

Robert MAGLIOLA, *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture*. American Academy of Religion Cultural Criticism Series. Number 3. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997. pp. ISBN 0-7885-0295-6.

IT IS HARD TO get a handle on deconstructive writing. It slithers away the moment one thinks to have a firm grasp. Robert Magliola has written a slithery book. Yet, it is clear in its way, for, unlike authors who hide behind their scholarship, he has deigned to recount his own journey through his own life-worlds, cultural and religious. Edith Wyschogrod notes in her Preface that these “biographical segments...bring to the fore transitoriness and becoming in their very passage, the ungroundedness of things” (p. xi). All philosophies come out of the life experience of their authors, but Magliola opens the door a crack that perfect strangers may glimpse the origins of his thinking in a series of decidedly unholistic and fragmenting experiences—from his Italian Roman Catholic upbringing, Jesuit seminary sufferings, bouts of depression, painful marriage, discovery of Buddhism, and encounters with the rigidity of the academy, to Derridean deconstruction, the island of Taiwan, and Thailand. He outlines his experience of life, which “has been precisely the falling apart of putative holisms, cultural, political, and religious” (p. 72). Such openness opens him to all manner of criticism, for what we really criticize in one another are not so much ideas as life orientations and choices. Magliola’s experiences are as they are—sometimes deep and penetrating, sometimes less so—which is to say that they are not my experiences. But they do open to the reader some insight into the genesis of this philosopher and his ideas. Part Two follows such revelations with four deconstructive sections, treating: (1) the “early” Derrida and Mādhyamika Buddhism, (2) the “later” Derrida and the tradition of negative theology, (3) Zen thinker Masao Abe’s

holistic reading of *kenosis* theology, and (4) an example of crosshatching deconstruction into Trinitarian theology.

I disagree with some of Magliola's appraisals in Section One. Not with his presentation of Derrida, for Magliola knows Derrida far better than I do. But I do differ with his evaluation of Buddhist traditions, for he follows the orthodox Tibetan canon of philosophical positions (*siddhānta*), according to which the Yogācāra school of Indian Mahāyāna is an incomplete understanding of the import of emptiness.¹ In Magliola's take, Yogācāra is "holistic," while the Prasaṅgika Mādhyamika school is properly deconstructive, for it "unlike Yogācāra and some other Buddhisms, steadfastly refuses to recuperate identity into a new mystic holism of any kind" (p. 72). The relationships between Indian schools of Mahāyāna thought are certainly complex, but a careful reading of Yogācāra texts demonstrates both "holistic" and "differential" tracts. Some Yogācāra texts do indeed oppose Mādhyamika and teach a mystic and unitary "dharmadhātu which is entirely dissociated from conventional experience" (p. 145). Yogācāra texts with Tathāgatagarbha filiation recoil from the doctrine of emptiness to affirm the reality of Buddha nature. But that is only one strand of Yogācāra thinking. Other texts, such as *The Summary of the Great Vehicle (Mahāyānasamgraha)* of Asaṅga, are quite as deconstructive as Prasaṅgika Mādhyamika, although within their own critical understanding of consciousness. They affirm no dissociated reality apart from worldly convention, but neither do they insist on immediate dismissal of each and every idea. Rather, theory is reclaimed within a context of empty dependent co-arising; that is, theory is recognized not as holistic and self-enclosed, but as entirely a construct of human language. It does therefore enjoy a conventional validity, inasmuch as it is reasoned intelligently and cogently. I have argued the point before in a review of Magliola's *Derrida on the Mend* (O'LEARY and KEENAN 1985), and here would urge the point afresh. Magliola misunderstands the Japanese scholar Gadjin M. Nagao, who holds that Yogācāra and Mādhyamika are organically related, with Yogācāra explicating the ramifications of Mādhyamika. Nagao does not think that Yogācāra is a completion of Mādhyamika nor a correction of the defects of Mādhyamika (p. 146).² Japanese scholars, such as Nagao and his mentor Susumu Yamaguchi, do present an interpretation of Mahāyāna thought at variance with the Tibetan Siddhānta arrangement, itself constructed not so much to map the course of Indian Buddhist thought with scholarly accuracy, but to train monks and meditators.

This point leads to another, more general, observation on the rhetoric of deconstruction/emptiness. Nāgārjuna's *Stanzas on the Middle (Mūlamadhyama-kārikāh)* is breathless in its insistent, unrelenting emptying of each and every notion one may wish to settle upon. It moves mightily and incisively to strip the reader's centered mind of any cherished notion whatsoever. Its

¹ This issue is an ancient one, forming the topic of a celebrated debate between Bhāvaviveka and Dharmapāla, for which see YAMAGUCHI 1941, pp. 112–18, and KEENAN 1997, pp. 94–123.

² See Nagao's essays in KAWAMURA 1991, especially "Yogācāra—A Reappraisal," pp. 219–26.

rhetoric leaves the engaged reader shaken, upset, suffering from intellectual motion sickness. Similarly, Derrida is on the fast track, at every moment deferring and postponing any set idea. Scarcely has one read a sentence than it is effaced, x-ed out, and one is left to recover insight from its detritus. And this does parallel Nāgārjuna's *Stanzas on the Middle*. But Nāgārjuna also wrote other texts, less rapid and more conventionally adjusted. The Yogācāra of Asaṅga and sometimes Vasubandhu also moves at a more measured pace, sketching out theories of consciousness and the construction of meaning, of defiled states and the occurrence of awakening. In the end, they too empty all theory, even the very hallmark theory of mind-only, the heart of Yogācāra thought. But first the theory is constructed and conventional discourse maintained, for one cannot empty an already empty head. One has to deconstruct something already constructed. If no time is allowed to construct any logocentric theory, nothing can ever be emptied at all, and one is left with either a sensuous immediacy or a mystic dispersal into inertia.

