

Zen Gifts to Christians, by Robert E. Kennedy

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [January 16, 2002](#) issue

Robert Kennedy is an American Jesuit priest who immersed himself in the practice of Zen Buddhism during his years in Japan; after returning to the U.S., he did further Zen practice and was commissioned as a Zen teacher in 1991 and as a Roshi in 1997. A practicing psychotherapist and chair of the theology department at St. Peter's College in Jersey City, New Jersey, Kennedy oversees a network of meditation centers in the New York metropolitan area, where Christians and others gather to practice Zen. In his earlier work, *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit* (1996), he wove together Zen insights, Western poetry and Christian theology. *Zen Gifts to Christians* continues in this style, with attention to the traditional ten ox-herding pictures that illustrate various stages of the Zen journey.

Kennedy's premise is that at least some Christians can learn from Zen Buddhism, from its attention to the present moment, its call to self-reliance, its path of action and its realization of the nonduality of the Absolute and the relative. Zen can call attention to insights that are already in the Christian tradition but have not been given sufficient attention. In this way, he hopes that Zen can help Christians to deepen their own faith and practice.

The ox-herding pictures are a classic Zen teaching device which has taken various forms over the centuries. In the form that Kennedy cites, a young herdsman (representing Everyman) sets off in search of an ox (his true self). He sees traces of the ox, and then catches a glimpse of it. After rigorous training, he and the ox come to perfect harmony; and then they disappear as the herdsman returns to the source of all. In the final scene, the herdsman, with bliss-bestowing hands, enters a city marketplace.

Kennedy's reflections are largely shaped by Western literature. He juxtaposes traditional Zen koans with poems by Denise Levertov, Wislawa Szymborska and Mary Oliver and novels by Iris Murdoch, among others. This juxtaposition tends to

lessen the otherness of Zen for Western readers. Often Zen perspectives are said to be similar to or the same as Western literary insights. Kennedy claims that he does not want to engage in philosophical-theological dialogue (though he acknowledges that there is a place for such conversations), but at times he oversteps his own limits and tends to equate Aquinas's view of God's presence in creation with Zen nonduality.

By assimilating a Zen interpretation of incarnation to Christian perspectives, Kennedy minimizes the distinctive differences between the two traditions. The danger of this approach is that Zen may have less to teach Western Christians if its insights are thought to be already present in Western authors and traditional Christian beliefs. While there are points of convergence between Zen and Christianity, there are also significant differences. Nonetheless, this work is beautifully and evocatively written and deserves a broad readership.