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Hans WALDENFELS, *Absolute nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian dialogue*. J.W. Heisig, transl. New York: Paulist Press, 1980. ix + 214 pages, including Bibliography and Index. \$ 7.95.

Waldenfels' Christian dialogue with Mahayana Buddhism as it is interpreted by Nishitani Keiji accomplishes much more than it claims. Not only does it help lay the "foundations for a Buddhist-Christian dialogue"; it also, and perhaps more importantly, clarifies controversial questions on the theory of interreligious dialogue in general. Scholars debate whether interreligious dialogue, requiring

as it does the bridging of profoundly different worlds of culture and experience, is really possible; whether religions with apparently contradictory models of self and the Ultimate have anything to say to each other; whether Christianity, with its claims of possessing a full and final revelation, has anything new to learn from other religions. From the concrete praxis of Waldenfels' dialogue with Buddhism, such questions of theory are answered with a convincing affirmation. Dialogue is possible; it does work. There is much to be learned, on both sides.

Waldenfels' study unfolds clearly and neatly in three sections—and is enhanced by the smooth and precise translation of J. W. Heisig. Part One provides the general background to Nishitani's thought: the central teachings of the Buddha, the Mahayanist interpretation of emptiness by Nagarjuna, further developments in Zen Buddhism, the thought of Nishida Kitarō (d. 1945), Nishitani's mentor and founder of the Kyoto School of philosophy. These summaries are necessarily sketchy, but they provide even the novice in Buddhist studies with a clear introduction to the contents of the dialogue.

Part Two is a masterful overview of Nishitani's philosophy of emptiness. Waldenfels presents Nishitani as a bridge-builder between East and West, especially between the Western existentialism of Heidegger/Sartre and Buddhism's affirmation of emptiness. With the aid of Abe Masao, Waldenfels clarifies for the Western reader the positive content and world-affirming implications of *śūnyatā*, understood as absolute nothingness. The emptiness of nothingness is a paradoxical fullness, the confluence of being and non-being. It is nothingness which is not relative to all beings but embraces all beings. As it overcomes the duality between being and non-being, it does likewise with the duality between objectivity and subjectivity, *and* between the Ultimate and the finite. Absolute nothingness, therefore, is the creative void, the still point of all reality which grounds the radical interrelatedness, the "circuminsessional" character of everything. To realize this absolute nothingness is to let go of one's substantial and egotistic self and to experience the peace, freedom and creativity of the interrelated Whole. Such an experience is beyond the logic of reason and the grasp of words. Waldenfels enables the Western reader to be both stunned and inspired by such a different vision of the Real.

Part Three offers "stepping stones for dialogue." Drawing especially on Karl Rahner as a reliable spokesperson for Christianity, Waldenfels explores three areas in which both similarities and differences can be traced between Buddhism and Christianity: the need to base both philosophy and dialogue on mystical experience, ways in which both mystical and theological concepts of God reflect *śūnyatā*, and the role of Jesus as the primary expression of God's self-emptying. Waldenfels does not hesitate to point out differences in which he feels Buddhists can learn from Christians. He urges, for example, the need for some kind of

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language to express mystical experience; also, he argues that, in order to affirm history, Buddhists should recognize the real (not just national) difference between “what is” and “what ought to be.” But more extensively, he focuses on the challenges that Buddhism offers Christianity, especially Christianity’s need to recognize, in its doctrine and practice, the radical mystery and immanence of the Absolute; this means that, while words may be necessary, they must proceed from the experience of the need for silence.

Especially in stating Buddhist challenges to the Christian understanding of God and of Christ, Waldenfels sometimes seems too timid. Instead of exploring the deeper implications of these challenges, he is content to line up quotations from Christian mystics and theologians which resemble Buddhist claims. Nishitani and Buddhism in general assert a pervasive non-dualism between *śūnyatā* and *samsāra*, between God and the world; as Nishitani points out, this is not pantheism, but it is a panentheism in which the Ultimate and the finite have their being and non-being in each other. Can Christians affirm such a radical non-duality and “circuminsession” between God and the world? Would it not correct the dualism that has characterized Christian theology since its birth in the world of Greek thought? Also, Waldenfels does not follow up the christological implications of the dialogue with Buddhism. Granting that Jesus is the self-emptying of God, a self-emptying that pervades the universe, what does this mean for the way Jesus “saves” and for his claimed uniqueness and definitiveness?

Such questions cannot be clarified in a preliminary study such as Waldenfels’. What he has done is focused the main questions and laid the foundations for further dialogue. It is a foundation on which both he and others can continue to build.

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