

*Buddhist-Christian Dialogue as Theological Exchange: An Orthodox Contribution to Comparative Theology.* By Ernest M. Valea. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015. 244 pages. Paperback: ISBN 9781498221191.

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This book by Ernest M. Valea is an interesting addition to the literature on Buddhist-Christian exchange or dialogue if only for the reason that it is written from the point of view of Orthodox Christianity, which has hitherto been largely silent in this regard. The book is quite ambitious. It offers a critical assessment of various Catholic and Protestant interactions with various kinds of Buddhism; it involves a searching out of central ideas of Mahayana Buddhism, mainly adducing British authors but also representatives of the Kyoto School; and it sets out key characteristics of Orthodox theology which initially seem to be relevant to these exchanges. In the first part of the book, the author selects a specific theme as a focus, namely the ideal of perfection as espoused both in the Orthodox theological tradition and in Mahayana Buddhism. He goes on to promote the idea of “comparative theology” as a way of exploring such themes. This latter term has been current for many decades now, and has not always been met with unreserved acceptance. In his own usage, Valea draws on the approach of Francis Clooney and James Fredericks, seeking to affirm inclusivism without relativism, as might be thought to befit the kind of eternal vision characteristic of the Orthodox theology which is his starting point.

Orthodox Christianity is of course itself a large and complex religious family and it must be noted that Valea draws on the particular background of modern Romanian Orthodoxy. Within that tradition he further concentrates on the substantial writings of Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993), whom he designates “the most important Romanian Orthodox theologian of all times.” It is not that Stăniloae himself attended to the challenge of Buddhism or sought to interact with it. However his work delicately underlies the perspective which Valea presupposes for his own foray into “comparative theology” towards the end of the work as a whole.

The book is divided into two parts, and it would be interesting to know which of these parts was developed first during the original writing of what started out as a doctoral thesis. Was his starting point a study of Buddhist thought in itself, or did he become aware of this on the basis of the modern theological question posed by perception of the multiplicity of religions? At what point, for him, did a normative theological position come into play?

Be that as it may, the first part of his argument as here presented is a critical survey of previous approaches to Buddhist-Christian interaction, and introduces the main elements needed as a basis for his later conclusions. This part ends with a forthright critique of various authors such as John Hick, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Mark Heim, Paul Knitter, and Thich Nhat Hanh, whose positions he sums up, very broadly, under the word “pluralism.” All such approaches, for Valea, are regrettably compromised by relativism, by “syncretism” (a term he uses pejoratively without any regard to its modern theoretical base in the history of religions), or by spiritual journeys such as that of Paul Knitter in which the voyagers seem to lose their connection with their starting point. The word “pluralism” has of course long since lost its once harmless usage as a reference to the plurality of religions as a sheer matter of fact in the world. At latest with the “Copernican” theology of John Hick it has come to refer to theologies that seek to reach beyond the conceptual limitations of any one tradition, positing some kind of more widely relevant ultimate being, divine reference point or metaphysical anchor. With Valea it has practically become a byword for any positions that out of enthusiasm for dialogue no longer refer to any kind of reserved finality, except in so far as a new one is conceived that transcends the historic traditions. At least some of his criticisms of “pluralism” would seem to be justified, but the details cannot be pursued here. Suffice it to say that Valea evidently feels a need to demolish all of these diverse tracks in order to position an Orthodox claim which is not negotiable in any such ways.

In the second part of his work, Valea conducts an exploration of four thinkers whom he calls the “founding fathers of contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue”: Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, Abe Masao, and John B. Cobb, Jr. This might seem to be a rather limited cluster in the overall, worldwide picture, yet they are big names, and certainly important figures to whom many others have referred. The reason for selecting the first three is apparently that the work of these famous representatives of “the Kyoto School” relates to central concepts of Mahayana Buddhism, notably emptiness. Valea argues in some detail what has long been generally evident, namely that these thinkers and writers, in spite of their intellectual engagement with European and American thought, are in the main putting forward a Zen Buddhist interpretation of religious experience without taking on board anything in particular from Christianity. The Kyoto School agenda is therefore one of apologetics rather than of dialogue in the sense of any kind of mutual learning process.

