

# Journey through the Gateless Gate

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The world was changing and it happened fast. After the Second World War the distance between various parts of the globe was gradually eliminated. Different cultures were no longer surrounded by an aura of inaccessibility. We lived in each other's backyards. We lived in a global village.

European culture and religion could no longer be regarded as the most supreme expressions of the human spirit. Western colonialism was gradually dismantled and when television sets were installed in our homes, we watched the emerging nations in Africa and Asia sometimes rejecting the values they had been asked to accept. On the map, Europe looked like a beak-shaped protrusion on the wide body of Asia. A political and economic restructuring was set in motion. Mercator's world map became outdated.

Perplexed Westerners found that other world religions were still very much alive. Indian swamis toured Europe. Transcendental meditation, Zen and scientology made inroads in Paris, Stockholm, and Zurich. Young Europeans dressed in yellow robes, danced to the glory of Krishna in Piccadilly Circus. Turbans were seen in the subway.

It was a time of insecurity. Had we not been taught that religion belonged to the past? Had we not been told that the death of Christianity was apparent and that the churches and religious institutions served as storehouses for the perennial harvest of human unhappiness?

Christian theology was on the retreat. The signals from the East were usually ignored. Faculties in Europe were mainly occupied with internal issues like the process of democracy, women's liberation, equality, etc. The spirit of 1968 loomed in the air.

Still, among the students of theology, a search was unmistakable. I was one of them. Some of us found that while *theologia propria* failed to communicate the spiritual dimension, this task was undertaken by other disciplines. We discovered C. G. Jung and Erich Fromm and became

aware of the life of the spirit expressing itself in the language of the human psyche. Martin Buber, T. S. Eliot, and Thomas Merton were read with great hunger. Some of us discussed Dostoevsky. A widening of the horizon was desperately needed and we struggled like drowning seafarers to escape the death of a thousand qualifications which seemed to characterize doctrinal theology at that time.

We did not, however, know how to handle our search. There were no teachers to guide us, but somehow we sensed that a dialogical approach presented itself. The life of faith had nothing to do with the isolation of a Robinson Crusoe. There were footsteps in the sand: someone to discover – my fellow man or woman, my neighbor. Religion was not a solitary voyage, a heroic thrust to grasp heavenly life for my own benefit; neither was it a passive listening in the square-shaped pews of the local churches. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and Che, Mao-tse Tung and Luthuli, US bombing Vietnam on Christmas eve: what was happening in the world? It became clear that the subject of theology was just these facets of human life.

Young people all over the world reacted almost in unison – planting flowers in rifle barrels, holding hands, demanding change, freedom and human dignity for the oppressed. Church and mission were severely criticized. Formerly plausible structures broke down. It was no longer credible to talk about God in an objectifying manner. God was involved in the suffering of people who were denied or deprived basic human rights.

Even the idea of truth was questioned. Orthodoxy in isolation became a non-issue. No truth could live its own independent life. Truth needed to relate to my neighbor's presence here and now. Without "you" there is no "I." Action and outreach became the criterion of Christian life.

I moved to Japan and my questioning took a new turn. The plurality of humanity's religiousness became a problem. What about the so-called absoluteness of Christ? Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists expressed their religious convictions in different ways. But instead of retreating into a dogmatic cocoon I somehow dimly perceived that humankind's religious and cultural diversity was not to be deplored. Were not all these religious traditions an asset to be appreciated and affirmed in its richness and variety? Slowly I discovered the spiritual quest of humankind and marveled in awe when I met an unending flora of attempts to express the longings and the hopes of mankind. Symbols and myths opened up deeper layers of meaning (Eliade, Tillich) and I found that the biblical

testimony came alive in a new a richer key. I found that God was not primarily interested in Christianity but in humanity.

So it became necessary to get to know the non-Christian traditions dispensing with the well-meaning guidance of Western textbooks. A fascinating exploration started. It became clear that the institutional church needed to break through its own provincialism and relate to men and women of non-Christian faith. After all was not faith a human quality which required to be taken seriously even when different expressions were used? No longer was it necessary to “protect” the Gospel. Christ belonged to the world, to humanity, and not to the ghetto-institutional churches.

But what about the absoluteness of Christ? For a long time the question returned – again and again. And there were times when the demands of loyalty to inherited affirmations led to excruciating agony, until one realized that the glorified Christ walks in and out of history and does not allow himself to be restricted by our interpretations. He makes himself known as the Unknown, eluding attempts to use him for the purpose of our own convenience. The trinitarian dogma stood out against the background of an undifferentiated Absolute. The Christ in function was both personal, impersonal, and multi-personal, and as a particular expression to me manifested in Jesus of Nazareth. Such an affirmation of Christ no more denied the uniqueness of Christ than knowledge of the fixed stars negated the sun.

At this stage of my journey I had become acquainted with Buddhism, particularly Zen. On the bench of the Zendō I was firmly “educated down.” The Rōshi’s *keisaku* (stick) functioned like a sledge, demolishing attempts to give precedence to the rational faculty of the mind. I learned to breathe – one, two, three, four – and I noticed that many layers of my mind had been underdeveloped and neglected. I found that hitherto I had been preoccupied with all sorts of abstractions. How can I find God? What does the incarnation mean? Confronting myself in thoughts, distractions, fantasies, and outcroppings of the unconscious proved with unmistakable clarity that a dimension of depth was sorely lacking. Images of God I knew, but I had almost no experience of the living God in me.

