

extremely detailed chronology of Murakami's life. It may also be added that the book is beautifully designed, featuring photographs of an elderly Murakami on its front cover and a young Murakami on the back.

As the chapters in this volume abundantly show, Murakami was a multifaceted scholar who played a major role in the development of modern Buddhist studies in Japan. Many of these chapters also reveal that his thought reflects the wider social and cultural currents of the Meiji and Taishō periods, suggesting that a more detailed study of this figure could provide new insights into the intellectual history of those years. Unfortunately, despite his importance Murakami gradually receded from public memory over the years, leading Hayashi to state that “although it may be an exaggeration to say that he is ‘a forgotten Buddhist’ (*wasurerareta bukkyō gakusha* 忘れられた仏教学者), there is no mistake that he has become ‘a Buddhist that no one talks about any more’ (*katararenakunatta bukkyō gakusha* 語られなくなった仏教学者)” (p. 257). This volume will undoubtedly serve to redress this situation and rescue Murakami from the oblivion to which he has been unjustly consigned for so long.

The Lost Way to the Good: Dionysian Platonism, Shin Buddhism, and the Shared Quest to Reconnect a Divided World. By Thomas Plant. Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2021. xxiv + 244 pages. Hardcover. ISBN-13: 978-1-62138-791-6.

DOMINGOS S. DE SOUSA

Thomas Plant is a Chaplain at Rikkyo University, Tokyo, and Fellow of The Cambridge Centre for the Study of Platonism. He wrote a comparative study of the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. ca. late 5th–early 6th c.) and Shinran Shōnin 親鸞聖人 (1173–1262) for his doctoral degree and has been engaged in interfaith dialogue with Shin Buddhist clergy and academics in the UK and Japan. He declares that it was his experience of the East that guided him from “atheist materialism to Christianity” and to the study of the ancient and mystical theologian, Dionysius the Areopagite (pp. 3–4). The study of Shinran, in particular, “is part of the strange path that led [him] inadvertently to the Christian faith” (p. 122). Both figures had a profound influence on his spiritual journey. Through the study of their thought, he discovers “the providential love that sunders the wall between faith and reason and satisfies both heart and mind” (p. 122). He claims that Buddhism and Christianity point equally to “a person of compassionate love beyond being, yet who sustains all beings” (p. 122).

Plant portrays himself as a “midlife advocate for the restoration of tradition in the West” (p. 3) and a proud Christian traditionalist. He is convinced that if Christians are

to become part of the solution to the problems of secularism, they need to rediscover the great ancient Western traditions closely intertwined with Eastern wisdom and cooperate in the pursuit of truth with other religious traditions. In his view, however, such a project should not be carried out under the “nebulous aegis of ‘interfaith’ work” (p. 6). Dialogue with other religious traditions must go beyond the acknowledgment of differences and a gentlemen’s agreement to cooperate in social and political projects. It should explore the possibility, he insists, of a “metaphysical commonality” (p. 6) even with nontheistic traditions. He argues that the sacramental metaphysics of Dionysian Platonism provides Christians with the language that “can help us to make allies of others who equally desire and seek the truth and want to stand against the nihilism of our age” (pp. 6–7).

The choice for a comparative study of Dionysius and Shinran is not arbitrary. The author advances the bold claim that Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the most influential Christian Platonists in the church, provides a bridge between the Eastern and Western religiophilosophical traditions and offers “Christian and Japanese Buddhist philosophy enough of a common language to make some mutual sense of the world” (p. xxii). In dialogue with the thought of Shinran, the founder of the Pure Land school of Buddhism, he tries to show “how traditions of the West and East can unite to challenge the relativism and power-obsession of secular modernity, reconnecting us instead to humanity’s common and ancient quest for transcendent truth and goodness” (p. xxii). He stresses that a Platonic approach to the Christian faith can unite us with ancient religions and philosophies and “offers the possibility of mutual intelligibility with Japanese True Pure Land Buddhism and the articulation of a shared, transcendent Good” (p. xxii). Dionysian Platonic philosophy is depicted as an “intellectual analogue to the Silk Road,” which made possible a “mutually intelligible philosophical dialogue from Ireland to Beijing” (p. 4).

