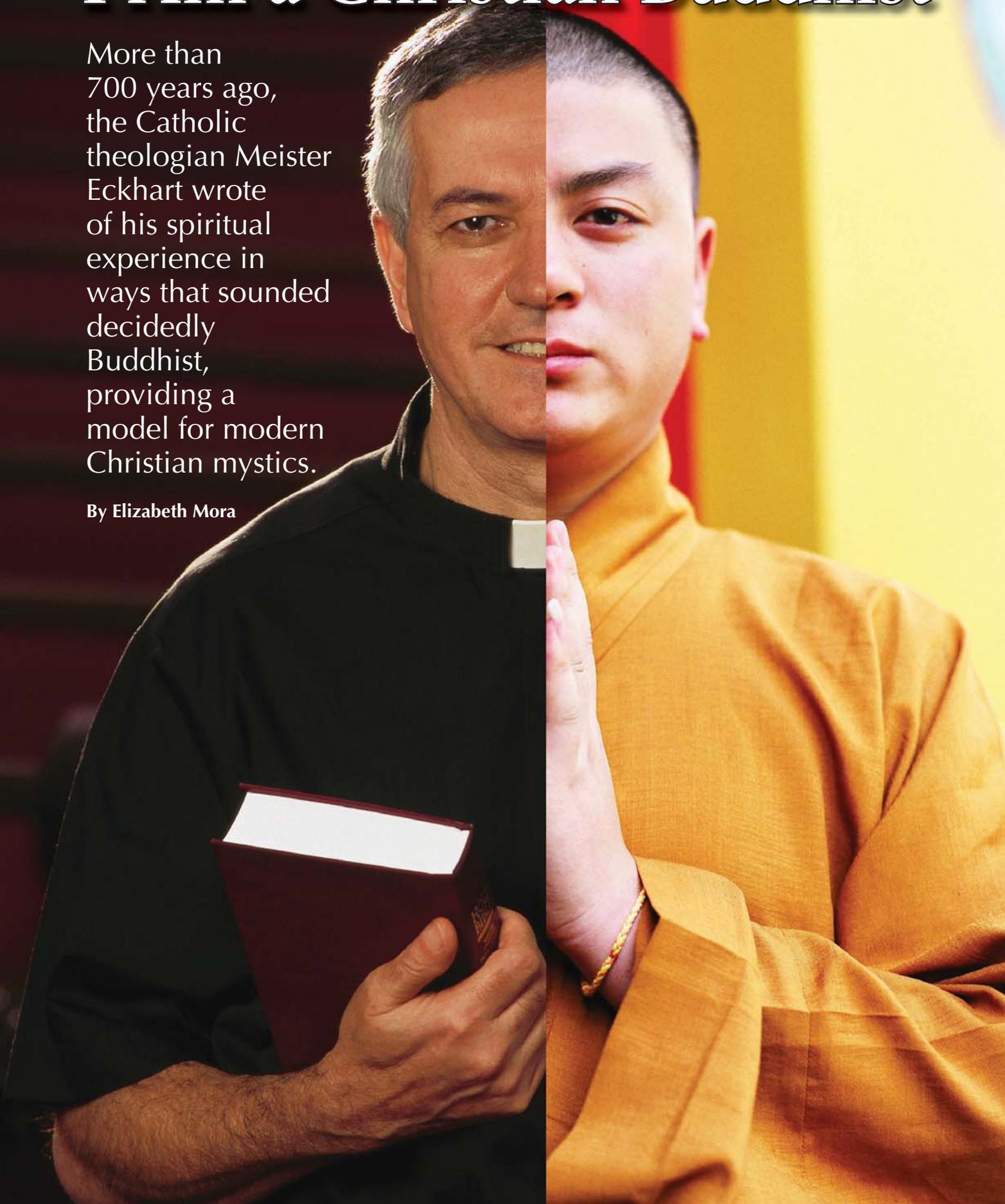


# I Am a Christian Buddhist

More than 700 years ago, the Catholic theologian Meister Eckhart wrote of his spiritual experience in ways that sounded decidedly Buddhist, providing a model for modern Christian mystics.

By Elizabeth Mora



I'm a Christian minister with a secret: I'm really a Christian Buddhist. It hasn't been easy getting to the point where I can say that. I've been told more than once, "You have to choose. You can't be Christian and Buddhist."

