Zazen

(Zen Sitting Meditation)

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Theories of Religion
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William James

A monk asked Baso: "What is Buddha?"
Baso said: "This mind is not Buddha."

While there are certainly ways to examine Zen meditation in social terms, James' individualist approach to the study of religion proves effective for what is overtly a solitary act. Moreover, meditation is primarily experiential over symbolic (perhaps uniquely so), serves to pragmatically advance a practitioner's personal development, and can lead to what James identifies as mystical experiences. As such, a Jamesian analysis of meditation is natural.

James' notion of "mind-cure" acts is applicable to Zazen, as meditation emphasizes the importance of awareness of the present. Moreover, the tradition speaks to James' concern for the naiveté he finds in certain "mind-cure" practices, in that continued meditation practice is cautioned so as to not become a dependence, attachment, or conceptualized as a means towards a final object of enlightenment.

James' description of religion in providing abstractions that become a 'backdrop' to life – a "total reaction upon life" (35) – and to which practitioners align corresponds to the view of concepts in Zen. Zazen, seen more as 'cultivation' over 'meditation' aims to either remove or replace such worldviews, albeit not with a new one, but with one preexisting and yet unrealized.

According to James, these abstractions define how objects indeed *exist* to individuals, that perhaps it is impossible to see an object "directly," without any conceptualizations or classifications. Thus, although the writings may talk about seeing objects directly, James might argue that this view of the object is still Zen's particularized way of conceptualizing objects, and we do not escape the language and framework of Zen. But James' accounts of mysticism align closely with enlightenment in Zen tradition, which ineffably deconstructs such backdrops, suddenly attributes intimate meaning the universe, dissolves the ego, reifies non-duality. For Zen, this state can be commonly considered as 'truth,' or the insight of 'true nature.' This refutes James' inquiry into whether there is truth behind 'reality' – where James suggests that religion gets at a reality that is "beyond the senses" (58), meditation does the opposite, and allows the practitioner to reclaim the senses *as* reality.

Mircea Eliade

> Shuzan held out his short staff and said: "If you call this a short staff, you oppose its reality. If you do not call it a short staff, you ignore the fact. Now what do you wish to call this?"

Eliade's main thesis is to situate the sacred in opposition to profane. Zen denies this very binary. The concepts of *nirvana* and *samsara*, commonly understood as 'liberation' and the 'cycle of birth and death,' are in fact subtly one. *Nirvana* cannot be liberation if it is conceptualized as yet another object of achievement, separate from this world. If liberation is possible in this world, then it *nirvana is samsara*, and vice-versa. Zazen demonstrates this principle in allowing the experience of sensation to illumine the interconnectedness of the practitioner and the world, and, very often performed with eyes open, not closed, does not shut the world out but embraces it. The sacred and the profane are not useful categories because Zen holds nothing *holy*.

This immersion in experience that occurs during sitting meditation may seem Eliadean, however, in his notion that festivals and rituals allow religious practitioners to exit the ordinary flow of time and enter an interval of time that is, he explains, *outside of* time – "time that 'floweth not'" (88). For him, an "eternally present" event is evoked, namely the divine happening of myth. Buddhist meditation could be said to be a recollecting or revival of the mythical event of the Buddha's enlightening meditation underneath the Bodhi tree. But meditation for the *purpose* of recreating that past is *not* Zen, and moreover the Buddha is seen as a not more than a human being and his idolatry is often dismissed. Even as Eliade separates intentionality and effect, Zazen does *not* emphasize the experience of a transcendent time, but precisely the *present* time. Eliade's argument also relies on a linear procession of time, where Zen and other Eastern religions establish a cyclic one through *karma* and *samsara*.

Eliade also discusses the idea that religion often engenders the belief that these mythic events and states are and have *always* been, and that it is very much like humans to forget it. The practice of Zazen does seems to insist this – that is, entering, immersing, oneself in a texture of life that is pre-existent and independent of time in order to "know," or "experience" one's true self, perhaps the "self" of the cosmos (of course, meditating to this end won't achieve it). The same is documented of *Brahman* in the *Upanishads*.

