

“In the Footsteps of Matteo Ricci”: The Legacy of Fr. Yves Raguin, S.J.

— Asian Catholic Prayer in Buddhist and Daoist dialogue.

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The year 2010 marks a worldwide movement to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the legacy of Matteo Ricci, S.J., who passed away in Beijing, China, in 1610. Ricci is acclaimed by historians for introducing western science to China, and adapting Chinese cultural and spiritual values to Jesuit missionary work in Asia. During the ensuing 400 years, the Jesuits were “suppressed” (1773 to 1814) by those who opposed Ricci’s vision.

The work of Yves Raguin, S.J. (1912-1998) and his quiet, less publicized movement to adapt Asian forms of prayer to Catholic/Christian spirituality, continues until today, transcending and going far beyond Ricci’s original “Confucian limited” vision.

A report on the “Monastic Interreligious Dialogue”, which occurred between September 18-22 1995, gives a concise account of the teachings of Yves Raguin on Asian Catholic prayer. The following report on “Prayer of the Name and Prayer of Silence”, organized by the Commission of the Secretariat “*Aide Inter-Monastères*”, took place at the abbey of Bec-Hellouin in France. A special session, given the title “*Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique*”, was called to study the question of “meditation without object”. The input of Yves Raguin was the core and main topic of this session.

The essence of Asian meditation, Yves Raguin suggested, was: “meditation without object, without theme, without reflection, without image and frequently without rite.” It was Yves Raguin’s life long mission to show that such meditation has a place in the spiritual, monastic, as well as Lay Christian tradition.

The question is of even greater importance for Christian prayer when it comes into contact with other religions, particularly Buddhism and Daoism. The Catholic Church in Asia must face squarely the question of the relevance of pre-Christian Greek and Roman cultural “*Weltanschauung*” (world view), when dialoguing with men and women versed in Asian forms of apophatic prayer.¹ This can be seen as one of the benefits of dialogue with other Asian religions, Yves Raguin suggested.

I. The “Departure” of Christ

The 1995 conference was based on an earlier talk, given on October 15, 1978, when Yves Raguin spoke at the Notre-Dame conference on prayer in Paris. The title was: “Ways of Contemplation—Encounters between East and West.” After the conference, Raguin was assailed with multiple questions. One of the auditors objected: “But, Father, it is necessary that we center on Christ and make Him the object of our meditations and contemplation.” Father Raguin spontaneously responded with the words of Christ: “It is expedient that I go away. If I do not depart, the Holy Spirit will not come to you” (*John* 16:7). The “departure” of Christ and the “taking away of the presence of God the Father” are indeed an essential part of Christian

¹ Prayer to God as the experience of God that eludes description. [Editor’s note].

spirituality, as seen in the Third Week of St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*,² as those versed in the Ignatian way of prayer know well. He went on to say: "We no longer see Him before us as an object of thought. Henceforth it is He Himself who through His Holy Spirit turns our regard toward the Father and makes us cry: "Abba, Father."³

That is to say, only after "departing from us," as seen in the Ignatian Third Week, can Christ invite us to share in the Fourth Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the "*Via unitiva*,"⁴ which is indeed an attentiveness to the divine presence within us, an awareness that would have been impossible without experiencing Christ's sense of abandonment in the Gospel.⁵ "Meditation without an object" is not a meditation. It is a pure attention which becomes awareness of who we are, children of God, made in His image, following in His footsteps, including the experience of *apophasis* or "*kenosis*."⁶

Buddhist, Daoist, and Christian mystics agree that this attention is without object; it is pure attention, total silence, void of all thought. The organizers of the session at Bec-Hellouin posed to Yves Raguin the question of whether this "meditation without object" has a place in the spiritual and monastic Christian tradition. The question almost totally overlooked the tradition of apophatic prayer in the western Church. It is precisely the mystical tradition of the Church which offers the basis and the pathway for dialogue with other religions such as Buddhism and Daoism. Just as Buddhism refers its faithful to the experience of the Buddha, so it is necessary that Christians model their prayer on the experience of Christ.

II. The Spiritual Experience of Christ

Jesus' awareness of His filiation and "Union with the Father" was affirmed as He grew. Again, paraphrasing Yves Raguin's talk, "At the age of twelve, while in the temple, which was the place of the presence of His Father, He gained a new awareness of the fact that He was the Son of the Father. When His mother said to him: "My child, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been searching for you (loss of a sense of Jesus' presence) with concern", Jesus responded very simply: "Did you not know that I must be in the house of my Father?" (*Luke*, 2:48-49).

