

Is Zen a Religion?

I would like to address the question, "Is zen actually a religion or not?" One thing scholars of comparative religion universally agree on is that there is no universally accepted definition for religion. There are a few different general criterias that scholars use to describe what it is to be a religion. The term religion is originally a western concept with the meaning "to tie or to bind". This is to bind oneself to God. This puts God and your relationship with God at the central core of religion. There are typically three different rational positions one can take on the argument for a God. Theistic which affirms a deity. Atheistic which denies a deity. And agnostic which comes down in the middle. Agnostics see rational inconsistencies with believing in a God but have not fully ruled out the possibility. Whatever your ideas and beliefs are about God, there is no conflict with Zen. What we teach here is Zen. Nothing else. Zen does not teach that there is no God. Zen just has no particular God to teach. This may sound like I am trying to avoid an argument about God and that is almost correct. I am not avoiding the argument as much as moving through the argument to the other side. This is the nature of Zen and non-dualistic thinking. Besides the assumptions one must begin with to argue one of the three rational positions above, the west has approached "does God exist" as if they have a thorough understanding of the word "exist". Existence and nonexistence are just ideas in our heads. There is no existence without nonexistence and there is no nonexistence without existence. Existence and nonexistence are not two and not one. All rational (dualistic) ideas of one can only acknowledge the other as an opposite and therefore, mutually exclusive. So, if you do expect to find god, I can tell you this much. There is an answer, but it is not rational. You must be prepared to transcend rational thought. Christians require faith. Otherwise, you are simply believing a story or an incomplete argument. You can pretend you know something but you will never escape doubt.

We are not spiritualists, we are materialists (a huge exception may be consciousnesses but we'll save that for another day). I would like to emphasize that when I say materialist I am not saying consumerism. We are not interested in finding the most efficient system and policies within that system in turning resources into trash. We are not interested in collecting more than our neighbors or holding our wealth up as an achievement. Rich or poor is irrelevant. What I am saying is that we understand the nature of material and that nature is forever changing. (For you Buddhist scholars out there, the nature is, more succinctly, sunyata or emptiness which allows change). When we have an existing cup in our hand we know we are ultimately holding a broken cup, a non-cup, a nonexistent cup. Therefore we appreciate the cup right now. We appreciate the function of the cup. The feel of the cup. When we wash the cup, we handle it with care and clean it with reverence. We put it in the cupboard carefully. We know the whole universe has

to be for that cup to be. Take away the big bang, you take away the cup. Take away several supernovas, you take away the cup. Take away space or time, you take away the cup. So on one hand that cup is precious and profound and then one day it is knocked off the counter and breaks into several pieces. It is no longer a cup. You know what we do then? We sweep it up (with the precious and transient broom) and throw it in the trash. We are not surprised by the broken cup. We knew all along that it was already a non-cup. Everything--carbon atoms, lakes, species, mountains, planets, suns, galaxies, black holes-**everything** in the whole universe is just like that. Precious and profound, transient and interdependent...And yet, though we are sometimes moved to tears with gratitude for the cup or anything else that has briefly manifested of the universe, we are not attached. That is Zen and we do all that with no particular God. I would also like to re-emphasize that we are not anti-God. If you worship (or deny) God it is of no concern to me, you will find no interference. We may explore what that means for you. After all, you are what is important here. But what we teach here is Zen and nothing else. Zen does not appear to meet this criteria of being a religion.

Another common observation is that religion shares a common core set of beliefs. My teacher would always claim that he didn't have any beliefs. I found that to be absurd. I mean what about "life is suffering"? Or "the earth is round"? Aren't these beliefs? He would just laugh at me. It took me about twelve years before I understood what he meant before he didn't seem so absurd. Since we don't have twelve years right now, I would just like you to consider some brief comments on belief and let it percolate for a while. Instead of putting it into a logical argument that ends in true or false, just let it percolate. First when my Sensei said he had no beliefs he was talking paradigmatically. Asking about beliefs from a western paradigm is the wrong question. Whatever my Sensei claimed from his paradigm would always feel like a belief claim and therefore disqualify the statement "I have no beliefs". The hallmark of a paradigm being a paradigm is that the worldviews can not even talk to one another, even when using the same words. Take Newton and Einstein. If you bring up the words time, space, mass, energy and gravity they would both have a thorough understanding of all of those words. They could both teach those words. But they would be talking past one another in a conversation. The terms time, space, mass, energy and gravity have fundamentally different meanings between Newton and Einstein. Newton and Einstein would be speaking from two entirely different paradigms. I had to step onto my Sensei's paradigm before I understood.

It might be helpful if we define belief as we see it. A belief is a conclusion based on insufficient information. You can have a tentative understanding of anything. I may say my understanding is that our universe is 13.8 billion years old and began with a big bang. What I am saying is that my understanding is based on all the information that I

have looked at so far by the people who study this sort of thing. This is not a belief because it is not a conclusion, it is always contingent on more information. It wasn't but a few years ago my understanding was that the universe was 13.7 billion years old. I guarantee that you could spend the rest of your life on this one tiny bit of understanding and you will continue to learn something. You may even be willing to change your views as new information is assessed. Understanding is dynamic and alive. To believe is static and dead. The idea that you need to believe in something or you'll fall for anything is misguided. People who stand for something, who insist that the world is a particular way...well, that's why old men can become so obstinate and difficult. They know the way the world should be, how it used to be better and can't understand why people just don't get it. In the West you may even be sentenced to heaven or hell for all eternity based on your beliefs. Beliefs tend to be strongly associated with our own identity, who we actually are. When our beliefs are "attacked" we feel like we need to "defend" them because we feel like **we** are somehow being attacked. This, in the view of Zen, would be false. You are not your beliefs.

