



John D'Arcy May, *Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions*

New York and London: Continuum, 2003. xi + 225 pp. \$45.00, cloth. ISBN 082641513X.

JOHN D'ARCY MAY was born in Melbourne, Australia, and has been Associate Professor of Interfaith Dialogue at the Irish School of Ecumenics, now part of Trinity College (Dublin, Ireland), since 1987. He has been very active for many years in the interfaith dialogue in general and in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue in particular, and has previously authored or edited a number of books, of which the most pertinent to this volume are *Meaning, Consensus and Dialogue in Buddhist-Christian Communication: A Study in the Construction of Meaning* (1984); *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader* (1985); *Christus Initiator: Theologie im Pazifik* (1990); *Pluralism and the Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions* (1998); and *After Pluralism: Towards an Interreligious Ethic* (2000). It is clear that May's previous work at the intersection of Buddhist-Christian encounter, indigenous Christianity, political theology, theology of religions, and interreligious ethics have prepared him well for writing *Transcendence and Violence*, the volume under review.

The central theme of *Transcendence and Violence* is what May calls "failures of transcendence," by which he means that as meta-cosmic traditions, both Christianity

and Buddhism have been complicit in or perpetrators of violence in the course of their expansion from their sites of origin. After an opening chapter that introduces the theme – as seen summarily in the failure of European Christianity in the Shoah and the failure of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka – the next two parts of the book focus respectively on “Christianity’s Pacific Voyage” and “Buddhism’s Asian Journey,” each with two case studies on their encounters with primal religious cultures and traditions.

The Christian failures that May narrates are those concerning Aboriginal religion and Melanesian societies. In the former case, European theology failed to comprehend the logic of Aboriginal culture and religiosity, and in the process of uprooting an entire generation of Aboriginal children from their parents into Christian homes, almost succeeded (were it not for Aboriginal resilience) in eradicating Aboriginal life. In the latter case, the arrival of modernity with the Europeans precipitated millenarian expectancies as represented in the frenzied phenomena of the “cargo cults,” even while the Christian gospel of the atonement was perceived and received by the Melanesians (and then in turn resisted by the Christian missionaries) in terms of their sacrificial and retributive logic of “payback.” In these chapters, May argues that, “It was this framework of idealism in the sense of the *a priori* certainty of abstract propositions...that allowed Christian doctrine to become an ideology of forcible adaptation, assimilation, and at times even exploitation and near-extirpation of Pacific peoples and their cultures” (p. 137).

The Buddhist failures include the Japanese case, especially its (mis)fortunes during the twentieth century, and the Thai case. In the former, Buddhist underpinnings of Japan as a “sacred nation” are seen as contributing to Japanese nationalism and its aggressions during the Second World War around the Pacific Rim. More specifically, the accommodations of Buddhist thought and practice to Japanese indigenous and cultural forms and patterns resulted in an almost complete loss of transcendence so that Buddhist philosophers and nationalist intellectuals were ill equipped to critically engage with national, social, and political agendas, especially during the wars of the twentieth century. The Thai example, however, sits somewhat at odds with the overall structure of the book since here May’s focus is more so on the intertwining of Theravada Buddhism and the Thai socio-political order, albeit to the point of Buddhist syncretism in its absorption by local traditions and practices, than it is on explicitly observable Buddhist “failures” on the Thai landscape. As the title to chapter four, “Development without Violence? The Rebirth of Ethics in Thai Buddhism,” suggests, the Thai case not only highlights the socially engaged Buddhism that has more recently been conscientiously working (against the historic tendencies) to renew the environment and developing an ecological ethic appropriate to the contemporary Thai experience, but also hints that Buddhist transcendence overlaid on indigenous spiritualities and religious traditions does not necessarily lead to or result in violence, even if it even here has been co-opted by local bio-cosmic concerns. Yet May is clear to note also that in the Thai context, monastic wealth accrued over the centuries based on merit-making donations by the laity to the sangha resulted

neither in just redistribution nor, in more recent times, in a consciously articulated program of social justice. So the salient thread throughout part two is that, “both the Mahayana in Japan and the Theravada in Thailand seem to have entered into such an intimate relationship with indigenous cultures that the transcendence they represent is rendered not only religiously inauthentic but ethically and politically impotent” (p. 110), and that “Buddhism in its various Asian forms...has shown neither inclination nor ability to resist cultural disintegration, economic injustice or political extremism” (p. 147).

