

Mitchiko ISHIGAMI-IAGOLNITZER, *Saint Francois d'Assise et Maître Dōgen. L'esprit franciscain et le zen – Etude comparative sur quelques aspects du christianisme et du bouddhisme*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000. 328 pp. ISBN 2-7384-8940-0.

IT IS NOT EASY to write a review—inevitably a kind of judgment—of a book that is so evidently a labor of love and wherein the personality of the author, with its background in two different cultures—Japanese and French-European—appears to reveal most of its secrets.

So let me concentrate first on introducing the contents of the work. In a short Introduction, the author explains why she wants to compare these two figures. She speaks here of a “comparable task accomplished by the two spiritual masters” (9), and defines the task as follows: “Both of them, inspired by a universal love of a high spiritual level, have blown new life into their respective religions, by a return to the sources and by creating a mendicant order, based on poverty and the love of neighbor” (9).

In Chapter 1, the author develops the surprising parallelism she finds in the situation of Europe and Japan at the time of Francis's and Dōgen's lives (from the late twelfth- to mid-thirteenth century), both on the political, economic, and social level and in the realm of religion. In both territories (which did not know of one another's existence) the period is marked by a plethora of calamities—famines, epidemics, etc.—and a significant impoverishment of the masses. As for the religious scene, two parallel developments are pointed out: a similar degradation of the clergy and the rise of “millenarian movements,” inspired in Europe by the apocalypse and in Japan by the idea of the Latter Days of the Dharma (*mappō shisō*).

Chapter 2 focuses on “The Birth of New Religions and Schools.” Here, the author explains the origins of the so-called Kamakura Buddhist sects in Japan, and for Europe, introduces the birth of the “mendicant orders” against the background of the pullulating sectarian lay movements, especially the Waldenses and the Albigenses. (In this connection, the author might have given more attention to the activity of the *hijiri* in Japan.)

Chapter 3 is devoted to a comparative biography of Dōgen and Francis. The author opens this chapter with a very significant remark: “When one compares the life of Francis of Assisi with that of Dōgen, his contemporary, one is first of all struck by the contrast. Their family background, their temperament, the motive of their conversion, and their religious formation, everything separates them” (p. 83). This becomes abundantly clear in the four periods of their lives which are treated successively: youth and conversion,

religious formation, organization of their community, last years.

Chapter 4, entitled “The Path of Christ and the Path of the Bodhisattva,” endeavors to show that, on a deeper level, “their practices and labors show a certain equivalence” (112). This equivalence is found in three basic themes, common to both: 1) following Christ or Buddha; 2) forgetting oneself; 3) saving others before saving oneself. And, indeed, the author succeeds in showing a striking affinity between Francis’s literal imitation of Christ and the attitude of Dōgen who enjoins his disciples “to learn the ways of the Tathāgata”: “The preoccupation of the monk must be to follow the traces of the acts of the Founding Buddha” (115).

As to self-negation, the author can conclude: “Notwithstanding their radically opposite positions with regard to the existence of the self and of the person, both the Buddhist and the Christian paths of salvation pass through the forgetting of self” (124). But, while both aim at benefiting others, Francis, after a hesitation that resembles that of Sakyamuni, opts resolutely for an active preaching life in the world, while Dōgen chooses the life of a recluse away from the world (cf. page 136). (The later turn of Dōgen’s Zen school to a more active form of life is, understandably, not taken into account here.)

Chapter 5 treats the place and significance of poverty in the spiritual paths of the two saints. That Francis wanted “lady poverty” as his constant companion and mistress is not surprising for someone who desired to imitate as literally as possible the Christ who emptied himself of everything and declared: “blessed are the poor.” In this chapter, however—and this was surprising to me with my very limited knowledge of the literature on Dōgen—the author shows that also in Dōgen’s spiritual program poverty plays a central role and is recommended more emphatically by Dōgen than by Sakyamuni himself and most Buddhist spiritual masters. A little checking revealed the fact that Dōgen comes to speak on the importance of poverty and “not gaining anything” at least 25 times in his *Zuimonki*. In a further analysis, the author indicates that Francis and Dōgen share six reasons for recommending poverty and that also their directives for the concrete living of poverty are identical in a number of particulars. If there is any clear difference, it resides in the fact that Francis, in the line of the older Catholic religious orders, accepts the idea of earning one’s own living by manual work, while Dōgen, in the line of the Buddhist monastic tradition, considered this non-fitting for the monk.

Chapter 6, then treats a specific modality of the life of poverty: living from alms (by going begging). While this is prescribed as the way of life of the Buddhist monk, Francis saw it only as one possible way, but nevertheless recommended it insistently to his disciples. And again the author documents how the justification of this way of life and the rules of its practice are parallel in both cases. Most striking here may be the similarity in the conception of the relationship the begging activity creates between the monks and the laity. The traditional Buddhist idea is that begging brings monks and laity together in a bond of mutual gift-giving: the laity supports the monastic order by their material gifts (*zaise* 財施), and the monks reciprocate by giving the much more valuable gift of the Dharma (*hose* 法施). It takes you a little aback, then,

to find that self-same idea in Saint Francis, who is reported to have said: "There is as it were a contract between the world and the brothers: they owe the world their good example and the world must give them the things to live by." And again: "In exchange for the alms, the servant of God offers the love of God, in comparison with which all things of the world and even of heaven are pure nothingness" (cited on pages 198 and 199). The author further detects a strong parallelism in the modalities of the begging as prescribed in the two cases, with the exception of the Buddhist monastic rule of not eating after noon not being shared by Francis and his companions, and the Franciscan habit of fasting days not being shared by Dōgen and disciples.

