



Project
MUSE[®]
Scholarly journals online

est away from sectarian religion and ethics towards a spirituality grounded in the universal principles marks a watershed in modern religious awareness” (p. 9). This kind of awakening to a movement away from purely sectarian religious concerns would be astoundingly momentous and wonderful to contemplate. While some Buddhists and Christians recognize their common humanity and even the beauty of the teachings of the other, this is nowhere universally acknowledged or accepted. Nonetheless Heisig is willing to tell the truth that so many Christians have not yet heard: Christians are not alone in this world, and, moreover, they also do not seem to have an absolute lock on religious truth, insight, or practice. Take the case of trying to do something to save the environment. This is a global issue that desperately needs the analysis of all religious communities, none of whom as far as I know, teach that greed and unlimited consumption are intrinsically good or noble or divine actions. If a Buddhist can help a Christian recognize the ethical principle of economic sufficiency, all the better for the Christian and the world as well.

But I do have one quibble with Heisig, and this concerns his account of the state of the Christian movement in the modern world. He writes with a focus on the situation for Protestants and Roman Catholics, and makes the point that neither of these great traditions are coping very well with the climate of disbelief so endemic to the modern world. But what about the vast upswing of the Pentecostal churches outside of Europe and North America, and even within North America in particular? These great movements, so often perceived as something alien arising from the socially suspect margins of the Christian world, have become a tidal wave in the twenty-first century. While Pentecostals have not yet become devotees of interreligious dialogue, their robust doctrine of the role and nature of the Holy Spirit may add another distinctive chant to the harmonies of the spirit that sustain us all one inch above the ground.

John Berthrong
Boston University School of Theology

CHRISTIANITY LOOKS EAST: COMPARING THE SPIRITUALITIES OF JOHN OF THE CROSS AND BUDDHAGHOSA. *By Peter Feldmeier.* New York: Paulist, 2006. 166 + v pp.

This book has a history that goes back at least fifteen years. The author, who has been on the faculty at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, for the last few years, originally wrote a much longer manuscript, “Interrelatedness: A Comparison of the Spiritualities of St. John of the Cross and Buddhaghosa for the Purpose of Examining the Christian use of Buddhist Practices,” which was approved for the PhD degree at the Graduate Theological Union in 1996. *Christianity Looks East* is

almost half the length of the dissertation and written in nontechnical terms accessible to the interested layperson (although there is a very helpful “Glossary of Terms” in the back of the book).

Feldmeier’s primary question concerns the possibility of taking the interreligious dialogue to the next level of spiritual practice. Succinctly put, his hypothesis is that, yes, this next level of dialogue and exploration is possible, but the complexities involved need to be approached cautiously. Five chapters structure the development of this line of thought.

Chapter 1 summarizes the state of the interreligious dialogue and introduces the book’s thesis and dialogue partners, the sixteenth-century Christian mystic St. John of the Cross and the fifth-century monk-scholar Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa, especially his classic commentary *The Path of Purification (Vissudhimagga)*. Chapters 2–4 comprise the main comparative chapters, focused respectively on St. John of the Cross’s and Buddhaghosa’s anthropologies, their views of the spiritual life, and their understandings of the goals of spiritual disciplines and practices. Each of these middle chapters is divided into three parts: on St. John of the Cross, on Buddhaghosa, and on comparing where their views converge and diverge. Anthropological convergences include a constantly craving human nature, a delusional human consciousness, a desire-driven will, and the remedy of asceticism. Predictably, St. John of the Cross and Buddhaghosa diverge on the nature of the self: as a substantive soul on the one hand, and as impermanent on the other. Their spiritual paths feature detachment from cravings and deconstruction of the self’s egotistical desires, but part ways in terms of St. John’s emphasis on divine initiative and the practice of self-emptying love versus Buddhaghosa’s emphasis on self-cultivation and the practice of analyzing phenomena. “Final bliss” (the title of chapter 4) presents convergent goals of absolute freedom and perfect peace, but different views of loving identification with a personal God (St. John of the Cross) and impersonal entrance into Nirvana (for Buddhaghosa, the cessation of suffering, negatively described as *unconditioned*).

