

of Buddha-nature, along with his radical new notion that nonsentient objects possess Buddha-nature.

Unfortunately, Liu does not provide an adequate discussion of the historical context in which Chi-tsang's thought developed. This is regrettable, since it obscures some important issues related to the rise of Chi-tsang's system to the position of San-lun orthodoxy. Despite the impression that Liu seeks to give, Chinese Mādhyamika did not develop in a single, uncomplicated line from Seng-chao to Chi-tsang. As Hirai points out in the book mentioned above, from the time of Seng-ch'üan (n.d.), two generations before Chi-tsang, there existed two groups within the Chinese Mādhyamika lineage. One group devoted themselves primarily to doctrinal studies, while the other stressed the importance of meditation. Chi-tsang belonged to the first group. The rise of Chi-tsang's philosophy to the position of orthodoxy represents the victory of his brand of Sinitic Mādhyamika over the other, more praxis-oriented lineage. Since this had an incalculable impact on the subsequent development of this sect, lack of attention to this point is a serious defect in any work on Chi-tsang's thought. Moreover, the rise of Chi-tsang's system to orthodoxy is no doubt intimately related to the close relationship he enjoyed with the Sui court. A closer look at the specific moves through which Chi-tsang sought to establish his system as the normative one for the San-lun sect would have immeasurably enhanced the value of this book.

In conclusion, it may be said that although this volume contains a reliable guide to the main points of Chi-tsang's Mādhyamika philosophy, it is far from being the definitive work on "Madhyamaka Thought in China."

*RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND CHRISTIAN TRUTH.* By Joseph Stephen O'Leary. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, xiii + 269 pp.

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ALL RELIGIOUS THINKING today faces the same double challenge: postmodernism and pluralism. Deconstruction especially cannot be ignored, for it has achieved important insights into how all language, including religious discourse, *means*; and the global encounter of religions with each other constitutes a serious challenge to their incommensurable truth claims. The danger with the first is the kind of nihilistic "atheology" that throws out baby with

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bathwater by denying all religious truths and, with the second, a superficial relativism that cheapens the importance of such claims. These challenges are more problematical for Christianity than Buddhism, since its greater emphasis on salvation through belief leaves it more vulnerable to deconstructive critiques of those beliefs, and its universalistic ambitions contrast more sharply with the uniqueness it attributes to the role of Jesus.

How can the Christian message be understood today, stripped of outdated dogmas and revitalized by its dialogue with other religions? I know of no other book that responds to these challenges as well as *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth*. O'Leary has thoroughly digested the implications of deconstructive (and analytic) philosophy and knows that one cannot just cut away the Gordian knot of theology but must delicately address its claims, piece by piece, to recover the salvific phenomenology that dogma now obscures. To help with that process, he engages in dialogue with Buddhism, especially Nāgārjuna, whose Mādhyamika offers an alternative deconstruction of truth claims in service of spiritual experience.

The preface offers three imperatives for theology today. Theology must be *phenomenological*, constantly soliciting metaphysical claims, for metaphysics cannot be overcome once and for all. It must be *pluralistic*, for pluralism today is an irreducible aspect of religious life and thought that can never be resolved in the final triumph of a single standpoint. O'Leary pictures religions as all "products of finite, historical, situation-bound struggles, each of which projects images and a rhetoric of the transcendent, and develops these in a constant ferment of self-deconstruction" (x). The antidote to relativism is found not in a retreat from this engagement but in those relations themselves. Finally, theology must be *rational* in the wide sense, referring objectively to truth or truths even though this truth can no longer be formulated independently of the interplay between different religious discourses (such as that between Christianity and Buddhism).

