



Robert Magliola, *Facing Up to Real Doctrinal Difference: How Some Thought-Motifs from Derrida can Nourish the Catholic-Buddhist Encounter*

Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2014. 206 pages. Cloth, \$26.95/£17.00; paperback, \$16.95/£10.95. ISBN 978-1-62138-080-1 (cloth); 978-1-62138-079-5 (paperback).

THIS BOOK PRESENTS “Catholic-Buddhist encounter,” rather than “Buddhist-Christian dialogue,” in a provocative displacement. The author courses freely through different branches of Buddhism, while the Christian side is represented only by a staunch Catholicism, invoking “formal declarations of the Magisterium” (35) and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, seen as “sure and authentic” (61) guide to church teaching (quoting John Paul II). Other Christian churches

appear only in an apologetic perspective: “Christian groups that reject the notion of Apostolic Succession have been and are at odds with one another even on the most consequential questions of faith and morals” (59). Much of the book is a polemic against liberal Catholics rather than a dialogue with Buddhism: “Some liberals, apart from outright dissenters, tend to treat declarations of the ordinary Magisterium as nothing more than today’s ‘marching orders’” (62). Completely lacking is any appreciation of the science of theology in its subtlety, sophistication, and historical complexity. Magliola seems to find in theology (despite a nod to thinkers like De Lubac and Rahner, whom he considers “sound”) only a treacherous dilution of the truths of the catechism.

Magliola’s discussion of theological differences between the two religions is in the style of Catholic apologetics rather than interreligious theology. Thus he says that for “most classical Buddhist ethicists” a thieving politician merits karmic retribution, but his victim, too, “deserves his victimhood” as a karmic retribution for his own former wrongdoing. To the contrary, “According to Catholicism, suffering may be divine punishment or purification for individual sin or imperfection,” but the church will not presume this in an individual case (48). In the current space of interreligious thinking and dialogue, both modes of thinking are likely to be seen as marked by unreality and obsolescence, so that this strategy of emphasizing them as stable or central doctrines is misleading.

That Catholicism, over time, and at any given time, is a varied and mobile formation full of tensions and struggles between opposing emphases, and in constant interaction with its cultural and religious environments (particularly in this post-conciliar age of ecumenism and of reading the “signs of the times”), is something to which Magliola, despite his wide international, interreligious, and interdisciplinary experience, does scant justice. He claims that Catholic theologians lack “a thought-structure enabling them to properly allocate Catholic and Buddhist values (including *truth*-values) in terms of dialogue” (10–11). But his own sketch of possible themes of dialogue remains fragmentary, and each of the lines of dialogue he takes up seems to peter out after a few steps in an agreement to disagree. What is needed is a majestic theological imagination that can embrace the wisdom of Buddhism alongside, and in profound interaction with, the full riches of biblical and Christian faith.

Magliola assembles authoritative Buddhist texts that present a religion of “Same-power, i.e. the realization that the empirical (or ‘relative’ or ‘conventional’) self is really the ‘same’ as the Buddha..., the Buddha-as-Pure-Emptiness” (64). He reads such utterances as straightforward metaphysical statements to which he opposes statements on divine being drawn from Catholic sources. Such a face-off can only be sterile. Tackling the Buddhist doctrine of non-self, Magliola explains that “human language arises in and from the samsaric, that is, *conventional*, world, so the word ‘person,’ especially when it is used in relation to what passes over from one life to another, is understood to necessarily function according to mere *conven-*

tion" (78). He does not bother to argue against this, but merely points out that it is incompatible with Catholic accounts of the soul and its destiny. The reader may find Buddhadasa more persuasive than this piling up of doctrinal differences: "One who has attained to the ultimate truth sees that there is no such thing as religion! There is only reality.... Call it what you like—dharma or truth—but you cannot particularize that dharma or truth as Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam" (quoted, 89). But Magliola cites this only to deny that Buddhadasa has transcended particularity: "For him 'reality' is the 'unconditioned, empty nature of things,' a historically Buddhist formulation" (89). This doxographic skirmishing blocks reflection on the Buddhist questions and aborts any possibility of a transformation of Christian thought in response to them.

