
THE DEPTH OF GOD: YVES RAGUIN, A LIFE BETWEEN EASTERN SPIRITUALITIES AND CHRISTIANITY

神之深处 甘易逢：介于东方灵修与基督教之间的一种生活

Gianni Criveller 柯毅霖

In May 1968¹, Yves Raguin returned to Paris, the city where he studied as a young man. There he witnessed the boisterous street demonstrations by large crowds of young people. The French missionary was coming from Taiwan, where he was a well-known scholar on Chinese culture and spiritualities. The Paris youngsters boldly stated that God was dead. Raguin, however, thought that the youth rejected a God different from the one he had come to know better in the East. It is not God who is dead, Raguin thought, but rather the abstraction that they call God. Eastern spiritualities, which seek the divine in the depths of the human, could have helped the youth of Paris to know God from a different point of view. “While travelling through France, I became deeply aware of whom I was, after twenty years in the East. I somewhat understood that Chinese humanism was two thousand years ahead of the West. And I wanted to state that, even if I did not know how” (Raguin, 1975a, pp. 5-6).

Later that year, Raguin began writing *The Depth of God*, his second book comparing Eastern

¹ On May 3, 1968, students in Paris occupied the Sorbonne, one of the most illustrious universities in Europe. The events that ensued over the following few weeks—through mass protests, street battles and nationwide strikes—had major impact, culturally and socially, in France and in Europe.

and Western spiritualities². The title was carefully chosen: “I attempted the discovery of the ‘depth of God’ in the depth of man.... In English, ‘the depth of God’ immediately resonates with ‘the death of God’. In fact, my thought expresses the passage from a humanism in which God seems ‘dead’, to a notion of man which reveals and manifests God in the depth of the human” (Raguin, 1975a, p. 6).

In his first book, *Paths to Contemplation* (1968), Raguin had written on ascendant paths toward God. The itinerary described in *The Depth of God* is the other way around. “The main theme of *The Depth of God* is that, when man discovers what man is, [he] finds God.... I can describe the process with these words: ‘Who knows man, knows God’.... *The Depth of God* is like digging a well in the heart of human being” (Raguin, 1975a, p. 6). A digging that leads to God.

Exploring the way of interiority, Raguin proposes an audacious parallel between the rejection of God in the contemporary West and Buddha’s refusal to submit humans to a God imagined as an external Absolute. “A Buddhist may say that he does not profess any belief in God.... He does not deny the existence of an Absolute, but he does not want man [to] feel he is subservient to it or related to it. He wants to make man totally master of himself. In a way this is the first known movement of the ‘death of God’” (Raguin, 1975a, p. 8). For the historical Buddha “to talk or think about God and metaphysical problems is a waste of time and energy” (Raguin, 1975a, p. 10). Raguin suggests that the encounter between Christian faith and Asian religious traditions is possible on the path to interiority. A path that goes beyond the denial of God declared by modernity and leads to the “depth of God”.

BUDDHIST EMPTINESS, DAOIST NON-BEING, AND CHRISTIAN NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

The historical Buddha had, in Raguin words, the “great courage” of stating that “the

everything, the Ultimate included, is void” (Raguin, 1997, p. 154). Buddhist emptiness (*kong* 空) and somewhat similarly, Daoist non-being (*wu* 無) and non-action (*wu wei* 無為), far from opposing Christian faith are, for Raguin, “fundamental for spiritual life”, a means or a “way to the ultimate experience of contemplation” (Raguin, 1998a, pp. 85-86).

The concept of emptiness can connect Eastern and Christian spiritualities, even if, in Christianity the “concept of emptiness has never been pushed as far or as deep as in Buddhism” (Raguin, 1998a, p. 96). While Christianity did not have a philosophy that would endorse the words “everything is void,” Christian mystics have stated that all their wisdom was nothing before God. “They go up to the point of saying ‘My God, you are! And I am not!’ This is the ultimate expression of emptying of the self in the face of God” (Raguin, 1998a, p. 96).