Emile Durkheim

> Two monks were arguing about a flag. One said: “The flag is moving.”
> The other said: “The wind is moving.”
> The sixth patriarch happened to be passing by.
> He told them: “Not the wind, not the flag; mind is moving.”

I am skeptical of how much Durkheim’s main argument (that religions are fundamentally one with society) holds with respect to religions that are largely individually focused, particularly Zen. Durkheim had already mentioned that Buddhism “counts” as a religion because it has concepts of sacred and profane (namely, the Four Noble Truths and their practitioners, etc (37)), but missing is the link to society. While of course it was society that inculcated the Four Noble Truths, the practice (i.e. meditation) deliberately instructs to disregard concepts handed down by others. This is especially evident in Zen, which rejects “scriptures,” or “words and letters” (attributed to Bodhidharma, said to have brought the practice to China from India). This paradoxically requires practitioners to reject their social environment to be accepted by it. Durkheim doesn’t seem to account for this.

It is possible, as mentioned before, that for Zen practitioners, the world is categorized and experienced by the ideas of the religion, counter to the claim of Zen that practitioners simply ‘see things as they are’. It may be the practice of meditation that reinforces these values for the practitioners, and the fact that they all practice Zazen that creates the collective as they know it. But being an overwhelmingly individually-focused, meditation is not a collective activity. Consequently, Durkheim’s feeling of “collective effervescence” doesn’t occur via collective ritual – rather, the mystical loss of ego, etc. described by the phenomenon occurs in private, as an effect of the meditation.

Moreover, Zen stands at odds with Durkheim’s claim that “god and society are one of the same” (208). Besides Zen’s lack of deity, the ‘abstract divine principle/force’ that Durkheim later refers to as ‘god’ produced by a means of society is, in Zen, entirely individually (and equivalently universally) contained – there is no intermediate ‘social’ between individual and cosmos. This is evident in the solitariness of the meditation practice.

Clifford Geertz

A monk asked Ummon: "What is Buddha?"
Ummon answered him: "Dried dung."

Geertz's focus on symbols will prove challenging to apply to Zen meditation, as conceptualizing meditation as symbol for any sort of progress or to the proximation divine is antithetical to the undertaking of Zen. Even the meta-level conversation surrounding Zen escapes symbols. One can be said to embody Zen when one no longer attaches to symbols in any way. The response "dried dung," for instance, to the question "what is Buddha?" is not only an illustration of the superficiality of words and symbols, it makes the entire exchange itself a mockery of the ordinary pedagogical practice of understanding via those words and symbols.

Nevertheless, we can *attempt* to apply Geertz's notion of ritual serving as a model *of* and model *for* reality to Zazen, if we can consider Zazen to be ritual. Meditation serves as a model *of* reality in that it has no *purpose* whatsoever, and that it is rather a collection of negotiations (relationships), causations, and feelings. It serves as a model *for* by instilling simultaneous autonomous engagement and passive observation in the practitioner, reflected back onto the universe as being ultimately indifferent to good and evil and, once again, lacking in inherent meaning.

That Geertz's definition of religion ties into moods and motivations of symbols fits rather interestingly with Zen because Zen to some degree *is* a theory of moods and motivations – that being 'true' involves cleverness and critical thinking. This is, however, where Geertz's reliance on religion promoting factuality is dismantled. Zen would prefer to invert questions or to answer them with non-sequiturs than to offer something as truth. Perhaps, then, it offers a truth of 'no truth,' but that too is paradoxical and so cannot be coherent (unless the coherency is incoherency, *ad nauseum.*) Similary, Geertz also relies on the function of religion to explain and account for the "problem of evil," and by extension provide a comprehensive account of the universe (105-107). But Zen is largely unconcerned with these issues, and would much more readily engage a simple universe with an interdependent and complex one, and also vice-versa.

