

Buddhist Nonduality, Paschal Paradox: A Christian Commentary on The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa). By Joseph O’Leary. Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2018. 313 pages. Paperback: ISBN-10: 90-429-3421-2.

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In its elegant prose, its command of multiple texts, and the author’s expertise in both Christian and Buddhist traditions, this is a commentary that reflects the maturity of the dialogue among Christians and Buddhists. Although it is a Christian commentary on a decidedly Buddhist text, O’Leary’s interest cannot be described as an exercise in comparative religion. Instead, he is asking a Christian theological question: “How can Indian nonduality correct and enrich Christian theology, and are there insurmountable tensions between the two?” (p. 26). This should not suggest, however, that O’Leary’s commentary will be of little interest to Buddhists. “My task is to draw on the theological imagination so as to bring out the religious themes of the [*Vimalakīrti Sutra*] and to encounter the sutra as a living scripture that can still speak to us under the changed conditions of the contemporary world” (p. 3). Buddhists interested in returning to a familiar text in the hope of discovering it anew will not be disappointed.

Along the way, we are treated to O’Leary’s enormous erudition. In addition to Buddhist scholars (Etienne Lamotte and Takahashi Hisao 高橋尚夫, of course, but also Paul Demiéville, Jan Nattier, Malcolm Eckel, and Michael Pye), O’Leary brings into the conversation Christian theologians (Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Barth, among others), the masters of Christian spirituality (Eckhart, John of the Cross, Fénelon, Pascal, and Newman), and philosophical thinkers (Feuerbach, Fichte, Hegel, Levinas, Derrida, and Marion). Best of all, in my view, O’Leary places Vimalakīrti in dialogue with European literati (Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Rabelais, Moliere, Hopkins, Eliot, Joyce, Yeats, and Beckett). Even Wagner, Elgar, and Pope Francis, alongside Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–ca. 250) and Shōtoku Taishi 聖德太子 (574–622), are given a say.

The basic thrust of his argument is that paradoxical Buddhist discourses on nonduality can elucidate Pauline and Johannine Christianity, both of which are saturated with paradoxical discourses of their own. These discourses have to do with the relationship of Jesus to God, the justification of the sinner by grace, and the paradox of death and resurrection. O’Leary combines these discourses under the broad heading of “the Pascal Mystery,” which he understands as the ultimate reality of all. He does this in the hope of making the truth of Christian faith more accessible and credible and to resist those who would dilute it, whether it be ancient Arians or those in more recent centuries who would reduce the historical Jesus to the status of a teacher of morality without remainder (pp. 17–19).

O'Leary has much to say about the literary character of the sutra. He looks on it as an unresolved narrative. It is a text that uses the power of narrative to come to closure without concern for a full resolution of the issues raised along the way. The sutra leaves us with dichotomies, without synthesis being attained in a higher, metaphysical level as with a Hegelian *Aufhebung*. Therefore, a text such as this invites comparison with the Pauline and Johannine literature in the New Testament. The Gospel according to John, for example, is also an unresolved narrative in which the dichotomies of life and death, sin and eternal life, the Son and the Father, remain perpetually suspended nondualities without ever succumbing to harmonious reconciliation. The commentary succeeds in showing us that there is a rhetoric of paradox at work in both Christian and Buddhist texts (pp. 15, 23, 82–92). Vimalakīrti, like Paul and John, manifests ultimate reality through the skillful use of language (pp. 72–81).

I want to offer comments on two issues that require reflection. The first issue has to do with what O'Leary says about the tension between wisdom and compassion in Buddhism. This may cause some controversy among Buddhists, all the more so, perhaps, because his understanding of wisdom and compassion serves as a basic hermeneutical starting point in his treatment of the sutra. Some background will be helpful. There is a danger of oversimplification inherent in applying Mahayana Buddhist metaphysics to Christian theological problems. Christianity, we are sometimes asked to assume, has a problem with dualism and that a ready-made Buddhist metaphysics of nondualism is waiting in the wings to supply a solution. This tendency can be seen in Japanese Buddhist intellectuals, like Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900–1990), Hisamatsu Shin'ichi 久松真一 (1889–1980), Abe Masao 阿部正雄 (1915–2006), and other figures associated with the Kyoto school. O'Leary, to be clear, is certainly convinced of the virtues of nondualism as a “therapy” for Christianity’s “painful dualisms for which it seeks healing” (p. 19). In such discussions, seldom do either Buddhists or Christians recognize that Buddhism has a sizable problem with monism, let alone that Christian theism and spirituality might have insights useful to Buddhists in remedying this situation. Abe, at least, came close to acknowledging the problem of monism in Mahayana Buddhist thought when he recognized the tendency of Buddhist nondualism to undermine the basis for ethical discernment.¹ From my perspective within Christian theology, the appeal to Buddhist nondualism as an *ancilla theologiae* runs the risk of privileging the mystical side of Christian tradition at the expense of its prophetic side. In encounters like this, Christianity is reduced to a kind of Gnosticism. This must be resisted. The God of Christian faith, precisely in the intimacy of the Incarnation of the Word, remains a transcendent Other who commands love and the pursuit of justice.

¹ James L. Fredericks, “Masao Abe and Karl Rahner: On Traces of Monism and Dualism,” in *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue*, edited by Donald W. Mitchell, pp. 242–47 (Boston: Tuttle, 1998).

