

# beloved community

What can a Zen priest learn from a fundamentalist theologian?

A Buddhist community takes interfaith dialogue beyond common ground with their evangelical Christian neighbors. **SALLIE JIKO TISDALE**

Photography by Jennifer Brinkman



#### The Odd Couple

Evangelical professor Paul Metzger and Zen abbot Kyogen Carlson are friends despite—and thanks to—their differences.

**NOT MUCH HAD CHANGED** in the thirty years since I lived in a college dormitory. The cafeteria was still a tangle of formica-topped folding tables. There were still giant bins of Froot Loops and Cocoa Puffs and a mess of dishes piling up on racks outside the kitchen. The custom-made omelet was a new touch, and there was never a Starbucks down the hall when I went to college. But the real difference this time was the company. Multnomah Bible College and Biblical Seminary in Portland, Oregon, is a thriving school of about 750 undergraduate and graduate students committed to a life of Christian evangelism. As a representative of nearby Dharma Rain Zen Center, on campus to attend a conference, I found myself explaining to a professor and a few students the meaning of the *rakusu*, the vestment I wear as a senior disciple in my lineage. I tried to explain, anyway, and they tried to understand. And little by little, we moved toward each other.

What is usually called Buddhist-Christian dialogue began in a shared respect for contemplative life regardless of social and religious beliefs. Over time, these dialogues evolved into gatherings of politically homogeneous people, well-meaning but awkward efforts to find common theological ground where little or none exists. (For some people, this has extended as far as calling oneself a “Buddhist Christian,” or a “Christian Buddhist.”) I was never much interested in such a conversation. I feel pain and anger about the world that is based in our differences—theological, political, and social. That pain and anger, in turn, widens the differences between us. Fixing the separations between us begins not with talking about where we agree, but facing all the ways we do not, cannot, agree. It begins—and perhaps remains—with discomfort.

Several years ago, Kyogen Carlson, my teacher and the abbot of Dharma Rain Zen Center, became concerned with finding a way to talk about civic issues as a component of his practice. “I wanted a dialogue on things that

were difficult,” he remembers. He accepted an invitation to join the Values-Based Initiative, a set of community “dialogue circles” sponsored by the National Council for Community and Justice (formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews). There he met an unusual man named Paul Metzger. Paul is a self-described conservative, fundamentalist, evangelical Christian, and an associate professor of Christian theology and theology of culture at the Multnomah Seminary.

“I like the word ‘orthodox’ better than the word ‘conservative,’” he says. “I find it hard to call myself a conservative because of the negative connotations.” One of Paul’s concerns is the significant difference between “theological conservatism” and the conservative politics with which it is usually associated. He mentions Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. “We agree on basic doctrine,” but it stops there. He adds, “It’s shameful to me, some of what they say.” Historically, conservative Christianity was involved in issues of social justice, but it began withdrawing from the mainstream of social activism in the early twentieth century—partly due to the rise of liberal Christianity in that arena, and partly due to a fear that it was a distraction from the evangelical’s primary work, which is saving souls. Conservative Christians today fear, in Paul’s words, the “taint” of being labeled liberal, and his peers worry that he might lose sight of his mission. But Paul disagrees, and talks of “theopolitical engagement,” peppering his speech with references to people like the civil rights activist John M. Perkins and former President Jimmy Carter.

Eventually, Paul began bringing his World Religions classes to meet Kyogen in the zendo as part of their exposure to different religious traditions. Last winter, around the time of Bush’s second inauguration, Kyogen found himself counseling a number of people feeling “anguish and distress” over the political climate. He invited Paul to speak to our sangha and present a different view of conservatism. The following summer, Kyogen spoke to the Bible College student body about the regrets he felt from his own activist past, and about the fears people have of conservative Christianity. “I found his words meaningful and pro-

*Contributing editor Sallie Jiko Tisdale’s most recent book is called Women of the Way: Discovering 2,500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom (HarperSanFrancisco).*

found,” Paul remembers. Over a period of years, they have found that their vast differences of worldview, political beliefs, and religious practice don’t get in the way of their friendship—at times, the very differences spark conversation and respect.

**LAST FALL, PAUL AND SEVERAL** of his graduate students joined some of our senior disciples for a potluck in the zendo basement. A few of us were openly skeptical, a few were unhappy, and several (myself included) were largely uninterested. We were a bit tentative and quiet at first, but gradually a conversation began to take shape.