Mary Douglas

> Rinzai came after Joshu, considered lineally, but Joshu nevertheless went to see him.
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> Rinzai was washing his feet. Joshu asked him, "What is the meaning of Daruma's coming from the West?"
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> This is the question solved by Rinzai when beaten by his master Obaku, and Joshu probably asked it ironically. Glaring at Joshu, Rinzai answered him, "At the moment I am washing my feet!" Joshu leaned forward with the appearance of not hearing what Rinzai had said. Rinzai exclaimed, "Do you want a second ladle of dirty water poured over you?" and Joshu went off.

As established before, Zen holds nothing as *holy*, as this would create attachment and reliance on a certain object for liberation or salvation. Douglas illustrates the proclivity to organize the world into categories, and the interrelatedness of religions to that end, in their categories of ‘pure’ and ‘impure,’ ‘clean’ and ‘dirty,’ etc. But in Zen, this is a dangerous categorization, as it yet again divides the world into a binary which Zen rejects. For instance, we can try applying Douglas’ categories to meditation in saying that meditation’s purpose is to “purify” one’s mind, by eliminating dirty, clouding thoughts that occur. However, such judgments are precisely the ones that meditation attempts to erase. Perhaps, however, this would place ideas such as “attachment” in the impure category, and “critical thinking” in the pure category. Once again we encounter a paradox, as being pure would require attachment to the idea of nonattachment, and we cannot proceed. As cautioned before, Zen is a rather stubborn subject to be theorized.

In terms of Douglas’ measures of grid and group, Zen monasteries seem to be situated simultaneously on low group and grid and high group and grid. Status in a monastery certainly exists, and monks are also defined by their individuality and their behaviors towards others. At the same time, true ‘acceptance’ into the group relies on the very act of subverting the grid and group. Many stories involve monks acting spontaneously, very often against grid (spitting, slapping students as well as teachers, breaking objects, etc.) and also the reversal of student and teacher categories, subverting ‘group.’

Max Weber

A monk asked, "I have come a long way, please instruct me."
Joshu said, "You have only just entered my door. Is it proper that I spit in your face?"

Weber's theories are (you guessed it) hard to apply to Zen due to the lack of their historical correspondence. Weber does not explicitly offer a model for his theory to apply to other religions, as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is rather limited in scope to Protestantism, and, well, capitalism. If there is an applicable theory to be extracted, however, we could examine how the historicity of religion molds social life. Zen in Japan was removed from Chan in China, and further removed from Buddhism in India. It is possible that this distance decreased reliance on ritual and ideology, as the Buddha would not seem relevant to the conversation in certain ways, especially considering his non-deity status (this is comparing to the rather facile spread of Christianity, reliant on a radical claim that God manifested in a human form). Thus explains the behaviors of the monks at a Zen monastery. Despite its rather secular views, this tradition seems to be for the most part lost in the modern world, perhaps having given way to Christianity. Economically, monasteries were largely self-sufficient, maybe motivated by the lack of drive to proselytize. On a different note, operating within the question of the relation of content, the notion of *karma* agrees with the emphasis placed on history and its causality.

I was also intrigued by the philosophical proposition of what it means for Calvinists to believe that they are divinely selected for salvation. Weber argues that the Calvinists' wishes of being "chosen" manifested in their attempt to prove it, either to themselves or to others, and so pursuing a passion was a way of assessing whether or not one possessed grace. In effect, does this very action not *make* one elect? We see the paradox of free will. (Perhaps one could argue that even this fits Weber's model in persisting through to secular life, in the 'iron cage.') This relates in some way to meditation, whose explanation commonly consists of seemingly contradictory, paradoxical instructions such as "avoid concepts," "*try* to *not* doing something," etc. Following the same model as the Calvinists and their free will, then, could we conceive of Zazen as a self-fulfilling prophecy in some ways? That liberation occurs *in* the engagement of the practice, not as some external truth to be directly achieved?

Peter Berger

> Goso said: "When you meet a Zen master on the road you cannot talk to him, you cannot face him with silence. What are you going to do?"

