ISSN 1076-9005
Volume 4 1997: 310-320
Publication date: 25 October 1997

Reflections on the Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in its Second Decade: Issues in Theory and Practice

Yagi, Seīchi, and Leonard Swidler. *A Bridge to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*. New York: Paulist Press, 1990. 152 p. $9.95.
Kennedy, Robert L. *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit: the Place of Zen in Christian Life*. New York: Continuum, 1996. 144 p. $12.95.
Cobb, John B., and Christopher Ives, ed(s). *The Emptying God: a Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990. 212 p. $19.00.
Keenan, John P. *The Meaning of Christ: a Mahāyāna Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996. 312 p. $21.00.

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In 1980, the Christian theologian John B. Cobb, Jr. and the Kyōto School Buddhist philosopher Abe Masao began discussing comparative points of Buddhist and Christian thought, hoping to break such discussion out of the strictly academic mold of "history of religions" and into a wider range of living religious and theological concerns. Others who shared their vision of interreligious interaction soon joined in, and by 1984 the first of several Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounters took place in Hawaii. In addition, the Abe-Cobb exchange gave birth to a learned society in 1987 (the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies), and a journal to provide a publishing outlet for the fruits of these discussions.

Generally, then, when one hears of "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue" within academic circles, it refers specifically to the movement initiated by Cobb and Abe, and continued by many scholars and religious individuals down to the present day. The movement has stimulated a great deal of writing, both articles and books, which tends to coalesce around three main concerns: philosophy and doctrine, spiritual practice, and cooperative social engagement. Of the three, books of the first two types have been the most numerous, and authors writing in these fields have produced some very interesting and worthwhile examples of religio-philosophical cross-pollination.

In this essay, we will examine four works of the 1990s in some depth: *The Emptying God* as an example of actual dialogue between scholars on specific topics, *A Bridge to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* and *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology* as examples of the application of Buddhist metaphysical categories to problems in Christian theology, and Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit for an example of a Christian spiritual practitioner who has adopted the techniques of Buddhism (specifically Zen) while remaining a Christian. Although the quality varies from one work to another (and even from one chapter to another), these four books seem reasonably representative of the literature emanating from the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Furthermore, they will reveal a deepening of the discussion and increasing scholarly and spiritual acumen as time goes on.

The touchstone that we will consider at the outset will be *The Emptying God*, edited by John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives. This book has been in print for awhile now and is one of the growing number of titles in the *Faith Meets Faith* series published by Orbis Books. It consists of one major philosophical essay by Masao Abe followed by responses from several Christian theologians, a feminist scholar, and one Jewish scholar, and it ends with Abe's rejoinder to all of the responses. The book takes its name from an idea that has run like a leitmotif through Abe's work on Buddhist-Christian dialogue, which is that the Christian idea of God and the Bud-

dhist idea of emptiness may be brought closer together by imputing ultimate emptiness to God and by imputing a (divine?) dynamism to emptiness.

Abe believes that all religious people today face a crisis that stems from scientism and a Nietzschean nihilism. The first represents not the scientific method as such, but the worldview that reduces all phenomena to that which admits of scientific study and explanation. The second refers to Nietzsche's analysis of human history into three religious stages: the sacrificial, the moral, and the descent into "nothingness" as humanity sacrifices God and takes hold of its own destiny. This last stage is not a simple atheism in which people reject the idea of God as incoherent; it is a rejection of God by people who were once religious (pp. 4-9). Abe is certainly not the only religious individual to sound the alarm about scientism; Huston Smith in *Forgotten Truth* makes the same point,[1] and anyone who has read the scathing denunciation of the religious worldview in Daniel C. Dennett's book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* will know that this is a source of genuine hostility.[2]

However, the central insight that drives this entire book is one that Abe has been pressing for some time now. Based on his reading of the Greek word *kenosis* in Philippians 2:6-7 ("His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and become as men are"), Abe engages in an exercise that is not so much sound exegesis as provocative word-play. He asks us to consider what the implications would be if we were to read that word "emptied" with a Buddhist understanding of *śūnyatā*. From this beginning he fleshes out an idea that transforms both the Christian notion of God and the Buddhist notion of emptiness into a single, convergent idea.