We surprise them by being ordinary. They surprise me by being more than ordinary—by being well-educated, intelligent, and funny.



Members of the Dharma Rain Zen sangha and students from the Multnomah Biblical Seminary mix it up at a recent barbecue.

As we have begun getting to know each other, we are a little surprised. We surprise them by being ordinary. (One young man was startled that we served fruit salad at the potluck. “We eat fruit salad, too!” he said.) They surprise me by being more than ordinary—by being well-educated, intelligent, and funny. They are willing to look at themselves deeply in a way not unlike our own efforts at self-examination—to the point where several earnest Bible College students have apologized to us for their past hateful speech, an act of contrition quite familiar to Zen Buddhists. Domyo, a monk at Dharma Rain, wrote of our first meeting, “It occurred to some of us over the course of the evening that in some ways Zen is an

evangelical form of Buddhism. . . . We make a point of deeply exploring and manifesting the truth in our daily lives. We expect to have a *personal* experience of Truth.”

Still, our differences are awkward, and there are many ways in which we are opaque to each other. Our worldviews are quite disparate. The doctrinal statement of the Bible College lists a set of beliefs (common, in their essence, to those of most fundamentalist Christians): the original documents of the Bible are “inerrant as to fact and infallible as to truth”; humankind is “under the judicial sentence of death” from God; Jesus was God born as a human through a virgin birth conceived by the

Holy Spirit; we are redeemed by his “propitiatory and substitutionary sacrifice” on the cross; Jesus rose from the dead and will return; the Holy Spirit “indwells all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ”; and we are saved eternally by “personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

They also believe that “the condition and retribution of the lost and the salvation and blessedness of the saved are conscious and everlasting.” When I look at the world today, I fear there may be irreparable wounds, losses that cannot be recovered, and I think this is partly due to the policies of conservatives. Their number, prosperity, and political power deeply worry me. When I add “everlasting retribution” to the picture, I can despair of the possibility of our finding a way to live together.

Not surprisingly, some members of my sangha have been disturbed by Kyogen’s involvement with Paul. A few had painful childhood experiences with a conservative church; others are committed to social action at odds with conservative positions. “I *bate* Christians,” one man told me, and he seemed surprised by his own words, shocked at hearing himself say them. “What’s the point?” a woman asked. “We’re never going to agree.” In a world at war, when Jerry Falwell titles an essay “God Is Pro-War,” how can we speak peace to evangelicals? One sangha member tried to explain his hesitation: “I get frustrated when people think they know the truth or that they have an absolute answer. If people are set in their views, *(continued on page 58)*

## Bridging the Gap



While Evangelicals claim that we are to ask God for forgiveness for turning our back on Him, I think the Evangelical/religious-right movement owes the broader American culture an apology for

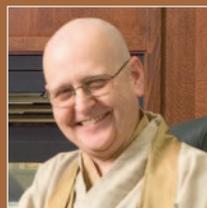
often turning our collective back on it. That is a key reason I have worked with my friend Kyogen Carlson to promote dialogue between our communities. What we Evangelicals as a movement have communicated to many (intentionally or not) is that we are going to take America back from our enemies in the name of Jesus. In contrast, the Bible teaches that we are all God's enemies, and that Christ died for us. Christ did not come to take back America, but to give his life for us, in order to take us all back to God. I am sorry that we have failed to communicate this Christ to you.

Some people in my movement are wary of what I am doing. Some see me as a liberal in sheep's clothing. While I hold to the fundamentals of the faith, I fundamentally disagree with those in my movement who think Jesus came to save us from liberals or any other group. As I see it, he came to save us from ourselves.

I am an Evangelical, and that means I share Jesus with others in the hope that they might come to know him personally. But I appeal to people—I don't compel them. There are no notches on my belt to symbolize all those I've dragged into the kingdom. Because I value my personal relationship with Jesus, and my belief in a very personal God, I value my personal relationships. My friendship with Kyogen is not a ploy to "get him saved," but springs from my desire for a personal relationship with him—no matter where our dialogue leads. And for all our differences, we share a common conviction that Buddha and Jesus invited—can I say, evangelized?—others to embrace a compassionate existence.