So much for the bad news; the good news in the two chapters of part three is May’s constructive thesis that the acknowledgment of failure is the basis for a new beginning in the contemporary interreligious encounter. More precisely, the encounter of both Christianity and Buddhism with primal religious traditions, whether in the Australian Outback, the Melanesian islands, feudal-turned-modern Japan, or the forests of Thailand, has unveiled that “the celebration and continuation of life in particular places, are the idiom of the poor everywhere, offering as they do the prospect of articulating the meaning of suffering and death and satisfying people’s need for consolation and hope” (p. 123). Here the meta-cosmic traditions can serve to empower the bio-cosmic traditions in the quest for peace and shalom, and they could do so precisely through nurturing and fostering a spirituality of non-violence that acknowledges the Other, welcomes the Stranger, and Reconciles with the Enemy. In these ways, May proposes, the interreligious dialogue resists the human capacity to rationalize violence and becomes instead an opening for new forms of interreligious relations. In short, then, “Transcendence, at bottom, is a practical-ethical, not a theoretical-intellectual affair” (p. 134).

At one level, *Transcendence and Violence* is a continual outworking of the thesis of May’s dissertation published twenty years ago, *Meaning, Consensus and Dialogue in Buddhist-Christian Communication* (1984), that comparative theology and the interreligious dialogue cannot proceed merely at the doctrinal levels (because all doctrines belong to autonomous communities of meaning that are historically, socially, culturally, religiously, and practically embedded) but must be engaged and assessed at the level of the “fruits” and practices of their encounters. At this level, the universalism of meta-cosmic traditions like Christianity and Buddhism not only “makes the indigenous cultures more widely communicable, but the faiths themselves are ‘earthed’ by these cultures in ways that...are surely indispensable if human beings in their life situations (*Lebenswelten*) are to articulate the transcendent immanent within their traditions and achieve global consciousness” (p. 147). May’s conclusion, then, is that transcendence manifest immanently means each tradition retains its integrity and autonomy even while it works in a complementary way with other traditions for the peace and wellbeing of all.

Precisely because May crosses so many geographical, historical, and disciplinary boundaries in this book, he potentially opens himself up to a crossfire of critical questions and even criticisms. Yet arguably the greatest strength of *Transcendence and Violence* is that it invites so many conversation partners to the dialogue table,

and does so around one of the key questions confronting the religions in a post-9/11 world: how can religion be a “force” for peace, harmony, and justice in a world of many conflicts? While I will leave it to Buddhists and others who belong to the people groups in May’s analysis to grapple with this important question on their own terms, my own brief response is informed by my identity and location as a Malaysian-born American-raised Pentecostal Christian, and proceeds along two trajectories.

First, from the perspective of contemporary Pentecostalism and world Christianity, I find May’s analysis both troubling and challenging. Troubling because all too often, world Christianity, currently dominated by Pentecostal-charismatic as well as more straight-laced evangelical forms and expressions, is complicit in various forms of economic, political, and cultural violence, but also challenging precisely because Pentecostal-charismatic spirituality, at least, affords bridges to primal religious traditions that may also transform interreligious relations. Here I agree with May that the interfaith encounter should be assessed as much, if not more, by interreligious hospitality, ethics, and practices as by interreligious claims to truth.

But second, from the perspective of contemporary discussions in theology of religions, interreligious apologetics, and comparative theology, I wonder if May gives up too quickly on the question of interreligious truth claims. His concluding chapter, “Beyond Violence? The Deconstruction of Absolutism and the Completion of Religion,” suggests that the ethical criterion trumps the alethic question. Now while wishing to be as weary as May is about transcendence used as a justification for violence, the truth is not necessarily violent (as chapter five on Buddhism in Thailand shows) and may even be liberating. I suggest that *Transcendence and Violence* itself does not necessarily lead to elevating ethics over theology, but rather links the two more securely, and that precisely through the provision of new discursive perspectives. May’s category of “violence,” for example, opens up fresh avenues for comparative religion and even comparative theology by juxtapositioning and bringing into relief beliefs and practices, even whole ways of life (*Lebenswelten*), that may be otherwise incommensurable, at least on the doctrinal level. Hence the result of *Transcendence and Violence* is a reformulation of the truth question as well as its connection with some of the things that matter most in a post-9/11 world. For this, at the very least, we must be thankful to John May.

Amos Yong
Regent University School of Divinity