: Lutterworth Educational, 1973.

Soelle, Dorothee. *The Silent Cry*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.

Sontag, F., & Bryant, M. *God; The Contemporary Discussion*. New York: The Rose of Sharon Press, 1982.

Špidlík, Tomas. *The Spirituality of the Christian East*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986.

– *Prayer: The Spirituality of the Christian East Volume 2.* Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005.

Stirling, Isobel. *Zen Pioneer: The Life and Works of Ruther Fuller Sasaki*. Berkeley, CA: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2006.

Streng, Frederick. *Emptiness, a Study in Religious Meaning*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1967.

Strong, John S. *Buddhisms, An Introduction*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2015.

Suzuki, D. T. *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (Revised ed.). London: Century Hutchinson, 1969.

–. *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973.

Suzuki, Shunryu. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. New York: Weatherhill, 1970.

Tanahashi, Kazuaki. *Beyond Thinking, A Guide to Zen Meditation*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2004.

– *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye, Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2012.

– *The Heart Sutra, A Comprehensive Guide to the Classic of Mahayana Buddhism*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2014.

– *Zen Chants, Thirty-Five Essential Texts with Commentary.* Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2015.

Teahan, John F. 'William Johnston's Writings on Mysticism: Analysis and Critique' (pp. 63-73) *Studia Mystica,* 1981

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *Toward the Future*. London: Collins, 1974.

Tracy, David. *Dialogue with the Other*. Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990.

Uchiyama, Kosho. *How to Cook your Life*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2005.

Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism* (12th ed.). New York: E. P. Dutton, 1911.

Vélez de Cea, A. ‘A New Direction for Comparative Studies of Buddhists and Christians: Evidence from Nagarjuna and John of the Cross’. *Buddhist-Christian Studies,* 26, 139-155, 2006.

Waaijman, Kees. *Spirituality; Forms, Foundations, Methods*. Leuven: Peeters, 2002.

Waldenfels, H. ‘Absolute Nothingness’. *Monumenta Nipponica*, 21(3/4), 354-391, 1966.

Walsh, J. A., & Maloney, G. A.. *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Other Works, by the author of the Cloud of Unknowing*. New York: Paulist Press, 1988.

Warner, Brad. *Don't be a Jerk*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2016.

– *It Came From Beyond Zen*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2017.

Wick, Gerry S. *The Book of Equanimity, Illuminating Classic Zen Koans*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005.

Williams, Janet P. *Denying Divinity: Apophasis in the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist Traditions*. London: Oxford University Press, 2000.

– ‘Going Beyond the Creator God.’ In D'Costa, G. & Thompson, R. (Eds.), *Buddhist–Christian Dual Belonging; Affirmations, Objections, Explorations*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2016.

Williams, Rowan. *The Wound of Knowledge*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979.

– ‘Mystical Theology and Christian Self-Understanding’. In Howells, E. & McIntosh, M.A., *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology* (pp. 9-24). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Wood, E. *Zen Dictionary*. New York: Penguin, 1957.

Wu, John C. *The Golden Age of Zen*. New York: Doubleday, 1996.

Yamada, Koun. *The Gateless Gate*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004.