Since its inception, Christian thought has known negative or apophatic theology, or the negative way (*via negativa*). During the Middle Ages, it became the preferred term for describing the experiences of divinity by many mystics, especially, but not exclusively, from northern Europe. The negative way emphasizes that God is beyond the human territory of language and concepts. As the human mind cannot comprehend the immensity of God, any word fails to describe God. Those who experience the divine, can describe what God is not, rather than what God is. Rather than making affirmations about God, these mystics and authors adopted an attitude of utter humility when mentioning anything about God.

Among the best known Northern European mystics, who embraced apophatic theology, is the 13th century Dominican, Meister Eckhart. His work still provides a point of departure for dialogue with Asian mysticism. Meister Eckhart—who was completely rehabilitated by Catholic Church and his Order in 1992 and 2010—is, according to Raguin, particularly close to Buddhist and Hindu

² *La profondeur de Dieu* was published only in 1973 in Paris by Desclée de Brouwer. *Chemins de la contemplation*, Raguin’s first book, was published by Desclée de Brouwer in 1969.

thought. “When Buddhists attempt to compare their traditional ways of contemplation with Christian ways, it is to him [Eckhart] that they refer to. When Hindus of the Sankhara School look to Christianity for equivalent theories, they look to Eckhart, who went as far as it is possible to go, in the theory of identification of the human soul with God” (Raguin, 1998b, p. 177).

Following in the footsteps of the Japanese thinker and historian of religions Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki, Raguin observed that Eckhart was able to develop a mystical theology close to Buddhist experience. Eckhart’s statements that all creatures are pure nothing—not something small—but really pure nothing, are very reminiscent of a Buddhist doctrine according to which all things are pure void or emptiness, or illusion (Raguin, 1998b, pp. 187-188). Raguin keeps quoting Suzuki on Meister Eckhart, stating that the thought of the Medieval German mystic is associable also to Daoist non-being.

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When Eckhart says that the Godhead is pure nothingness, he means something totally different from what he says when he claims that the creatures are pure nothing. One is nothingness because it is absolute in itself and beyond any quality of being “something.” The other one or the creature, is nothing in regard to the Absolute which is everything. The creature has no existence outside of God’s being.... The inactivity of the Godhead

corresponds very closely to the concept of non-action in Taoism. The impossibility to speak about the Godhead seems to directly correspond to the ineffability of the *Tao*, according to the very first sentence of the *Tao Te Ching* (*Daodejing*). (Raguin, 1998b, pp. 190-192)

In *The Depth of God*, Raguin stated that Christians might very well agree with the famous opening of the Daoist classic *Daodejing*: “The *Dao* that can be named is not the eternal *Dao*. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. Nameless is the origin of heaven and earth.... The origin is the mystery, Mystery within mystery; the door to all marvels.”

The statements by Meister Eckhart, on God being Nothingness, according to Raguin, were “more to explain the mystical itinerary of humankind rather than to speculate about God” (Raguin, 1998b, p. 194). When stating that Godhead is pure nothing, Eckhart does not mean that Godhead does not exist, he rather means that “he is nothing of what we may say or think about it” (Raguin, 1998b, p. 192).

Nevertheless, as a Christian, Raguin affirms that, after all, God did speak to humanity through the incarnation of the Logos. This event, writes Raguin, makes for a basic change of perspective in the search for God. Yet, we find a constant in all mystics: the more they progress in the depth, the less they can explain themselves and God (Raguin, 1975a, pp. 91-92).

The universe of the mystics is as wide and as great as the mind can conceive, extending in all directions, into the heights and into the depths as far as human mind can go.... The mystics as they continuously strive to relate to what is beyond or inside, will never be content to rest. They will continuously be trying to reach that which is beyond everything.... They try to live in relation to the mystery, to live within it, to be taken into it. Thus we call them mystics. (Raguin, 1997, p.

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MATTEO RICCI S.J. AND YVES RAGUIN

In 1966, in Taichung, Yves Raguin founded the Ricci Institute, which was transferred to Taipei in 1969. The Ricci Institute now has branches in Taipei, Macau, Chantilly (Paris) and San Francisco. The dedication of the Institute in the name of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci S.J. was not chosen by chance. Ricci reintroduced Christian faith to China in early modern times, through cultural dialogue and accommodation, science and friendship. Raguin devoted to Ricci numerous pages (Raguin, 2001, pp. 323-336) in which he describes his spirituality as reflecting “a deep sense of the greatness and profundity of humanity. It has its foundation in the virtue of *Ren* (humanity)” (Raguin, 2001, p. 333). Ricci, according to Raguin, “practiced true friendship as the foundation of exchange and dialogue. Ultimately, his spirituality was a spirituality of friendship” (Raguin, 2001, p. 335).