Emphasizing that there is no neutral viewpoint which transcends or balances different religions, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* is a Western Christian attempt to clarify the conditions under which theological thinking can be pursued today. Like every religious message which has to "pay the price of its existence" (Hocking) and cannot surpass the conditions of its own historical contingency, the price of O'Leary's perspective for the Buddhist-Christian dialogue is that he is less sensitive to some of the historical developments in the Buddhist tradition. So he tends, like I often do, to assume that Nāgārjuna had the last word on *sūnyatā* and the two truths, without considering the historical disagreements, explicit and implicit, that have occurred (and still recur) over their meaning. Thus this book is better at using the resources of the Buddhist tradition for demonstrating how Christian theology

must change, than it is at elucidating the dialectics at work in the historical development of Buddhist theology.

Looking at it from the other side, however, perhaps Buddhist thinkers can learn from this book the importance of conducting similar deconstructions of Buddhist doctrine. Lacking a Vatican, we find it easier to ignore what we find uncomfortable in the tradition, but then we end up with a diminished tradition. For example, how literally should karma and rebirth be understood? And no one wants to address the awkward fact that the Ch'an/Zen understanding of enlightenment is very different and probably incommensurable with Pali accounts of what Śākyamuni realized under the Bodhi tree.

Chapter one, "Interreligious Space," offers an overview of O'Leary's desire to accept the historical relativization of all religious discourse while still affirming the referential objectivity of dogmatic language. "God" is a cipher for the whole history of the construction and deconstruction of monotheism, and Jesus Christ is disseminated across history, his identity constructed by us and subject to profound alterations from new encounters such as the dialogue with Buddhism. The parity of religions is a surface manifestation of the finite status all religions share: their contingent and incomplete character as historically developing identities. Religions refuse to see the real conditions of their existence because they transfer to their language, representations and history the ultimacy that actually applies only to the ultimate reality they serve witness to. In other words, they fall into self-idolatry.

O'Leary has no time for an Eliade-type unitary theology of the sacred that overrides the diversity of historical phenomena, for that loses the anchorage of religions in believing engagement, the very thing that makes their words real for those who live in them. The striking convergences that sometimes occur do not point to any uniformity. Rather, it is their "rough similarity as existential projects which unites the varied spiritual trajectories of humanity" (21). (I would add that Buddhism and Christianity are further distinguished by their preoccupation with the liminal experiences of suffering and death.) O'Leary also criticizes attempts to extract a common mystical depth-dimension, in a way that challenges our usual ways of understanding enlightenment: "The search for pure immediacy ends up clutching the wraith of an ephemeral sensation" (31). The presence of the spirit is not the foundation for such a metaphysics of presence but arises as an unpredictable spontaneity making all closure impossible.

Chapter two, "Dissemination," is a sophisticated application of Derridean insights to theological language. Because there is a necessary core of blindness to our usage of any concept, which no amount of clarification can completely eliminate, religious understanding too consists in a process of constant translation which never comes to a halt in the finally correct language. Thus religions

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are metaphorical constructs, although usually unaware of “the repressed fluidity of the imaginings they have canonised” (44). There are no statements about God that are true once and for all, for “God” lends itself to an endless slippage of meaning in successive contexts.

Theology cannot remedy this brokenness of scripture by thinking-back to the pure Word-event of revelation. Its only recourse is to accept its finitude and live that disseminated condition. The biblical world is historically and culturally remote from us; we are exiled from it. The Bible unsettles us not by imposing some univocal meaning or moral demand on our lives, “but by unforeseen solicitations which make of our belonging to it a dangerous adventure. Instead of giving us a meaning it disseminates us” (52). The Incarnation appears as a series of unpredictable breakthroughs of the transcendent in everyday life, which oppose the grip of a totalizing logos. If the biblical stress is on laying down one’s life, “it is so that life can be lived as a death to self at every moment, whereas the cult of a full, immutable, unified, originary life, in its denial or mortality, turns out by its abstraction to represent a grip of death on life” (65). A deconstructed Christianity begins to look quite Buddhist, but it is not so simple, as we shall see.

