

# Ἐν Χριστῷ Out of Context: The Zen-ification of the Son of God

Jacob S. Bullock

## KEY WORDS

| Zen-Christian | Theology of Religions |  
| Jesus | Biblical Theology | Gospel | Buddhism |

## ABSTRACT

Zen-Christianity is a pluralistic theological movement that is gaining greater acceptance in the global evangelical community. Members of this movement claim to have achieved a theological bilingualism in which both distinct theological/philosophical systems are held in concert without conflict or distortion of one by the other. This article argues that far from achieving theological harmony, Zen-Christian theology severely distorts numerous tenants of orthodox Christian faith including the person and work of Jesus Christ. In demonstration of this, this article examines the Zen-Christian theology of Jesus as presented by Ruben Habito, a prominent theologian of the Zen-Christian movement. From an exegetical and biblical-theological perspective this article demonstrates that in order to fit Jesus into his Zen-Christian theological program, Habito must divorce Jesus from his theological, linguistic, and historical context. This article concludes that because it distorts the deity, teachings, and nature of Jesus Christ, Zen-Christianity, as presented by Habito, should be completely rejected by the evangelical community.

## I. IN PURSUIT OF A ZEN-CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

In the current marketplace of theological trends pride of place is given to interreligious dialogue of a collaborative nature. The most prominent fruit of this collaboration is an emerging legion of theological amalgams and their adherents; those claiming multiple religious belongings. Those who claim multiple religious belongings seek to hold in concert two distinct theological systems without the subjugation of one system to the other. In other words “multiple belongsers”<sup>1</sup> seek to operate from a place of “religious bilingualism” in that their life experience might be interpreted by either religious system while each system is not directly analogous to the other. (Homrighausen 2015, 64–66) A popular current incarnation of this religious

bilingualism which has made inroads into the global evangelical community is that of being a Zen-Christian; an adherent of the Christian faith who either has attained or is seeking Zen enlightenment. Writers such as Ruben Habito and Robert Kennedy (2020) have popularized the Zen-Christian identity as being a natural outpouring of the quest to follow Jesus. In his book *Living Zen, Loving God*, an exemplar text of the Zen-Christian movement, Ruben Habito embarks on a semi-autobiographical set of essays in which he proposes a synergy between Christianity and Zen. Habito, a former Jesuit Priest and current Zen master describes his own personal experience of Zen enlightenment. Habito presents the benefits for understanding Jesus (2004, 16–17) that he believes arise from the joint practice of Christianity and Zen and attempts to argue for theological compatibility

<sup>1</sup> Term invoked by Braak for those who seek to maintain two distinct theological identities simultaneously. (Braak 2017, 434).

(2004, 6–7) between the two theological systems. The goal of the book, in Habito's words, is to answer the question, "How am I to understand and articulate the Zen experience in the light of my own Christian faith?" (2004, XVII)

#### **A. Habito's Stated Goal: To Combine Without Mixing**

In the preface to the text, John P. Keenan, a colleague of Ruben Habito and a fellow Catholic-Zen theologian, makes the claim that what is truly unique about Habito's approach to combining Zen and Christianity into a mutually beneficial amalgam is that he is able to present the compatibility between Christianity and Zen-Buddhist worldviews without "mixing" the two traditions in any way. This claim seems to indicate that, in the views of both Keenan and Habito, the book draws on the biblical text and Christian theological tradition without forcing either to fit its thesis. Keenan states, "So here, Zen remains Zen and Christian faith remains Christian faith. Neither is watered down. Neither is confused or bent out of shape. Rather each interweaves and dwells within the other." (2004, XI–XII)

#### **B. Weighing the Claims of Habito Keenan, *et al***

In this article I will take Ruben Habito's theological articulation of Zen-Christian theology as a prototypical presentation of the movement.<sup>2</sup> By critiquing this single work of Zen-Christian theology, I seek to offer an short examination and rebuttable of the theological

2 As Zen-Christianity is a grass roots movement there is no official coherent articulation of Zen-Christian theology. There is also a lack of coherence in the writings of individual Zen-Christian theologians as their works at times appear contradictory. As such my strategy has been to select a single work from a single author with which to interact. Thus, I hope in critiquing this single work to provide a general critique of popular claims of the theological movement.

underpinnings on the movement. My aim is to critically examine, as presented by Ruben Habito, Zen-Christian theological claims as they pertain to the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. I will argue that, far from keeping them undiluted, Ruben Habito habitually bends the teachings of Jesus to fit his theological arguments and supplants them with his own Zen-Buddhist worldview. I will argue that far from showing compatibility between the teachings of Jesus and the teaching of the Zen masters, Habito's theology remakes Jesus into a first-century Jewish Zen master and teacher of modern Buddhist panentheistic theology.