The emphasis in Zen is not on beliefs, or understanding for that matter. Understanding is just the natural outcome of our practice when talking about what's going on "out there". The emphasis in Zen is a way for you to live your life, to experience life. Saying Zen is the way of no way may sound like we are trying to be cute. The no way part is that this is not all planned out. If you need a way that is clearly defined you may find it frustrating here. We treat you like an adult. We don't give advice, tell you how to live your life or what to think. What you think will naturally change regardless. We do challenge (dualistic) thinking itself. We help you look at yourself. We help you see and question your assumptions. Zazen is immensely helpful in experiencing mind for what it is. This is a very simple (not necessarily easy), bare bones practice. There is no way but it is as narrow as a razor's edge. Every step, every breath, every moment is alive with careful awareness of direct experience and yet no way is as wide as the cosmos...you can make no mistake! So if religion is defined as sharing core beliefs, we would not be religious either. But I understand if that doesn't make sense right away.

Another common way of looking at religion is shared rituals. If this is what religion is, then we are religious. We sit in zazen and we have some rituals before and after zazen. This agreed-upon ritual is a space between zazen and our usual social role (you are not that either!) to give us time to let zazen breathe into our practice. If you stop zazen when you get up from your cushion, you are not practicing zen. If you keep zen here in the zendo and are unable to take it with you into your daily life then you are not really practicing anything at all. You would be just treating this like most people treat a movie. Interesting? Entertaining? Maybe even just a distraction. Something to talk about with your friends.

So we do have rituals but the rituals don't have us. What I mean by that is we use ritual because ritual appears to be a part of being human. Just like humans have always used art and music. But we are not attached to rituals and know any meaning we do attach is temporary. Physical expressions with mindful sincerity may be gently entered into this ritual. Taking a moment to express these things, whatever they mean, during ritual is a step towards taking your zazen into your zen and your zen into your life. But we know these expressions never came from the ritual. We placed these expressions into ritual. So, if shared ritual would be a determination for religion then we would be a religion.

Another criterion of religion is it answers profound questions that are otherwise never satisfactorily answered and is agreed upon by the group. Creation myths, where we come from, what is life, what happens after life, what happened before the big bang. You know, "big" questions like that. Religions offer narratives for these kinds of inquiries that are repeated until they are accepted. In Zen, we have a very practical approach to this as well. When we find our line of inquiry takes us to a place we don't have an answer, our response is "Not knowing". I know, right? Crazy Zen people! When they don't know something, they admit it! After a while, you may even begin to embrace not knowing. It is humbling for one. If you begin to pay attention to what you don't know, it begins to expand as well. Like not knowing what dark energy is or how you swallow. We don't get our knickers in a knot if the answer is "not knowing". "Knowing" over time is dogma, "not knowing" is every moment alive. Every moment anew. We are not surprised by mystery, we fully experience the mystery...as mysterious! Even knowing is a mystery. So, we offer no narrative for the unknown. Most of us tend to feel incomplete with not knowing and want to fill that incompleteness with more knowing. Our aim is non-dualistic thinking and non-dualistic thinking includes both the known and the unknown. Knowing and not knowing **is** complete! So if knowing is what makes something a religion, then we are not a religion.

So if we weigh all that, answering if Zen is a religion would come up, in my estimation, as a no. If, however, you consider all those variables and you want to call Zen a religion, well, that's fine with me. It would actually be easier to just call it a religion but it is my view that being easier is not the point. Now if I wouldn't call it a religion, what is it? Well first of all, I said by my estimation it doesn't meet enough criteria to be a religion but it does meet one. Maybe a quasi religion? My teacher would often quote Alan Watts and say "Zen is a sacred philosophy". I don't think that's quite right. I like the sacred part. I would say that Zen is a philosophy of no philosophy though. Maybe Zen is a kind of worldview? Almost. Zazen is a sacred discipline. The aim of this discipline is to study the self. Maybe Zen is a kind of psychology? How about "sacred psychological discipline"? I like that. We could say Zen is the direct experience of reality itself. Zen is

non-dualistic so it doesn't parse reality into this and that. Zen is nonconceptual so thinking in words or symbols is not important. If reality is explained in any way, we are using one thing (symbols) to point to another thing we are calling reality. Surely these symbols or concepts that represent reality can not be reality itself. But is direct experience of reality, reality itself? It is the only reality you will **ever** have access to!

During a talk I can only use words and if I use words we just decided that they can only represent. Kind of a conundrum, huh? Not really! Life is an experience, even with its words. A persistent, ever changing experience. The words aren't the problem. Our attachment to them are. Our desire to make them meaningful and permanent is the problem. This Universe came together in this time and this place and grew us. This Universe grew us and sprouted a consciousness that for an incredibly short yet profound amount of time is able to experience itself. There is no place to go, nothing to know, nothing to achieve. It is all right in front of, around, and within you. The universe is unfolding and experiences life through what "you" are calling "you". You **are** that!

Yet, the dishes need to be washed. The rent is due on the first. If you drive too fast, you may get a speeding ticket. We don't take this all so seriously! I said in the beginning that we only teach zen here and nothing else. We may not have defined it conclusively but that is only because it is alive and beyond words. Our practice is zazen and we take it sincerely, not seriously. You don't need words for zazen either. It is not a belief, it is a practice. And your understanding of what this practice is will change as well. So, if I haven't scared you off... I sincerely hope to see you here someday.