For Kyogen and me, dialogue can only occur where there is compassionate give and take, and embrace of "the other." This happens not by going around our differences, but by talking through them. It's been life-changing for me. I guess you could call it a conversion.

—Dr. Paul Metzger



In the sixties, college students would sometimes shout down speakers at public events when they heard views they didn't like. Antiwar protesters burned down ROTC buildings on campuses and

bombed draft board offices. A student at UC Berkeley myself, I was uncomfortable with this, but I would respond defensively, saying it was understandable, considering the important issues involved. Now conservative shouts dominate the radio, and women's clinics are bombed. Last year, as a Soto Zen Buddhist priest, I stood before several hundred conservative Evangelical Christians at a local seminary and apologized for not speaking out when I had the chance.

The first time in front of this group I was nervous, not knowing what to expect. The odd thing is, I have been just as nervous expressing my views to my own sangha and to my ordained peers. Such is the degree of polarization we have created with our culture wars. I have held my tongue for fear of being castigated by more extreme voices on "my" side of this divide, not only in my student days, but very recently. Even as I write this, I feel some anxiety. I was surprised and relieved to hear from Dr. Paul Metzger that he has had experiences very similar to mine. These days, when expressing moderate views, stones are more likely to strike from behind, not from across the divide.

I've wondered why moderate Muslims are not more vocal in speaking out against outrageous and hateful radical Islamic polemics, and why I only hear the extreme views of the religious right. There is a vacuum in the center of social and political discourse when the rhetoric is controlled by the extremes. We can, however, claim some space in the center if we choose to speak up. I once confessed that I think abortion is a tragedy, even when necessary, and that many, maybe most, of us "liberals" would welcome a time when they are not necessary. Afterward, a surprised right-to-lifer confessed to me "You know, at the end of the day, I really don't want abortion made illegal." We turn to face each other, a small step, but it's a beginning.

—Kyogen Carlson

(continued from page 56) there's not much room for dialogue." In all such comments, the undercurrent is one of discomfort and disturbance we share. At our meetings, they are as anxious as we are, concerned with saying the right thing, with trying to understand, with the frustration of not understanding. Beth, a seminary staff member, told me that she was afraid not just of being judged, but "of being seen as judging." I share this concern—because I do, in fact, judge them.

**ABOUT ONE IN FOUR MEMBERS** of our sangha identifies as gay or bisexual, and we perform same-gender weddings. Most members are strongly pro-choice. The cars in the temple parking lot sport a lot of antiwar bumper stickers alongside the faded ones for the Kerry-Edwards ticket. I am frustrated by Christian commentators who seem more interested in the condemnations of the Old Testament than in the grace of Jesus, and who choose only the parts of the Old Testament they like. I am shaken by the fact that honest Christians support a president who seems corrupt and decadent to me, and support policies that enrich the very wealthy at the cost of the poor. In the last few years, I have been asking a lot of either/or questions about the world. How can I change the minds of those honest Christians? Which side will prevail? How can I bring my point of view into power?

Paul politely declines to tell me whom he voted for in the last election, but then adds, "I was upset that Nader didn't get on that ballot, because I think he understood Democratic values better than Democrats. When I look at the country, I think democracy is waning."

In the Lausanne Covenant of 1974, more than 2,300 evangelical leaders signed a statement that Jesus' church "must not be identified with any particular culture, social or political system, or human ideology." This prescription has been lost in the noisy and repeated ideological affiliations made by a few visible Christian leaders in the last decade. Most people assume that theological conservatism and sociopolitical conservatism go hand in hand, and vice versa—this assumption, this enfolding of religious and political beliefs, is the framework on which much of our division exists. I am surprised by how deep this stereotype goes in my own thinking: I am surprised that the young Bible student brings up unfair labor practices in China as a moral problem, that a conversation about abortion turns to birth control and not to Constitutional amendments. Paul tells me this is not unusual; he has many peers who share his hope that Jesus' concern

for the poor and vulnerable, his concern with love, can find a voice in the conservative evangelical community.

Such dialogue can continue to deepen, but only if further polarization between conservatives and liberals is stopped. Part of what we are doing in pursuing this difficult conversation is learning how to handle intolerance in our own communities, and in ourselves. Our Buddhist practice drives us to examine the self, but also to examine the self's ideas about the other, and to admit that any problem we encounter is at least partly of our own making.