The fifth chapter asks about the future of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, particularly with regard to interreligious practice. Drawing especially from John Dunne’s theory of *passing over* and then *coming back*, Feldmeier defends the possibility of Christian use of Buddhist practices. While clearly identifying the problematic aspects of interreligious practice, he also carefully delineates when Buddhist practices cooperate with and complement the Christian paths, and when the former might critique the latter. A short epilogue addresses the various limitations of the book’s main proposals with regard to the complicated methodological, theoretical/conceptual, and practical issues that confront interreligious practice.

At one level, *Christianity Looks East* is similar to a number of other books familiar to readers of this journal that have compared and contrasted Christian and Buddhist meditation or their respective monastic traditions.¹ At another level, however, the perennial questions pertaining to comparative studies of meditation and spirituality are explored through juxtaposing two specific voices: St. John of the Cross and Buddhaghosa. Hence, the striking structural similarities (what Feldmeier calls convergences) separated by geographical and temporal distance beg not only for his-

torical analysis but also for further theological explication. Since my training is primarily in theology rather than history, I cannot adequately address the genealogical questions surrounding the possible intertwining of the mystical traditions of East and West. I can, however, make a few observations about how *Christianity Looks East* engages the contemporary discussion in comparative theology.

Although he does not reference the volumes of *The Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (CRI) under the editorial oversight of Robert Cummings Neville (SUNY Press, 2001), *Christianity Looks East* reveals that Feldmeier's comparative instincts are in alignment with the most recent developments in comparative theology. The editors and authors of CRI are all convinced that the task of comparative theology is still in its infancy; that comparative theology in the past has made too much of superficial similarities that ignore the "thick description" of the narratives, practices, and other aspects of religious traditions that produce doctrinal ideas; that adequate comparative categories are needed so that appropriate comparisons of both similarities and differences can be made and perhaps adjudicated; that adequate comparative categories emerge, are refined, and perhaps are discarded or transformed through a dialectical process of interplay between concrete case studies of things being compared and more abstract theoretical hypotheses; and that adequate comparative categories be sufficiently vague so as to be capable of exemplifying genuinely different things on the one hand, but sufficiently specific so as to be capable of identifying when things are inappropriately comparable.

The virtues of *Christianity Looks East* exhibit these important insights. Feldmeier explicitly notes that despite the contributions of Merton, Abhishiktananda, Griffiths, and others, the dialogue of interreligious practice is still in its formative stages, and he is rather modest about drawing premature conclusions. More important, his approach to comparative theology is grounded deeply in the spiritual practices at the heart of the contemplative traditions of St. John of the Cross's Christian mysticism and Buddhaghosa's monasticism. Finally, Feldmeier's first and third primary comparative categories—anthropology and final bliss—correlate with the categorical framework of two of CRI's three volumes: *The Human Condition* and *Ultimate Realities*. Although his category of spiritual practices differs from CRI's volume *Religious Truth*, arguably Feldmeier provides a "from below" approach to what *Religious Truth* discusses "from above." Even so, I suggest that *Christianity Looks East* provides one book-length extension of the comparative theological methodology hypothesized in CRI, and in that sense participates in a very important contemporary conversation.

Yet Feldmeier's careful attempts to lay the groundwork for comparison also advance the discussion precisely by inviting further questions. Here I wish to take up Feldmeier's discussion about love and its relationship to final bliss. On the Christian side, the goal of the spiritual life for St. John of the Cross is union in love with a personal God. This union is enabled through the purgation of the senses and of the soul in this life (and perhaps even in purgatory, although Feldmeier does not raise this point), and then is realized in the beatific vision in the afterlife, which St. John understands in terms of *dark wisdom*: an ineffable knowledge of God incom-

municability in conventional human language. On the Buddhist side, the goal of the spiritual life for Buddhaghosa is Nirvana, the extinction of grasping, greedy, hateful, and delusory existence; here, the karmic forces of life fade away in the impersonal realm beyond any analogy of being. Yet insight into Nirvanic reality is mediated by the divine-abiding meditations that illuminate various aspects of love: doing good to others, compassion that eases the sufferings of others, sympathetic rejoicing with others, and equanimity vis-à-vis others. Still, these experiences of love are penultimate, belonging to the conventional world of this life (or to the worlds of the gods, which are still caught up in the cycle of rebirth), and not to the realm of Nirvana.