But is that true? Do I have to choose one, or can I be both? Just because I don't fit in a box, do I need to change? What if it is the box that needs to change? As religions intersect and impact their believers, perhaps they need to reflect what is happening among their followers—people like me, who find themselves bringing together the teachings of multiple religions into a singular practice, whether we are supposed to or not.

I think I'm in pretty good company on this. More than 700 years ago, German Dominican priest Meister Eckhart, one of the greatest Christian mystics, wrote of his spiritual experience in ways that sounded decidedly Buddhist. Admittedly, he never drew a connection to the teachings of the Buddha, but I, along with numerous scholars, see connections between them. In reading Eckhart, I find a kindred spirit from the past—another minister whose experience of truth could not help straddle the great religions of Christianity and Buddhism.

Eckhart's writings were so personal and mystical they eventually came under the scrutiny of the Inquisition and were condemned. That alone makes him of interest to modern Christians, and he has gained in popularity in recent years. It is from him that writer Eckhart Tolle, another mystic who defies categorization, took his name. The teaching that brought Meister Eckhart condemnation was this: One can reach unity with God through deep, personal contemplation. His emphasis was not on the church, but rather on the inner experience that transforms and reveals truth. Humans all have a "little spark of God," and through contemplation, we reach unity with God. He wrote, "God must become I, and I must become God . . . . Thus we are transformed into God and know him as He is." The ultimate spiritual experience was oneness in God. Oneness found through meditation is also central to the

Buddha's teachings. While the goal of Buddhist meditation is not explicitly union with "God," per se, it can foster a feeling of complete connection to reality at its deepest levels. One can argue, as many have, that this awareness through meditation and the oneness in Eckhart's contemplation are one and the same.

Another key teaching of Eckhart's was that we grow spiritually through detachment. Even a beginning student of Buddhism knows that detachment is a central teaching of this faith. Yet it is not the Buddha but Meister Eckhart who wrote, "True detachment means a mind as little moved by what befalls, by joy and sorrow, honor and disgrace, as a broad mountain by a gentle breeze." He not only speaks of detachment like a Buddhist, but also provides a beautiful description of another Buddhist teaching: equanimity, an evenness of mind.

Eckhart also mirrors Buddhism when he speaks of the nature of reality and our existence. The origin of all things he called "the Godhead," which is beyond even God. "Everything in the Godhead is one, and of that there is nothing to be said." In Eckhart's theology, the very nature of existence is beyond description.

Similarly, the Buddha described *tathata*, the real nature of things, as "a sphere which is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, the sphere of nothingness. It is only the end of suffering." Thus the indescribable nature of reality is common to both teachers.

One of the most practical similarities between these two masters is their mutual emphasis on the concept of silence or meditation. Eckhart wrote, "It is in the stillness, in the silence, that the word of God is to be heard." The Buddha said, "Silence is an empty space, space is the home of the awakened mind." For both men, this mystical connection in the silence was the key to a spiritual life. This is not to say Eckhart could have easily donned the yellow robes of a Buddhist monk. First, there is no God per se in Buddhism. To some, this is just a semantic argument about differing descriptions of Ultimate Reality. To others, it points to a fundamental difference between Buddhism and Christianity.

Yet the Buddha did not teach the nonexistence of God, simply that the question was not important. One might say he was agnostic. Still, Eckhart was theistic and Buddha not. Scholars also point out their basic disagreement on the concept of the soul. While Eckhart believed God put his very nature into the soul, the Buddha taught there is no permanent, unchanging, real soul residing within the human individual. The difference seems clear.

Scholars have long debated just how Buddhist Eckhart was. While some see passing similarities, many see meaningful parallels. Daisetsu T. Suzuki was one of the first to write of the common threads between Christianity and Buddhism. For him, Eckhart's writings "closely approached Buddhist thoughts, so closely indeed, that one could stamp them almost definitely as coming out of Buddhist speculations." Numerous other scholars have studied these mystics for years and find much common ground.

So the scholars can continue to debate whether the Buddha and Meister Eckhart are mystic brothers or distant

cousins. Theologians can argue that the two must stay separate, and friends can argue that I have to choose between my religions.