Paul told me recently that "all truths are God's truth." But what if we don't agree on what constitutes truth in the first place? Part of my labor in getting to know the



Finding common ground in odd places, two seminary students and a Zen priest (right) compare ink.

evangelicals is that I must continually consider what it means to think I "have the Truth." They won't—or can't—do this internal examination in the same way, but I must. Among other less attractive things, I have found in myself both the desire to confront and a wish to avoid confrontation.

Paul's wife is Japanese—"the only Christian in her family." In the early 1990s, they lived in Nagano. Paul was getting to know his in-laws, earning money for his doctoral studies by teaching English, and learning about Japanese culture. Toward this last goal, Paul studied Tendai Buddhism with a priest at Zenkoji.

I asked Paul recently what he thought of Buddhism. "What do you think are its gifts? What is its delusion?" I asked.

"If I weren't a follower of Jesus, I'd probably be a Buddhist," he said. "There is a profound sense of being one with something greater than yourself, a profound sense of mystery, of awe." This is something of a moot point, of course—Paul can't really imagine a world in which he is not a follower of Jesus, or in which that path is not more

important than any other belief. “Given how supreme the person of Jesus is—his person, his claims, his call—anything that would detract from that is delusional. I don’t really like that word. I say that word with pain.”

Last October, the day I tried to explain about my rakusu in the cafeteria, Kyogen, Todd (another senior student), and I went to the Bible College for a conference called “Building Beloved Community: Calling For an End to the Culture Wars.” The conference was sponsored by New Wine, New Wineskins, a teaching institute Paul created to explore issues of culture and theology. We stood out in our temple clothing, and I saw people peeking at us sideways. A few tried to pro-

were polluted. “We think ‘there’ is someplace else. It may be near or far away, but there’s no real other place. Nothing outside.” We all, he said, “share the wound.”

**I LIKE THESE PEOPLE;** they are easy to like. They are curious, interesting, and kind. They are happy people. While I’m dubious about the source of that happiness—it stems from sharing an absolute conviction of being right—I’m honest enough to see the parallels. What’s the difference in their happiness and in my mine—in their group identity and in mine? What’s the difference in my deep faith in my own path, and theirs?

As a lonely teenager, I spent a couple of years in the

I know that if I asked, he would close the door and be down on his knees beside me, right now, praying that my heart could be transformed.

nounce our strange names and make small talk. The conference was intended for a mainstream audience, but most of the speakers were conservative Christians, and they were speaking to a mostly conservative Christian audience. And they spoke bluntly: Beware of simplistic messages and slogans. Learn critical thinking. Consider the “identitarian imperatives of modern community” that make us reach for affiliation and group identity to avoid our inner loneliness and isolation.

One speaker, Georgene Rice, was a radio commentator I had sometimes listened to with gritted teeth. To me, her show is sanctimonious and smug. But she stood up and said with sincerity that Christianity should drive a person to sacrifice position and self-esteem. “Be slow to speak and quick to hear,” she said. “Be humble and willing to apologize. To repent means, ‘Do otherwise.’”

Paul had arranged for Kyogen to speak last. He told a story about the Cold War, when the West Germans had sent toxic waste to East Germany for disposal. After the Berlin Wall fell, the West Germans discovered that the waste had been mishandled, and their own soil and water

Mormon Church. I had a sense of the divine, but never a real faith in Jesus. There have been times in my life when Christianity seemed like a wonderful idea. But often the whole story seems a little mad, a twisted myth that has created a fanatic sense of righteousness in its believers, and caused untold suffering in the world. And sometimes I think it is a beautiful myth just the same.

Whether or not we like each other, find ways to hear each other, or learn from each other, there is still “us” and “them.” The terrible sense of otherness we eventually confront as serious students of meditation is embodied for me here, and I feel a mix of tenderness and exasperation in the midst of it.

Today, the term “beloved community” is as frequently invoked by New Age believers as by Southern Baptists, but it was coined in the early twentieth century by Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Martin Luther King, Jr., later took the idea from a utopian ideal to the real world, as a place without poverty, racism, or violence. King’s beloved community is a distinctly human one, sweaty with the hard *(continued on page 114)*

(continued from page 59) struggle required to rise above ourselves. It is not a place free of disagreements, but one where disagreements are met openly and with care.

