

# Comparing and Contrasting Zen Buddhism with Christianity

## Koans and Parables

In Zen Buddhism, *koans* are short sayings that are intended to derail our ordinary ways of thinking about things in order to enable us to see things radically differently. Some of Jesus' parables share a similar intention. Jesus sets up a situation that his hearers would tend to assume would resolve in a certain way, and then he resolves it in a way that surprises and perhaps even offends the everyday sensibilities of his hearers. One good example is the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). In the culture of those who heard this parable from Jesus' lips, the Samaritan was despised and ostracized. In the parable, he is the one who does the will of God, the one who acts with compassion, the one who emerges as a decent human being willing to take risks in order to help another person. The parable invites Jesus' hearers to rethink their usual ways of looking at Samaritans and at who does the will of God.

There is also a contrast between *koans* and parables in that the intent of the *koan* is to frustrate thinking in order to facilitate the direct experience of truth. The parable, however, hopes to revise our thinking along lines consistent with Jesus' message about the nature of the Kingdom of God.

## Life after Death

Zen Buddhism is very much focused on this world, this life, and the here and now of every day. It neither affirms nor denies the existence of life after death. Christianity, on the other hand, strongly affirms the existence of life after death and the importance of preparing for eternal life in this world.

## Seeing the World in a New Light

Zen Buddhism invites and enables its practitioners to see the world in a new light. The "new light" of Zen is the direct experience of the everyday world, unmediated by thinking, concepts, and opinions. Christianity also invites its followers to experience the world in a new light. For Christians, the "new light" is seeing the world as God's creation and daily life as significant because it is how God's purposes are fulfilled in the world. Jesus invites Christians to see everyday reality in light of the coming Kingdom of God.



## **Zazen and Prayer**

*Zazen*, or sitting meditation, is the primary form of religious activity for Zen Buddhists. Prayer occupies a place of importance for Christians as well, including corporate worship and the celebration of the Sacraments (especially for Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians). *Zazen* has been described as sitting quietly and doing nothing other than just being. Although Christianity also has a tradition of meditation and contemplation, prayer for most Christians tends to be more active in the sense that it often involves verbal prayer as well as listening for the urgings of the Divine.