The years spent at Nazareth were a time of "increasing in wisdom and stature before God and men". Just as He grew in awareness of Who He is, so the Christian too must grow in awareness that he/she must also experience Thabor,⁷ the ascent to Jerusalem, the agony in the Garden, the Cross, the Resurrection, the Ascension. Christian prayer is thus a growth in awareness that Christ

² The *Spiritual Exercises* are presented and explained by Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) in a small booklet made of notes, guide lines and meditations on Jesus Christ's words and actions as witnessed in the Gospels. They are based on Ignatius' personal experience during his early spiritual quest. Ignatius proposed these exercises to some of his close friends with whom he founded the Society of Jesus or the Jesuit order (1540). The experience of these exercises progresses in stages, from ordering personal life to some more thorough imitation of Jesus Christ, a free choice to follow Him and the union with Him in His Passion and Resurrection. The whole experience may last one month or so, hence its progression is conceived in four weeks. In the Third Week, the contemplations focus on Christ's Passion and Death. [Editor's note] .

³ Cf. St. Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, Chapter 8, verse 15.

⁴ *Via unitiva*: the way of union with God in Christ. [Editor's note].

⁵ Cf. *Matthew* 27:46 : "And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani" that is "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?" [Editor's note].

⁶ *Apophasis*: way of affirming something by denying what it is not; hence the *via negativa*, way of denial, of negation; *kenosis*, way of self-emptying. [Editor's note].

⁷ Thabor: name of a mount in Galilee, famous for the round shape of its summit, where, according to age old Christian tradition, Jesus' oneness with God manifested itself to three of his disciples (Cf. *Matthew*, 17:1-9) "through his passing which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem" (*Luke*, 9:30). The experience of the Thabor became the symbol of the most profound Christian mystical experience. [Editor's note] .

Himself pursued throughout His whole life. And this growing awareness cannot happen without a “prayer without object”, an experience shared in all mystic forms of spiritual cultivation.

III. The Discovery of the Word

Again, quoting the words of Yves Raguin, “In this process of becoming aware of Himself, in this “prayer without object”, there surfaced “the Word”. Christ became aware that He is the “Word of the Father, the word in which the Father knows Himself”. He knew Himself as the Word of the Father and this Word of the Father was to inform and model His humanity. He became the perfect image of the Father. This is why He could say: “Whoever sees me, sees the Father” (*John* 14:9).

When Christ is the wordless object of our contemplation, this contemplation “brings us into silence in the face of He who is. He reveals Himself as the source springing up within.” Yves Raguin suggested that this is what Christ wanted us to understand in the allegory of the vine.⁸ Seeing the fruit invites us to be aware of the flow of sap, which rises from the roots. In the same way the word invites us to become aware of the current of life, which rises from the depths of God. “But such a prayer is truly a prayer without object, for it flows out of a simple awareness that God, by His Spirit, animates our whole life. In this way we join ourselves with the prayer of Christ as it was spoken of above.”

It is this kind of prayer which contemplatives share and live in Christian, Buddhist and Daoist context, without even being aware of it, since attention is totally given to “presence” in itself. It is in mind and heart’s silence, whether through Zen contemplation, Daoist “centering” prayer, or Christian mystic experience, that one passes from prayer with object to prayer without object, the passage from self-expression to simple awareness.⁹

IV The Doctrine of No-Thought, No-Attachment in Chan (Zen) Buddhism and the Christian Experience.¹⁰

“The Zen experience,” Yves Raguin taught, “is based on a few very simple principles, which are quite well known:

- 1) The way to the ultimate experience of oneness with the Absolute Reality is not based on a relationship to God through a mediator. The way to this ultimate experience is through the realization of the oneness of our original nature with “the Buddha-nature” in Buddhist prayer, and with the “Absolute reality,” in the Christian mystic experience.
- 2) At the depth of our human being lies our “original nature”, which is absolutely pure. When the Zen monk or Daoist monk/nun sits in meditation, he/she becomes aware of Absolute presence in oneself, as well as in all of nature—in the Daoist sense as “gestating” or “birthing”, in the three western traditions (Judaic, Christian and Islamic) as “creating”.
- 3) We cannot reach, understand or “will” the experience of Absolute presence. We can only wait for it to manifest itself and shine at the depth of our human being. This manifestation, which will

⁸ *John* 15: 1-8.

⁹ The above quotes are taken from an article entitled “Christian Spirituality and Spiritualities of Other Religions”, published in *Bulletin of the Secretariat pro non Christianis*, Rome, 1988, XXIII/2 #68.

¹⁰ From a talk given by Yves Raguin in October 1988, cf. *Bulletin...*, *ibid*.

be a real enlightenment, is beyond our power, because by our original nature we are in fact open to this awareness.