On the side of God, this gives Abe room to re-define the nature of God's existence in Mahāyāna terms: Jesus could not empty himself and still be co-existent with God in the Triune sense unless God also emptied God's self. For such emptying to mean anything, it must be a complete and total emptying of everything God has and is: all essences, attributes, and powers. This leads to the following understanding of God, stated in terms that may confuse most western Christian theologians but which will look familiar to students of Buddhist philosophy.

God is not God (for God is love and completely self-emptying); precisely because God is not a self-affirmative God, God is truly a God of love (for through complete self-abnegation God is totally identified with everything including sinful humans) (p. 16).

In other words, a traditional theology of God's nature, based on Greek philosophical ideas of essences, would yield a God who was completely

static and unable to interact with creation (or to create at all, for that matter). A God that cannot change cannot love, and thus one of the cornerstones of Christianity is rendered incoherent. But by seeing God's most natural activity as a self-abnegation based on pure love, God is then able to carry out the work of redemption. Thus, by reading the Greek word *kenosis* as "emptying" in a Buddhistic sense, Abe thinks to provide an account of God's nature that makes sense of Christian soteriology.

At the same time, Abe is aware that this raises difficulties on the Buddhist side. Emptiness, after all, is an attribute of all existents, not an activity in which they engage. Thus, while he wants to use the idea of "the Emptying God" as a means of renewing Christian theology, he also wants to use the idea of "dynamic emptiness" to revitalize Buddhist thinking so that it may relate the believer to the present world in a way that inspires positive action rather than passive dismissal.

Coming from a Buddhist thinker in the East Asian context, this idea makes somewhat more sense than it might to a specialist in Indo-Tibetan philosophy. The Chinese were historically uncomfortable with the negative tone of the Mādhyamika analysis of emptiness and sought in various ways to give it a more positive connotation. Examples include the reformulation of the idea of Emptiness as "Middle Way Buddha Nature" in the thought of Zhiyi of the Tien Tai school, or the emphasis on the idea of suchness over emptiness in Chinese Buddhism generally. Abe himself points out that the equation presented in the *Heart Sūtra* works both ways: not only is form nondual with emptiness, but emptiness is also to be identified with form. Thus, emptiness is a dynamic activity, not a static condition (p. 28). However, Abe pushes the concept farther, so that emptiness itself acts upon things-in-the-world such that they are self-emptying during every moment of their existence. In this manner, Abe pushes Buddhist emptiness and the Christian God to meet in the middle by making the first a kind of entity that acts, and the second into a being whose primary activity is a constant self-de-essentialization.

This move appealed to Cobb and other theologians at the time because they were already involved in articulating a theology based upon Whiteheadian process thought, which sought to carry out a similar project of de-essentializing God so as to make the possibility of God's actions in the world intelligible. They did not approach Abe's proposal uncritically, however; many have pointed out that his interpretation of the verses from Philippians fails to follow any accepted principles of exegesis, and at any rate the Bible has a lot more to say about God than just what one may find in these two verses. (For a detailed critique, I refer the reader to Hans Küng's response[3] in his essay "God's Self-Renunciation and Buddhist Emp-

tiness," in *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity*, edited by Roger Corless and Paul Knitter, Paulist Press, 1990, 32-34.) At the same time, scholars of Buddhism have criticized Abe's notion of "dynamic emptiness" from the context of more traditional Buddhist beliefs about the nature of existence (see, for example, Roger Corless, "Can Emptiness Will?" from the same volume).

The balance of the book under review here consists of various scholars' responses to Abe's ideas from a variety of perspectives, including Jewish and feminist. Some quibble with his scriptural exegesis, some with his analysis of the predicament of (post-modern) humanity, and others with his interpretation of the Holocaust and other tangential issues. Whether they agree or disagree with Abe, however, is not really the point I wish to press; the reader can read their responses and come to know their arguments very readily. The real point is that scholars and theologians are still discussing with Abe points that he has made again and again since 1963 with very little change; his agenda still appears to control the discussion.

