
Frederick FRANCK, *The supreme koan*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983. Paperback, large format, 183 pp. \$12.95.

BECAUSE I TEACH and work at a Lutheran seminary, I am keenly aware of my need and desire to transcend the limitations of Protestant Christianity. From young adulthood I have investigated Buddhism, Eastern Orthodoxy, the writings of Thomas Merton; I have been to monasteries and Zen dharma talks; I have walked the broad path in preference to the narrow, more catholic than dissenter in my wish to include as much as possible in my own faith-life. My own Christian convergence with the Zen tradition stems from a time when, at the age of nineteen, I discovered *The way of*

Zen by Alan W. Watts, which was a crucially important discovery in my young life. Since that time, Zen has been the major counterpoint to my own theological work, a balance I felt was needed for my own life and work.

The new wave of critical interest and excitement over possible correlations and convergences between East and West delights me. Books which invite us to East-West dialogue now come regularly off the press. In years to come, however, when deeper intellectual furrows are ploughed between East and West—as they must be, if we are to survive—and when it comes time to remember pioneers, Frederick Franck's name will be there.

Ten years ago I learned about Franck through a small circle of friends who said that his concerns were my own, his approach to the spirit through art would amplify and support my own halting attempts, his concern for the consonances between Buddhism and Christianity would match my growing but somewhat closeted sensibilities. So I began with *The Zen of seeing* and I knew immediately that my friends were correct.

The supreme koan contains the conclusions to a long spiritual pilgrimage which we are invited to share. Franck will no doubt have further surprises and insights in the future, but this book personalizes his search best of all those published to date.

There is a gentle yet firm urgency to the book. It is never shrill but is consistent, quiet and sure, about things that matter, things expressed in a language that holds the reader's attention throughout. The book is free from intellectual obscurity and theological argot. It is not "religious writing" in the usual sense; it is marked by clarity, precision, and simplicity of language, an absence of technical terms. The book surges with passion.

Dr. Franck's spirit is reminiscent of Tauler and Tersteegen, finding in pensive silence the unmistakable presence of the Ultimate. He writes as one imbued with the mystic single-mindedness of his beloved Angelus Silesius. The time for wisdom has arrived. All of the homework is finished.

Consider this: faith is proclaimed herein as wonder, and the fall from grace means to become **unaware**. Professor Abraham Heschel taught no less when he said the original sin was and remains cynicism.

The light within (shades of the Rhineland mystics are seen here) enables us to see things as they are in themselves. The experience is the thing; interpretation is secondary—a lesson one wishes Protestantism would learn before it is bereft of all spiritual content. *Theologia Germanica* said as much, and Simone Weil when she said, "all religion is but a looking"; Hui-Neng's comment was "the meaning of life is to see."

Seeing remains the primary vehicle for the spiritual life in all of Franck's works. We see and perceive the realities and the Reality within, not beyond, the phenomenal world. The danger, we have been told, is that such an approach obliterates the ethical dimension of life—but one would not be able to find cause for such a criticism in *The supreme koan*, which offers a convincing argument for the interrelatedness of all creation in the One Reality some name God. The argument is subtler than Alan Watts' in *The supreme identity*, but no less compelling for its simplicity. Franck shows that there is no cause for alarm; those who cling to codes of ethics are safe from worry: the true mystic is not antinomian—but the recognition of the moral imperative in the universe derives from different grounds, the interrelationship of all creation, its "mutual rising," rather than an external rule of God. There is no One without the Many, and Franck can look at both the Christian teaching of creation and the **mutual arising** of Buddhism and see through them to the same truth. The rules, so to speak, are written into the system or, better, the organism—but this is not yet the natural revelation of traditional Catholic theology. Rather, he urges us to look for a natural transcendence, which is not quite the same thing: nature and grace arise mutually for those who have the eyes to see. Thus we return full circle to the crucial and central place of clear vision or seeing in Franck's spirituality, a

place which seems natural and sensible given the author as artist, for this is a spirituality bound up with aesthetics and, thus, one which finds its home in religious modalities common to Japan, where religion and aesthetics have for millennia been interconnected.

We are to distinguish between belief and faith, according to Dr. Franck. Belief is mental or intellectual assent to truths or dogmas, perhaps propositionally offered. Faith, on the other hand, means once more what it did for the devotional writers of the Church and, I might add, for Luther, faith is trust, the sense that the universe is ultimately meaningful, that our lives are buoyed by a Life beyond, within, and contemporaneous with our own. "The beliefs, verbalizations, and conceptualizations by which people come to terms with their faith are culture-bound and subject to change...To lose one's faith, one's basic trust, however, is a catastrophe. It means the loss of a vital organ of one's humanness, it means to be mutilated as a human being, for 'faith' is the integrating factor X that discerns sense and meaning in one's existence and that of the universe, that makes one literally see the point of being here at all" (p.158). Faith is what enkindles the light within—the *scintilla animae* of Meister Eckhart—in order that we are enabled to see things as they are in themselves, which is to see them *sub specie aeternitatis*—from the viewpoint of eternity—not as we want them to be.

The "rape of the inner sanctuary" (p.166), the loss of faith: here is the issue of the age. The new point of reference for spiritual malaise is to be found in nihilism. The nihilistic spirit of the age makes Christianity and Buddhism soulmates; in the press of history, the need to find correlations between East and West which can combat the suicidal drive of Western society may take precedence over ecumenism of the gentler variety based on simple interest. (Important material on this may be found in Franck's edition, *The Buddha Eye*, New York: Crossroad, 1982, and the two other Nanzan books.)

So what does one who has this seeing and this faith do?

ONE BUILDS, as did Franck, a place like *Pacem in Terris*, a work of art which proclaims in wood and stone and glass and the use of shadow and light, space and negativity, that there is a spiritual dimension to life in the worst of times. In the pamphlet describing this "oasis of inwardness," one reads "although dedicated to a Pope, John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* is not tied to any particular religion, but to all... and to none. For I hope that it may speak also to those who, while shunning religious labels, share fully in the specifically human quest for meaning and for values to live by. FOR TO BE OR NOT TO BE HUMAN, THAT IS THE QUESTION"...and the supreme koan. The book is illustrated with photographs of *Pacem in Terris* which add much to its impact.

The final third of the book comprises two plays, Franck's well-known variation on the medieval theme of Everyman, "The death and life of EveryOne" and that variation on the medieval passion play, "Inquest on a crucifixion," which he calls Buddhist-Christian miracle plays.

These plays are meant to be seen or read aloud, so that for those who have not seen them the flavor comes through in the words. I find it helpful to read them aloud, changing voice tone and inflection for the different characters, to feel their insights on a level below the mind.

In *The supreme koan*, then, we have a work in three parts: one part biography and reflection and shared religious insight; one part visual; and one part dramatic ritual. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, though each part is itself deeply moving and thought-evoking.

Franck's approach is not without its dangers; he admits in the book that he is a loner who has lost confidence in the dynamics, the vitality of organized religion in its conventional forms as the place for genuine community and spiritual awakening. His counsel to high-minded independence in matters spiritual may make the path harder for

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those who have known the inner tradition and true community available in some religious forms. But his is not and never has been an individualism in isolation, and perhaps for our age and in our culture this book hits more precisely than I can assess. And nothing would please me more.

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