

Dharma in the Christian West

Sunday, September 15, 2013 at 09:39AM

Robert A. Jonas

CHRISTIANITY AND NONDUALITY

I was born in 1947 and grew up as a Lutheran in northern Wisconsin, where almost everyone was white and either Lutheran or Roman Catholic. As far as I know, I never met a Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Pagan, Baha'i, Sufi, or Buddhist. It's a very different world today. The fastest growing group of people who have some kind of faith experience call themselves "spiritual but not religious." And when people are asked on job applications for their religious affiliation, the fastest growing group is the "nones." My wife is an Episcopal priest, and it is not surprising to meet parishioners in her congregation who attend yoga classes or belong to a Tibetan Buddhist *sangha*.

Two friends of mine are both Roman Catholic monks and Zen Masters. The meeting of spiritual traditions from East and West that began with the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 and picked up steam since the 1960s has completely reshaped American spirituality. In this increasingly pluralistic religious setting, allegiance to particular denominations is weakening and many people are exploring the wisdom and spiritual practices of different faith traditions.

A Gift from the East



Father Thomas Keating – Photo:
Spirituality and Practice

Perhaps the most significant spiritual contribution from Eastern spirituality to Christians in the West is its grounding in nonduality, or non-dual consciousness. Many of the most popular Roman Catholic and Episcopal retreat leaders today – Cynthia Bourgeault, Thomas Keating, Richard Rohr and James Finley, among others – are teaching Christians the practice of non-dual

consciousness and showing how this deep but often forgotten strand of our tradition is woven through our biblical and mystical heritage. Perceiving reality from a non-dual perspective contrasts sharply with a dualistic perspective, which sets oneself apart from people, creatures and nature, viewing everything as objects “out there.”

Generally speaking, perceiving the world in this subject-object mode stems from an isolated ego-self that “owns” its own existence and is motivated by self-interest. A dualistic existence tends to be ego-driven, self-centered, and self-conscious. A dualistic person is always thinking – consciously or unconsciously – “What about me?” and “What’s in it for me?” A dualistic person looks out at others and nature as separate from him- or herself.

So, how would one characterize non-dual awareness as it is understood in the East? The Hindu and Buddhist traditions have been thinking and practicing nonduality for millennia. In the Advaita Hindu tradition, a practitioner seeks to realize Brahman, the universal Self. This word Self is distinguished from self, small “s,” which we in the West might name the self-centered ego.

Hindus envision a gradual dissolving of ego boundaries until one becomes united with “the All” – with everything, including ultimate Reality. The center of one’s “I” becomes everyone and everywhere. Similarly, in Buddhism, the goal is to become fully awake in non-self awareness, and therefore liberated from the suffering that comes from attachment to all objects of awareness and from craving and aversion. Many Hindus and Buddhists might say that their goal is to overcome separateness and otherness and to open their minds to Reality itself and their hearts to universal compassion.

To be sure, Hindus, as well as Buddhists in the Mahayana tradition (including sects such as Tibetan, Ch’an, Zen, Nichiren and Pure Land), also honor with devotional practices eternal archetypal gurus, Buddhas, holy deities and bodhisattvas. But these human-divine relationships are understood to be only vehicles or stepping stones on the way to the non-dual experience, where there is no longer any distinction between the person and the ultimate All, Reality or Dharma. Because in many Eastern traditions there is no ultimate distinction between the self and the All, our relationship with ultimate reality and with divine figures is not usually characterized by anything resembling interpersonal intimacy. In Eastern versions of non-dual consciousness, “otherness” is finally overcome in ultimate oneness.