Therefore, the appearance during the 1990s of the other three books that we will be considering below is very welcome, since they depart from this agenda and open up some genuinely new ground and demonstrate new and more fertile possibilities for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. We begin with Robert Kennedy's *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit*, which gives us an example of more spiritually-oriented than theologically-oriented writing. Kennedy, a Jesuit priest who teaches at St. Peter's College in Jersey City, has practiced Zen under Yamada Roshi and Bernard Tetsugen Glassman since 1976, and this book represents a distillation of his thoughts and reflections on what it means to be a Christian who has made some genuine progress in the way of Zen. What does it mean for someone committed to one religion, its vision of the world, and its scheme of salvation to practice and enjoy some degree of attainment in the way of another, different tradition? How does one integrate belief and practice under these conditions?

Kennedy organizes his answer under four headings, using metaphors drawn from alchemy: lead, quicksilver, sulphur, gold. Under lead ("The Darkness of Knowledge and Theory"), Kennedy acknowledges that some Christians may have intellectual doubts or other sources of reluctance that deter them from following him in this path of combined practice. In these pages he gracefully acknowledges that Christians can lead a perfectly fulfilling spiritual life without ever coming near Zen, and that he must provide a reason to engage in the exploration (p. 32). Accordingly, he suggests that Zen represents a living tradition that can help Christianity to recover its own lost practice of "contemplative prayer," "an empty and imageless prayer which is the naked intent of the will to God...as he is in himself" (p.

33). This yearning for God is the heart of Christianity, which gives it vitality and consistency, and without which it becomes empty speculation. Zen, he suggests, provides one way of recovering this heart by providing a method and a lineage of living teachers.

The section "Quicksilver" consists of one brief chapter in which Kennedy uses the poetry of Hanshan ("Cold Mountain") to issue an invitation to the journey. While he acknowledges that Buddhism and Christianity are "poles apart" in terms of doctrine and worldview, he still finds common mindsets and attitudes that bind them together, such as nonviolence, poverty, gratitude, and peace. The practice of Zen can help to cultivate and deepen these attitudes, making the Christian a better Christian. The largest section of the book is the one called "Sulphur, the transforming fire of the alchemist," in which Kennedy explores the insights he has gained from Zen at various points (some of them authenticated by either Yamada or Glassman), and he then offers a brief reflection on its effect within his own life as a Christian. For example, the insights into the relationship of the one and the many gained through Zen practice, he says, helped him to understand the relationship of Jesus to God, and how God inheres in creation without being identical with it (pp. 58-59).

The last section, "Gold," uses story and metaphor to show that both the Zen Buddhist and Christian traditions (as well as Islam) contain teachings on the unitive experience of the self with the absolute that marks the end of all searching. In the end, the self finds itself alone with the fulfillment of all striving. At this discovery, one supposes, all of the previously-perceived differences between the two traditions melt away in the light of the unitive vision.

This book provides a well-thought and well-written testimony of one who has not simply followed the dictum of the Christians who have participated in Buddhist-Christian dialogue heretofore ("cross over and cross back"). Kennedy instead demonstrates a commitment to eliminating the bridge so as to obviate all crossing in either direction. He shows how one can make a coherent religious life by taking the best that both traditions have to offer and following them both to their final goal.

The other two books under consideration are more intellectual and theological in tone. The first, *A Bridge to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, consists of two parts. The first, by Leonard Swidler (pp. 1-72), presents an overview of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, focusing specifically upon its foundations in the Abe-Cobb exchanges. This section provides a good, brief introduction to the issues and discussions that have pre-emptively come to be identified as the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and the reader who needs a place to get up to speed quickly on this aspect of Buddhist-Christian

interchange will find it a handy summary. Swidler also introduces the reader to the history of Buddhist-Christian relations in Japan and to Seīchi Yagi's life and theology.

The second part of the book (pp. 73-152), originally written by Yagi in German and translated here by Swidler, is of far more interest to Christian theologians and readers with a good background in both Christian theology and Buddhist metaphysics. Yagi takes as his starting-point Nishitani Keiji's use of the concept of "front-structure" as a way of explaining emptiness, and from there presses it into the service of providing new understandings of the Christian doctrine of God as Trinity, of Jesus as the Son of God, and of the integration of God/Christ with every human being.