The rhetorical style of deconstructive writing embodies a refusal to close any thought into a putative holistic circle. It is an off-writing that forces the writer into incessant eddies and twists, refusing any momentary respite or any blessed isle of maintained meaning. It is as if one had to posthaste launch out into the deep, beyond the realms of conventional meaning. Yet, Mādhyamika is based upon the two truths, and Nāgārjuna's *Stanzas* are embedded in a host of explanatory commentaries, for there are no terms that are not conventional.³ Magliola is quite aware of this, and his rapidly moving style splashes French, Greek, Chinese, Spanish, Italian, I-Ching symbols, enigmatic citations, and allusions in a rhetorical sleight of hand that closes the door to any sense of maintained meaning. The very rejection of closure becomes a kind of closure. The style does impel insight and engagement, but it is particularly unfriendly and off-putting, and perhaps in a world where meaninglessness is more common than closed, holistic meaning, not always very skillful in engendering understanding.

Section Two, "Double-Binds and (Derrida's) 'Dénégations'," is an engaging commentary on Jacques Derrida's 1986 lecture on "How to Avoid Speaking," delivered at a conference on Absence and Negativity in Jerusalem. It is a rather clear commentary, pointing out congruences between the dif(f)ering of Derrida, negative theology, and Buddhist Mādhyamika. Still, there are the cat-and-mouse games, the introductory allusion(s) to black robes and El-Briar, etc. Through it all, however, one can catch glimpses of a reversal of negation (dénégations) that parallels Mādhyamika, indeed Mahāyāna, thought.

Section Three, "Differentialism and the Buddhist Christian Dialogue," is a critique of Masao Abe, who reads the Christian doctrine of Trinity through the lens of the Kyoto School philosophy of Nishida Kitarō. Magliola judges Abe to be centrist, much as HAKAMAYA Noriaki does in his 1986 critique that this philosophy is substantialist. The essay is lucid and the point well-taken. Yet in making his point Magliola presents a rather idiosyncratic view of

³ Against the idea that *paramārtha-satya*, on pp. 142-43, for ultimate meaning "frequents" nothing whatsoever. See NAGAO 1989, pp. 66-68.

Buddhist doctrinal development (pp. 169–70). Most scholars see both Prajñāpāramitā and Mādhyamika as based on emptiness and would reject the claim that the former is logocentric. Few would agree that most later Mahāyāna thinkers saw Nāgārjuna's Buddhism as incomplete; he is revered as the patriarch of many later schools of Buddhism, Indian and Chinese. In the view of most, Mādhyamika is a school, a scholarly tradition, within the Mahāyāna, itself grounded upon the Prajñāpāramitā scriptures. I would agree that the Kyoto school is centrist, but would prefer that a fuller and more nuanced presentation of Buddhist doctrinal developments replace the binary framework of "centrist" or "differential."

Section Four, "Differentialism and Trinitarian Thinking," employs Derrida to crosshatch, i.e., to interweave an understanding of the Trinitarian formulations of the Council of Florence with the alterity of Derrida. The argument is tightly focused on that Council's pronouncements, and does succeed in coaxing an image of Trinity through Derridean notions of alterity rather than stasis. This is a penetrating piece of Trinitarian speculation.

In sum, *Deconstructing Life Worlds* is a creative book, employing the fast-paced rhetoric of Derrida to suggest ever new ways of understanding who we have been, and who we might become. Whatever its faults, it is a successful book for it leaves one vertiginous.

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A Response

I am honored that John Keenan reviewed my book, but I do have some demurrals. 1) My understanding of Nagao accepts the carefully argued inter-

pretation of Paul J. Griffiths (*Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14/2 p. 346) whom I footnote (p. 146). Throughout my text, I cite “critical historians” of Buddhism whom John does not mention in his review. 2) What John would call Nāgārjuna’s “more conventionally adjusted” texts are precisely those excluded from the canon by many Buddhologists (see D. R. Komito, *Nāgārjuna’s “Seventy Stanzas”* 1987, pp. 186, 188–89). 3) When Keenan says that “*paramārtha-satya*... ‘frequents’ nothing whatsoever,” he shows he has in fact “entirely dissociated [ultimate truth] from conventional experience,” which is precisely my charge against much of Yogācāra. 4) Derridean argument logically deconstructs constructions—it does not defer them (deferment in Derrida does not work the way the review says). Asaṅga may “In the end...empty all theory,” but all things are empty all along, and Derridean writing better exhibits this; it maintains conventional discourse but signals subtexts that subvert this discourse at the same time, much like the (Mādhyamikan) wheel of becoming and the “two truths” themselves operate. The “cat-and-mouse games” aim to act something like Ch’anist *kung-an*, which can be quite “slithery.” As for “El-Biar,” it is Derridas’s hometown.

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