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## Collingwood's "Zen wisdom for Christians" (book review)

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# Book Reviews

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Collingwood, C. (2019). *Zen wisdom for Christians*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 264 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 9781785925726

Christianity has borrowed from ancient or exotic traditions, as far back as Boethius' *Consolations of Philosophy*, (circa 524. AD), or the *Liber Usualis* (circa 11<sup>th</sup> century), the source book of Gregorian chant. Stoicism enjoys a current revival as a path to inner peace. Similarly, Zen Buddhism began as a Chinese reaction to Mahayana Buddhism's oppressively elaborate philosophies. Its central doctrine was lack of doctrine, as in Ann Bancroft's *Zen: Direct Pointing to Reality*, 1987. Thus, any religion's followers may in theory gain from studying Zen.

What Americans know as Zen is mainly Soto Zen, which is just one of many schools. Americans first encountered it through Daisetsu Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927) and Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery* (1948). A lapsed Anglican minister and counter-culture guru, Alan W. Watts (1915–1973) in *The Spirit of Zen* (1936) and *The Way of Zen* (1957) combined Zen Buddhism with bromides against suburban American religion popular at that time. His writing still rings with bell-like clarity worthy of C.S. Lewis, but with less humor and more rush to judgement.

Collingwood writes of *Zen Wisdom*, not *Zen*; he commendably asserts each religion's distinct integrity. He lays side-by-side a rich array of Zen story-riddles, biblical narratives, Christian spiritual classics, Wagner's opera *Parsifal*, and Descartes. He seeks to illuminate each culture, at times comparably to the best Hasidic wisdom. He has a master-teacher's gift for rephrasing each point until the reader's "lights come on." His erudition never bores and rarely bewilders, making him suitable for public libraries. Every chapter begins and ends with its main points summarized, yet it remains pleasantly short. In recent years, Christian charitable outreach inspired Zen Buddhists to erect their own charitable organizations. Compassionate encounters can refresh one's own devotion.

Collingwood leaves one challenge unspoken: zealous converts, who offer to replace, not complement, Christianity, write many popular books on Zen or for that matter Stoicism. Many avidly read them seeking freedom from Christianity. Furthermore, Zen, Stoicism, and Christianity have all been accused (never so much as now) of navel-gazing while neglecting suffering and injustice. Collingwood mentions

only in passing Orthodox centering prayer, or mystics like Meister Eckhart. He says nothing of the 4<sup>th</sup> century desert fathers. Christian spirituality deserves fuller exploration, because Dogen, Seneca and Jesus each make a similar reply: Saving the world starts with oneself, and may never go beyond that. It is a humbling, and therefore unwelcome, point (see Crucifixion) but a hardy perennial one.

Unlike most Zen authors beginning with Herrigel, Collingwood says little about his own meditations and how well they went (or did not). Academic libraries need to supplement him with new translations of primary sources, such as Dogen or Takuan Soho, and personal encounters or dialogues such as Paul Metzger's *Evangelical Zen*, with the late Kyogan Carlson, and Dr. Kim Boykin's *Zen for Christians: A Beginner's Guide*. Ruben F. Habito is a former Jesuit writing on Zen Philosophy. *Alan Watts in the Academy: Essays and Lectures* reprints the best of his writings. General works about Zen in American culture include Rick Fields' *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, and Jeffrey Mann's *When Buddhists Attack: The Curious Relationship between Zen and the Martial Arts*.

**Reviewer**

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