I will contend that in Habito's theological program the apostle Paul fairs little better than Jesus, finding his Christology submitted to unwarranted cutting and pasting to fit Habito's theological aims. My thesis is that Habito, in an attempt to meld Zen-Buddhism with Christianity, has divorced both Jesus and Paul from literary context and read into them Buddhist philosophical and theological ideas foreign to their culture, contexts, and use of language. I will argue that Habito misrepresents the words of Jesus and Paul not only philosophically but also linguistically.<sup>3</sup>

Following a short overview of Habito's theology, I will discuss a number of ways in which I believe that Habito has misrepresented both the mission and worldview of Jesus and has taken a Pauline theological concepts out of context for his own purposes. Since Habito's book is theological in nature, my arguments will extend beyond exegesis to biblical, systematic, and historical theology. Where my critique is theological, I seek to represent as fairly as possible normative historical Christian theology. Where

3 As shown below, at times we see Habito edit sentences, change tenses, and make unwarranted translation choices in an attempt to squeeze the words of both Jesus and Paul into a previously prepared Zen-shaped mold.

it is exegetical, I will operate from a historical-grammatical approach to exegesis, seeking to understand the words of Jesus and Paul as clearly as possible in context. I will demonstrate that Habito's appeals to scripture and orthodox Christian theology divorces them from context and reshapes them into a form more convenient with the Zen-Christian agenda.

## II. HABITO'S BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL PROGRAM

In his first essay entitled, "Seeing Into One's Nature: A Christian Experience of Zen" Habito describes his own experience of achieving Zen enlightenment and his attempts to fit the Zen experience into his Christian faith. Through dialectic reasoning, he struggles to connect many theological concepts in Zen-Buddhist philosophy with concepts in Christian theology. In the process he makes four very significant connections: (1) that the status of all sentient beings<sup>4</sup> is ἐν Χριστῷ<sup>5</sup> based on Jesus' creation of them *ex nihilo* (2004, 6–7); (2) that Jesus' teaching on repentance (μετανοοῦν) is analogous to an encouragement to achieve Zen-like enlightenment; (3) that Jesus' purpose in undergoing crucifixion was solely to demonstrate solidarity with all sentient beings who endure suffering and to teach others to do the same; (4) and that the Gospel as preached by Jesus is that all sentient beings are part of God in the "Realm of Heaven"<sup>6</sup> and that through

4 Zen-Buddhism teaches that all sentient creatures equally possess the Buddha-nature and as such exist as part of God.

5 Habito describes this as having the "Christ Nature" equating it with the Buddha-nature and drawing on Paul's statements in Eph 1:4 "For he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we may be holy and unblemished in his sight in love." (NET) as proof.

6 As discussed below, Habito insists on translating the phrase βασιλείαν θεοῦ as "Kingdom of God" or βασιλείαν

enlightenment and Buddhist moral philosophy one can reconcile with God through embracing God within oneself and others. (2004, 57)

### A. The Personhood of God and Nature of the Trinity

God figures into Habito's theology as both flat and impersonal. God in many ways is coterminous with love and should not be seen as the source of love or the object of loving but instead the action itself. (2004, XVII) The Spirit of God as well is depersonalized; the Spirit is merely the presence of God that was released through the crucifixion. (2004, 37) Because both God and the Holy Spirit become depersonalized positive forces, Jesus is the only member of the Godhead who truly achieves personal status in Habito's theology.<sup>7</sup> However, Jesus only achieves personhood in an impoverished way. He is honored as a moral teacher who encouraged all to love one another and who worked tirelessly to help the suffering. However, because of Habito's underlying panentheistic worldview, Jesus is no more divine than any who hold the Buddha-nature as part of God.<sup>8</sup> It is in his treatment of Jesus that Habito seems most unable to reconcile the two competing worldviews he is attempting to meld. While common core Buddhist theology states that Christ himself could not have held any more of God than

τῶν οὐρανῶν as 'kingdom of heaven(s)' and attempts to redirect its meaning away from any sense of lordship, imbuing the term with entirely new meaning.

7 Jesus, in Habito's arguments, is clearly human, but in true Buddhist dialectical style also seems to be an impersonal force at times. It seems that both Christians and Buddhist have trouble wrapping their head around the concept of the incarnation of God.

