

BOOK REVIEWS

BUDDHISM MADE PLAIN—An Introduction for Christians (Revised edition of *Buddhism and Christianity—Their Inner Affinity*). By Antony Fernando. Indore (India): Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, 1981, XIV + 153p.

This book, written by a (Catholic) Christian Sinhalese author, “who had the rare chance of studying the two religions up to a doctoral degree” (Introduction), may be the harbinger of a new breed of books to come: catechetical exposes of another religion that are not intent on proving the superiority of the own religion. It betrays a very personal grasp of and great appreciation for the “Buddhist truths,” together with an attitude that is irenic in the extreme. From beginning to end the author displays his conviction of the “inner affinity of the projects of the Buddha and Christ” (cf. Introduction, pp. 4–5) by discovering everywhere the common why of both doctrines behind the very differing *what* (pp. 141–142). Fernando thus appears to see himself as one of the persons who can “be at one and the same time fully a Buddhist and fully a Christian.” (p. 6)

The book consists of two unequal parts. Part one: Human Liberation according to the Buddha (108 pages); Part II: Human Liberation—The Inner Affinity among the Views of the Buddha and Christ (30 pages of explicit comparison).

The “Revised Edition” is in fact the fourth edition of the book. After two Sri Lanka editions (1981 and 1983) it was adapted with the help of Leonard Swidler to become this time an “Introduction for Christians and Jews” (Orbis Books, 1985). Comparing the present edition with the first, we see that the work has gained much not only in form—a substantial improvement in the English (with elimination of “male chauvinistic language”), diacritical marks added, and a more logical division of the chapters—but also in content. The explanation of the no-self idea of the Buddha has been considerably enlarged and the addition of a General Index and an Index of Pali and Sanskrit Terms enhances its “reader-friendliness.”

In judging the value of this book, two questions seem to impose themselves: Does it paint a true picture of Buddhism (and of Christianity)—a picture wherein a Buddhist can recognize her- or himself? And, does it serve the purposes of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue?

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As to the first question, only a Buddhist can be the judge (which makes me hope that *The Eastern Buddhist* will also engage a Buddhist reviewer besides this Christian one) and I can only make a few preliminary remarks. Since an introduction to the general public can, of course, not dream of treating all the aspects of the immensely rich phenomenon called Buddhism, I guess that the author's choice for a rather detailed explanation of the Four Holy Truths must be applauded as a felicitous one—all the more so because this appears to be common ground recognized by all brands of Buddhism. As befits his Sinhalese background, the author's explanations are then mostly in the Theravāda line, with an occasional preference for a Mahāyāna interpretation (as in the monk-laity question). But the author warns us that, while trying to be true to the Buddha's "original thought," he does not feel obliged to "follow slavishly and in every detail the interpretations given to the doctrines in contemporary Theravāda Buddhist manuals." (p. 3). This might elicit the interesting question when and under which conditions one may feel entitled to appropriate tenets of another religion in a sense that deviates from the one commonly accepted in that religion.

However this may be, we find in the Foreword by the monk-scholar, Rev. Bellana Gnanawimala Thero, an eloquent endorsement from the Theravāda side: "A non-Buddhist could use this book safely to discover the authentic teachings of the Buddha. A reader of the book will not only get an objective grasp of Buddha's philosophy of life, he will also be led to appreciate and value it." (p. XI) But the question remains, of course, whether also Mahāyāna Buddhists would be equally willing to give the book their blessing. In the meantime, I am inclined to think that especially the following interpretations, while making some Buddhist tenets more readily acceptable for Christians, might sound objectionable to many Buddhists:

1. The Buddha's analysis of the five Aggregates and his characterization of them as *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* is not meant "to analyze life in its physical form, but a particular form of life pursued by many" (p. 65), "a pattern of behavior" (p. 76). And, concomitantly, "what the Buddha is underlining here by the use of the term *anattā* is the autonomy-lessness of the emotion-dominated life" (p. 74).

