
Buddhist-Christian Studies

VOLUME 24, 2004

EDITORS Terry C. Muck, Rita M. Gross

NEWS & VIEWS EDITOR Harry L. Wells

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR Alice Keefe

EDITORS

Masao Abe

Robert Bobilin

John B. Cobb Jr.

Roger J. Corless

Gordon Kaufman

Eiko Kawamura-Hanaoka

Hans Küng

John Maraldo

Donald W. Mitchell

Masatoshi Nagatomi

Tokiyuki Nobuhara

Reginald Ray

Judith Simmer-Brown

Donald Swearer

George J. Tanabe Jr.

Taitetsu Unno

Seiichi Yagi

FOUNDING EDITOR David W. Chappell

Subscription rates (2004): institutions \$30 a year; individuals \$24 a year; students \$16 a year. Check or money order drawn on a US bank and payable to University of Hawai'i Press should be sent to University of Hawai'i Press, Journals Department, 2840 Kolowalu Street, Honolulu, Hawai'i USA 96822. Claims for issues not received will be honored for 180 days past the date of publication; thereafter, the current rate will be charged. Back issues are available from University of Hawai'i Press Journals Department at current subscriber rates.

© 2004 by University of Hawai'i Press. All rights reserved. Manufactured in the United States of America.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

ISSN 0882-0945

BESIDE STILL WATERS: JEWS, CHRISTIANS, AND THE WAY OF THE BUDDHA. *Edited by Harold Kasimow, John P. Keenan, and Linda Klepinger Keenan.* Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003. 284 pp.

Religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith teaches us, is about people, not about ideas. This remarkable collection of essays provides us with a glimpse into people, their spiritual aspirations, and their life journeys. This collection of narratives of Jews and Christians, who recount the story of their involvement with Buddhism, turns out to be a powerful spiritual medium. It allows us to get to know, at times in a very intimate and revealing manner, the stories, struggles, and processes that have shaped participants in this enterprise. Many of the participants are well-known figures in academia and in religious or interfaith circles. Getting to know the person behind the idea, or the book, is always a valuable means of grounding and contextualizing what might otherwise be disembodied ideas or concepts. But the volume does much more than introduce us to an impressive array of sensitive and thoughtful personalities. Through the life stories told in this volume, key elements of the relationship between the three religions— theological, philosophical, and ritual—are confronted. The flow of the book moves in interesting ways between the personal, philosophical, theological, experiential, and mystical, as the various life stories weave the greater whole of this book. The sum total of the fourteen stories of Jews and Christians and their encounter with Buddhism provides an interesting vantage point on the Jewish-Buddhist and the Christian-Buddhist encounters. (I use the term “encounter,” as opposed to “dialogue,” following the distinction made in this volume by E. Burke Rochford Jr.; “encounter” involves personal change and transformation, something shared by nearly all participants in this volume.) From this perspective, interesting observations emerge regarding the ways in which the encounter impacts and interfaces with both Judaism and Christianity, on the sociological, ritual, theological, and experiential levels. The juxtaposition of two sets of stories, Jewish and Christian, allows us, finally, to make some interesting observations on the difference between these two parallel sets of encounters with Buddhism.

The concept underlying this volume—sharing stories, short spiritual biographies—suggests the growing importance of biography or autobiography and narrative in the study of religion. This collection of short contemporary spiritual biographies makes us aware of the importance of narrative as part of spiritual process, and of its sharing. As the reader discovers, storytelling is a very powerful medium for conveying ideas and sharing processes. Something of the transformative nature of the very enterprise of encounter is thus communicated through the medium of this book. There is no doubt that every reader of this book who is sympathetic to the sensibilities of interreligious encounter will be moved and inspired by some of the stories and testimonies here collected.

The strengths of *Beside Still Waters* are also its weaknesses. The medium of storytelling calls for particular literary skills quite distinct from the spiritual and intellectual qualities that have rightly earned participants in this volume their place in it. Moreover, not all participants are able to share a personal, let alone a spiritual, process. Some of the writers (Cobb, Lubarsky) share an intellectual journey, couched in the appropriate autobiographical context. Others (notably Muck) offer theological insight. At the other extreme, a significant group of Christian contributors shares with us some of the most intimate mystical moments of their spiritual odyssey. The uniform assignment that contributors were asked to fulfill has thus been variously interpreted. This makes the book both highly interesting and, in some sense, weak. The lack of consistent focus takes the reader on a ride between a range of dimensions and experiences—intellectual, experiential, mystical, sociological, and more. With the exception of the mystical-experiential dimension that looms large in some of the presentations, none of the substantive issues is ever fully developed. The cross between autobiography and religious reflection whets one's reflective appetite, offering tantalizing theological insight, only to fade into one of the dimensions of narrative through which the individual contributors address their task. The sum total of the book is thus highly suggestive and highly appealing, yet lacking the consistent focus that either a good theological exploration or a good narrative presentation would have. My feeling in reading the collection of essays was thus one of simultaneous inspiration and frustration. I found my peace with the book only when I decided to approach it as I have learned to approach many contemporary musical recordings: developing an intense feeling for some tracks, while allowing others to recede to the background. Seen in this light, one may say that some parts of this book are sure to inspire everyone.