I remember the Rōshi saying: “You are a Christian, aren’t you?” I answered quietly: “Yes, I hope so.” We sat on the veranda in front of the temple garden. I was painfully aware of the fact that he read my mind like an open book. He poked my chest twice saying: “God in you – that will be your *kōan*!”

Two years of Zen training entirely changed my spiritual landscape. I was no longer desperately trying to affirm my own existence, my own standpoint passing judgments and opinions about other people, about problems, not even about my eventual spiritual achievements. Some sort of basic trust whispered: you are not Atlas, the world is all there is, you are accepted. And when finally I left the Zen temple I felt like the person who was helped by the good Samaritan. Actually Buddhism acted like the good Samaritan “bandaged (my) wounds, bathing them with oil and wine” (Luke 10:34).

Returning home I was delighted to discover previously hidden aspects of the Christian faith: the immense power of the Christian kerygma crystallized in a new way in Jesus the Christ. Theology was no longer an isolated wisdom divorced from active verification in the soul. I had discovered a Christianity lost in Christendom, a wisdom lost in knowledge. The authoritarian image of God vanished. There was no longer any clear difference between the human Self and the *imago Dei*.

When I look back on my spiritual journey I can't help thinking that my encounter with Zen-Buddhism was providentially prepared for me. I needed help to break through the self-centeredness of a Western perspective. The Zen practice under the direction of the Rōshi firmly pointed out that so far I had mainly been engaged in cerebral exercises. And I said to myself that never again would I allow myself to become imprisoned in thinking about God, creating my own images about God and the world to come.

My previously somewhat unhappy relationship with the church was straightened out. First of all, I recognized that the Church is an item of faith: I believe in one holy and catholic Church. The church has a human face tainted with the usual weaknesses and shortcomings which belong to this world. Even more important was the realization that God addressed people in many different modes. Truth was distributed according to a person's capacity to comprehend, perhaps according to different spiritual temperaments. Persons in my local .congregation were mainly farmers. Perhaps they had not had as much time to think about the matter as I had. I didn't have to decide the reason, but it seemed to me that most persons were unable to distinguish between truth and the forms in which it is dressed. I could understand the choice many

Westerners are faced with. Either retaining their Absolute, which means absolutizing the forms in which Absolute truth comes to them: "In no other Name . . . "; or relativizing all forms, thus ending up in the standpoint of Frederick the Great: "Die Religionen müssen alle toleriert werden . . . denn es muß ein jeder nach seiner Fassung selig werden."

In my case I found that it was possible to retain a religious Absolute while gladly admitting the relativity of religious forms. I had discovered that any religious statement was simultaneously relative and absolute. Creeds and dogmas were transparent and made sense as provisional expressions of an Absolute, transcendent Truth, unattainable and still immanently present. Thus I felt no need whatsoever to combat fundamentalism, but found that I had returned to my own tradition with a capacity to recognize that Truth is two-eyed – both absolute and relative.

My exposure to Buddhism made me painfully aware of the tragic impasse in the Western mentality. The challenge was to widen the Christian spectrum, allowing different aspects of the Christ event to speak to persons varying inner needs. I had no wish at all to depreciate a child-like faith in God. How could I, since I knew well enough that such was the very basis of "my own" discovery. It seemed that God was calling us to let him act through new forms, or rather through forms which lay dormant within the Christian gospel itself. And I recognized that in my case the Buddhist way of reflection had introduced an understanding of the Christ event which was broad enough to cope with, yes, to resolve our modern predicament: the dichotomy of faith and reason, of being and substance, the personal and transcendent notions of God, the exaggerated role given to the knowing ego, and even the Judeo-Christian view of history itself. The transdescendent God appeared as in St. Augustine's well-known prayer: "My God, you are closer to me than my own heart."

In a sense I found that it was not meaningful to polarize different religions against each other. Faith was not meant to be a weapon excluding others, but rather a joyful response to a transcendent and immanent calling. Such an understanding calls for a way of expressing Christian faith which is both absolute and relative. The positionless position of the living Christ needs to be made known today, hinting at the boundless horizon which alone can meet the human quest for life abounding. The Christ of no abode meets the longings of a modern person. As the master said: "Foxes have their holes, the birds their roosts; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58).

It has been may joyful experience that the encounter between Buddhism and Christianity is one of the most meaningful events in the religious history of our time. Acting like the good Samaritan, Buddhism may help Christians to widen their perspectives, discovering that the Jesus way ultimately breaks through its own particularity, accepting “other” expressions of the ultimate meaning of man’s existence as intrinsically grounded in the one cosmic and original fact of Immanuel (Gen 9:9–16, John 1:1).

Still walking through the beautiful city of Kyoto or along the coastline of Oresund in my home-country, Sweden, always I’ll hear within myself reverberating with the beat of may heart: “God in you – that will be your kōan!”