2. [Rejoice, ye Pudgalavādin!] "By the doctrine of no-self the Buddha could not have denied the existence of individuals as distinct from one another." (p. 70)

3. "Rebirth, in its physical sense, is in no way a constituent element of the Buddha's doctrine of liberation." (p. 44)

As a Christian reviewer, however, I am probably expected to answer the question whether I can agree with the picture of a Christianity brought in so close proximity with Buddhism. I must then first say that I share the author's

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preference for "this Christianity of a liberational dimension" and therefore very much appreciate what he has to say positively about Christ and Christianity. On the other hand, however, I cannot but feel that the Christianity, prepared here for its "pas de deux" with Buddhism, has been subjected to a good deal of "cosmetic surgery." My list of the "distorting omissions" would comprise at least the following:

1. The doctrine of creation, which does not permit to simply call Christianity a doctrine of liberation.

2. The social and eschatological components of Christian liberation. Thus, for example, the following sentence (the use of the word "primarily" notwithstanding) looks a bit misleading to me: ". . . nirvana and the reign of God are realities that pertain primarily to an individual's life here and now" (p. 132)

3. The "reality" of God for the Christian.—Although the author's analysis of the human attitudes obtaining in the Christian worship of God is certainly suggestive and important, the impression thereby conveyed that God's reality is nothing but the sum of these subjective attitudes does not carry conviction in the Christian context. And I certainly cannot subscribe to the author's reduction of Christ's doctrines of Divine Providence and of the Forgiving God to mere *höben*, sedatives for individuals who are unsure of themselves and guilt-ridden (pp. 133-137).

4. The Cross and, in general, the "labor of negativity." This last gripe of mine may possibly be shared by the Buddhist reader. For, indeed, Christian and Buddhist liberation alike are mainly presented as as "development of the person in man" (p. 85) "through an adult, enlightened form of life" (p. 41), without due attention to the element of discontinuity, negation, and "death-resurrection" this involves in both religions. It sometimes looks as if the author finds the common denominator of both religions in the well-lit halls of the *Aufklärung*, wherein no shadow of mystery or negativity is allowed. "For him [the Buddha]. . . to be religious is to be reason-controlled. To be a religious person is to be a mature adult." (p. 79)

Coming now to our second question, whether Fernando can help us in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, I can only answer yes and no. Yes, we can all learn from his spirit, his will to understand and evaluate the other. Yes, the book is to be recommended to all participants in the dialogue for the good number of fresh insights to be found in it. And no, for I must agree with another reviewer, the Chinese Protestant, Peter Lee (1), who thinks that Fernando's kind of irenism would in the end do a disservice to the dialogue, since it systematically glosses over real differences. Peter Lee singles out the fact that, over against the Buddha's avoidance of the God idea, Fernando only

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stresses that Christ was also critical of the theism of his day, and then remarks: "To speak in such negative terms alone does not squarely face the problem at hand. The difference between the Christians' belief in God and the Buddhists' silence on God cannot be dismissed so lightly." (p. 188)

Indeed, the beautiful irenic attitude of the author may strengthen us both in the convictions we have in common but does not really permit us to learn from one another or be transformed by one another. This latter benefit can only be had by facing the real differences squarely and together—in a common attitude of seekers of the Way. But let me finally admit that I am doing Fernando an injustice. After all, he did not write for theologians or participants in the dialogue on the academic level. He wrote his book for the "Christian in the street" for whom the reading of this book may mean an invaluable widening of mind and heart.

Note (1) *In Ching Feng*, Vol. XXV nr. 3 (1982), pp. 186–189.

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WAS IST DER WEG—er liegt vor deinen Augen, Zen-Meditation in japanischen Gaerten ("What is the Way? It is right in Front of you—Zen Meditation in Japanese Gardens") by Rudolf Seitz, with contributions by Kim Lan Thai and Masao Yamamoto (Koesel-Verlag, Munich 1985), pp. 176, including 72 monochrome plates.

Jōei Matsukura, abbot of the world-famous Ryōanji Temple in Kyoto, once answered the question as to "What is Zen?" in the following words: "Zen is a religion without a personal God . . . without an idol to worship; Zen is a religion of self-cultivation . . . by which man deepens his self-awareness . . . through which man intuits his own nature, that is to say, a religion of Satori-enlightenment. Zen is a religion of 'Nothingness', 'Selflessness' . . . , a living religion of work and action . . . by which man realizes that 'the place where he stands is at once the Pure Land' . . ." Everybody who has undergone some Zen training knows of the weight given to physical work to be performed in the true spirit of Zen (*samu*). Such work being part and parcel of Zen training, is mainly directed towards the maintenance of monastic buildings or temples and the gardens surrounding them. The art of laying out, shaping and finally maintaining gardens and, of course, the gardens themselves cultivated in Japan for many centuries, their symbolism and aestheticism are so closely and predominantly related with Buddhism—especially Zen Buddhism—that it ap-