How do the non-self, non-dual teachings and practices of the East compare to those of the Christian West? It is worth pointing out that popular Christian spirituality tends toward dualistic awareness: for many Christians, God is imagined as entirely transcendent, far off in heaven, separate from humanity and, indeed, from creation as a whole. Christians tend to pray to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as objects of devotion that are in charge of ultimate reality and are ready to reward or punish the believer from their perch in heaven. Belief or intellectual assent tends to be the vehicle of connection to God. Emphasis on cognitive belief has led to this central question for some Christians: Do you *believe* that Jesus Christ is your personal Savior? From an Eastern perspective, an exclusive focus on belief is a sign of dualistic experience: I am here on earth and Jesus Christ is up in heaven, and beliefs or mental constructs are the filters through which I relate to God.

Christians and Nonduality



Meister Eckhart

In fact, there is a non-dual tradition in Christianity, but most Christians, especially Protestants, know nothing about it. Christian mystics such as Cassian, Evagrius, Meister Eckhart, Marguerite Porete, St. John of the Cross, and Thomas Merton have been writing about contemplative or non-dual awareness for centuries. Their insights spring from their practice of prayer and meditation, and from their reading of the Bible. Many foundational biblical texts suggest a non-dual reality.

For contemplative Christians, Jesus is the archetype of non-dual consciousness. As a Jew, Jesus was deeply steeped in Hebrew Scriptures, which begin with the creation story. The first book, Genesis, portrays the Creator God as existing before time and space, and then creating the cosmos out of nothing. Only God can create something from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), and since the Divine precedes creation, many mystics call God the Uncreated.

The cosmos that flares forth from the Uncreated is distinct from God, and is fashioned to operate according to natural evolutionary laws – the Creator, distinct from the creation. Human beings are given the freedom to make choices that are not dictated by the Divine, even choices that reject our relationship with the Creator. In this sense, Jews and Christians value the distinction between creation, humanity and the Divine. We are not God’s robots or slaves. Rather, we are created with the gift of real, authentic freedom.



Marguerite Porete

For a contemplative, God is both a name and an “un-name.” We can name aspects of the Divine because the Divine exists here, in our material world, which is a world of interconnecting causation that we can comprehend. But the names of God are simultaneously “un-names” because words can only point to the great Mystery that births us into time and space – can only point to the infinite space between our thoughts, opinions and names. In a sense, the Divine allows It/Her/Him Self to be known and named, but the Divine will always transcend our knowing and the vast interconnected, mutually caused dynamism of the created world. For contemplative Christians, this transcendent Mystery is not somewhere else: it is here, within us and within all things. Since we are born in God, the Uncreated and Uncaused is an aspect of our own being and nature.

Even though there is a distinction between the Uncreated and creation, and between God and creatures, we are created in such intimate relationship with God that we are said to be images of God. In the first chapter of Genesis (Gen 1:26-27), *Elohim* (a plural name for the Divine) says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”



Elohim Creating Adam by William Blake

Christians have noticed this distinction between “image” and “likeness.” Many Christian contemplatives and mystics who are inclined to a non-dual approach have said that because we are made in the “image” of God (*imago Dei*), we are already one with God, with no distinction.

But they also say that achieving our “likeness” with the Divine is the work that we must do, with effort and care and the help of God’s grace. Mystics, such as sixteenth-century Carmelite monk St. John of the Cross, call the image of the Divine within us a “substantial” or “essential” union. It’s a done deal. The union that we must work on, with the help of God’s grace, is the “union of likeness.” This union or oneness is achieved when we spontaneously want what the Divine wants: to manifest a communion of Love everywhere.



Father Henri Nouwen – Photo:
Spirituality and Practice

For Christian mystics who emphasize our unity with God, our spiritual work is to learn to accept ourselves as true images of God – that is, as already one with the Divine. My mentor, Fr. Henri Nouwen, spent his life proclaiming that we, like Jesus, are God’s Beloved. But we are also called to acknowledge our distinction from, and our relationship with, God in two ways: First, in acknowledging the distinction between the human and the Divine, we accept the challenge of free choice, the fact that non-dual oneness is possible only if we *choose* to let go of the ego attachments that keep us separate from God. The Divine has created us with the freedom to choose separation from God. It is our free choice as to whether or not we seek to manifest our “likeness” and our oneness with God.