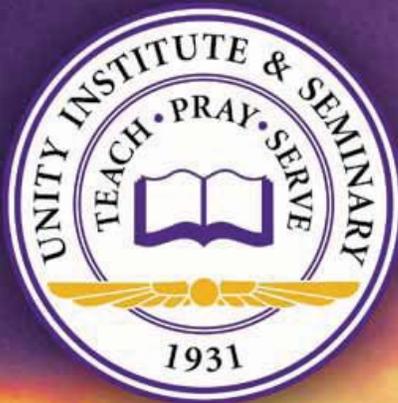
But what you cannot argue with is my personal experience.

Scholars, theologies and religious definitions aside, I do sit at the feet of two masters, Buddha and Eckhart. Their teachings are seamlessly interwoven in me, and I cannot separate them anymore.

The old boxes just don't fit, so I'm creating my own box. Maybe it's not even a box, but an open circle, an all-encompassing circle that includes the teachings of two religions that work for me.

The secret is out. I am a Buddhist Christian, and I love it. ■

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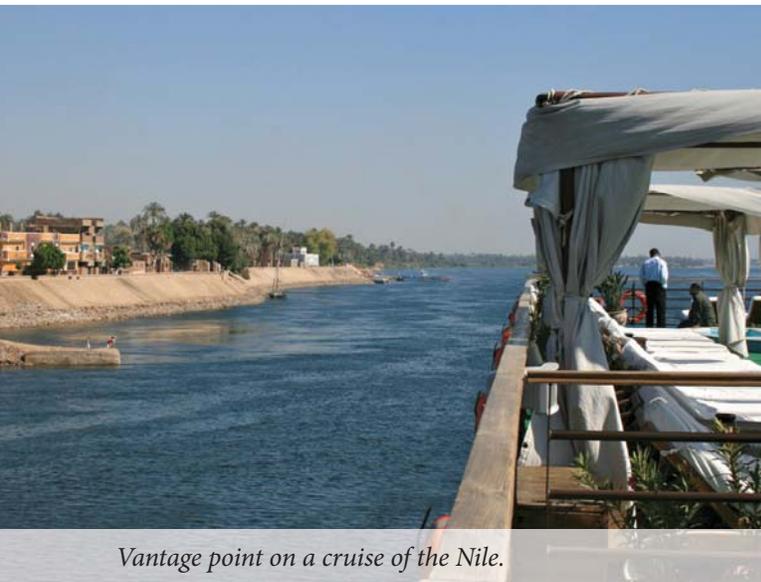
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*Vantage point on a cruise of the Nile.*

introduction to this spiritual principle actually came from the Gospel of Thomas. Finally, a third principle is that of Cause and Effect, which says, “Every Cause has its Effect; every Effect has its Cause; there are many planes of causation, but nothing escapes the Law.” In Unity, we probably understand this as the Law of Mind Action.

As spiritual seekers on a journey of discovery, thousands of miles from home, listening to our Egyptian guide Gigi tell us about Egyptian rites of passage, culture and religion, we were continually amazed at how connected we are, not just in the present tense, in our beliefs around Unity principles, but to the mystics of long ago.

Some of my favorite moments were those of reading *Daily Word* on the bus in the morning and watching the faces of our guides—one of them, Gigi, a Coptic Christian, the other, Magdy, a Muslim—as they closed their eyes, allowing the words to touch them. In typical Unity fashion, we instantly made them a part of our family by spending our free time together, sharing meals, connecting in ceremony, talking, laughing and shopping. Two seemingly opposite religions, and yet both having their home and roots in ancient Egypt.

On the last day we gave Gigi and Magdy a traditional Unity blessing, thanking them for their generosity, support, care and the ease they provided in making our trip fabulous and wanting to acknowledge them, behold the Christ in them. A couple of people wondered if they might feel uncomfortable because they were not “Unity” people, but we blessed them anyway.

What I know about Unity, and saw so clearly on this trip, is that Unity is not one message repeated by a thousand voices, but rather one message shaped by a



*At Tahrir Square, at a memorial for those killed in the revolution. Under Mubarak's regime, memorials such as this were not allowed.*

thousand minds. Whatever the faith tradition—Coptic Christian, Muslim, Unity, Christian, Jewish or Buddhist—at the heart of religion is a source of life, an awe and reverence for humanity and divinity. At this heart is where we all meet to behold each person as sacred, sharing the voices of common ancestors and coming together to lift up our thoughts, and, as Charles Fillmore said, “spread our wings into a higher radiation of universal life.” ■



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