What I found most intriguing and bizarre in Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* was his theory of mysticism. Berger sees mysticism primarily as a method for dealing with phenomena of evil and being alienated. Achieving unity with the divine thus allows an individual to find the ultimate and divine truth and reality, rendering any of the individual's social or mortal concerns irrelevant. Berger relates this to the sadistic or masochistic "I am nothing – he is everything" mindset, but he overlooks that *unity* by definition equates the individual with the divine, so there would only one, which is perfect, known as the *samadhi* state in meditation (56). His mentioning of lifting the "veil of *maya*" begs analysis of Zen meditation, which serves to do precisely this, in effect resolving the problem of theodicy as he explains it. While this may be the functional purpose of the act within the tradition, however, it also integrates well into, under his theory, *maya* being the social nomos, which plagues the self, and from which meditation liberates.

The definition of the self as ultimately an internalized performance of the social nomos is rather fascinating as well. I think it would be wrong to say that Zen attempts to liberate this notion of self to try and uncover a particular self that exists behind this performance, but it does claim to grant access to a 'true' self. The behaviors and writings of Zen masters demonstrate that this true self manifests among monks of high confidence and full engagement and attunement to the world. The opposite state – one of disconnection between expectation and perception of self, what Berger might call alienation – is seen as remaining a student of Zen. His theory of world-building is thus rather relevant to meditation practice, which allows a practitioner to realize the falsehood of certain constructions that have been handed down via society's nomos. He or she obtains the opportunity, therefore, to gain insight into one's self and worldview, and thus change the way in which they experience their world.

Karl Marx

Wakuan complained when he saw a picture of bearded Bodhidharma:
"Why hasn't that fellow a beard?"

Marx's world is one haunted by false conceptions of commodities, through their simultaneous fetishization and alienation. In his world, the working class is subjectivized in relation to the bourgeoisie. He calls for shared property and the leveling of social classes through which society will be liberated from the oppression of capitalistic pressures and forces, illusory choice, and false happiness.

Marxism and Zen Buddhism seem diametrically opposed, as Zen monks most often lived in isolated communities in the mountains. They weren't regularly exploited, although certainly pressured by their masters through monastery power structures, but the masters and teachers themselves didn't directly benefit from the students. Rather, they helped them reach enlightenment and not for their labor. To go further, capitalism itself was virtually nonexistent when Zen and such were developing, so not super applicable.

Nonetheless, Zen monasteries relied on shared property, food, housing, etc. to be self-sustaining. The practice of meditation precisely serves to realize and internalize a detachment from the concept of material intransience, which is to say that the material ought to be embraced *as is* for liberation (the emergence of 'real') to occur. Marx makes a point nuanced very similarly, claiming that the 'real' can be realized when materiality *as such* is accepted, rather than being alienated from it.

Of course, Marx calls for large-scale political action on the order of a social revolution, where Zazen serves to revolutionize a single individual's *worldview*, without necessarily explicitly changing the external world. Notably however, Buddhism developed in a society of highly divided social classes. Buddhism's philosophy included the deconstruction of this caste system and the rejection of the exclusivity of Brahmin power, perhaps in an analogous way that the Reformation sought to reclaim power and access to the holy from the institution of the church. In this sense, the movement itself was a Marxist, perhaps influencing the proclivity of China for communism (yes yes, not precisely Marxism).

Georges Bataille

A philosopher asked Buddha: "Without words, without the wordless, will you tell me truth?"
The Buddha kept silence.
The philosopher bowed and thanked the Buddha, saying: "With your loving kindness I have cleared away my delusions and entered the true path."
After the philosopher had gone, Ananda asked the Buddha what he had attained.
The Buddha replied: "A good horse runs even at the shadow of the whip."

Bataille's notion of the world, and universe in general, as consisting of a system of energy flows is an insight similar to Zen's notion of *karma*. In Zazen, one comes to realize that one is connected to the flow of energies all around him or her and that the energy consisting of the practitioner will eventually move along, just as Bataille's same energy that is given by the sun, allows plants to grow and us mammals to eat them, can flow between nations, and even across and through the universe.