Chapter three, “Relative Truth,” argues for what it terms “situated objectivity.” The fact that reason is always historicized—the product of a particular history which it can never master—means that all we can ever have is a perspectivist account of religious discourse, a more or less “skillful means” for designating what always surpasses it. For O’Leary this does not contradict the objective referentiality of religious propositions, but merely underlines the situation-bound character of this objectivity. Just as scientific theories are confirmed by the facts they permit us to observe, so religious visions are confirmed by the experiences they make possible. “Every perspective is in itself a distortion, but the truth emerges only in perspective” (78). Speculative theology, insofar as it tries to “stop up these holes” in religious language, ends up blocking out transcendence. All revelation too is mediated by interpretation, which is why there are no “naked core events” (such as miracles or prophets’ encounters with God) recoverable independently of the way the tradition has understood them. Even “Christ is risen” is not the simple description of a visible miracle but one of several ways to interpret the experience of the earliest Christians after Jesus’ death. It summarizes a cluster of interpretations in tension with each other, and remains open to reinterpretation. From a pragmatic perspective, religions are “true” only if they can be lived as liberative under particular cultural and political circumstances. As these circumstances are changing all the time, so must our interpretations.

A religious system is but a makeshift net trawled in the sea of

spiritual reality; yet insofar as it is pervaded by the vibrations of the reality it envisages and glimpses, one can trust such a system, and dwell in it not only affectively but intellectually. We have no other access to religious reality than what these fragile and contingent systems offer. A thinking that bypasses them, on the basis of some original spiritual breakthrough, cannot claim to have an objectivity they lack; at best such thinking may in its turn found a tradition, which will be subject to the same conditions. (95–96)

Chapter four, “Derrida on Truth,” criticizes Derrida in an attempt to salvage an objective truth from the unstable disseminations of textuality. According to O’Leary, Derrida glosses over what is crucial to the philosophical tradition: the importance of *the act of judgement* in affirming propositional truth. This chapter is more strained and, from a Buddhist perspective, probably unnecessary. The need to rescue the relationship between a proposition and “what is the case” may be more important for a religious tradition that emphasizes the salvific role of faith in that truth. Buddhism, however, can accept the relativity of truth more easily, because ultimately the issue is the performative, i.e. liberative, role of such truth claims. Instead of truth as correspondence, we can understand it as skillful means. Then historically contingent truth can be truth, because liberative for a particular historically contingent people, without concern for its objectivity. It is enough that such a religious truth reveals to us that we must change and how we can do so.

It is also important for us to realize that there is no escape from such truths: we may reject “religious” ones in favor of more “secular” ones but our lives gain their meaning as we learn to navigate according to one or another star. Then the issue becomes the kind of transformations that different contingent truths encourage and assist. In the end, perhaps the value of religious truths is due to the fact that the transformations they enable are superior to the transformations encouraged by idolatries that worship money, fame, power, etc.

Despite its concern to preserve a core of truth immune to context and relativity, there is much in this chapter too which resonates with Buddhism. “We seek a spiritual truth hidden behind the plurality of the biblical gestures, not seeing that it’s in these gestures themselves that truth happens. . . . One might see the language of Scripture more as a strategic writing aimed to free us from illusions and fixations than the direct transmission of a concrete message; as an ensemble of language games to be practised, not in the confidence of uttering truth, but in an effort to maintain the demystificatory force of this mature and subtle language without falling back into the platitudes of a less refined one” (120).

Following on the deconstruction of theological language in the first half of

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the book, chapter five “Emptiness and the Two Truths” explicitly brings in a Buddhist perspective, with emphasis on Nāgārjuna’s deployment of *sūnyatā*. Understandably, O’Leary is not as much at home here as in Christian theology, and his use of *sūnyatā* reproduces the tensions that infect many Buddhist applications of the concept. On the one hand we are told that ultimate reality is fully attained only in liberation from all conditioned thought (132), but we also read that even ultimate reality is merely a label of conventional thought, for nirvana itself is empty (139). In the latter case the final dualism, between relative and ultimate, also collapses, but this chapter, like most Buddhist writings on the topic, attempts to preserve a non-conceptual transcendence revealed at enlightenment. Although *sūnyatā*-language works against itself to foreclose all reference to an ultimate reality transcending this one, O’Leary uses it to clear the ground for the irruption of transcendence.