Nishitani's explanation of emptiness and how it provides a model for the relationship of all things to all other things hinges on a traditional Asian understanding of causality. When considering what makes an object to be what it is, one takes into account every factor, including its relationship with other things, and not just its material causes. Thus, to take the simplest example from Nishitani, two adjacent rooms share a wall. The wall thus simultaneously is and is not Room A's wall or Room B's wall; they share it. Because it is the point where the realities of the two rooms intersect, this wall is the "front" of each room to the other; their "front-structure."

Extending this line of reasoning, everything presents a "front-structure" to everything else whenever there is any relationship between the two. When I look at an object, the image of that object mediated by my eye-consciousness constitutes that object's "front-structure" in relation to me. The image in my consciousness is part of who I am, and by virtue of this relationship the object temporarily causes me to be what I am in that moment. But the object manifestly is not identical or self-same with me. Thus, like the wall between the two rooms, this image, this "front-structure," both is and is not part of the reality of whom I am. I am incomplete (or at least something different) without it. This demonstrates a relationship of non-duality between the object and me.

Yagi takes this explanation of relationship through "front-structure" as causality to illuminate the Trinity as the three persons of God understood as both one and three in a non-dualistic manner through the front-structure they present to each other. Likewise, the human being and God assume a relationship of non-duality without obliteration of individuality through their regard for each other in which each makes the other what it is while the relationship lasts. Seen in this light, many of the traditional Christian mysteries become comprehensible; indeed, it becomes difficult to imagine that the three persons of the Trinity or God and human beings could have any other kind of relationship.

There is a hidden cost to this understanding, however. Christian theology has long had to struggle with making such relationships as the Trinity, Jesus and God, and God and creation comprehensible without overgeneralizing. In other words, the relationship between God's three persons in the Trinity is a special case; they relate to each other in a way that does not violate their still being one God over against all other entities in the world. Yagi's appropriation of front-structure thinking necessarily makes this relationship perfectly ordinary and common to all things. The three persons are non-dual without violating their individuality; so what? One can say that about any two things in the universe, and so there is no more reason to suppose that they should count as one God. Using front-structure reasoning in this way, everything becomes God and the significance of the Trinity disappears.

Finally, John Keenan in his book *The Meaning of Christ* provides a very sophisticated rumination on the Christian understanding of Christ from a Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective. Keenan, an Episcopal priest and scholar of Yogācāra Buddhism (he translated the *Mahāyānasaṃgraha* for the *BDK English Tripiṭaka* series), does a scrupulous job of providing historical overviews of both the Christian understanding of Christ and of Buddhist thought. In the first section Keenan sets up the problematic for which he sees Buddhist concepts as the solution: Christian theology very early on adopted Neo-Platonic ideas in which God became an object of knowledge, even though no coherent account of the nature of this knowledge was forthcoming. Thus objectified, God became static, and human prayers had no way to see God other than as the other pole in a subject-object relationship. Missing from this was any examining of alternatives to this relationship or of the nature of mystical consciousness itself. Indeed, God ceased to transcend the world of ordinary knowables; the distinction between God and all other objects of knowledge was one of degree, not kind, and so no fundamental transformation of consciousness was needed to attain knowledge of God (pp. 84-85).

Countervailing this trend, however, was the apophatic mysticism of the Cappadocian fathers and Pseudo-Dionysus. These mystics realized from their own experience that all words, concepts, and ordinary ways of knowing fail when confronted by God, and that therefore all language about God is symbolic and serves merely to point, not to represent. However, this "negative theology," with its attention to the state of the consciousness that regards God and God's inherent ineffability, failed to become the mainstream in Christian theology. Instead, the schoolmen of the Middle Ages held God to be eminently knowable by ordinary, untransformed consciousness. The net result is that "negative theology" derived from the apophatic

mystical experience has never received the attention it would need from mainstream theologians to become a significant part of Christian thinking, and Keenan believes this is to Christianity's detriment.

Thus, he proposes Mahāyāna thought as a *theologiae ancilla*, a source of categories and reflections capable of helping theologians deal with this experience-based way of thinking about God. Because he sees the need for a critical evaluation of the consciousness and its role in the generation of meaning, he recommends Yogācāra thought as a useful heuristic. This in itself makes the book well worth the price. Without exception, all of the Christian participants in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue have been quite taken with the Mādhyamaka concept of Emptiness and the Two Truths. Keenan is the first, to my knowledge, to suggest to the dialogicians that there are other components and traditions in Buddhist philosophy that are worth examining. Not only that, but chapter seven, "Yogācāra: a Critical Understanding of the Genesis of Meaning," is one of the most lucid introductions to this philosophical system that this reviewer has ever encountered.