Reviewing Buddhist inclusivist language, which grants to monotheistic religion a temporary validity on the path to final release, Magliola cites the Dalai Lama who, when asked to explain the difference between the Vajrayana Primordial Buddha and a Creator God, said, "I understand the Primordial Buddha ... to be the ultimate reality ... the space of emptiness ... where all phenomena, pure and impure are dissolved.... We can say, therefore, that this ultimate source ... is close to the notion of a Creator, since all phenomena ... originate therein ... *We must not be inclined to deify this luminous space*" (95–96, Magliola's italics). It seems then that in the end a Christian, ultimately, must sacrifice the notion of God for the unconditioned, for emptiness, and become a Buddhist. This would refute the possibility of a dual belonging to Christianity and Buddhism, since in the end one will have to choose between the two. But perhaps one might avoid this by treating the Dalai Lama's account as a traditional language that can be surpassed, or by demythologizing it, making it refer only to reality as apprehended here and now.

The dialogal relationship of the two religions is "chiastic," in a Derridian sense: "Each of two contradictory 'texts' is reinscribed in modified form as the subtext of its respective contradictory" (118). In shared meditation "the Buddhists are internalizing ... the image of the Catholics praying for them in Catholic terms, and the Catholics are internalizing ... the image of the Buddhists intending ... a contradicting path/beatitude for them" (120). Magliola believes that most accounts of Buddhist-Christian encounter miss the complex dynamism of difference emerging here. "The chiasm supplies the Catholic theologian a good way of thinking about how empathy with the intentionality of his/her Buddhist counterpart (cross-inscribed into the subtext of his/her own Catholic consciousness) can be vital and sincere while not reducing to common ground" (121–22).

It may well be true that much of Buddhist-Christian thought has been too speculative, and that it needs to be tested against the experience of actual encounter in shared meditation. But this encounter is already a lived experience of common ground, or of what Paul KNITTER calls "interbeing," (2009, 22, 112) that lies deeper than Buddhist or Catholic representations of future salvation (representations that are always being reconceived in any case). A sense of historical pluralism would

greatly lessen the urgency of the contradictions that exercise Magliola, as when he writes: “An imaginary agent seeking to affirm both Catholic ‘one mortal birth’ and Buddhist ‘many mortal births’ (‘rebirth’) finds that these opposing doctrines block each other—constituting … a case of *aporia* (‘no passage’ through the horns of the agent’s dilemma)” (124). For Magliola, if one just puts this conundrum on the back burner, one is committing “violations of divinely revealed truths” and disobeying “an irrefragable moral imperative—the imperative to acknowledge irreducible difference” (124). But the horns of the dilemma are not as immobile as he postulates. Conceptions of what lies beyond the horizons of temporal experience are bound to be difficult to formulate clearly and to be set in clear contradiction to one another. “Divinely revealed truths” on this front are couched in mythological language pointing to a realm of mystery. The Old Testament preserves an immaculate silence, and the New speaks of “eternal life,” said to begin in spiritual transformation here and now, but in its eschatological lineaments sketched only in parables and pictures.

In two “annexes” to the book, Magliola plays a bit more freely with Derridian thought-motifs, producing new insights on the adventure of dialogue: “Wonder of wonders, though, that authentic Catholic teaching, as presented at length above, sets forth a model that is much more *askew* and *lopsided*, and thus postmodern in the Derridean sense” (142). Magliola correlates divinely willed “fissures” in the structure of dogma with the wounds in the body of Christ. Theology has associated brokenness with Original Sin and conceived redemption as a restoration of wholeness. “But cannot fracture-in-wholeness also be a clue to God, a ‘trace’ of God.... These two understandings, brokenness as flaw and brokenness as divine trace, can in many ways be one-and-the-same” (162), in that the divine Word identified with our brokenness. One wishes that Magliola would let himself develop such thinking further, in the key of philosophy of religion rather than that of dogmatic theology.

REFERENCE

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