8 The Buddha-nature is a complex concept difficult to translate into Western philosophical thinking. Essentially it involves possessing both sentience and the potentiality for spiritual progress. It is not limited to humanity but is shared by all humans, self-aware portions of the animal kingdom as well as certain natural phenomenon such as mountains and waterfalls. For a detail historical treatment see: (King 1989, 154–56)

any being who is aware of its own existence, Habito's Christian heritage seems to keep him from stating this outright. For him to invoke the name Christian at all, Habito seems compelled to describe Christ as unique to a degree.<sup>9</sup> So here we see a compromise, Christ wins out as unique in some way to the rest of the beings who are part of God. He is unique as the one who, through his death, burial, and resurrection showed a way for all those who are part of God to commune with the God who already indwells them. (2004, 8–9) According to Habito, the way Jesus showed the way to commune with God was through solidarity with suffering by choosing an inglorious and painful death.

### B. Jesus the Bodhisattva

The uniqueness of Jesus in Habito's view is that he is the ultimate example of a human in tune with the divine. As such, Habito tends to take passages or verses from the Gospels that refer in context specifically to Jesus in his messianic role or divine/human nature and apply them generally to all sentient beings. This tendency is seen in Habito's use of Mark 1:11. In context it is a pronouncement of divine favor and commission upon Jesus, (Collins 2007) but Habito applies it generally to all sentient beings, in proof that, far from being separate from God, they are unfallen and inherently acceptable to the divine. He says,

In short, we need only be humble enough to accept the fact that we are accepted, just as we are, no matter what, by that cosmic

9 It is in dealing with Jesus that Habito most clearly is seen to conflict with his dual identity. While Habito desires to retain a Christian identity, in his proposal Jesus simply does not fit well into Buddhism. So, we find Jesus' words retranslated and edited. While Jesus was undoubtedly a teacher of morality, one becomes keenly aware the Gospel writer's record numerous statements by Jesus very inconvenient to Habito's position. For example, Jesus' self-descriptions are problematic for Habito's views. I will explore this more below.

love that permeates through the universe... Jesus heard these words as he received baptism from John the Baptist at the river Jordan: "you are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). (2004, 60)

### C. Habito's Theism: Pantheism vs. Panentheism

Claiming that his view of God fits neatly in the Christian doctrine of omnipresence, Habito rejects the claim that he is advocating pantheism. (2004, 56) This is rightly so for if he claimed pantheism, he would claim that God is coextensive with the universe. Instead what Habito advocates, though it is unclear whether he himself would admit to it, is a form of panentheism,<sup>10</sup> the belief that reality comprises a portion of God. So, though God transcends creation, all creation is in some way part of God. Panentheism is ultimately incompatible with the Christian doctrine of God.<sup>11</sup> Habito's panentheism leads him to see the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as analogous with the Zen notion of possessing the "God nature".<sup>12</sup> Because Habito theologically links the doctrine

10 Panentheism would state that "all reality is part of the being of God". *Bowker 1997*, s.v. pantheism, panentheism.

11 Specific areas of conflict between Christian theology and panentheism are the distinctness of God from creation, the immutability of God, the impassability of God, and strict anti-supernaturalism. The God of panentheism shifts with reality and introduces a God of changing nature in which God grows and shrinks, changing with creation. Panentheism also deifies creation making no separation between creation and creator. See: (*Geisler 1999*, 576–80.)

12 It should be noted that the concept of panentheism was known in the Roman world in the first century having been theorized by Plato. (*Geisler 1999*, s.v. panentheism)) However, the burden of proof rests on those who would show a philosophical and theological relationship between Plato and the message of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Jewish concepts of God so extremely separated God from the created world that in the intertestamental period a belief developed that the Law must have been given by angels (*Davidson 1992*, 120–1.) to Moses and not by the hand of YHWH because of this transcendence of God. If Intertestamental Judaism erred from the Christian perspective, it was not towards panentheism but in seeing God as too inseparably transcendent.

of omnipresence with Buddhist panentheism, statements by both Jesus and Paul have been reinterpreted in this light. Where Christian theology would see Jesus' statements in John 14:15-20<sup>13</sup> as indicating that the Holy Spirit will be given to believers, Habito interprets them to mean that all sentient being will be revealed as being part of God's being, having a portion of his Spirit. Where Habito would claim the indwelling spirit is synonymous with God's omnipresence, the indwelling of the Spirit is, according to orthodox Christian theology, distinct from God's omnipresence.<sup>14</sup>

#### **D. Sin, Suffering, and What is Wrong with this World**

While sin is largely absent in Habito's theological program, suffering stands foundational. Habito states,

We must make clear at the outset that Zen as such is non-theistic, that is not at all concerned with the notion of God or with the question of God's existence or nonexistence. Rather its central concern, as in Buddhism in general, is the resolution of the fundamental problem of human existence, characterized in this tradition as *dukkha* (dissatisfactoriness). (2004, 104)

This *dukkha* of which Ruben Habito speaks is the notion of suffering. (Bowker 1997, s.v.

