

such-as-it-truly-is . . . this is a point of contact with the realm of the sacred” (p. 108). In a very human and rather moving conclusion to this essay, Gibbs addresses those who are apt to remain sceptical: “All of these ways of speaking about it are my attempts to share the safe haven I have found in the nembutsu. If all I’ve said has not convinced you to rely on the nembutsu path, I hope you will find another way to have a secure base, a safe haven. We all need this” (p. 108).

In a sense, this is the primary message to emerge from this valuable and thought-provoking collection of essays. As a sincere and committed wayfarer on the Shin Buddhist path for almost five decades, Gibbs has experienced the difficulties and joys in the quest for spiritual freedom and seeks to share with us the treasures he has found on his journey. This book is both an invitation and an exhortation to seek the “pearl beyond price” in a world of specious and vapid substitutes.

In the Company of Friends: Exploring Faith and Understanding with Buddhists and Christians. By John Ross Carter. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012. 348 pages. Paper \$26.95.

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In the Company of Friends is a collection of John Ross Carter’s essays, papers, and articles produced for various fora between 1986 and 2008 and compiled into a cohesive whole. Drawn from insights gleaned over two decades of active engagement with Buddhists (rather than just with “Buddhism” at a purely intellectual level), Carter’s thesis, as the title suggests, is a call against arms: against the arms, that is, of polemical and apologetic debate, and towards sincerely friendly, multi-lateral colloquium between people of faith.

The last term is used advisedly, because “faith” is something that Carter insists all such people share, at least in part (Introduction, p. xxxii). This “faith” is, according to Carter, “a religious dimension in human life . . . as old as homo sapiens” (p. 5), an external impetus which propels one along a certain religious path, whether it be the *mārga* of Theravada Buddhism, the White Path (*byakudō* 白道) of Shin Buddhism, the *derekh* of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Way (*hodos*) of Christ. Carter thus sets the trajectory of

his study with an unacknowledged but presumably conscious homage to Anselm's dictum of "faith seeking understanding," *fides quaerens intellectum*, though he qualifies this by rendering faith a "universal religious dimension" and limiting its understanding to "what it means to be genuinely human" (p. 5). He portrays the relation between the two by scholarly reference to Theravadin texts, the works of Shinran, and his own Christian inheritance.

Before doing so, Carter notes with humility the limitations of his particular sociological methodology. In this, he takes an apparently and perhaps surprisingly Thatcherite turn, in refuting the notion of "something called 'society'" at the expense of the individuals who comprise it (p. 6). While religion is indeed influenced by the society in which it arises, its real locus is in individual religious persons and their encounter with the "transcendent." Therefore, too, one must be cautious of the sociological category of "religion," looking instead to "faith" (in the terms by which Carter has defined it) as a fundamental impulse behind religion's variegated forms. Section 1 of the book portrays religion as a "quest for understanding" in which the basic agent of inquiry is the individual person of faith.

Carter is conscious of and unapologetic for this individualistic or "personalist" slant, influenced by his free-thinking Baptist tradition (he explicitly states this on p. 176 and in his portrayal of Baptist theology, pp. 202–4). A sense of individualism pervades the entire work. Even when in section 2 he takes us from the religious individual to the community of faith, Carter's focus is very much on one's personal salvation: it is particularly apparent in chapter 6, "Celebrating Our Faith," that the community presupposes individuality, or to put it differently, that "my" faith is the building block of "our" faith. This individual faith, it emerges in the final chapters, is the product of one's personal relation to sacred texts (pp. 189, 192), even to the extent that Carter claims that "Buddhists, like Baptists, affirm the primacy of scripture" (p. 206). While this is debatable, the expressed and surely laudable aim with which Carter concludes his book is to move beyond the impasse of "dialogue" between supposedly monolithic traditions and towards a colloquium among individual friends, that is, a "Conversation into Our Common Future," according to the title of chapter 17.

It is perhaps chapters 5 and 8, focusing expressly on *shinjin* 信心, that will most interest readers of this journal. Here, Carter embarks on an ambitious and learned differentiation between *shinjin* 信心 and *shin* 信 per se. The latter, Carter argues, corresponds to *kimyō* 歸命, "taking refuge," and thus to his definition of faith as a universal property of all people. Taking

refuge should not, he says, be taken as an act of that self-power (*jiriki* 自力) so strictly repudiated by Shinran, any more than the “personal commitment” to Christ by which Carter defines Christian faith necessarily implies Pelagianism. Rather, in both cases, “faith” is an external impetus generated by the salvific core of all being, an impetus which demands the response of awed and trembling but joyous submission; there are echoes of Rudolph Otto here.

Carter’s idea here (see especially p. 55) of an inherent salvific direction to all things from Amida or God is convincing and appealing. However, the highly personal aspect of the individual’s submission to this direction may not convince all Christian or Buddhist readers. For example, while Carter cites Shinran to support his idea that *kimyō* is *namu* 南無 in the sense of “seeking refuge” (p. 53), he nowhere connects this to the practice of the *nembutsu* 念仏, of which *namu* is the opening phrase. The link between teaching and practice—which the very title of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* surely makes clear—is never made. Indeed, the *nembutsu* seldom features in Carter’s book. As a Protestant thinker, Carter reads into Buddhism a duality of faith against works that arguably is not there. The non-duality between faith and practice is surely just as much a part of Shin Buddhism as of Zen, but comparison with Christian sacramental thought, which might help make some sense of this non-duality, is dismissed as uncongenial (p. 203).