This Otherness cannot be reduced to the true suchness of all (Skt. *tathatā*; Jp. *shinnyo* 真如) or the original naturalness of things (Jp. *jinen* 自然) based on the principle of emptiness or the logic of the *prajñāpāramitā*.

O'Leary is quite aware of this monistic tendency in Buddhism. Modern Japanese philosophy (O'Leary names Inoue Enryō 井上円了 [1858–1919] and the Kyoto school), promotes “the identity of phenomenon and reality” (*genshō soku jitsuzai* 現象即実在). Thus, writes O'Leary, in modern Japanese philosophy, “a Buddhist monism was put forward as ‘the religion of the future,’ more scientific than Christianity and free of the dualisms that plague Christianity” (p. 25). With all this as background, O'Leary is genuinely intriguing when he argues that wisdom and compassion are actually at odds with one another in Mahayana Buddhism (p. 11). There is no easy-going harmony between the two in his untypical reading of the tradition. Wisdom and compassion are two forces within Mahayana that struggle for dominance. They do not imply one another in any automatic or natural way. Compassion does not arise naturally out of wisdom. In fact, compassion confers on self and other a relatedness that wisdom seeks to refute. I can imagine any number of Buddhists objecting to this reading of the tradition. Yet, I also suspect O'Leary is on to something of genuine importance with the potential to enrich Buddhists in their practice of the Dharma.

O'Leary, however, has much more to say about this matter. He sees in the bodhisattva ideal an audacious attempt to reconcile wisdom and compassion through *praxis* (pp. 11–12). The bodhisattva finds inspiration and motivation in the unresolved antinomy of the two. Moreover, we must resist the temptation to resolve this tension between wisdom and compassion with a metaphysics of emptiness. Like contemplation and action in Christian spirituality, the tension between wisdom and compassion can only be maintained by means of practice. Therefore, according to O'Leary, Buddhist nonduality, correctly envisioned, is not some “placid luxury,” but rather a “creative living” in which opposing realities are kept in tension by skillful means (p. 12). Buddhism must look to ascetics, not metaphysics, in practicing the Dharma. To this, I would add, not only ascetics, but ethics, and most especially, social ethics, which remains woefully underdeveloped in contemporary Buddhism.

A second issue deserving attention has to do with the nature of a commentary as a literary genre and as a theological enterprise. Reflecting on this book, I have come to think of commentary as a literary performance of tradition. By “tradition,” I mean a negotiated tension between continuity and innovation. By “performance,” I mean an enactment or realization of this tension mediated by a text.

Commentaries create this tension of innovation and continuity by contributing to what Julia Kristeva called “intertextuality.” No text stands alone. Every text appears to us in relation to other texts, either explicitly or, more commonly, implicitly. Lurking

about within the vicinity of the *Divina Commedia*, for example, are Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. How can we read Eliot's *Wasteland* without reaching for Dante and therefore, implicitly, for Aquinas and Ovid? All these texts are linked by a web of intertextuality. A similar argument could be made about the Prajñāpāramitā literature. The *Heart Sutra* does not stand alone. Its textuality is an intertextuality.

Kristeva's principle becomes especially vivid in the writing of a commentary. In a commentary, the text receiving comment is not present in some pristine originality. It is presented to us in terms of another text, namely, the commentary itself. This phenomenon is considerably magnified in a tradition like Buddhism where there is often a lineage of commentaries on commentaries, sometimes even to the extent that it is no longer possible to speak simply of an urtext. Shinran's great work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証, exemplifies this phenomenon by collecting passages from the three Pure Land sutras and assembling them into a choir with passages from Pure Land patriarchs like Nāgārjuna, Shandao 善導 (613–681), and Genshin 源信 (942–1017). The *Kyōgyōshinshō* is a commentary, in a purely technical sense, because Shinran comments on the texts he has selected for inclusion in it. The *Kyōgyōshinshō* is a commentary, in a less obvious way, in that by assembling texts, Shinran is manifesting their intertextuality. The real text, in this case, is the intertextuality of the many texts, which are, in effect, commenting on one another. My point is that a commentary, including Shinran's famous *Kyōgyōshinshō*, offers a peculiar linguistic instantiation of tradition, understood as a nexus of continuity and innovation.

What happens when we are presented with a Christian commentary on a Buddhist text? O'Leary has linked the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, which inevitably presents itself to us with its own intertextuality, to numerous Christian texts, each of which brings with it its own web of texts. In doing this, I would argue that O'Leary's commentary takes on the character of what Deleuze and Guattari once called a *multiplicité*: a complex and not completely integrated literary structure that does not reveal any definitive unity or starting point. As a commentary, O'Leary's book is not a branching out from an original meaning. Rather, O'Leary's commentary is a conversation with multiple voices, some Buddhist and some Christian—a conversation that did not begin with his commentary and does not conclude with it. If O'Leary is using Paul and John to comment on the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, the sutra is also commenting on Paul and John.

Toward the end of his book, O'Leary quotes Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) to the effect that, with attentive reading, the Bible “grows on its readers” (p. 272). The same can be said, he assures us, of the Buddhist scriptures. His commentary can be read as proof of this. The *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, read with care and reverence, can “grow on a reader,” even a Christian reader. For this to happen, however, the reader, and especially a Christian reader of a Buddhist text, must go around the hermeneutical circle

many times. This commentary is by no means O'Leary's first pass around the hermeneutical circle. Best of all, this contribution to Buddhist-Christian dialogue should be welcomed as an invitation to us all to enter the circle and pass around it many times.