1603). In this catechism Ricci launched a stern attack against Buddhism, accusing it of being a caricature of Christianity. For Ricci, Buddhism was a direct competitor against Christianity: both were religions coming from the West; both had monastic life, celibacy, fasting, scriptures, meditation, devotions and temples. *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* had Ricci rejecting the Buddhist concept of void as an absurdity. His book, *Twenty-Five Sentences* (*Ershiwu Yan* 二十五言, 1605), was a direct response to the Buddhist *Forty-two Paragraph Sutra* (*Sishier Zhangjing* 四十二章經). Ricci also attacked Daoism in his catechism. He knew Daoist doctrine and practices rather well as he made very attentive observations³, yet he condemned Daoism as tainted with “superstition” and rejected as absurd the Daoist concepts of non-being and non-action⁴.

Raguin, on the other hand, looked with positive appreciation at Daoism and Buddhism, and he wrote on Confucianism as well, especially about Confucius’ humanist way to spirituality. As

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However, Raguin’s approach to Chinese cultures and religions was quite different, if not opposite from Ricci’s. The latter appreciated Confucianism and rejected Daoism and Buddhism. Ricci’s approach is best summarized by the four-character sentence: “to complement Confucianism and replace Buddhism” (*buru yifó* 補儒易佛). This expression was used by Paul Xu Guangqi, Ricci’s most important disciple and collaborator, in his 1612 preface to Ricci’s 1603 “Catechism,” *The True Meaning of The Lord of Heaven* (天主實義 *Tianzhu shiyi*, first edition in

one who was also adept at meditation, Raguin especially appreciated the neo-Confucian practice of Silent Meditation (or Quiet Sitting, *jingzuo* 靜坐), on which he wrote a book (Raguin, 1994). It is a practice of self-cultivation for wise men, promoted especially by the

3 Ricci reported the only written version of a certain Daoist oral tale. Ricci might have very well met the 50th Master, Zhang Guoxiang 張國祥, who died in 1611, as the latter lived in Beijing for almost 13 years, in the same period when Ricci was there.

4 For Ricci’s attitude toward Daoism, see *A Matter of the Greatest Importance* (Criveller, 2010b).

influential philosopher Wang Yangming (1472-1529). Even if the practice may have reminded Ricci and fellow Jesuits of their own meditation and Loyola's "Composition of Place" exercises, Ricci did not promote or practice it. Ricci could not accept Neo-Confucianism as he considered it contaminated by Buddhist and Daoist concepts and practices. The Confucian *jingzuo* is similar to the type of meditation (*zuochan* 坐禪) carried out by the followers of Chan Buddhism (禪, known in the West by its Japanese name, Zen).

The most significant difference between Ricci and Raguin is their different readings of Buddhist, Daoist and Neo-Confucian traditions. Ricci rejected the three of them, advocating a return to the original Confucianism of the Classics, as he noted that many passages in the classic texts were in harmony with Christian teaching. He even proposed a parallel between the relationship of Christianity with Greco-Roman culture and that of Christianity with Confucianism. The distinction between the original teaching of the Classics and the later Neo-Confucian commentaries is a key point in Ricci's interpretation of Confucianism. Ricci asserted that the ancients believed in God the Creator. The ancient Confucian terms "sovereign above" (*Shangdi* 上帝), and "Heaven" (*Tian* 天), are not impersonal and immanent, but personal and transcendent.

Ricci was a humanist, trained in the philosophical rigor of scholastic theology. His philosophy and theology, rooted in Aristotle's "principle of non-contradiction," could not accept concepts such as void, non-being and non-action. They were absurd and self-contradictory, and thus ill-suited to describe the nature of God. The concept of "religion" could be associated exclusively with Christianity, as its claim to truth is an essential characteristic of religion. For Ricci, Buddhism and Daoism were therefore not even religions (as there is only one religion, the true one), but idolatrous "sects."