13 "If you love me, you will obey my commandments. Then I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, because it does not see him or know him. But you know him, because he resides with you and will be in you. I will not abandon you as orphans, I will come to you. In a little while the world will not see me any longer, but you will see me; because I live, you will live too. You will know at that time that I am in my Father and you are in me and I am in you." John 15:15-20 (NET)

14 Historically, the exact nature of God's omnipresence has been a debate in Christian theology. See discussion in (Gasser 2019, 57). However, what has been asserted historically is that the theological concepts of omnipresence and the indwelling of the Spirit are distinct. The spirit's indwelling being unique to the believer. See Lombard's excellent articulation (Lombard 1971, sec. I, d. 37, c. 1, n. 2)

*dukkha*) In Habito's theological program, suffering is part of the world by design and is not related to a moral failing on the part of humanity. Rather, suffering is the result of ignorance on the part of those who possess the Buddha-nature; ignorance that they and all other sentient beings innately exist fully indwelt by God.<sup>15</sup> So, repentance for Habito is the achievement of enlightenment, a realization of the reality of the Buddha-nature that frees one from suffering. The world exists as a paradise in which all suffering merely results from ignorance. Habito supports this assertion with a revised translation of Jesus' words to the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43, "It is on the Cross itself that Jesus tells the Good Thief beside him, 'Truly today you are<sup>16</sup> with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43)". (2004, 9)

In the end the redemption of humanity is really freedom from the ignorance that results in suffering. This freedom from ignorance, according to Habito, leads one to accept the world as it is and value the portion of God within each individual equally without judgement. (2004, 19–21) While Habito seems to strongly believe that moral wrongdoing does

15 (2004, 62) Habito seems to demonstrate an awareness that this argument is theologically difficult for Christianity to swallow and attempts to obscure the issue by claiming that the doctrine of omnipresence makes Christianity panentheistic itself. (2004, 56) But I would contend that claiming Christianity is panentheistic fails to consider different degrees of the presence of God that Christianity claims. For example, Christian theology would state that the believer is indwelt by God in a way a frog is not, though God is omnipresent. Buddhism and Habito, in contrast, would see God as indwelling a frog to the same degree as a person who follows Christ. This is panentheistic and outside the bounds of Christian theology.

16 The translation of the verb ἔσθῃ (a future middle tense form of εἶμι 'to be') in this verse as the English present tense is truly bizarre. In his revision of Jesus' statement Habito changes the statement to say "Truly today you are with me in paradise" in support of his claim that the earth exists in an uncorrupted state. (2004, 9) . This amendment to Jesus' words seems to indicate either an ignorance of or complete disregard for the underlying Greek text.

exist,<sup>17</sup> the solution to the moral evils in the world is not found in the removal of a fallen state. It is found in enlightenment, through realization that all is part of God. So, repentance for Habito is a turning from ignorance to a Zen worldview through enlightenment. For Habito this atonement is found in meditation.

### E. Habito on the Purpose of the Crucifixion

For Habito the primary purpose of the crucifixion was to demonstrate to all those who possess the Buddha-nature that the true way to be free of suffering and achieve union with God is through demonstrating compassion for and solidarity with the suffering of the world.<sup>18</sup> Of the purpose of the crucifixion Habito states,

So to experience being “one in Christ” with all beings involves not only a oneness in eating and drinking and laughing and crying with all sentient beings, but also a concrete experience of solidarity with the sufferings of living beings in this historical existence. This is the solidarity that Jesus himself assumed with the sufferings of all humanity on the Cross. (2004, 9)

Thus, solidarity with suffering and not atonement for sin is the purpose of the cross in Habito’s theology. While Christ’s ignoble death ultimately did serve as an example to his followers of obedience and ultimate love,<sup>19</sup>

17 For instance, his discussion of the evils that come out of having a focus on oneself. See: (2004, 28–31)

18 Habito’s views on the purpose of the crucifixion along with other points of his theological program are Socinian in nature. This covert Socinianism is at odds with the Catholic Christian identity he claims. Many of these doctrines were condemned by Innocent III in the *Profession of Faith* he composed rejecting the Socinian heresies. (Pope 1912, s.v. Socinianism) As the *Profession of Faith* is official church doctrine in the Catholic church these views put him further at odds with his Catholic self-identification.