Feldmeier's discussion raises the following set of interrelated questions. First, given St. John's apophatic vision of God, is not the personalistic quality of the soul's dark wisdom of the divine compromised? In this case, the greatest commandments of loving God *and* neighbor in this world take on a kind of existential ultimacy, and it is only in faith that the Christian hopes for an afterlife of personal union with God. Following this line of thought, then, the nurturing of love in the divine-abiding meditations may have much more than conventional significance. They remain at a penultimate level if Buddhaghosa's "path of purification" is conceived in progressive or linear terms culminating in Nirvana. But if Nirvana is not other than *samsara* (as other Buddhist traditions posit), then loving one's neighbor takes on a similar kind of existential ultimacy in Buddhaghosa's spirituality, and it is also only in faith that the Buddhist would anticipate a radically impersonal Nirvanic final bliss. Is it the case, then, that Christians connect loving their neighbors with loving God and conclude toward a personal union with God, while Buddhists connect loving their neighbors with freedom from greed and hate and conclude toward an impersonal view of Nirvana in which the delusional self is finally overcome?

Peter Feldmeier's *Christianity Looks East* is helpful precisely because it raises these kinds of questions not only with regard to what Christian and Buddhist traditions understand as final bliss, but also with regard to what both traditions conceive as the path of holiness in this life. Its accessibility means that it belongs not only in graduate courses in religious pluralism, comparative theology, and interreligious dialogue, but also in undergraduate classrooms exploring these matters.

Amos Yong
Regent University School of Divinity

NOTES

1. Books comparing Christian and Buddhist meditation include Susan Walker, ed., *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way* (Paulist, 1987); Donald W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (Paulist, 1991); Tom Chetwynd, *Zen and the Kingdom of Heaven: Reflections on the Tradition of Meditation in Christianity and Zen Buddhism* (Wisdom, 2001); and Rita M. Gross and Terry C. Muck, eds., *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation, Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer* (Continuum, 2003). Books that compare monastic traditions include Patrick G.

Henry and Donald K. Swearer, eds., *For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism* (Fortress and Liturgical, 1989); Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman, eds., *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (Continuum, 1997); and Bruno Barnhart and Yuese Huang, eds., *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (Continuum, 2001).

BEING A BUDDHIST NUN: THE STRUGGLE FOR ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE HIMALAYAS. *By Kim Gutschow.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. 333 pp.

HIMALAYAN HERMITESS: THE LIFE OF A TIBETAN BUDDHIST NUN. *By Kurtis R. Schaeffer.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 220 pp.

Because these two wonderful new books are about Buddhist nuns, the topic of gender looms prominently in them, in a way that it never would in books about Buddhist monks. Such is the unavoidable heritage of the androcentrism that has dominated both religious institutions and scholarship about religion for centuries. It will probably be a long time before books that include a great deal of information about women are the normal course of events rather than a special event. Fortunately, at least books about religion that include almost no information about women are no longer acceptable to most scholars.

In both books, the Tibetan Buddhist (and general Buddhist) preference for men and monks comes through loudly and clearly. The difficulties women and nuns face in negotiating Buddhist institutions are accented in both accounts. The view that female rebirth is definitely inferior to and much less desirable than male rebirth is emphasized by all the women whose voices are heard in both books. Yet neither book is polemical in the least. They simply present a straightforward account of how things are for women, and to a lesser extent, for men, in these Himalayan societies.

Of the two books, *Being a Buddhist Nun* is the more heartbreaking because the nuns studied in this account face such unrelieved difficulties in their pursuit of the religious life. This book is based on fourteen years of fieldwork in Zangskar, which is in the western Himalayas near Kashmir and Ladakh. The author lived in local nunneries while doing her fieldwork. Thus, this account narrates the contemporary condition in which some Buddhist women live. Beginning with the absolute preference for a male body, everything conspires against nuns and women, and there are no success stories of women who somehow transcend all these barriers in this book.

Regarding the desirability of a male rebirth, Gutschow writes, "The bottom line is clear. No Buddhist in her right mind desires a female body" (p. 17). As we read of the nuns' lives and of women's lives in general, the reasons for this conclusion quickly become clear. If a girl or woman becomes a nun, she receives little recognition or