The dualism that results from this, between language and that-which-transcends-language, has had a long and problematic history within Māhāyana thought. Dōgen’s philosophy, in particular, can be seen as a response that attempts to overcome this dualism because of problems that by his time had become apparent—such as that between means and ends. For Dōgen, words and metaphors can be understood not just as instrumentally trying to grasp and convey truth (and thereby dualistically interfering with our realization of some truth that transcends words) but as being the truth, because one of the many ways that Buddha-nature *is*. This is not the place to elaborate on that history, nor can we fault O’Leary for reproducing tensions within Buddhist thought; what this problem means, again, is that perhaps we Buddhist scholars need to do for the Buddhist tradition what this book does for the Christian.

Chapter six, “God Deconstructs,” focuses on the meaning of “God.” Language about God must be rightly directed if it is to refer to its object, and this involves the way of life and long tradition which lies behind the use of God-language. No divine name can fix the identity of God; naming is always context- and culture-bound (which is why Jesus calling God Abba “Father” may have been a breakthrough in his time but is too patriarchal for ours). Only the history of its usage gives the word “God” any concrete sense now. In short, God too is a construction and the more we labor on this construction, trying to stabilize it, the more it wobbles—a law figured in the tower of Babel. We apprehend the divine not by totalizing it but by discovering the impossibility of totalization. “If one uses the name of God in a consciously subversive way, leaving it none of the solidarity of a great master-name, if one assumes it as an excentric name which no longer furnishes a stable centre to the self that invokes it, but rather dislodges the self from its habitual ruts, then the meaning of this God cannot be known in advance” (169). Such a God lacks self-identi-

ty because its significance is always situational.

The book includes short but incisive critiques of many other thinkers, among them Karl Barth, John Hick, Gordon Kaufman, Jean-Luc Marion, and even Richard Rorty. One of the sharpest is directed against the Kyoto school, especially John Cobb and Masao Abe. O'Leary points to "a certain massiveness" in its thinking about nothing and emptiness, and quotes Jamie Hubbard: there is no infinite, functioning emptiness swooshing around the universe, relating to dependent beings and thereby validating its own existence.

To make emptiness a principle of speculative construction is to miss its value as a mobile strategy, to be differently applied from case to case, as in the Zen koans (194).

The alternative to a metaphysics of being seems to be not a metaphysics of emptiness, but a thinking that is aware of the limits of metaphysics, and that deploys such words as 'being' and 'emptiness' adroitly as fragile products of a historical labour of thought, having only a provisional usefulness in certain contexts. . . . The notion of emptiness serves at the phenomenological level as a therapy against metaphysical delusions. But in Abe's hands it becomes itself a metaphysical absolute. This leads to a speculative engagement between this absolutised emptiness and metaphysical versions of Christian theology, which themselves need to be overcome by being recalled to their biblical roots (195).

These few words express my uneasiness about Kyoto school thought better than anything else I have seen.

The final chapter, "The Empty Christ," addresses what from a Buddhist perspective is perhaps the greatest problem with Christianity: the way it privileges the role of Jesus as unique and pre-eminent. Hinduism can embrace many avatars and there were several Buddhas before Śākyamuni, which seems more consistent for teachings that realize they must vary according to circumstances. From outside the Christian tradition, it is difficult not to see the emphasis on Jesus's uniqueness as an attachment, perhaps not so different from the desire we all have to be special or unique.

This problem is addressed squarely but not resolved. O'Leary admits that, the more we open up and listen to what other religions say, the more difficult it becomes to claim that God is fully and definitively revealed only in Christ. The first section discusses what the divinity of Christ means, and, although the vocabulary is very different, the conclusion is perhaps not so incompatible with Buddhism. All human beings are called into existence by the Word; Jesus



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corresponded to that divine call into existence, and the call to return to God, in so perfect a way that his human life becomes a definitive expression of the Word in human and historical terms. . . . But then, one cannot help adding, there may well have been, and may yet be, other equally definitive expressions of the Word.