19 Such we can establish from Christ’s statement about his intended purposes leading up to the crucifixion. As seen in John 15:13 where he ties the theme of sacrifice on behalf of others to that of love for others.

Jesus himself states in Mark 10:45 that his own intention was to give his life as a ransom, a phrase that mirrors statements in Isaiah 53:10-12 about the servant who will bear sin on behalf of others (Collins 2007, 500.).

## III. JESUS ACCORDING TO RUBEN HABITO

### A. The Mission of Jesus

#### 1. Habito on the Mission of the Jesus

It is in dealing with Jesus that Habito’s attempt at a Zen-Christian amalgam is the most threadbare. Through bending the text, Habito presents Jesus as a teacher whose moral perspective fits cleanly in Zen-Buddhist ideals. At several points Habito, attempting to proof-text his arguments, modifies the wording and meaning of statements in the Gospels made by Jesus. Where tense is inconvenient for his thesis, Habito as seen above in Luke 23:43 simply changes the tense in translation.

Transmogrified by Habito’s editorial adjustments, Jesus emerges as an itinerant moral philosopher whose time is spent chiefly relieving the suffering of the poor and whose life was voluntarily offered up in crucifixion to show his followers moral resolve and solidarity in suffering. (2004, 8–9) But this selectively edited Jesus is difficult to support from the text. While Jesus does spend considerable time with the poor in the Gospel accounts, he also spends a considerable amount of time with the rich.<sup>20</sup> He provides healing for all regardless of their socio-economic position in society.<sup>21</sup> In

20 For example, time spent with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10); Nicodemus (John 3:1-21); Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50); Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (John 11).

21 For example, the healing of a centurion’s servant (Luke 7:1-10); a nobleman’s daughter (Matt 9:18-26), and a royal official’s son (John 4:43-54).

addition, even a cursory reading of the Gospels leads one to believe that, in context, the message of Jesus was largely one of moral repentance and the legal ramifications of wrongdoing and the violation of divine moral standards.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. My Critique on Habito's Portrayal of the Mission of Jesus

As stated above, for Habito, Jesus performed three key functions: he created all things, he educated people to the current reality of God fully indwelling all sentient creatures, and he himself possessed the Buddha-nature to demonstrate solidarity with those who are suffering by himself suffering in the crucifixion.

While I would agree with Habito that morality as an outworking of love was a core component of the teaching of Jesus, the Gospel writers continually highlight that the bases of this call to righteous was presented by Jesus as a necessary response to the kingship of God and his moral standards as revealed to Israel in the Mosaic Law and the teaching of the prophets.<sup>23</sup> This is in contrast to Habito who presents Buddhist morality as the philosophical and theological basis of Jesus' message of the Kingdom. In Jesus' teaching, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven seem to be used somewhat interchangeably to refer to the reality of God's rule over the nation of Israel and the world at large. (*Bowker 1997*, s.v. Kingdom of God). Specifically, the Kingdom of Heaven/God, drawing on the Jewish tradition, speaks not to the presence of God in created beings, but rather the sovereignty of God over creation

22 (*Bowker 1997*, s.v. Jesus) This does not discount Jesus' teaching of love of other, which is the content of moral repentance. Jesus himself summed up his teaching in terms of loving God and loving other. (Mark 12:30-31)

23 Perhaps the clearest example of this is Matthew 22:36-40 with Jesus' declaration that his teaching on love for God and others, the greatest and second greatest commandment being drawn directly from the Law and the teachings of the prophets.

(Green et al. 2013, 473). Only by cutting out soundbites, and bending the text to his will is Habito able to arrive at a Jesus whose message has nothing to do with moral repentance and coming eschatological judgement.<sup>24</sup>

## B. The Kingdom of God/Realm of Heaven

As stated above, Habito presents the idea that, when Jesus refers to the Kingdom of God/Heaven, he is indicating the presence of God in all those holding the Buddha-nature. (2004, 12–19) Thus, according to Habito, the Gospel, as preached by Jesus and later Paul, is an invitation to find God in self and others,

“This [The Gospel] is an invitation to the enter the Realm of Heaven (cultivate an awareness of the portion of God's being within you and others). ‘The Realm of God is at hand. Open your hearts to receive the Good News!’ Mark (1:15). What is the Good News? Just that: The Realm of God is at hand! It is in our very midst!(2004, 57)

