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## BOOK REVIEWS

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BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY: A MULTICULTURAL HISTORY OF THEIR DIALOGUE. *By Whalen Lai and Michael von Brück.* Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001. xiv + 265 pp.

This book is an abridged translation of *Buddhismus und Christentum: Geschichte, Konfrontation, Dialog*, first published in 1997 by Verlag C. H. Beck in Munich. I do not know how much has been lost in the abridgement, but this English version remains a treasure trove that deserves to be read and digested by everyone engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

From the English title, I expected a somewhat dry work of intellectual history, summarizing dated doctrinal debates. This book provides much more than that. Most valuable is its emphasis on the historical and cultural context of Buddhist-Christian encounters, especially the poisonous legacy of Western colonialism (which still survives today as economic neocolonialism). These quite varied contexts have usually been decisive for the success or failure of the encounter, and as this nuanced but frank study shows, the failures have been at least as notable as the successes. Here, too, we must remember the past if we want to do more than keep repeating it. As well as identifying specific problems, there is a perceptive analysis of the obstacles to openness and dialogue in each case.

The penultimate chapter includes a discussion of our Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, its conferences, and this journal. As a relative newcomer to the conversations, I found this particular example of contextualizing fascinating. In just the few conferences I have been able to attend, there have been so many facets to the dialogue that it has been difficult to gain a sense of the whole, to understand how the main threads have developed and interwoven. How well do we remember what has already been discussed, and often agreed upon? It is important that we do not just keep repeating ourselves, and I know of no other book that conveys the historical dimension of the dialogue so well. The silent, contemplative aspects of the encounter are also addressed: cross-cultural meditation groups, Christian Zen teachers, and visits to each other's monastic centers.

A useful foreword by Hans Kung reviews his own contributions, including his

paradigm analysis of six different “general constellations” found in the Christian tradition (the original Jewish-apocalyptic paradigm, the ancient ecumenical-Hellenistic paradigm, the medieval Roman Catholic paradigm, the Reformation Protestant-evangelical paradigm, the modernist progress-oriented paradigm, and now the post-modern ecumenical paradigm) and six other constellations in the Buddhist tradition (Gautama’s original paradigm, the Theravada-*sravakayana* paradigm, the Mahayana paradigm, the tantric Vajrayana paradigm, a defensive modernist paradigm, and most recently an emerging postmodernist paradigm), with the implication that we need to be careful to clarify which of the paradigms we are comparing.

Inevitably, the focus is limited: India and Sri Lanka are discussed at length, but not southeast Asia; China and Japan, but not Korea; Germany, but not the rest of Europe. The Indian chapter is mostly about Tibetans in exile. I was intrigued by the generation gap between older, conservative Tibetan monks and more freethinking younger ones. Otherwise, the Indian dialogue seems not to have been as intensive as many other places in Asia, which makes sense since there are relatively few Buddhists in India today. Given the mass conversions of Dalits, the social context has usually been the emancipation of disadvantaged social groups, and is further complicated now by the increasing influence of neo-Hindu political movements, which makes all interreligious exchange more sensitive.

The Sri Lankan dialogue, perhaps more than any other, has been preoccupied with the heritage of colonialism. Sinhalese take pride in being citizens of the only country to have shaken off colonial rule with a successful Buddhist revolution, which reversed the power relationship between the two religions. Evidently most Sinhala Buddhists, including much of the *sangha*, accept the need to defend Buddhism and Buddhist culture militarily, if necessary. The ruling political class that succeeded the British, a largely Buddhist- and Marxist-inspired elite, opted for constructing a national identity that excluded minorities, Christians as well as Tamils. The protracted Tamil independence movement means that the political climate remains explosive, although a recent cease-fire raises hopes of a nonviolent resolution. Present Christian interest in dialogue remains in large part a middle-class response to its loss of power. Due to recent missionary activities, the influence of evangelical and other conservative Christian groups is growing, but they are uninterested in dialogue. As all this suggests, Buddhist-Christian encounter in Sri Lanka is always a political as well as a theological debate. Marxism remains an important factor, and is usually a third partner.

China has always been multiethnic and multireligious, so its struggle for independence was not so religiously based except insofar as Chinese Marxism might be considered a secular religion. In general, the missionary legacy of Christian intolerance has left a painful inheritance that still shows no signs of healing. Although Christianity sometimes had a place in syncretic movements such as the T’ai-p’ing Rebellion (1850–1866), even Buddhism was largely sidelined by China’s neo-Confucian modernizers. Debates between Buddhism and Christianity fell into the familiar trap of comparing the ideal of one with the reality of the other. Lacking hermeneutical sensitivity, the comparisons and contrasts have often been superficial. Due

to general distrust on both sides, the dialogue has tended to degenerate into bitter polemics and diatribe rather than actually attempting to understand and learn from the other. Add the fact that Buddhism is not at center of Chinese culture, and the overall result is that the dialogue has not developed very far.

In Japan, encounter has been encouraged by the common situation of both religions, each facing a search for identity in an increasingly materialistic industrial consumer society. In contrast to China, the dialogue has been quite fruitful philosophically, but it remains very abstract. This chapter includes useful discussions of Tanabe, Nishida, Keiji Nishitani, Shizuteru Ueda, and Hisamatsu, as well as several other figures less familiar to philosophers yet important to the dialogue, such as Takizawa Katsumi, Yagi Seiichi, and Honda Masaaki. There is also a summary of discussions between Japanese Christians and Pure Land advocates. Due to the “vertical” structure of Japanese organizations, which makes it difficult even for different Buddhist sects to interact with each other, the dialogue has been mostly among individuals rather than between groups. The challenge today is whether this philosophical debate can actually relate to the spiritual need to provide a practical religious lifestyle that can help people faced with modern industrial society.

