

Christian-Zen Dialogue: Sacred Stories as a Starting Point for Interfaith Dialogue.
Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph SVD. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2021.
xviii+192pp. \$29, (paper). ISBN: 978-1-5064-7077-1.

In recent years, scholars committed to interreligious dialogue or comparative theology have sought to broaden the scope of their endeavor, moving away from an almost exclusive emphasis on textual interpretation and reflection and increasingly turning to other forms of religious expression, such as art, music or ritual. In this sense, Joseph's agile volume on Christian-Zen dialogue can be said to resist this trend, once more foregrounding texts as the starting point for an interreligious conversation. Unlike Francis Clooney's erudite exercises in textual juxtaposition, Joseph O'Leary's comprehensive reassessments of Christianity in light of Madhyamaka Buddhism and its doctrine of conventional truth, or the Christian commentaries on Buddhist texts penned by Perry Schmidt-Leukel or John Keenan, this work adopts a more explicitly methodological approach, and does not focus on a specific pair of texts. The goal of the project, however, is arguably quite ambitious: the author sets out to offer a hermeneutic map for a joint reading of Christian and Buddhist works, takes as a starting point the transformative impact that these texts exert on their audience. In other words, Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph challenges us to rediscover the original attitude of openness that is required to receive these texts with a posture of humility and vulnerability.

The history of the Christian church in the first few centuries of its existence is the history of the emergence of a Christological and Trinitarian consensus, in a dynamic where doctrinal definitions also provided the Christian community with institutional boundaries. Behind the doctrines of the Trinity and the hypostatic union, however, are the stories we read in the Gospels—stories about Jesus. There also are stories told by Jesus to his disciples: narratives that seek to transmit information, but that, more often than not, also seek to open up new spiritual horizons, challenging their readers' complacency and calling them to an experience of *metanoia*. Joseph reminds us of the analogous trajectory that marks different schools of Buddhism: behind the elaborate speculative constructions of Mahāyāna philosophy, one finds the pithy directness of the Zen *kōans*, which eschew detailed and comprehensive narratives, but deliberately startle or puzzle their audiences to invite them to reflect on the ineffable character of awakening. The author's reflection on the narrative strategies of the two traditions underscores the transformative impact of these texts, whose primary purpose is to sustain their readers' ongoing struggle for salvation or awakening. At the same time, Joseph's exhaustive map of the epistemological strategies undergirding Gospel narratives and *kōans* does not overlook the substantive divergences that exist between the two traditions' approaches to anthropology, soteriology, and the conceptualization of ultimate reality.

Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph SVD is a Roman Catholic priest from Kerala, in Southern India—a region where Christianity was present long before the arrival of European missionaries in the early modern period, and which was long characterized by a relatively peaceful co-existence between different religious traditions. Indeed, as Joseph points out, from his early childhood the stories of the gospel and the stories of the Hindu tradition of his neighbors provided the background of his education and of his spiritual growth as a Catholic. His academic trajectory, led him eventually to focus on the Buddhist tradition and conclude a PhD in Buddhist studies at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan, where he continues to work as an assistant

professor. In this volume, he is attempting to articulate in a more academic fashion the kind of questions with which he was already wrestling in his youth—namely, how do the texts from these traditions actually transform us? Do Christian and Buddhist texts exert their spiritual impact on their readers in an analogous way, or is there something that is specific to each tradition that colors their distinctive hermeneutic strategies?

This short monograph is divided into three parts. The first section emphasizes the importance of interreligious dialogue for our time and moves on to explore the different ‘types’ of text that one can find in the four Gospels and in the Zen tradition. Quoting Sandra Schneider’s work on New Testament hermeneutics, Joseph emphasizes that sacred stories are ‘carriers of experience’, or in other words ‘carry these experiences into shapes’ (45). The spiritual experiences that are described come to acquire a paradigmatic character—one could even talk of them as “classics” that we seek to emulate, and against which we assess our own spiritual record. Resorting to the hermeneutic phenomenological approach by Paul Ricoeur, the author endorses the latter’s critique of structural reductionism, and outlines his understanding of the “surplus of meaning” that any text comes to acquire as it distances itself from its original setting. The spiritual significance of a sacred text will then emerge from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader (57). Both the New Testament and the *kōans* can be said to have a surplus of meaning that interacts with their recipients and comes to shape their understanding of their own subjectivity, their spiritual path, and their notion of ultimate reality.

The second part of the volume addresses the content of these sacred stories. In Christianity ultimate reality takes the personal form of the Triune God, whereas Buddhism envisages *nirvāna* or the Buddha nature as a fundamentally impersonal reality. The problem of evil is addressed by the Christian tradition through different theologies of the atonement, whereas in Buddhism the notion of liberation is conceptualized mainly as an insight into the absence of an abiding self. Finally, both traditions view the cosmos as a manifestation of the divine or the irreducibly enlightened character of all reality, offering a springboard for a much-needed reappraisal of the role of the natural environment in the spiritual lives of their practitioners.

The third part (comprising just a few pages) is a final reflection on the way the sacred stories of these two traditions lay the foundations for a spirituality—“a world in front of the text,” in Ricoeurian parlance—that is appropriated by their audience, thereby reshaping their understanding of the world as well as the very thrust of their spiritual trajectory. This last part of the volume left this reader somewhat disappointed—the author lays the foundations of a Ricoeurian approach to interreligious textual hermeneutics throughout the previous two parts, but merely suggests how this method could be applied to the texts discussed previously, as if the entire monograph were a long introduction to an experiment in interreligious hermeneutics that has yet to be carried out. Perhaps, however, this was the intention of the author all along: provide us with the tools for a new approach to interreligious dialogue that will disclose numerous new perspectives in the future.

Thomas Cattoi
Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* (JIRS) are the authors' own and do not reflect or represent those of the JIRS staff, the JIRS Board of Advisors, or JIRS publishing partners.