Raguin, on the other hand, was a contemplative, attentive to what he regarded as

the work of the Spirit within Asian spiritualities. He was quite obviously less interested or even suspicious of Confucianism. I remember a private conversation with him, concerning the outcome of the Chinese Rites Controversy. Objecting to mainstream opinion on the disastrous consequences of the notorious controversy, he said that, should the outcome have been different, Christianity would end up becoming little more than a branch of Confucian national ideology⁵. Raguin walked a different path, trusting the religious and spiritual dimensions of Daoism, Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism as meaningful for Christianity.

The theological assessments of non-Christian religious worlds changed significantly following Vatican Council II (1962-1965) and the promulgation of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, (1964). This encyclical deals with the Church's relation with the modern world and articulates a vision for dialogue with other religions and the world at large. In fact, with this encyclical, Paul VI introduced the term "dialogue" into the language of the Church⁶. Along with many other pioneers, Raguin followed the path of dialogue to participate in developing a new theology of mission.

YVES RAGUIN'S THEOLOGY OF MISSION

Yves Raguin and Matteo Ricci S.J. have in common an awareness of being missionaries and shared a lifelong commitment to this call. Raguin developed his own theology of mission in an Asian context, describing the missionary as a "catalyst." This image, picked up recently by Maciej Bielawski (Bielawski, 2014, pp. xi-xii), and Giorgio Marengo (Marengo, 2018, pp. 163-164), was first described by Raguin in 1973.

5 I have reported this conversation in *The Parable of Inculturation of the Gospel in China. A Catholic Viewpoint* (Criveller, 2003, p. 39).

6 The encyclical, published on the eve of the conclusive session of the Second Vatican Council, invites Christians to acquire a deep knowledge of their own faith, and move into dialogue with the world. The Pope particularly highlights the importance of dialogue with other religions, pointing to the inherent dignity of the interlocutor in such a dialogue. Paul VI suggests that the dialogue has to be humble, patient and charitable. It also looks for common ground. However, the Pope argues, Christians cannot give up the purpose of bringing the truth of the Christian faith to others.

In chemistry, a “catalyst is a body that is present to create a reaction; it does not produce the action but it causes it to be produced.... A small amount of catalyst can effect the conversion of a large amount of substance being changed” (Raguin, 1973a, p. 118). Similarly, a missionary is a “catalyst” that helps others become capable of realizing themselves.

If we are true catalysts our influence will be considerable. A real catalyst will be the one who enables others to grow and develop.... The perfect catalyst helps and inspires others to discover and develop within their own culture.... He is an inspirer, someone who awakens, whose mere presence and existence is a call, not to imitation but to full personal development. He has no desire to make disciples but only to show people they are loved and help them attain the full level of their capacities.... The catalyst has his own experience of meeting God in a particular culture; the temptation would be to provide ready-made formulas and to speak of his experience.... The catalyst is there to inspire others in their search for God (Raguin, 1973a, pp. 121-122).

The missionary catalyst seeks the grace of “kenosis, and through the Spirit acting in him, is able to awaken the Spirit in others” (Raguin, 1973a, pp. 118-119). The joy of the missionary catalyst “is to see growing up around him people of other cultures and different upbringing, as Christian as himself, now ready to enter into dialogue, and to live in an intimacy of shared thought and inspiration” (Raguin, 1973a, p. 123). In his 2018 book on evangelization in Mongolia and in Asia, Giorgio Marengo develops Raguin’s image of the catalyst as a form of “whispering the Gospel,” which he contends is the most appropriate style of narrating the story of Jesus in Asian contexts (Marengo, 2018, pp. 163-165).

Father Yves Raguin wrote over 20 books and many more articles, having contemplation and Eastern spiritualities as his favorite themes. He preached retreats and lectured on spiritual life in many countries of Asia and beyond. Many religious women and men, as well as lay faithful,

sought him for spiritual advice in their path toward experiencing the divine. His legacy still lingers in Asian theologies of mission.



PROF. GIANNI CRIVELLER, STUDY DIRECTOR OF
PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE FOR FOREIGN MISSIONS

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