O'Leary defends the eschatological primacy of Christ—"the only event within history that can take the measure of history itself" (225)—as based on the conjunction between divine transcendence and the human struggle against oppression, giving Christianity an "unsurpassed historical concreteness and eschatological reach" (227). His primacy, then, is less a matter of ontological superiority than precise, irreplaceable function, which roots Christianity firmly in its biblical context as the working of the divine in history. "If history can be redeemed, then Christ alone emerges as the historical saviour" (233).

This may remain less than obvious to those many Buddhists who have taken the vow to save all sentient beings. And, as we look back over all the horrors of our century, we may wonder what kind of God would allow such a history, even what "the redemption of history" could possibly mean today. Perhaps the author was struck by the same thoughts, for the above argument is followed by deep reservations about this whole Christological tradition: it is all a contingent interpretation, a doctrinal construction subject to possible revolutions in light of new ways of understanding. Here, it seems to me, the book falters: O'Leary obviously feels some discomfort with this tradition and is searching for an alternative articulation; but for the time being, at least, he can do no more than draw attention to its problematic status. Because to do so would strike too deeply at the heart of the Christian tradition, which has been built too much upon the uniqueness of Christ?

Yet more can be said about the unknown Christ, who emptied himself and did not cling to his own identity. For an "empty Christology" one needs a middle way between substantialist attachment to traditional conceptions and the type of nihilistic critique which robs them of all authority. Christ is not a substance to be defined but an event to be interpreted. . . . Then how should we understand that event?

The final section addresses John Keenan's important effort to rethink Christ as empty of any essence and fully engaged in the dependently co-arisen world in all its radical contingency. The problematical meaning of *śūnyatā* notwithstanding, much can be said in favor of this interpretation. The basic problem remains, however, that *śūnyatā* does not transcend dependently co-arising forms in anything like as clear a way as the Christian God transcends creatures. Here the application of Māhāyana language becomes problematical, stumbling on discords and resistances which cannot be brushed away without brushing away too much of the Christian tradition. "One is constructed on



the basis of the biblical separation of finite and infinite, the other ignores this distinction and bases its economy of meaning on the perception of reality as such" (257).

Finally, then, there can be no fusion of horizons between the two traditions. Either one becomes translated into the other, as Keenan translates Christianity into Buddhism, or one accepts their ultimate incommensurability, as O'Leary does. "The event of salvation, historical and fleshly, in which we are caught up, according to the Gospel, cannot be reabsorbed into any general philosophical vision, even that of Buddhism" (258). That Zen, for example, makes a very similar point does not overcome the difference between two such different ways of understanding the world and living in it.

This summary—much of it appropriating O'Leary own words, which I cannot improve upon—has been able to touch only very briefly on some of the many issues addressed. Despite the reservations expressed above, and the additional reservation that I am not familiar enough with the other literature in this field, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* seems to me an impressive accomplishment. It is too much to expect that all future work in Christian theology and Buddhist-Christian dialogue will take account of what this book does toward keeping the Christian "good news" alive. But it should.

*TRANSMISSION OF LIGHT: Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan.* Translated with an Introduction by Thomas Cleary. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990. xx + 232 pp.

*THE RECORD OF TRANSMITTING THE LIGHT: Zen Master Keizan's Denkōroku.* Translated by Francis H. Cook, with forewords by Dr. Azuma Ryushin and Ven. Umeda Shunryu. Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1991. xxiii. + 281 pp.

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WE ARE VERY FORTUNATE to have these two translations of this major work of Zen literature. Within the Japanese Sōtō Zen tradition, Keizan's *Denkōroku* is considered second as a text only to Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, and it serves as a valuable and highly illuminating record of Zen lore and teaching. Sometimes two competent translations of Zen literature are better than one, as com-