4) To arrive at this form of wordless, “apophatic” enlightenment, the best we can do is to sit in pure attentiveness to our original nature. We cannot think about it and still less imagine it. This is the reason why the great masters of Zen and of Daoism teach the principles of the method: no thinking, no relying on, no attachment. This creates a real “emptying” of the “heart” which becomes void. This does not mean that the Zen or Daoist contemplative faces “nothing”. He/she faces original nature through void mind and heart empty of selfish desire (心斋坐忘 *xin zhai zuo wang*, “heart fasting, sit in forgetfulness”, in the words of the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 4).

Again, we listen to Yves Raguin speaking:

“From Zen practice, I learned not to search for a God on high, a transcendent level, but I turned toward my inner being, facing my human nature. Since my human nature is God’s image, I simply wait for this image of God to manifest itself to me. Being a child of the Father, I learned from Christ to be simply attentive to my inner mystery, knowing that I cannot see myself as God’s child unless the Father enlightened me by His Spirit.

The practice of Zen, as well as Daoist meditation, can teach all who practice it, Christian as well as other faiths, to stay in pure attentiveness before the inner mystery. “No judgment, no thought” makes one realize this inner mystery. Buddhist, Daoist, and Christian mystics agree that one cannot rely on any thought, any desire, to reach this presence of “God within me”.”

In Yves Raguin’s words (from a private letter written to a nun in Macao): “When I was told not to think, not to rely on anything, I was a little disturbed. I was not allowed to think of Christ. Then I realized, after some years, that the last step of the Gospel was not only to follow Christ but to imitate him.” These are necessary steps, but the last step of the Gospel is taken when Christ says: “It is good for you that I go.” We would comment: “You will not see me any more before you, you will not be able to rely on my external presence, but I will be in you.”

In the book of an anonymous fourteenth century Benedictine, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Christ is not seen as an object of contemplation but as the one who, living in us, stirs in us this intent of love which turns our attention toward God Himself, the God which cannot be known by knowing but only by unknowing.

The way of prayer of Jesus when he was alone was of the “Zen” or Daoist type. He was simply aware that all his life was filled with the awareness of sharing the life of his Father. “This is why I dare to say that the practice of Zen led me to a deeper understanding of God’s presence in me and of Christ’s way of prayer.”¹¹

In 1976 the Archbishop of Taipei invited Yves Raguin to teach a course at the Institute of East Asian Spirituality. He was asked to teach “the method which emphasizes sitting”, that is not sitting physically but “any attitude of prayer in which one does not face a person or object”.

Yves Raguin explains his method as follows:

¹¹ The above quotes are based on a series of lectures first given at the Institute of East Asian Spirituality, Taipei, from 1977 to 1982, and later published in a four-volume series called *Ways of Contemplation East and West* : Part one to four , Taipei, Taiwan, Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, 1993-2001. ISBN: 9579185476 (v.1); 9579185581 (v.2); 957918562X (v.3); 9579185999 (v.4).

“In my development of the topic I decided to make East and West meet but not in a syncretic manner; Christ would be the center and way from start to finish. The whole course began to appear to me as a highway leading to God. The central experience would be Christian, but as I moved ahead I would meet Buddhists, Taoists, Yogists and many others. Christ would help me understand them, while their experience would help me deepen my understanding of Christ. To my amazement, this is what actually happened.”

The course, comprising four parts, has been published. Its basic outline is as follows: 1) The Structure of the Spiritual World; 2) Methods and Powers; 3) Spiritual Writers and Works: A Parallel between East and West; 4) Chinese Spirituality: Important Authors and Works.

The work of Yves Raguin has had a profound influence on nuns, lay people, and members of varying faiths in Asia, who are on a spiritual path. Yves Raguin hoped that his legacy would encourage and assist all those eager to participate in inter-religious dialogue on spirituality and inner contemplative practice. In celebrating the legacy of Matteo Ricci over the past 400 years, surely Father Yves Raguin must rank as one of those who furthered and expanded, even transcended the impressive work of the early Jesuits in China, truly one of those whom George Dunne S.J. (1905-1998) would rank as “a Generation of Giants”.¹²

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¹² George Dunne S.J., *Generation of Giants: the story of Jesuits in China in the last decades of the Ming Dynasty*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1962. — Chinese edition: 巨人的一代：利瑪竇和他的同會兄弟們，喬治·鄧恩 (George H. Dunne) 著；余三樂，石蓉譯，台北市，光啟文化事業，2008 — For a continuation of this theme, please see the recent work of Thierry Meynard, S.J., *Following the Footsteps of the Jesuits in Beijing*, Saint Louis, Missouri, The Institute of Jesuit Studies, 2006, ISBN 1-880810-66-2.