Habito bases much of his discussion of Jesus on the presupposition that Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom is synonymous with Buddhist panentheism. In response to his definition of the Gospel preached by Jesus and his concept of the Kingdom, I contend that Habito's translations of Jesus' words and their assigned referents misrepresent the words and context of Jesus' use of the phrases βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν and βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ. For Habito, there is no concept in Jesus' theology of a kingdom with a ruling king. Rather Jesus invites others to seek God within themselves. Jesus, according to Habito, is not calling for his hearers to repent from sinful self-rule and to recognize the lordship and reign of God. Instead he is merely calling them to the realization that God dwells in them and all they need to do to find him is to forsake material pursuits and reach out to the

24 *Bowker 1997*, s.v. Jesus.

God within them. In keeping with this idea, to distance the phrase from the concept of rule/authority, Habito does not translate βασιλεία as 'kingdom' but rather 'realm'. There is no room in Habito's view for a God who rules the earth, issues judgement, and demands allegiance.

In examination of this claim by Habito that Jesus's statements should be translated as 'realm of heaven', I argue there is no lexical evidence for a translation of βασιλεία as "realm" without connecting a ruling authority to that realm.<sup>25</sup> While usage of the term can indicate an area or territory in connection with a ruler, never does it define a spiritual sphere without connection to one who rules it.<sup>26</sup>

As seen above, Habito heavily modifies the words of Jesus in his discussion because he must if he is to meld the world of Zen and the world of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus in the Gospels is uncontested as a preacher of moral reform, but also as a messianic figure bent on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy of the reconciliation of the nation of Israel to God through lasting atonement. In the life of Jesus as recorded and portrayed by the Gospel writers, far from pointing people to seek God within themselves and others as a path to redemption, Jesus continually points them to repentance and to love God first and to love neighbors as themselves.

25 Both BDAG and NIDNTTE do well to bring out the progression of the idea of God's rule inherent in the two phrases by tracking the use through Old Testament and intertestamental literature as context to Jesus's statements. See: (Ardnt et al. 2000, s.v. βασιλεία 1.b) (Silva et al. 2014, s.v. βασιλεύς).

26 LSJ contains myriad usages of the term throughout the classical, koine, and byzantine periods. Each usage without fail is connected to the ideas of authority, lordship, or rule. There seems to be little basis for considering the term to simply indicate a region, or state apart from reference to rulership or authority. Liddell et al. 1940, s.v. βασιλεία.

### C. Habito on Jesus' Teaching on Repentance

Jesus' teaching on repentance is perhaps one of the areas where Jesus and his message have been subjected by Habito to the most cultural and philosophical modification. Habito, in referencing Jesus' teaching on repentance attempts to bypass any sense of moral reform and acceptance of the rule of God underlying it. Habito seeks to accomplish this readjustment from traditional Christian understanding by imbuing the term μετανοέω 'to repent' with a proposed equivalent Zen understanding. In his treatment, μετανοέω becomes the passive allowance of the self's transformation embraced in meditation. (2004, 17) This is in contrast to the use of the term μετανοέω more widely in koine Greek to refer to an active change of one's mind or change of action based on moral compunction or fear of divine retribution.<sup>27</sup> However, bypassing synchronic evidence, he clings to the meaning "be transformed", an unattested meaning in the lexica. For Habito, this transformation of μετανοέω is the enlightenment of Zen, the emptying of oneself of the ego and acceptance of the world as it is without judgement. It is not about turning from unrighteous action, but rather the removal of ignorance which leads to a false concept of self.<sup>28</sup> This concept, for Habito, is passive transformation, though μετανοέω is an active concept. (Kittel 1964, s.v. μετανοέω) Neither this translation nor this understanding proceed from the wider literary milieu of the New

27 See BDAG and MM for numerous examples of the use of μετανοέω in period literature. (Moulton et al. 1930, s.v. μετανοέω); (Ardnt et al. 2000, s.v. μετανοέω)

28 Habito is extremely Freudian at points in his concept of the self. He sees a bifurcation between the ego and the true nature of a person. Thus, the ego feels it needs something outside of it to be complete, but Zen educates the individual that they are complete already. (2004, 60) It is essentially through the education of self, he contest, that the ego can be discarded.



Testament, nor the Greek translation of the Old Testament text. Instead as a foreign import it skews the message of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels.