It may be inevitable that a collection of such personally charged narratives will have selective appeal. Readers will respond to those statements that most reflect their own sensibilities. Fully cognizant of the subjectivity of my own reading, I would like to draw attention to the three or four essays that I found most compelling. No doubt my appreciation of these essays is indicative of the type of interfaith encounter with which I am personally most comfortable. Among the Jewish essays, I was particularly moved by the essay of Rabbi Alan Lew. Among the Christian essays, Ruben Habito's was striking. Both essays were written from the perspective of firm commitment to their own religion, while considering the enrichment Buddhism could provide to

their own tradition. A sense of divine providence and profound relationship with God emerges from both stories. Both suggest a kind of religious and theological maturity that allows interfaith encounter to offer its best possible fruits. The blend of religious experience, reflection, and testimony characteristic of these two pieces suggests to me the full power of the genre of this book and its terrific potential. Also noteworthy is the contribution by Terry Muck, who brings the fullness of his own Protestant tradition and its theological language to the interfaith encounter in thoughtful and original ways. Finally, Norman Fischer, though announced as speaking from a Buddhist perspective, offers some profound insights that both transcend the boundaries of the different religions and portray one particular Jewish-Buddhist synthesis, inadvertent and unintentional—and therefore providential, as it may be.

The classical “issues” that are under discussion between Judaism and Christianity on the one hand and Buddhism on the other do not always receive their full due in this volume. It is interesting that the issues that emerge from a narrative perspective are not identical to what an ordered conversation between the two religions might seek to address. For example, the tension between theistic and nontheistic religion or the meaning of attachment to a peoplehood and the particularity of its history are barely, if at all, addressed. That these personal narratives do not provide a kind of introductory overview of the conversations between the religions is revealing. It suggests how Buddhism is incorporated in the West and the dimensions to which it appeals. The Buddhism one encounters in this volume is primarily experiential—a technique, a method. The theological (buddhological) or philosophical dimensions of the encounter seem to play a secondary role not only because of the genre in which this book was written, but because they seem to be secondary to the ultimate concerns of the contributors. Furthermore, as Zalman Schacter observes, Buddhism as encountered in the West is a Buddhism that is almost completely detached from culture, from ritual obligations, and from the variety of trappings that give the various forms of Asian Buddhism much of their cultural characteristic. As Norman Fischer astutely observes, it is Buddhism approached as spirituality, rather than as religion. And it is due to such an approach that most of the Jews and Christians we meet in the pages of this book were able to enrich their religious identity through encounter with Buddhism.

The juxtaposition of Jewish and Christian perspectives on the encounter with Buddhism tells us not only about the individuals involved, but also about the distinctive ways in which each of these religious communities, through these particular representatives, interacts with Buddhism. The differences are telling. Without exception, all Jews featured in this volume began their encounter with Buddhism from a life context of either low affiliation with Judaism or a low level of religious observance. Not one of the Jewish contributors writes from an Orthodox Jewish perspective and not a single one entered the encounter with Buddhism from the fullness of Jewish religious identity, observance, and commitment. The only Jewish contributor whose spiritual odyssey was one of expanding a strong Jewish identity through encounter with Buddhism is Zalman Schacter. Yet, as a reading of the interview with Schacter suggests, his path is not really one of encounter with Buddhism, as much

as it is an encounter with all forms of world religions. While providing the spiritual impetus for about half of the other Jewish contributors, Schacter himself is ultimately more an ideologue for the interreligious encounter than he is an authentic specimen of sustained Jewish-Buddhist encounter. The type of Jewish-Buddhist encounter documented here is a thoroughly American phenomenon, typical of a particular generation of Jews seeking both spiritual fulfillment and their own particular Jewish identity.

All this is very different from the Christian-Buddhist encounter. Participants in the second part of this volume are not all American. Nearly half the contributors come from other countries. If one attempted a kind of morphology of respective Jewish and Christian narratives, they would probably boil down to the following. In the Jewish narratives the hero has lost his/her identity, encounters Buddhism, is inspired in some way spiritually, rediscovers his/her Jewish roots, and ultimately finds some type of synthesis or balance between the two religions, or aspects thereof. The Christian narrative, in contrast, would reveal the following structure: The hero enjoys a strong religious identity. His/her own religious identity is then expanded, on internal religious grounds, to include some form of significant contact with Buddhism. The contact with Buddhism is often accompanied by strong mystical experiences that are integrated into the hero's religious identity. Some kind of synthesis between Christianity and Buddhism is attained.

While the final form of both narrative structures is similar, there is something deceptive in this similarity. Most Christian contributors are significantly more comfortable with their traditional Christian life, theology, and practice than are the Jewish contributors. Their encounter with Buddhism is an expression of religious strength and not of a weakness of identity. Significantly, none of the Christian narratives tell of a return to Christianity, the rediscovery of a relationship with the Church, Jesus, and so on. Christian identity seems to be intact. It is only enriched by the encounter with Buddhism. For this reason, one encounters so much more of Christian thought, experience, and theology in the second part of the book than one does Jewish religion in the first part. While I imagine this was never the intention of the book's editors, they have in fact provided us with invaluable insight into two contemporary religious movements.

Beside Still Waters is a unique project, opening a series of windows that provide us with an insider's view of a range of beautiful journeys as well as insight into broad contemporary religious currents. It will continue to inspire and to occasion reflection for many years to come.

Alon Goshen-Gottstein
*The Elijah School for the Study of
Wisdom in World Religions*

* * * * *