In Bataille's theory of excess energy, Zazen is also rather applicable as meditation can be seen as quite literally the most useless expenditure of energy of all (e.g. literally sitting for hours). Thus, it is a way to distill excess energy, and not particularly tied to a symbolic goal or ideology, in true Zen fashion. Bataille's concrete example of Lamaism (as opposed to Islam) illustrates this principle: "[Lamaism] alone avoids *activity*, which is always directed toward acquisition and growth. It ceases – true, it has no choice – to subject life to any other ends but life itself: Directly and immediately, life is its own end" (109). He later claims that Buddhim's "triumph is unleashing it within," an important recognition of the inward direction of meditation (110). But Zen is also about more than unleashing energy within, such as expressing that energy through interacting with others, performing art, drinking tea, and engaging with the world.

But then, how does Bataille resolve lack of growth (with no excess energy left) with Buddhist monasteries? Are the lamas not still achieving growth, but perhaps in a different way or direction? Minds certainly ought grow and awaken to their senses to experience enlightenment, or must they? It could be said that a baby's non-discriminating mind is already a Zen mind, and that the longer we are in society the more damage is done to sever oneself from that state.

Catherine Bell

Ummon asked:
"The world is such a wide world, why do you answer a bell ·nudge·
and don ceremonial robes?"

Catherine Bell's radical look at ritual offers us the insight that the intentionality, effect, and rationalization of a ritual act ought to be problematized. Consider the excerpt: "The molding of the body within a highly structured environment does not simply express inner states. Rather, it primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves. Hence, required kneeling does not merely communicate subordination to the kneeler. For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinated kneeler in and through the act itself" (100). Bell implies that the very ritual act subordinates, imposing whatever value or purpose is assigned. She seems to deliberately embrace the process of religious authority and socialization and deny individual autonomy. While the actions of the ritual certainly precede an the practitioner's emotions, it is presumptuous to assume that the practitioner does not have a particularly emotional relationship to the action, and that there is some appropriation of the act that gives it value to him or her.

In the case of meditation, it could be seen that while the act is suggested, if done with the intent of the teachings, the "very act" of meditation *liberates* the practitioner, acting as a tool upon the individual, as Bell suggests here. But meditation very much expresses the "inner state" of an individual, twofold. First, in the very willpower the act takes in itself and the effect it has on the practitioner, an inner state *is* achieved by the very performance of the act. Secondly, if *used as a tool* for liberation, meditation will fail to realize enlightenment as we've explored before. Moreover, this has implications in Bell's analysis of ritualization as a *strategy*, which necessarily is not the appropriate term for Zazen, even on the meta-analysis level, because the very suggestion to meditate is debated by Zen masters. However, Bell's observation that ritualization is rooted in a ritualized body in the context of its environment is absolutely evident in Zazen, in that the body plays crucial importance in the ritual.

Saba Mahmood

Hyakujo wished to send a monk to open a new monastery. He told his pupils that whoever answered a question most ably would be appointed. Placing a water vase on the ground, he asked: "Who can say what this is without calling its name?"

The chief monk said: "No one can call it a wooden shoe."

Isan, the cooking monk, tipped over the vase with his foot and went out.

Hyakujo smiled and said: "The chief monk loses." And Isan became the master of the new monastery.

Mahmood critiques Butler's theory of performance, in that ritual operates not merely as one, but as the discursive means for expression and self-work which develop a woman into her potential virtues and as a result, produce autonomy. The question of 'spontaneity' is an interesting one, as it can define the boundary between genuine-ness and imitation. This subject is interesting to me in the context of Zazen, as it is said that enlightenment that doesn't come spontaneously and feel like a whack on the head is not 'true,' and that anything beyond that is simply striving to an ideal without achieving it. Correspondingly, however, practices like meditation can facilitate one to be more conducive to such an experience, as Mahmood argues. But, I don't think Mahmood is interested in this discussion of 'genuine' vs 'fake', however, although it is one she has to address, as it seems to be a divisive issue amongst her subjects themselves.