Carter’s emphasis on a fundamental shared soteriological direction between Christians’ and Buddhists’ religious experience is something I heartily share, but find that his highly personalistic approach leads him to abandon metaphysical questions too readily. This is despite a nuanced and helpful discussion of *hosshō hosshin* 法性法身 and *hōben hosshin* 方便法身 in chapter 10, where Carter stresses that *hōben* should not be seen as merely provisional in the Shin tradition, but is expressive of reality, which a theologian of Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglican proclivities would instantly recognize as something like the “effective outward sign of an invisible inner grace” of traditional sacramental theology. The *nembutsu*, if I am not mistaken, is more than just a sign of the practitioner’s *shinjin*, but actually effects it through the merit-transference of Amida, just as a sacrament is not human work, but God’s work effected through human hands. It is quite fair that Carter, as a Baptist thinker, should reject such thought, and he openly acknowledges his bias—indeed, there is something of the Comparative Theology approach to Carter’s persistent denominational commitment—but it might have been helpful to acknowledge wider Christian viewpoints and refer to at least one or two relevant non-Protestant theologians. There might

then have been some more exploration of the communal, rather than individual, nature of salvation implicit in, say, Amida's Vows, or the efficacy of the *nembutsu*.

For example, Carter's insightful discussion of the Trinity and the implications of God's internal interrelationships in chapter 12 would make for interesting comparison with the Roman Catholic theologian Gavin D'Costa's *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000). Carter equates *perichōrēsis*, the divine interplay of the persons of the Trinity, with the Buddhist doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda*, describing both in terms of simultaneous unity and distinction, individuality and reciprocity (p. 157). The implications of this for inter-religious colloquy are illuminating, to be sure, but without any articulation of the vehicle for the Trinity's extension into the created order, such as Christ's Incarnation and continued presence in the world today in the sacraments he entrusted to the Church, it remains rather distant and abstract. The Shin Buddhist might say that Amida's absolute transcendence is paradoxically qualified by his absolute immanence via the skilful means of the *nembutsu*, whereby the Buddha-nature inhabits all things, if only we can see truly, and many Christian theologians would cite the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, as God's vehicle of immanence in the world today. Carter's God, though, seems at times impenetrably transcendent. This is partly because Carter offers a very low Christology which is not representative of majority Christian thought: indeed, with his advocacy of Niebuhr's "radical monotheism" (stated emphatically on pp. 66, 219), one could sometimes be forgiven for mistaking Christianity for liberal Judaism. Carter maintains that "Christians have worshiped God through Christ" (p. 66), which is true in itself but falls rather short of the Trinitarian belief that Christ actually is God. Some engagement with wider Christian theology may well have strengthened Carter's argument for Trinitarian non-duality.

When it comes to Buddhism, on the other hand, Carter's work does show how inter-religious discussion can lead not only to increased understanding of the faith of people from other religions, but also of those from different schools within one's own religion. Chapter 5 offers a notable example of this, in which Carter attempts to reconcile Theravadin thought with the Shin Buddhist insistence on other-power (*tariki* 他力). But it does lead him to the important question in chapter 7 as to why it is a Christian scholar attempting to make this connection; or to put it another way, why do Buddhists seem more interested in dialogue with Christians than with each other? Where, Carter asks, are the Theravadin and Shin Buddhist inter-religious colloquia?

Being unfamiliar with the Japanese literature on the subject or the contemporary academic scene there, I cannot comment as to whether that particular question is pertinent today. Perhaps it will also take a Buddhist to prompt Christian thinkers to take wider ecumenical views into account: I am certainly no less guilty than Carter of denominational bias!

SUNY Press has produced a handsome and durable volume, well-laid out and clearly formatted. The index is meticulous and the bibliography full, although it does betray a distinct bias towards Protestant authors (Raimundo Pannikar is, I think, the only Catholic theologian cited). Unfortunately, there are several editorial slips: most of the Greek contains errors in diacritical marks and there are many mistakes in its transliteration. There are also repeated errors in Latin quotes. I am not competent to comment on the accuracy of the impressive wealth of quotes in Sanskrit and Pāli.

These are minor quibbles. Few nowadays would argue, I think, with Carter's core conviction that inter-religious engagement should be conducted in a spirit of genuine friendship. We can indeed recognize each other's "magnificent faith," even if we are not as convinced as Carter that one person's faith is necessarily the same phenomenon as another's, and we should surely disavow our inheritance of "shockingly cunning foibles," "brutal wars," and "troubling pettiness" (p. 224). I hope that this review has avoided the latter, because I mean in no way to detract from Carter's profound and sustained meditation on the relation between faith and understanding in inter-religious dialogue. It is a work which will interest and inform Buddhist and Christian scholars alike, and challenges us to engage in ever more frequent and fruitful encounters both with each other and among ourselves.