#### IV. PAUL ACCORDING TO HABITO

##### A. Habito on the Pauline Theology of Jesus

Having reinterpreted Jesus' message and mission apart from their literary and social context, Habito proceeds to further proof-text his views from the writings of Paul. Habito's use of Paul's writings, similar to his treatment of the words of Jesus, is divorced from the literary context of the cited text and Paul's Jewish-Christian cultural background. As example, I will critique Habito's reference to a single Pauline concept: the Pauline phrase Ἐν Χριστῷ. I will argue that Habito has taken this phrase out of context of Pauline theology and applied it too generally to all creation.

##### B. Habito on Paul's Use of Ἐν Χριστῷ

A majority of Habito's use of Pauline literature centers around the Pauline phrase Ἐν Χριστῷ. In Habito's theological arguments the phrase Ἐν Χριστῷ achieves a technical sense, referring to the creation of all things by Christ. As I stated above, this creation of all things in Christ is an important starting point for Habito's theology. It is here that Habito attempts to infuse the Christian worldview with the idea that, because Christ created all, all creation is in some way part of God. This is his starting point for pantheism. In Habito's formulation, Paul's use of the phrase Ἐν Χριστῷ is synonymous with the Buddhist concept of God's presence in all who hold the Buddha-nature. Thus, at several points

Habito quotes Pauline statements, infusing them with a Buddhist pantheism based on this phrase. For example, Habito interprets Paul's statements in Romans 12:5 as a statement of universal unity of all living creatures, "And thus, 'We, though many, are one body in Christ, and we are individually members of one another' (Romans 12:5)... this oneness with all living beings in all their joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties...is not just a pious platitude, but constitutes a central aspect of ones mode of being."(2004, 99)

Habito takes the phrase Ἐν Χριστῷ to refer to all of creation in either a locative sense, that all creation is being sustained inside of the spirit of Jesus,<sup>29</sup> or that all creation, having been created by Christ, is automatically infused with a divine spirit.<sup>30</sup>

While this phrase could at times be functioning in a locative sense, indicating the presence of Christ's spirit, the Holy Spirit, within the individual or the Church, the phrase itself may defy technical use and indicate various kinds of association.(Green et al. 2013, s.v. Christ). While Paul at times may use the phrase in a specific sense contextually, I disagree with Habito's inference that Paul's use of the phrase Ἐν Χριστῷ itself allows classification to one technical sense. In support of this objection, Wedderburn in his presentation of the evidence states that grammatical arguments over the meaning of the phrase are not as useful as context in determining Paul's intent and that Paul's use is not necessarily technical. (Wedderburn 1985, 91-7) Instead, Wedderburn argues, we should consider that Paul nuances the phrase contextually. These contexts refer generally to the association with Christ enjoyed

29 See note above concerning Habito's tendency to at times present Jesus as a disembodied spirit.

30 See discussion above about Habito's Buddhist pantheistic view of reality.

by the Church as his people. The Church, according to Paul has a “corporate personality” defined by Christ’s action in saving them. Upon further consideration of context, we can establish that most uses of the phrase serve to single out a group as being in association with Christ, often through loyalty or faithfulness to him.<sup>31</sup> Paul’s use of the phrase is at times quite varied, including the aforementioned locative sense, agency of Christ in carrying out God’s blessing, senses of Christ’s followers’ association with him as well as other senses (Wedderburn 1985, 90–1). But the phrase defies constraint to a technical sense, and Paul clearly does not use it solely to refer Christ’s role as the originator of all of creation as Habito argues (2004, 98–100). Rather, we must determine Paul’s use of the phrase based on context as the chief criterion in which to seek its meaning.

I contend that Habito’s use of the phrase in a technical sense to proof-text panentheism is unwarranted and lacks consideration of context. I maintain that Habito’s motivation for imbuing the phrase with a panentheistic understanding is because without this claim he lacks a connecting point with the Pauline theology of Jesus. For Habito, imbuing this often-used phrase allows him to transplant a philosophical understanding otherwise not found in the text. While I agree that Pauline writings present Christ as the both originator and sustainer of creation, the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ is not, in most usages, used of all creation nor in reference to Christ in his role as agent of creation.<sup>32</sup> Rather, context suggests that much of this phrase’s usage links not all the human race

nor all sentient creatures to association with Christ, but merely a subset of creation impacted in a special way by his messianic role.<sup>33</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