In comparing the thought of Dionysius and Shinran, the author intends to highlight the modern problem of the privatization of truth and the relegation of any sense of common good from the public square. He distances himself from “conventional Western scholarship” (p. 117), which has often pointed out shared structural patterns between Shin Buddhism and Protestant Christianity, such as the priority of faith over works and the account of human nature as utterly depraved and incapable of achieving salvation. He considers these parallels no more than “cosmetic similarities” (p. 198). He claims that in comparing the thought of Dionysius and Shinran we can discern a deeper “shared metaphysical ground” (p. xxiii) between Shin Buddhism and Christianity. However, neither the God of Dionysius nor the Amida 阿弥陀 portrayed by Shinran should be conceived as a “static metaphysical absolute” (p. 167). On the contrary, both embody a unifying dynamism that encapsulates all reality, which is unknowable by bare reason, but which can be experienced as person and gift. God and

Amida are conceived not as being, not even as the supreme being, but rather as emptiness. Dionysius's Christlike God, who reveals himself by emptying himself into beings, shares a remarkable conceptual similarity with Shinran's understanding of Amida Buddha as the inconceivable light that permeates all reality. In Plant's view, both exemplify the understanding of being as dynamically unfolding from an infinite plenitude of self-emptying love as put forth by Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900–1990). In this shared metaphysical ground, true reality is conceived as an activity of emptying. One's true self is found in the emptying of the self that is false, epitomized by the Mahayana no-self doctrine, with the parallels being Christ's teaching of taking up the cross and Paul's notion of dying so that Christ might live within. While acknowledging the existence of considerable and irreconcilable differences between Christianity and Shin Buddhism, the author insists that the striking conceptual overlap in seeing reality as salvific and a self-emptying unfolding of goodness provides a shared metaphysical ground that helps us to articulate a common resistance to the secularism and nihilism of our age.

In this highly eclectic and personal study, Plant's aim is to show how the metaphysical wisdom of Dionysian Platonism and Shin Buddhism can meet the challenges posed by the secularism of modern societies. It is unclear to me how the book accomplishes this task. The author, as many traditionalists like him, appears to be on a crusade against secularism. He sets up secularism as a straw person to be knocked down by the revival of ancient philosophical and spiritual traditions, failing thereby to appreciate the challenges of the present. Secularism does not have to be envisioned as a process whereby religion falls away, to be replaced by science and rationality. Charles Taylor, in his outstanding work *A Secular Age*, challenges such a negative view of secularism. He sees secularism as a development within Western Christianity. The modern age, in his view, is not an age without religion; rather, secularism heralds "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others."¹ The resulting pluralism and unprecedented freedom create new challenges to religious traditions, which are called to interpret anew their roles in society. Religions cannot avoid being reshaped by modern forms of thought and practice, by secularization and globalization, with which they need to be brought into conversation. They must continually redefine themselves, holding on to what is normative in their scriptures and traditions, and adapting to the fresh challenges and opportunities of the present. This means that religious believers should advocate neither a blind embrace nor a blanket rejection of the secular world, but rather a critical engagement with it.

Underlying Plant's railing against secularism is his conviction that it is possible to find "metaphysical commonality" among religions, including nontheistic traditions

¹ Taylor 2007, p. 3.

like Shin Buddhism. In seeking to challenge the relativism of secular modernity by searching out a shared metaphysical ground in Shin Buddhism and Christianity, he glides over the fact that there are no human experiences that are not mediated through particular cultural forms. The specific features of concepts and religious doctrines are not just a means to an end but are themselves constitutive elements of the goal of religion. It is the distinctive patterns of story, belief, and behavior that give the respective religious concepts their specific and sometimes contradictory meanings. This suggests that to the extent that the specific features of each religion are de-emphasized in the name of a putative metaphysical ground common to both religions, the value of each distinct religious tradition is lessened rather than affirmed. The whole thread of Plant's argument, in short, rests upon the dubious assumption that it is possible to devise a universal conception of an ultimate good common to all religions, in the light of which secularism can be confronted. Although the book raises many more questions than it presents answers for, it provides a welcome contribution to the growing literature comparing Shin Buddhism and Christianity.

REFERENCE

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.