The question of agency in Zen is also interesting because of the constant language of 'liberation.' This is reminiscent of the misappropriation of the Western standard imposed onto Muslim women in the Middle East as revealed by Mahmood, and one wonders if the term is a mistranslation (which is another issue entirely with regard to appropriation and 'speaking for' Zen practitioners in terms that may appeal to us.) However, it turns out that this *is* a contested subject in Zen literature, primarily because it plays into the age-old (at this point) non-duality trope of "liberation from *what?*" But additionally, because these Zen monks experience relatively privileged lives, being able to live in monasteries in the mountains without exploitation nor social duty to the rest of humankind, one must conclude, by Mahmood's reasoning, that different types of agency are at play.

Stephen Bush

A monk asked Tozan when he was weighing some flax: "What is Buddha?"
Tozan said: "This flax weighs three pounds."

Bush's thesis is to unify the "three visions of religion," experience, meaning, and power. How can Zazen be conceptualized in this way? Experience seems by far the most well-fitted for the practice, for obvious reasons. But one wonders how much *about* Zen can be understood based on the *experience* of meditation, versus the accounts people may give about their meditations and how it relates to their knowledge of Zen. This is especially true in the case of meditation as we've seen with James and many of the Zen writers that ineffability is an unavoidable obstacle.

We've explored Zazen through the lens of meaning already, and concluded that if we attempt to theorize it in this way, the elusive, non-conceptual Zen successfully slips away. Bush even argues, under this category, that contends against the claim that mysticism occurs only under non-conceptual conditions, which transcend ordinary cultural modes of thinking: "An experience that was not conceptual would be an experience that one could not report to anyone, even oneself" (146). Bush operates under the premise that the experience of life is always *through* 'concepts', or modes of consciousness. But this doesn't disprove the possibility of alternate modes of consciousness that are independent of upbringing and collective knowledge (which aren't necessarily universal across cultures, but may merely be variations on existing cultural patterns). He even claims, in the very context of meditation, that "cultural particularity is still involved…The experiencer, when having the ostensibly pure consciousness event, retains the necessary bodily posture and attention to persist in the state. The experiencer does not (typically) lie down and go to sleep, make a phone call, or strike up a casual conversation with a peer." (146) But this argument seems absurd — the last few examples he gives are certainly just as much cultural things, and perhaps staying in the posture or giving attention *is* precisely the behavior that is produced and required by the meditative state.

Power is an interesting subject for meditation because, in the Marxist sense, it makes people passive and docile (as much as they can get). But by rejecting the authority of scripture and authority over an individual's body it also levels out such hierarchies.

Affect Theory

A monk asked Fuketsu: "Without speaking, without silence, how can you express the truth?"

Fuketsu observed: "I always remember springtime in southern China. The birds sing among innumerable kinds of fragrant flowers."

You feel light, and calm. You are resonating endlessly.

And blending with everything, into another hollow pitch, submerged in this sea of sound.

A current sways you gently and your thoughts float you up and out.

Close your eyes. Erase all that's around you; erase yourself.

In front of you is a path, gravel, and all around you is grass. There are bushes, trees, some birds pecking about.

You are walking down this path, you have simple shoes, canvas, and each step you take rustles a bit, which produces a pleasant sound. You enjoy this as it makes you feel more awake.

The sun shines brightly. A soft breeze comes and goes. You run your hand through your hair; it feels right. You have long, unkempt hair. Bugs are buzzing around you.

You hear the trickling of a stream nearby. (You try to pinpoint when you first started to hear it, but you let this thought go.)

As you feel your feet tread on some damp earth, you notice you've come across the stream. A small stream, which you feel is moving almost too slowly for you to notice the moving.

Slowly raising your head, you notice that someone is sitting by the stream, dressed in plain clothes, legs outstretched and hands on the damp earth.

They tell you, "Why have you brought your bug here?"

You reply, "Oh, this ghastly spider."

They tell you, "What have you learned about the mind since you've been here?"

You crush the spider that's been sitting by the river and open your palm. "I haven't, my legs carried me!"

"On Using Theory to Study Religious Stuff"

Shogen asked: "Why does the enlightened man not stand on his feet and explain himself?" And he also said: "It is not necessary for speech to come from the tongue."