In Chapter 7, entitled "Love and Peace," the author takes up a final trait of the personality of Francis, namely, his work for peace in the world. She then wants to indicate again a corresponding trait in Dōgen, but it must be said that this time the parallelism is a rather forced one, since the link of Dōgen with peace is mainly found in the idea of nirvana. She therefore felt the need to broaden the theme to that of universal love, embodied both in Francis's life and Dōgen's bodhisattva ideal. Most noteworthy in this chapter is probably the following passage:

Differently from the gospel, which invites us to love God and love our neighbor, the Buddhist sutras mainly appear to warn us against a possessive love that attaches us to people and things in the world. Dōgen is one of the rare Buddhist masters who stress the positive aspect of universal love for all sentient beings, daring to use the word "love" (Jap., *ai* 愛, mostly used in a pejorative sense in Buddhist texts) and advising us to address "words of love" (Jap., *aigo* 愛語) to our neighbors. (215)

In the final chapter (Chapter 8), the author systematically lists the points of convergence and the points of difference between "the Franciscan spirit and the Zen of Dōgen." The points of convergence are listed as follows: 1) forgetting self to save others; 2) return to an original poverty; 3) living from alms; 4) love and charity; 5) bringing peace; 6) return to the source or essence; 7) practice rather than theory; 8) distrust of intellectualism and erudition; 9) staying away from the people in power; 10) interior life; 11) importance of the "heart"; 12) joy. And as the main differences the following are mentioned: 1) Franciscan simplicity and clarity over against Dōgen's involved "spiral" style; 2) living in the world over against seclusion in a monastery; 3) itinerant preaching over against sedentary monastic life; 4) Francis's distrust of women over against Dōgen's respect for women; 5) forgetting the self over against non-existence of the self. The author's concluding remark is worth quoting:

The extraordinary value of the [parallel] works accomplished by Francis of Assisi and Dōgen resides in their complete self-denial, their choice of poverty, their stubborn will to save all beings, notwithstanding the hard trials they encountered, and the foundation, in that spirit, of communities which spread all over the world and are still active today. (284)

The above takes care, I believe, of the presentation of the book, but how should we judge it? And, to begin with, how should we classify it? Basically, it is, I think, a book of spirituality but, since it attempts a comparison between two contemporary spiritual figures belonging to two different religious traditions, it also belongs to the rather new category of interreligious studies and, as such, is interspersed with flashes of historical and buddhological erudition. As to its structure, with its many “asides”—comparative charts, explanatory appendices, etc.—the book looks a bit disorderly or disjointed (like the proverbial camel, said to be a horse put together by a committee).

More importantly, maybe, taking Dōgen and Francis as the subjects of an interreligious comparison looks, at first sight, like a desperate wager. Indeed, as the juxtaposition of their portraits on the book cover intimates, a greater contrast between two religious figures seems barely imaginable. Over against the dignified member of an ecclesiastical institution with a recognized lineage, we find a kind of unpredictable maverick, a “visionary vagabond” (CHESTERTON 1925, p. 149) without any recognized credentials or genealogy. While Dōgen was a man of one piece, methodical and reflective, Francis was emotional, “rash and capricious,” a poet “whose ideal and demeanor were hard to reduce to a clear and distinct idea” (Verroux in DE CELANO, p. 6). In Dōgen we encounter a brilliant and very erudite scholar with “a full-fledged speculative mind” (DUMOULIN 1990, p. 74), while in Francis we meet an “ignoramus,” a man with very little formal education, ignorant even of theology, and “barely able to read and write in Latin” (87). While Dōgen stuck to a stationary contemplative life in a monastic setting, Francis’s life was highly itinerant and always engaged in one or the other “utopian” action in the world.

All in all, it looks as if it would be more apt to compare Dōgen to a Saint Benedict, a Thomas Aquinas or an Eckhart, for example, and Francis to one of the Zen mavericks or poets, say an Ikkyū or a Ryōkan. (Here it should be mentioned that our author has a previous book precisely on Saint Francis of Assisi and Ryōkan—a book to which I had unfortunately no access.) That the author nevertheless chose to compare these two disparate figures is undoubtedly due to a personal admiration and love for both Dōgen and Francis, and she is to be highly recommended for discovering basic common traits between the two—mainly, the return to the origin of their respective religion, a fundamental concern for losing the self, and a special allegiance to “lady poverty.”

Since a reviewer is supposed to proffer some critical remarks, let me mention three. The author, who has been living in France for too long a time, betrays her lack of familiarity with the Japanese world of Buddhism by a good number of inexactitudes in historical details and especially in spelling (always tricky with Japanese Buddhist terms). Secondly, it can be doubted whether some of the “appendices,” which mar the structure of the book, are really relevant or helpful to the matter at hand. Take, for instance, the appendix on the introduction of Zen to Japan before Eisai and Dōgen on pages 80 and 81. Thirdly, it is not clear to me which audience is served by the short bibliography on Christianity in general and the rather long bibliography on Buddhism in general.

In conclusion, Mitchiko Ishigami-Iagolnitzer's book is a welcome addition to the growing number of studies that probe the relationships of Buddhism and Christianity.

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