Having laid all this groundwork and cleared potential objections to a Buddhist-based theology, Keenan finally reaches the point of the book in the last two chapters, "A Mahāyāna Understanding of the Meaning of Christ" and "A Mahāyāna Understanding of the Trinity." Like Yagi, he attempts to provide the reader with a doorway to understand these two "mysteries," but he does so on different bases. The fact that these are "mysteries" at all comes about through the uncritical use of Greek essentialist thinking. A Mahāyāna theology, on the other hand, realizes that all phenomena are empty of self, and that all meaning is conditioned. Keenan says:

> Mahāyāna theology is not focused on the content to be understood, the Greed *noeta*, but on the mind that understands, for wisdom is a mode of conscious awareness and the wisdom of theology issues from minds familiar with the emptiness and ineffability of all doctrines in their co-arising articulation (p. 225).

By applying the Yogācāra analysis of consciousness and the Mādhyamaka understanding of existence to Christ, Keenan leads the reader to see that everything about Jesus, from his life in a particular place and time to the community's understanding of him after his death and finally to the doctrinal elaborations of theologians about him, is dependently-arisen. The doctrines do not, in Greek fashion, embody true statements about the way things are in and of themselves; rather, they crystallize the way in which very particular, dependently-arisen people and communities under-

stand and recount their dependently-arisen experience of Christ. Seen in this way, doctrines become more flexible and responsive to the conditions of the community, and theology gains the theoretical basis it needs to recover the "negative theology" of the Cappadocians and Pseudo-Dionysus.

In the final chapter on a Mahāyāna understanding of the Trinity, Keenan presses the point once more that a Greek philosophical doctrine of empirical essences that confront the human consciousness as object to subject does not provide an adequate framework for understanding whom God is. God is dynamic, not static, and any understanding of God must, if it is to be useful, explain God in terms of a co-dependent interaction with human religious consciousness that issues in the conversion of that consciousness. The crux is God's action, not God's essence.

To this end, Keenan uses the Buddhist understanding of the Three Bodies (*trikāya*) in order to illustrate what he means. God as Father is the support (*āśraya*) of conversion. God as Jesus arises as the human consciousness becomes aware of the Abba- (or fatherly-) nature of God. God as Spirit works within the human consciousness as it perceives and interprets this experience of Jesus in order to bring about the conversion of consciousness from alienation to relation, from hard politics to compassion, from ignorance to wisdom. Thus, Keenan identifies the Father with the Essence Body, the Son with the Enjoyment Body, and the Spirit with the Transformation Body, based on how each of these functions in the dynamic interaction that converts consciousness.

Keenan's book is the longest of all that we have been considering, and the richest in content. It is also the most scrupulous in its effort to be faithful to both of the traditions to which it witnesses. Not only does he document various Christian positions well, but he makes more use of primary sources in Buddhism (particularly from the Yogācāra branch) than any other work in Buddhist-Christian dialogue that this reviewer has ever seen. Christians will find all four books illuminating to some degree, but only in Keenan's book will Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism find substantial food for thought.

The appearance of the latter three books (among many others that might be cited) also shows that Buddhist-Christian dialogue in the 1990s is breaking away from the agenda set by the Abe-Cobb conferences, and that some authors are taking a deeper look into the doctrines, histories, and experiences of both traditions to find fruitful avenues of inquiry. One might wish that it would cease to be such a one-sided affair, with Christians doing all the thinking and "transforming" (with the exception of a handful of Western Buddhists), but one cannot force change in this department. Still, the field is quite vital and is producing many provocative investigations

and reflections, and holds promise for the future.

NOTES

[1] Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (New York: Harper, 1992), chapter one.
[2] Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 512-520.
[3] Hans Küng, "God's Self-Renunciation and Buddhist Emptiness: A Response to Masao Abe," in *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity: Essays and Explorations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 32-35.