If conservative Christians are my enemy, they are enemies who live in the same city, on the same street, next door to me. We shop at the same stores and we vote in the same elections, and we find ourselves wounded in the same way. I want to change their minds. I can acknowledge that simple fantasy, and then work toward accepting our differences. Regardless of our beliefs, we all suffer from ignorance, and we all have projected our losses and fears onto each other in one way or another. This is my dream of the beloved community: that we can at least find a way to talk to each other, to talk past the fear, the separation, and find another way to live.

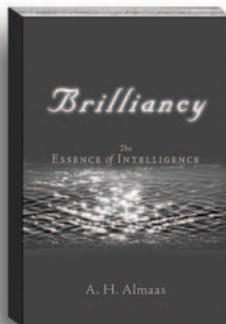
When I first heard the word “unsaved” in conversation with Christians, I was a little annoyed. When I mentioned this reaction to some members of my sangha, one person said, “No one is saved!” Another said, “Everyone is saved.” To me, perhaps, their urge to save me is not unlike my urge to save all beings, but it doesn’t feel that way to the Christians, to whom each soul is a discreet, essential and—if

lost—irredeemable thing. One member of my sangha said, “We’re all in this together, and it doesn’t matter who is saved.” But to Paul, that each soul is saved individually and specifically is the most important point of all.

At the conference last fall, I asked Paul how he dealt with this fact—that I am unsaved, that for all the talk that day of mutuality and community, I do not know the “good news,” that I face “everlasting retribution.”

“This is the elephant in the living room,” he answered. “I do want to save you.” He paused. “I don’t know what to do about it.” To Paul, this is not an ecumenical matter in any way; it is a matter very much of the individual and God meeting in a particular way. To be “born again,” in Paul’s words, is to have “a heart transformation, a trust in Christ, and then one looks solely to him for sustenance and life.” Without this, he believes, one cannot dwell with God after death, cannot avoid damnation. Such salvation and the unmatched happiness he feels in it is the root of his evangelism. He offers “an invitation,” he says. “At times it is a pleading, but a pleading out of love.”

Paul sees this “unwillingness of heart,” this inability to accept “an invitation open to all,” as a dreadful error.



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It is my error and the error of millions like me, and he wants to fix it. I believe Paul feels genuine pain, especially when he thinks about his friend Kyogen, whom he admires deeply.

We sit together in his office on a wet winter afternoon, and he says, "I go to Romans, where Paul says, 'For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren.' I hope that Kyogen could come to know Him. And I would be cursed." There is a pause, and he looks at me. I know that if I asked, he would close the door and be down on his knees beside me, right now, praying that my heart could be transformed. And I look at him, wanting to open his mind to the dharma, to offer some kind of turning word, and I have none. The moment passes, and we talk of other things.

**"WHAT ARE THE 'WORKS PLEASING TO GOD'?"** I asked Paul one day, as we talked about the doctrinal statements of the college. He answered with scripture, as he often does. "Galatians 5:22," he said without hesitation. "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

It is also in the Book of Galatians that Jesus says, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." This past spring, a dozen people from our two communities began meeting for supper and conversation every few weeks. We ate, chatted, shared jokes and stories, and then, each evening, tackled a difficult subject. We talked about abortion, gay rights and marriage, the political scene, the war in Iraq, and—again and again—what we believed about the divine, the world, the human being, the meaning of our lives. We tried to explain to each other what we have trouble explaining to ourselves. At times, our meetings have been exquisitely painful, at times warm and tender, and always humbling. I did not expect them to be inspiring, but I am inspired—they are not what I thought they were. I hold these questions now: What does "beloved" mean to a Buddhist? What does it mean to let go of the enemy? What happens when we let go of being sure of ourselves, and move toward our former enemy, hands outstretched? There, in the center of the battlefield, it isn't always easy to know what to do or what to say. I would have thought it impossible for us to get this far. How much further can we go? ▼

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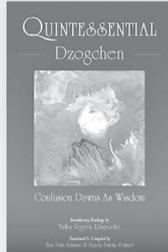
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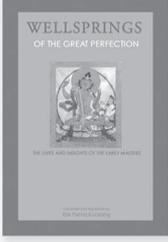
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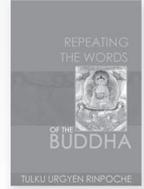
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