While Ruben Habito makes an ambitious attempt in *Living Zen, Loving God* to reconcile the two opposed theological traditions he lays claim to, his misrepresentation of the Biblical text and the context of its authors is the greatest failing of his theological program. While I cannot weigh in on what distortions Zen philosophy has undergone in the attempt, I can say that Christian theology and the text of the New Testament have both fared badly in Habito’s treatment. Jesus and Paul both are subjected to unwarranted proof-texting, both having their worldviews transplanted by Habito’s own. Far from achieving the stated vision of theological bilingualism between Christianity and Zen, I believe Habito’s theology only serves to underline the impossibility of melding the two traditions without modification of either. Taking Habito’s theological work to be an exemplar of the Zen-Christian movement we see that the overarching tendency is that orthodox Christian theology is made subject to the theological assertions of Zen-Buddhism. In order to hold a Zen-Christian theology one likely must divorce Jesus from his Jewish theological context; edit, mistranslate, and obfuscate his teachings; and redefine the very purposes of the incarnation. Truly, the moral concerns, simplicity of living, and level of self-reflection advocated by Zen-Christian philosophers are attractive to the evangelical community in the midst of the morally corrupt, over-paced, and materialistic

31 For example: Eph 2:13; 3:6; Phil 3:14; 1 Tim 3:13

32 The possible exception to this is Eph 2:10 where Christ is in view as the creator. However, in this passage the context still references the people of God in the Church, the main referent not being all of creation but rather the creation of those who compose the church for purpose of performing good works.

33 Many Pauline usages can be explained as referring in some way to Christ in his messianic role either as agent of God’s blessing or the one in which those who are his followers find their identity.

modern world in which we live. However attractive a Zen-infused Christian faith may be, starting from a clear understanding of Scripture, the evangelic community must reject this ill-conceived amalgam. The solution to the ills and excesses of modern society must not be sought in remaking Jesus into our own image, but by Christ remaking us into his. Thus, our goal must be to truly live ἐν Χριστῷ, in context.

### Works Cited

- Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, Walter. 2001. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Edited by Frederick William Danker. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bowker, John, ed. 1997. *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Braak, André van der. 2017. "Zen-Christian Dual Belonging and the Practice of Apophasis: Strategies of Meeting Rose Drew's Theological Challenge." *Open Theology* 3 (1): 434–46. <https://doi.org/10.1515/oph-2017-0034>.
- Collins, Adela Yarbro., and Harold W. Attridge. 2007. *Mark: A Commentary*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Davidson, Maxwell. 1992. *Angels at Qumran: A Comparative Study of 1 Enoch 1-36; 72-108 and Sectarian Writings from Qumran*. London: A&C Black.
- Gasser, Georg. 2019. "God's Omnipresence in the World: On Possible Meanings of 'En' in Panentheism." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 85 (1): 43–62. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-018-9695-9>.
- Geisler, Norman L., ed. 1999. *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Baker Reference Library. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Green, Joel B., Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, eds. 2013. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. 2nd edition. IVP Bible Dictionary Series; IVP Bible Dictionary Series. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Habito, Ruben L. F. 2004. *Living Zen, Loving God*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Homrighausen, Jonathan. 2015. "Spiritually Bilingual: Buddhist Christians and the Process of Dual Religious Belonging." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 35: 57–69.
- Kennedy, Robert. 2020. *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit*. Revised and Updated Second Edition. Revised edition. Bloomsbury Continuum.
- King, Sallie B. 1989. "Buddha Nature and the Concept of Person." *Philosophy East and West* 39 (2): 151–70. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1399375>.
- Kittel, Gerhard, G. W Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. 1964. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Liddell, H.G., Robert Scott, and Sir Henry Stuart Jones, eds. 1940. *The Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford Clarendon.
- Lombard, Peter. 1971. "Sententiae in IV Libris Distinctae Grottaferrata: Editiones Collegii S." *Bonaventurae Ad Claras Aquas* 81.
- Moulton, J. H., and G. Milligan. 1930. *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Pope, H. 1912. "Socinianism." In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 14. New York: Robert Appleton Company. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14113a.htm>>.

Silva, Moisés, ed. 2014. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Special ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Wedderburn, A.J.M. 1985. "Some Observations On Paul's Use of the Phrases 'in Christ' and 'With Christ.'" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 8 (25): 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X8500802505>.

**Jacob S. Bullock**

*Jacob S. Bullock lectures at The Pacific Institute of Languages, Arts and Translation (PILAT) in Papua New Guinea and is a member of SIL international. His research interests include relevance theory, literary pragmatics, Biblical interpretation, and translation. When not teaching or researching he enjoys spending time with his beautiful wife Juliann and chasing his five energetic children.*