On using theory…

I appreciated in class when theory was used as a political tool, because it made the most sense to me why we were doing what we were doing. To theorize on abstract topics seemed to me mostly like an intellectual game, which is certainly a worthwhile endeavor—participating in the debates in Theories this semester made me genuinely excited to be there every Tuesday, and I always left exhilarated. But it still irked me that something was either wrong or bizarre, debating, among laughter, about topics that people take very seriously, either because they hold that conviction extremely close to their hearts, or because it directly impacts their lives and wellbeing, sometimes rather negatively (e.g. Marx, Mahmood). In this way, Marx and Mahmood were redeeming to me because we as a class were becoming more educated on topics that had real-world impact. The Eliadean vs. Durkheimian theories of religion make for fantastic philosophic debate (well, maybe Eliade wasn't a good example there) and may change one's perception of the world, or of the Republican Primary debates.

That being said, reading and applying theory helps one discover the connections between a multitude of ideas, and situates (empowers) one historically in a longstanding intellectual tradition. One realizes that the criticisms and novel ideas that develop from this process open the opportunity for more original scholarship, and on continues this tradition. (Here is the point, as always, when we apply theories of religion to the theories of theory, etc.) The newly-converted humanities major in me is also anxious that this process resembles a lot like the scientific process (perhaps not method) of refining theory over and over in hopes of some discovery. But the readings by the end of the semester, such as Bell and Mahmood, renewed hope for me that we aren't moving towards *solutions*, but towards exposing a deeper degree of nuances, subtleties, and complexities. And most especially, towards self-reflection, and away from living the lie of only believing that we are studying other people.

...to study religious stuff...

In my opinion, there are some things that theory isn't always the most productive or effective at, such as debating metaphysics. I'm talking about thinkers from James to Eliade to Bataille, where arguments can be so outside of the orbit of traditional scholarship, to unverifiable claims, to overtly universal claims. To me, this is the intellectual exercise part of theory. But to attribute this to all of the thinkers we have read so far in class would be a mistake.

I'm not sure if religion is becoming more and more important in the public discourse or if I am just now noticing it more having gone through several upper level religion courses at UR. I decided to study religion out of a passion for the non-normal, the mystical, and out of a fascination of the idea that something *more* could exist than our reality. But now I am tired of the metaphysics and am much more interested in seeing how religion *engages* in this world and with humankind. I am only now understanding how important it is to be aware of how religion interacts with people, cultures, politics, ideas, and histories, and being informed on how to talk about it. As Marx put it, "the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism."

All this being said, Zen meditation probably wasn't the best choice as a test case. Zen is particularly tricky, loopy, and stubborn about staking down any claims (one Zen adage (if you could call it that) goes something like "how can you nail a cloud to the sky?"), and so is particularly immune to theorizing. Or rather, doing so is *certainly* an intellectual exercise, and *certainly* not Zen. I am curious to how such a topic can be approached. Affect theory is surely intriguing choice, for one. In any case, I find Zen to be more of a philosophy than a religion. Interestingly, we never converged as a class on singular definitions of religion, which I have been given by several other religion professors. I found this to be yet another subtle lesson.

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The rigid structure of the "synopsis/implication/critique" thinker presentations forced me to think critically and engage with the books that we read, and not merely absorb their information, for which I am very grateful. Writing the critiques was probably the most difficult part of the class for me, as I am not so used to engaging with texts so critically (sometimes I like to let them wash over me, and spend a few days after completing the work looking through their

eyes.) But criticism became more of a logical way to truly understand and internalize the texts, I found. With every thinker we read, I felt something new and radical being added to the table. And even if counterexamples debunked them, or if they've since been thrown out of the academy, I agree (I did not earlier in the semester) that they're important to study and genuinely attempt to take seriously. On that note, I earnestly applaud your pedagogical method for being truly fair to the writers and dispensing your contributions in class not as a lecturer but as one of us, trying to wrestle with and through them. Thank you for such a wonderful semester! -dan