Secondly, we are called to the devotional doorway of Jesus Christ, through whom we pass on the journey to union with the Divine. We are not Jesus of Nazareth, and yet we are baptized into Jesus Christ and are called to experience Christ’s consciousness and to serve with Christ’s hands in the world, in the context of our own lives. St. Paul experienced this mystic union when, after his conversion, he exclaimed, “Now, not I, but Christ in me” (Galatians 2:20). Jesus Christ exemplifies and manifests the belovedness and oneness that we seek, the oneness that we already are.

Contemplative Christians interpret Scripture texts with the intention to realize non-dual unity with God, so that we can discover for ourselves that “In God we live and move and have our being... For we too are [the Divine’s] offspring” (Acts 17:28). To say that we are the “children” or “offspring” of God means that we share in God’s DNA, including the timeless Uncreated dimension of the Divine.

Jesus and Nonduality

For Christians, Jesus is the exemplar of non-dual consciousness. Passages in the New Testament, especially Paul's Letters and the Gospel of John, suggest how Jesus experienced the Divine and how his experience was like and unlike non-dual consciousness as it is taught in Asian religions. Jesus saw his mission as one of reconciliation, healing, mercy, and love, a mission that sprang from his oneness with the Divine.

He prayed to *Abba*, his tender Aramaic name for the Uncreated Creator, which means in English something like "Daddy" or "Papa": "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one" (John 17:22). In this passage we glimpse Jesus' experience of non-dual consciousness. He is both one and other than the Uncreated Creator, his *Abba*: he is one with God and yet he also addresses God as "You."

Jesus tells his followers, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30) and that "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9), but he also asserts that "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28) and he speaks of "the works that the Father has given me to complete" (John 5:36). In the Gospels, there are passages that suggest both unity and distinction in Jesus' experience of the Divine.



Women dancing, Greek bronze, 800 BCE -
Archaeological Museum of Olympia

For Jesus there was clearly something personal and interpersonal about his relationship with ultimate Reality. This is why the early Christian Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon (4th and 5th centuries) parsed out three "personal" dimensions of Divine Presence: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In fact, these Councils defined the Divine ultimate reality as a *perichoresis* (Greek: a dance-around of love), involving three "Persons." For non-dual Christians consciousness involves not simply perceiving "The One" or "The All" or an infinite cosmic unity, but also perceiving God as dynamic relationship, as inter-Personal being-in-communion, or (to use the traditional Latin) *imago trinitatis*. Contemplative Christians assume that Jesus's consciousness manifested the *perichoresis*, the dance-around-of-love, and that he wanted to share this wholistic way of perceiving reality. Our spiritual challenge is to manifest the *perichoresis* – a kind of self-othering in love – in all that we are and do.

Jesus' most powerful statements of the dancing nonduality appear in his "farewell address" in chapters 14-17 of the Gospel of John. Jesus says that his ego-I has surrendered to the great "I

Am” of the Holy, even to the extent that when he speaks or acts, it is his *Abba* (Father) who is actually doing these things: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works” (John 14:10). Jesus tells his friends that they too can do the work of *Abba*: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12).

Jesus says that his knowing and loving are not his own – not a manifestation of his personal ego – but rather that they are a manifestation of God’s knowing and loving: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9). Essentially, there is no difference and no separation between his love, God’s Love and the love he is sharing with everyone (even non-Jews). To “abide” is to live in the vast, boundless reaches of eternal life and love that flow from the Uncreated. To abide is to live as a branch of the infinitely interconnected vine of Christ that is rooted in the Uncreated *Abba*.

Indeed, Jesus does not preach separateness. He wants everyone to experience the same boundless joy that he experiences, “so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). Jesus says that when he passes away, the same Spirit of God that fills and animates him will stir up and manifest universal love within us and among us: “When the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). When we allow our egos to be dissolved in the Holy Spirit, we are fully one with God and Jesus, as a gift of Grace. No separation.