In Germany, interest in Buddhism originated in fascination with the example of a more rational alternative to Christianity. More recently, Buddhist meditation has become attractive as a spiritual practice unavailable in Christian churches. The role of “the great transmitters” Nyanatiloka, Nyanaponika, and Anagarika Govinda is evaluated, along with the more contemporary work of Enomiya-Lassalle and other Zen meditation teachers and the influence of writings by Heinrich Dumoulin, Hans Waldenfels, and Gustav Mensching. As these figures suggest, Catholicism has played the larger role in the German dialogue.

Since about 1980 the center of gravity for Buddhist-Christian encounter has shifted to the United States, where mostly middle-class lay academics have been involved. This chapter begins with a historical summary of Christian developments in America—especially Unitarianism, Universalism, and New England Transcendentalism—and discusses the Chicago World Parliament of Religions and its centenary in 1993. The authors emphasize that the U.S. dialogue should be viewed in the larger context of “America’s social collapse” (209) in the 1960s—a social chasm not yet resolved, in their view. They note, among many other things, the liberalization of American Catholicism, the Supreme Court’s ruling against school prayer (1962), the split within American Buddhism (Asian immigrants versus middle-class, mostly white, converts), and the development of religious studies programs in colleges and universities. This chapter ends with the history of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and the Cobb-Abe group. The conclusion is so perceptive that it deserves quoting in full:

Buddhist-Christian dialogue is an aspect of the liberal heritage of intellectual culture in America. It is to a large degree a theoretical conversation between American Buddhists and American theologians who teach at the same universities. It is supported by an intellectual avant-garde that has up to now

found little resonance in politics or the great ecclesiastical organizations. While the liberal church confessions continue to lose members, America's conservative and evangelical churches are growing. It is an entirely open question whether or not it will be possible to make the concerns of Buddhist-Christian dialogue known and comprehensible to these groups. This will decide whether the understanding between the religions in America's multi-religious cities and communities can also become socially and politically effective. This is an urgent task. (235)

Given the internal problems within Western Christianity, especially in the United States, I was left with the feeling that the most important group for American Christians to dialogue with is their own "fundamentalist" wing, and I was reminded of the truism that more "progressive" Buddhists and Christians communicate better with each other—indeed, have more in common—than with the more conservative, literalist, missionary, and politically influential branches of their own religion. This is a gap that seems increasingly dangerous, given the various world crises that challenge us today and that need a religious response.

Inevitably, some of the information is now a bit dated. To mention only a couple of examples that I am familiar with, the chapter on Germany refers to "a clearly visible process of gradual opening toward Buddhism and its meditation" (164) in the Catholic Church over the last four decades, and quotes from a document published in 1991 by the Papal Council for Interreligious Dialogue that extends the ecumenical spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Since then, less encouraging developments in the Vatican, including the recent silencing of the German Benedictine priest and Zen teacher Willigis Jaeger, indicate more obstacles in that direction. Also, the Institute for Oriental Religions at Sophia University in Tokyo, which provided an important resource and platform for the Jesuit fathers Kakichi Kadowaki, William Johnston, and Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle—all important advocates of Zen Buddhist-Christian dialogue—has been closed.

The conclusion, on "Hermeneutical Aspects of Future Encounter," begins by reflecting on the challenge of the other and our need for the Other: "All religions known today have their roots in several cultures or several original situations." Religions are predominantly integrative, while ideologies on the contrary are a complete self-identification through demarcation and fencing-off. Religions die, then, when they become ideologies, when "their identity becomes fixed and they can no longer change and adopt anything new" (246). Religious conflict originates in the fact that religions assert an absolute claim that they want to make universally valid, at the same time that they are also historically determined, which undermines their claim. "Does recognition of this dilemma already contain a solution in itself?" (237). When God created the world, he not only allowed very different sorts of people, cultures, and religions, but he evidently wanted them! Why? The challenge today is the global sense of one humanity that is so painfully being born. Religions will contribute to a healthy birth only insofar as they can overcome their superiority complexes. "For at present the world is experiencing demarcation movements that are

legitimized nationalistically, racially, and religiously, and are linked to force. Unfortunately, in this movement religions often play a discreditable role precisely because as religion they lay claim to an absolute and uncircumscribed level of reality. Ideologically recoined, this assertion is misused to legitimate power” (249).

Lai and von Brück conclude that Christians need to address honestly the arrogant imperialism of so much Christian missionary activity, and Buddhists need to address Buddhism’s own poor record of social justice and their arrogant dismissal of Christianity’s “irrational” doctrines. Regarding future prospects, the authors emphasize that the otherness of the other is a source of inspiration and understanding; that there is no alternative to dialogue among religions; that missionizing the other should be forbidden; that historical-cultural relativizing of one’s own standpoint is an *upaya* that can help free us from the negative effects of attachment to our own tradition; that our dialogue does not need fixed dogmas about methods, but rules built from consensus; and that the goal is not to melt into the other, but to help each other reinterpret one’s own tradition in light of the other. “This could be accomplished through a renewed Christian spirituality, created with the help of Buddhist experience; and through a renewed social organization of Buddhism, attained with the help of Christian experience” (254).

Not all of these points are new, but I finished reading with the conviction that this book points us in the right direction. *Buddhism and Christianity: A Multicultural History of Their Dialogue* is a milestone in the Buddhist-Christian encounter. Our future conversations will be more fruitful insofar as they take account of its many insights.

David R. Loy  
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