This leaves Valea with the challenge of John B. Cobb, Jr., who not only engaged with Buddhist thought rather deeply but has also been very active

and helpful in developing various forums for dialogue between the two religions. However, Cobb's proposals and positions are not acceptable to Valea on the grounds that his call for a new orientation transcending both traditional Buddhism and Christianity would be true to neither, and that they would in effect amount to a new religion. The "process theology" that Cobb sees as a path towards an inclusive conception for both Buddhism and Christianity simply does not work either for Valea himself or for his chosen representative of Orthodox theology, Stăniloae. On the other hand this very failure clears the way, argues Valea, for a new approach in terms of "comparative theology," in which his own argument culminates.

Valea seeks a form of dialogue that would maintain the distinctive character of both Orthodox Christian theology and Buddhism while allowing for some exchange of views and perceptions to take place. This is best served, he believes, by a theological exploration of specific themes in each tradition, for example the concept or vision of "perfection" which he had introduced at the beginning of the book. The objective is, apparently, that as a result of such study one would learn to appreciate one's own tradition better than one did before. This objective may be laudable in itself, but it must be pointed out that it falls considerably short of coming to any kind of understanding of the "other" tradition *for its own sake*. Each tradition will preserve itself, to the satisfaction of its well-established exponents, but it will have deepened itself, possibly, while continuing to exclude the other.

Valea's thesis concludes with three thematic examples: compassion, prayer, and faith. (Unfortunately the theme of "perfection" seems to have been left behind at this point.) So how do these examples work out? At the risk of unfair abbreviation, it seems that the author reverts, in effect, to apologetics. He presents Buddhist "compassion" in such a way as to imply that it is mainly a matter of a mental attitude that has practical outworkings and is hence less commendable than the Christian concept of *agape*. By focusing on Theravada Buddhism (though with a reference to the Dalai Lama), Valea skates around the profound dialectics of compassion in the Mahayana with its subtle relationship both to the bodhisattva concept and to the associated "perfections" (*pāramitā*). So a big opportunity is lost in this case. On "prayer" he focuses on the oft-noted parallel between the very short "Jesus Prayer" and the *nenbutsu*, while also exploring other aspects of prayer, particularly the distinction between prayer as petition and prayer as aspiration and/or mindfulness. Some important and subtle matters are considered here. However, the conclusion seems to be simply that the Christian tradition of prayer in relationship with God is in principle more satisfactory, and the question emphasized is, accordingly, whether Christians understand

their own ways satisfactorily in this regard. Apart from being challenged to re-evaluate their use of prayer, Christians should also correct “syncretistic views they have already accepted” (p. 216). So the author is again somehow learning from Buddhism, but learning that which he already knows. What about taking more seriously the concept of prayer as aspiration or vow? The third case adduced is “faith.” Here too he recognizes that there is a terminological mine-field. However, his main purpose is to emphasise difference. He concludes that Christians should consider the nature of their own faith “and practice a faith which opens them towards God and other people, instead of one that isolates and limits them to the cultivation of inner strength” (p. 219). Well and good. But does this not somehow imply a rejectionist critique of a presumed Buddhist understanding of “faith,” and could this not in turn be challenged? One wonders whether this really amounts to any kind of interactive dialogue.

In the closing pages, Valea offers a few suggestions as to how Buddhists for their part might engage in comparative theology, but avers that this really has to be a matter for them. That might seem to be fair enough, and non-intrusive, but on the other hand it effectively makes “comparative theology” very standpoint-based and not in any sense an approach that could be anything like a shared enterprise. In the conclusion, he rests his case by stating, “An Orthodox contribution to comparative theology can only be imagined if the rich traditions that engage in dialogue are not corrupted by syncretism, but rather respect the other traditions, learn about their values on their own terms and as a result better know themselves” (p. 230). Once again we have “syncretism” being held up as the great danger to what is presumed to be true religion. However given that all religions are in many ways syncretistic (if historically and theoretically analyzed), there is a serious issue here that requires greater theoretical attention. The apparently safe and solid position of Orthodox theology is contrasted with the “pluralism” of Paul Knitter, who preferred to wander freely about in the religious landscape. But surely there are paths of dialogue which fall between the two extremes of rudderless drifting and normative safety. All in all therefore, the hope that we might in this book have an interesting new departure in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, advanced from the position of Orthodox Christianity, seems to be rather faint. Perhaps the future will hold more.