

Eastern Thought and the Gospel

Unlike traditional monotheism, there is no authoritative work in Eastern Thought akin to a systematic theology. The market overflows with a multitude of resources blending Eastern philosophies, consumerism, the self-help industry and post-modern thinking. Some may be helpful and some enticingly misleading. Our goal is to provide suggested readings and material that enable the Christ follower to effectively live a life true to Christ and speak into the lives and hearts of those no longer familiar with traditional Judeo/Christian concepts or language.

Increasingly, Canadian society is changing from being predominantly Judeo/Christian to one with a plurality of ideas, values and cultural expressions. Canadians are just as ready, if not more so, to speak of: karma than carnality, re-incarnation than redemption, authentic Self than atonement, low self-esteem than sin, consciousness than conversion. A challenge for Christians in presenting the gospel today is that many people must first be taught Hebrew and Greek concepts and, more importantly, Biblical concepts to understand our presentation of the gospel. These are foreign ideas to many or overworked clichés to others. What is commonly understood by many Christians is well, “Greek” to others.

In the last fifty years, Eastern Thought (Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, etc.) has become part of Canadian life and not simply confined to ethnic or religious communities. In response, Christians are beginning to explore Eastern wisdom and teachings as a way to explain the gospel just as the Early Church “translated” the gospel from Jewish concepts to Greek. Free Methodists continue to develop a broadening missional understanding of the gospel to reach all people. We do this intentionally, thoughtfully and prayerfully without compromising the gospel or being unfaithful to Christ.

Learning this new language requires work. It calls for honest dialogue, willingness to learn, and courage to use new metaphors and concepts in teaching about Christ. Following is a bibliographical list of materials which gives insight to the increasing influence of Eastern Philosophy and Religion on Canadians. The intent is to give assistance for a better understanding of the concepts and thinking increasingly found in Canadian society not to necessarily advocate the ideas expressed in these readings.

Suggested Readings:

Eckhard Tolle, A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose, Dutton, 2005.

Tolle is a popular best selling author who also wrote, “The Power of Now”. He deals with the problem of people living in illusion under the strong influence of ego. His call is to wake up and become aware of the hold ego has on our lives, to live reality in the present and to choose the way to a life of peace, freedom and love. He mixes Zen Buddhism and Christian concepts. This would make a great comparative study using the Book of Romans and its teachings on the carnal mind and the life in Christ.

Thomas Merton, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, New Directions Book 1968.

Zen and the Birds of Appetite is an excellent source to begin a study of Zen Buddhism. Merton, a Trappist monk, was able to gain a grasp of Zen as a Christian. Merton boldly states that there is a world of doctrinal difference between Buddhism and Christianity and takes time to explain it. He goes beyond religious dogma to discuss what Christians call the mystical experience and shows that this encounter with God is Christian to its core. This is one of the better sources to gain some understanding of Zen Buddhism and to see why it has become so popular today. Merton gives a thoughtful and helpful Christian response to questions posed by a leading Buddhist teacher.

David R. Hawkins, Transcending the Levels of Consciousness, Veritas Publishing 2006.

David Hawkins teaches that there is universal Truth easily accessible to those seeking to escape from the illusion of ego and desiring to live in higher energy fields of joy, love and enlightenment. He calls this the evolution of consciousness and presents a kinesiology technique whereby he asserts truth can be discerned. Although many would consider this book to be typical “New Age” in thought and style, it could be useful because of its insightful writing on shame, despair, guilt, hate, apathy, grief, fear, anger, pride, courage and peace. This would be a helpful resource in bringing further understanding to topics as the Seven Deadly Sins and the Christian Virtues.

Shusaku Endo, Deep River, translated by Van C. Gessel , A New Directions Book 1994.

Deep River is an award winning novel written by Shusaku Endo a Japanese writer. It is the story of a group of Japanese tourists traveling to the Ganges River. Endo draws on his life experiences as he explores the Buddhist mind and the Japanese lack of understanding Christianity. A convert to Christianity, Endo knows full well the loneliness and ostracism which comes from being a Christian in Japan. Endo writes to reveal Christ in a way that the Japanese mind can understand. For Christians dismayed by the portrayal of Christ from the political left and right or the prosperity gospel, this is a liberating read. It is a gift not only to better understand Eastern Thought but to gain a refreshing image of Christ.

For a more thorough perspective of Shusaku Endo’s writings, check out the review: Japan’s Faithful Judas by Philip Yancey Copyright © 1995 Christianity Today, Inc. (BOOKS AND CULTURE Review).

Spencer Burke and Barry Taylor, A Heretic's Guide To Eternity, Jossey-Bass 2006

Burke and Taylor take a look at life with God in the twenty-first century and what the Christian faith has to offer. This is not simply an attempt to update the gospel with contemporary language but acknowledge new ways of seeing Christ's message. They deal briefly with Eastern Thought. The value of the book is their proposal that new forms of viewing the gospel can be engaged without compromising or violating Christ or what he taught. It is a book which engenders the courage needed to venture beyond what is conventional Western Christian thought while remaining true to Christ.

Dalai Lama, How to Practice The Way to a Meaningful Life, Atria Books 2002

There are millions of followers in North America of The Dalai Lama's teachings. His influence is large and his teachings are instructive and helpful to many. Without some background in basic Buddhism, this work could be confusing but many of The Dalai Lama's writings are worth the read and easily accessible. They give sound ethical advice that resonates with Christ's teachings. How to Practice the Way to a Meaningful Life speaks to Practicing Morality, Practicing Meditation and Practicing Wisdom. It is a call to an inward journey typical of most Eastern writings and many self-help books. This could be a source for a comparative study with the Christian belief that Christ is our peace, in him is life and his call to us is to serve. Check any book store or public library for the Dalai Lama's books.

Ekanath Easwaran (translator), The Bhagavad Gita, Nilgiri Press 1985

The Bhagavad Gita is considered by many to be the most important and influential of all Hindu scriptures and literature. This epic poem written in ancient times tells the story of Prince Arjuna's encounter with Lord Krishna before battle. The message of the Gita is to see the Divine in every creature and behave accordingly. It is about life and death and a dialogue between the human personality and the inner Self taking place in the inner consciousness. Much of the teaching attributed to Krishna will seem similar to the Sermon on the Mount and Lord Krishna could be taken for a Christ figure. For the Christian this is an opportunity to see and reflect on why Christ is not Krishna even if some similarities are present. The Gita offers a positive way to look into the Hindu mind.

Gregory A. Boyd, "Appendix: Practicing the Presence and the New Age Movement," Present Perfect: Finding God in the Now (Zondervan, 2010), pp. 153-160.

Boyd's book is an attempt to help people today to understand and appropriate the historic Christian discipline of practicing the presence of God. However, living "in the moment" and "practicing the presence of the divine" are notions which can be also found in New

Age writers. Boyd knows (from personal attack) that some Christians carelessly and falsely label as falsehood any teaching that contains themes or vocabulary similar to those utilized by non-Christian teachers. Other faithful Christian writers have been attacked unfairly because what they teach has some similarities to popular New Age teaching. Boyd's Appendix is a good description of the kind of careful assessment which must be made of such claims, and of writers who use some language or concepts similar to those of historic Christian faith.