

Book Review

HINDUISM, BUDDHISM, ZEN
By Nancy Wilson Ross. (Faber 45s.)

Review by Kathleen Raine

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 2, No. 2. (Spring, 1968) © World Wisdom, Inc.
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NANCY WILSON Ross is a novelist, whose long association with Buddhism in America is well known. She has travelled in India, with the specific purpose of studying the Indian religions; she met Gandhi, with whose programme of social reform she is in sympathy. She has also made several visits to Japan; Dr. Suzuki and Mme. Sasaki, among other exponents of Zen to the West, were her friends.

America is in many ways more open to Eastern religions and religious art than this country; it is astonishing how very little the English, during their long occupation of India, learned from the great civilization with which they came into (apparently) only physical contact; the foundations of Asiatic studies laid by Sir William Jones and Warren Hastings seem to have been laid in vain, until the Theosophical movement at last, and perhaps too late and in the wrong way, resumed Indian studies. Miss Wilson Ross is representative of an entirely different attitude to be found in cultured American circles (and indeed on an almost popular scale) towards the Far East. America has long been under the spell of Chinese sculpture and Japanese painting in somewhat the same way as England fell under the spell of the Elgin Marbles, whose influence upon English taste lingers on to this day. For many years—indeed from the time of the Impressionist painters who first drew attention to the beauty of Japanese prints—Japan has exerted upon American taste, and especially perhaps on domestic architecture, a vital influence.

Nancy Wilson Ross's book is, in consequence, written in a spirit of acceptance of the present and of her own civilization which may surprise—even shock—the purists of this country for whom acceptance of the East frequently means the rejection of the West. To such purists any change within the traditional cultures they admire tends to be seen only and inevitably as deterioration, and the mutual inter-action of cultures (from which in the past new flowerings of the arts, and even the religious traditions themselves, have again and again resulted) only in terms of the corruption of one or both of the confluent traditions. Miss Wilson Ross is an American who believes in her own country, and who in consequence welcomes such civilizing and enriching influences as Zen, and in a lesser degree Indian religions and art, have brought to the United States. Our attitude to the influence of Zen acknowledged by such artists as Maurice Graves, Martha Graham, Mark Tobey, J. D. Salinger, Robert Rauschenberg, not to say Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and the "beats" will depend on our judgment of the work of the artists in question; and undeniably some of those named are great artists who have accomplished in their work the miracle of assimilation without imitation. Nancy Wilson Ross is herself critical of the social irresponsibility for which Zen has been made a pretext; but on the other hand she cites Dom Aelred Graham, whose book *Zen Catholicism* advocates what is undeniably a kind of eclecticism. Perhaps we fear eclecticism through a failure of creativity, through fear of the future and the unknown: in a nation on the flowing tide of growth in the arts and in ways of life, this

fear is replaced by an openness which may at times be naïve but which is vital, generous, positive, and (Miss Wilson Ross is herself an instance) on the whole on a very high level.

The purist would of course argue that American Zen has little to do with true Zen, since it disregards the doctrinal foundations upon which this local variant of an ancient tradition reposes. That must necessarily be the point of view of those who consider rather the source of the flow than the new land it irrigates. But such influences are not accidental; and certain elements of Zen, which to "cradle" Buddhists might seem extraneous, are precisely those which American culture is capable of assimilating. Zen has two characteristics which make it particularly congenial to a contemporary civilization looking towards its own future, and with a sense rather of "global" than local issues: it is non-mythological, and non-historical. Mythology may unite a national, but can only divide a world-wide culture; (and America is itself a microcosm of the "one world"). The sense of the past has recently come to be felt not as the support which throughout European civilisation, as elsewhere, it has been for the last two thousand years, but rather as a burden to be shed. Even within the Catholic Church, whose foundations have hitherto been upheld by the rock of history, an almost unreasoning impulse to throw out the past seems to be at work. Between the historically based poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot and all that has come since there is a watershed which we have irrevocably crossed. Natural appearances, on which Zen art is based, are non-mythological and non-historical; they belong always to the timeless Now. The modern West has looked always to "nature," and the scientific civilization has as its only foundation a conception of the natural order. Zen offers a subtler alternative view of "nature" for which many of the most perceptive minds of the west (who have seen that the scientific view of the physical world has already dissolved the once solid concept of "matter") are now prepared. What for Eastern Buddhism is a sophisticated end-product is for the West *a point d'appui*; whether from that point the West will necessarily go on to adopt elements of the Buddhist metaphysics which the purists would insist are the only and necessary ground of Zen remains to be seen; it seems likely that at least in some cases this is already so to a greater extent than can be assessed in formal terms; for the art of *haiku* or the Zen style of painting themselves communicate a whole mental orientation. In any case we would do ill to condemn less complete assimilations, or for that matter the "beats," the flower-children and the multitude of desperate searchers for whose total ignorance our own society is responsible.

I have concentrated rather on the author's attitude to Zen than on her careful and sympathetic chapters on Hinduism and the older forms of Buddhism, because therein lies the vital point of her work; or so it must strike an English reader, for whom the salutary American openness to the world must come as a sharp reminder that our own country might benefit from an infusion of new modes and attitudes which we seem on the whole both too lazy and too complacent to attempt. Much as we may wish it otherwise we see everywhere the obliterating tide rising; unless we follow the American example and take in what we can of the Eastern cultures while they still exist, the secret of all that richness may vanish from the earth, leaving only the enigmatic records of a religious art after the disappearance of the religions which created it.

The illustrations to this book are especially beautiful; chosen with sophisticated taste and with relevance to the author's exegetic purpose. It is a book for beginners, less demanding than *The World of Zen*, her earlier book; but it is neither popular nor academic. Perhaps there still exist some vestiges of an intelligent reading public who have leisure to reflect on images of peace and beauty remote from the all-devouring machinery of the Reign of Quantity.