

Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor and Zen Buddhism in the West, by André van der Braak, Brill | Rodopi, 2020. xii + 260 pp., Pb. €55. ISBN 978-9004435070

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In *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor and Zen Buddhism in the West*, André van der Braak, currently Professor of Comparative Philosophy of Religion at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, traces the numerous ways in which Zen Buddhism has been reimagined throughout the ages from its origins in India to its various reimaginings up to the present. The main focus of the book is the diverse ways in which Zen traditions have interacted with secular modernity and the reimaginings of Zen Buddhism that ensued from these interactions. Whether Zen is imagined as realizing enlightenment, as therapeutic mindfulness or as a brand of aftershave, in the West, “different images of Zen continue to intermingle and reverberate throughout popular culture, and permeate everyday language” (41–42).

The aim of this contribution to the series *Currents of Encounters: Studies in Interreligious and Intercultural Relations* is both philosophical and theological. As a work of philosophy, it seeks to understand the various points of tension between popular imaginings of Zen modernism on the one hand and critical academic interpretations of Zen on the other. Van der Braak achieves this through a theoretical framework that builds on the philosophy of Charles Taylor, especially as expressed in *A Secular Age*. As a work of Buddhist theology, it aims to contribute to a reimagining of Zen that is able to go beyond the tensions that other imaginings have encountered. Van der Braak sees the work of the Japanese Zen Master Dōgen (1200–1253) as providing fruitful inspiration for such a reimagining.

In chapter one, Van der Braak provides a clear overview of the various reimaginings of the Zen tradition from Mahāyāna Buddhism in India to Chinese Chan, Japanese Zen, and finally also Zen modernism in Europe and North America. Here, Van der Braak convincingly shows that there is no such thing as an authentic, original, and unitary Zen and that Zen traditions were always already imagined as something and that each imagining both solves and creates points of tension. In the second chapter, the philosophy of Charles Taylor is introduced with a special focus on the meanings of “secular,” “fullness,” and the “porous” and “buffered” self. After introducing and applying Taylor’s concept of “cross pressures” as the various

contradictions, tensions, and contestations that Western imaginings of Zen have encountered in chapter three, Van der Braak goes on to apply it to the main imaginings of Zen Buddhism: Zen Buddhism imagined as universal mysticism (chapter four), as a psychological experience (chapter five), as a form of therapy (chapter six), and as a global spirituality (chapter seven). Then, in chapter eight and nine, two previous attempts of going beyond the cross pressures of Zen modernism are analyzed, namely Stephen Batchelor's secular Buddhism and the reimaginings of the Kyoto school of philosophy and its adherents, with special attention to David Loy's new Buddhist path.

Finally, in chapter ten, Van der Braak takes a normative position and presents his own attempt at reimagining Zen Buddhism beyond Zen modernism. Here, he critiques the latter and provides a response to it with the help of Dōgen's mystical hermeneutics. Van der Braak is critical of reimaginings that have sought to reinterpret Zen for a secular age by avoiding the language of transcendence and remaining within an immanent frame. As an alternative, he proposes an imagining of Zen as a Buddhist practice that goes forwards towards modernization and simultaneously back towards traditional Zen. Van der Braak hopes that doing so will contribute to a more inclusive Zen spirituality that is able to break out of the immanent frame and its cross pressures.

This book has several strong points but also some potential weaknesses. One of its strong points is its coherent structure and pleasant writing style. In each chapter, Van der Braak clearly and eloquently structures his argument. Each chapter engages creatively with various Zen traditions as well as Taylor's analysis of the secular West. Van der Braak critiques the various imaginings through engaging with its primary sources and reflections of other scholars and by analysing them through various concepts borrowed from Taylor's philosophy. At the same time, he also critically considers Taylor's philosophy in light of the various (re)imaginings of Zen. Van der Braak calls this process in which such reimaginings and Taylor's philosophy engage in a critical dialogue and shed light on each other in a "reciprocal illumination," a term he borrows from Arvind Sharma, a scholar of comparative religion.

According to Van der Braak, Zen is primarily about contextualized practice. This means that "language is important, that embodiment and enchantment are important, that practice, ritual, and liturgy are important, and, most of all, that the tradition of Buddhism is important" (221). Though the book provides a thorough account of the interaction of Zen as a set of traditions or ideas, the reader is still left wondering how these ideas relate to Zen Buddhism as a lived religion in Europe and North America. As a philosophical and theological enterprise, it is understandable that the book focuses on the history of ideas, yet the argument could potentially have

been strengthened if the various (re)imaginings were related to the cross pressures of Zen Buddhism as it is experienced in everyday life by its practitioners in the West.

Chapter ten is arguably the most creative section of the book. Here, Van der Braak provides a comprehensive Zen philosophy and theology that is rooted in the traditions of Zen Buddhism. But, although Van der Braak clearly shows how his reimagining could potentially leave the cross pressures of Zen modernism behind, there is little to no reflection on the cross pressures that his imagining will create. This leaves a gap in Van der Braak's argument since he has clearly illustrated in chapter one that each imagining both solves old cross pressures and creates new ones.

Finally, Van der Braak writes both as a scholar of Zen Buddhism and as a theologian who seeks to reimagine Zen Buddhism. This is both the strength of the book and perhaps also its weakness. It is a strength in that it speaks to an audience of both scholars and students of religion as well as to Zen theologians and practitioners. It is a potential weakness, especially for scholars and students of religion, in that scholarly analyses and emic critiques are not always clearly distinguished so that scholarly reflections are found alongside, for example, the judgment that some forms of Zen spirituality are too exclusive and do not honour their religious roots (175).

Overall, Van der Braak successfully achieves the aforementioned philosophical and theological aims and does a magnificent job at presenting and contributing creatively to the various imaginings of Zen Buddhism in relation to secular modernity. As such, *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age* is an essential read for anyone interested in the history of Zen Buddhism in Europe and North America.