Finally, Jesus stays fully in non-dual consciousness when he prays to the Uncreated *Abba*, his Source, our Source, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one; I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (John 17:22-23). Jesus makes clear that this non-dual consciousness brings with it certain obligations that seem to flow naturally from it: to love one’s neighbor without judgment or separation, to give one’s life for the benefit of others, to heal the sick, help the poor, and to stand for justice among all people. Jesus was not interested in an exclusive focus on consciousness. He proposed and invited people into a transformed way of living with others.

The Christian understanding of non-dual consciousness bears a striking resemblance to the Hindu, Sufi and Buddhist understandings. With Mahayana Buddhists, we Christians would say that the True Self participates in the dependent co-arising of all beings, or, with Zen Master Ryomin Akizuki, that in Christ one becomes a trans-individual individual.¹ St. Paul writes of this oneness when he declares,

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

One distinctive feature of Christian non-duality is that it honors a kind of interpersonal multiplicity within God, and it does this in a paradoxical way. God is One, as Jews and Hindus believe, and yet God is also a dance-around of love, a being-in-communion, and each of us is created in the image of this ultimate reality. We are the dance.

For Christians, something ultimate is at play in every relationship, and there can be no separation

between the ultimate Uncreated “ALL” and the interconnectedness and inter-subjective dynamism of all beings. We honor and agree with the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, who said, “In the beginning was the relationship,” and “all real living is meeting.”² A sacred I-Thou is stirring in every I-thou relationship. Many Christians would sense the whisper of Divinity in the words of C.S. Lewis who, having lost his wife to cancer, said that what he missed was “the rough, sharp, cleansing tang of her otherness.”³ Yes, many Christians travel the non-dual path, even as we dance in the boundless love that animates the inter-subjective cosmos that we share.

1. Ryomin Akizuki, *New Mahayana: Buddhism for a Post-Modern World*. trans. James W. Heisig & Paul L. Swanson. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1990, p. 90.
2. Martin Buber. *I and Thou (Ich und Du)* tr., by Ronald Gregor Smith. Collier Books, N.Y., 1958, p. 11.
3. C.S. Lewis. *A Grief Observed*. New York, Toronto: Bantam Books, 1961, p. 22.

Robert A. Jonas, Ed.D. (Harvard University), M.T.S. (Weston Jesuit School of Theology), is the director of The Empty Bell, a contemplative sanctuary in Northampton, MA. He is a retired psychotherapist, a theologian, retreat leader, musician, and spiritual mentor. The Empty Bell website is an internet resource for contemplative Christians. A Christian in the Carmelite tradition, he has also received spiritual formation with Buddhist teachers.

Dr. Jonas is a member of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and the Eckhart Society, a past Board member of the Henri Nouwen Society, a Trustee of Trustees of Reservations, and the Board Chair of the Kestrel Land Trust in the Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts. His books include *Rebecca: A Father's Journey from Grief to Gratitude* (1996), *Henri Nouwen* (1998), and *The Essential Henri Nouwen* (2009).

Robert is also a student of *Sui-Zen*, the Japanese bamboo flute (*shakuhachi*). He has shared his music in many secular and spiritual contexts and has played at three Buddhist-Christian retreats with the Dalai Lama, most memorably under the Bodhi Tree in India. His CDs, *Blowing Bamboo*, *New Life from Ruins* and *Many Paths, One Joy* are available at www.contemplative-life.org, and on iTunes. His playing is featured in the new DVD, “*Jesus & Buddha: Practicing Across Traditions*” (Old Dog Productions). Visit The Empty Bell’s Facebook page for more information.

Article originally appeared on The Interfaith Observer (<http://theinterfaithobserver.org/>).

See website for complete article licensing information.