

## REVIEWS

Donald S. LOPEZ, Jr. and Steven C. ROCKEFELLER, eds. *The Christ and the Bodhisattva*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987. 274 pp., with a bibliography and index.

The most interesting contributions to this 1984 symposium held at Middlebury College are those of Robert Thurman and Luis Gomez, who, handling with a light touch the immense resources of their scholarship, manage to save the bodhisattva mythology of East Asia from the confines of folk religiosity and scholarly antiquarianism and to suggest that it may have a spiritual impact and theological profundity comparable to those that the idea of the Risen Christ has for Christians. The success of this venture in ecumenical communication is largely due to the participants' cultivation of an entente at the level of spirituality; thus the presentation of Christ by David Steindl-Rast and Ann Belford Ulanov is experiential and psychological, raising no thorny dogmatic issues, and Langdon Gilkey's riper and more substantial theological account of the meaning of Christ neatly fills out the Christian side of the encounter without losing touch with the spiritual note of the proceedings or throwing awkward doctrinal spanners in the works.

This happy Christian-Buddhist encounter certainly verifies Gilkey's claim (p. 237) that we are living through a blessed *kairos* marked by "the wide acceptance suddenly of the parity of religions." But the thing to remember about a *kairos* is that it doesn't last very long; it is a rare occasion of grace and it can be squandered. The rate of publication and successful distribution of the volumes in the SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies are a worthy response to the present *kairos*; but the same cannot be said of the quality of one or two of the volumes or of the standard of proofreading in, for example, the two important works of Kalupahana on Nāgārjuna and Yogācāra. East-West discourse still enjoys only limited acceptance in the U.S., and anything that suggests that such discourse is intrinsically sloppy betrays the cause. The Christian-Buddhist dialogue, far from being assured of a glorious future, is a risky tightrope, on which we must find our places with great fear and trembling. Philosophical and theological muddle or eccentricity; loss of religious identity; reanimation of religious divisiveness; academic or ecclesiastical withdrawal of support for the dialogue—these are only a few of the dangers of which we should remain constantly aware. The present work is a worthy response to the *kairos*, and is beautifully presented. However, there may be some flies in the ointment. I am not sure that any of the participants in the dialogue have taken sufficiently seriously the responsibilities and difficulties of their enterprise. I also have the feeling that talk about religion should be much more difficult, especially under the conditions of an open interreligious dialogue, than the participants make it seem.

For a start, the spiritual kerygmas of all participants, apart from some developments on selflessness in Tibetan tradition (pp. 77–83), left me cold. On the Buddhist side I noted a tone of evangelistic fervor, a reliance on traditional schemes and representations, a harking back to glorious ages of faith,

and a refusal of demythologization, which recall analogous phenomena in Christianity. On the Christian side, to the contrary, an updated Jesus was to the fore: "Mostly he taught by living, just by the way he was, the way he acted. . . . He goes from party to party, has a good time, and his joy radiates a healing power for mind and body. . . . Mostly he *lives* the kingdom. Lives as someone who fully and gratefully belongs" (p. 104). Christ "brings the antecedent experience of our being connected up, linked to the source, no matter how frail, flawed, fagged, or failed we may be. From that anterior connection to being flows the experience of I-ness and we-ness that makes possible justice and peace and a fullness of life, religious, sexual, or whatever, establishing the conditions for their coming into being. But we always begin with those values of justice, peace, health, which we prize as our best human values. Adhering always to those old, nagging departure points—our causes, our cult-idols—keeps us outside the sphere of Christ's new being, this zone of new creation, making it impossible for us to penetrate it" (pp. 136–137). Transcribing these utterances and noting their abstract and somewhat slangy language, I feel more confident that it is not deficient spiritual responsiveness that makes me sense a lack of moral, intellectual, or liberative bite here.

From a Christian viewpoint the basic problem of any correlation of Christ and the bodhisattvas is the ontological and salvific uniqueness claimed for the historical figure of Jesus Christ. Of the major bodhisattvas, only Gautama Buddha is a real historical figure. All the others are purely mythical projections. That seems to be the Achilles' heel of this branch of Buddhist faith. The major apparent difficulty of the Christian position is the opposite; not a flight from history, but a massive investment in a particular historical figure. Thurman asks: "Now, can you Christians be sure deep in your hearts that that statement [Christ is the only savior], even though it is in your scriptures, might not be God's little white lie? Might it not be that he detected that you were egocentric, like us all, and that you wanted to hear that you had the only way. . . . Are you sure in your heart of hearts that he hasn't told somebody else that their savior is the only exclusive savior?" (pp. 254–255). Gilkey's answer fudges the issue: "We are learning, Robert. And I think that I don't know any contemporary and influential theologian of note who has any use for that description. . . . We don't agree with that doctrine of exclusivity" (p. 256). Gilkey treats the problem of the divinity of Christ with comparable blandness: "These two stories about Jesus: God the creator's descent in the appearance of Jesus to save us, and the presence in power in creation of Jesus (the Logos or Son) . . . can be seen to be 'myths' representing the divine affirmation of the world" (p. 195). The implications of whisking away central Christian claims for Jesus in this way should give us pause.

The encounter of Christianity and Buddhism is the most promising religious event of our time. Serene exchanges such as those recorded in this beautifully illustrated book are undoubtedly the proper setting for the fruitful unfolding of this promise. Yet a shadow looms in the background still, a cold wind is blowing for all kinds of religious discourse. As the religions huddle up together they have to be drastic in sacrificing the unessentials of their traditions and intransigent in guarding the essentials. Spiritual attunement is

one element in which the requisite discernment may be formed. Another is sharp intellectual and ideological criticism; only in thorough self-questioning in light of modern ideals of reason and liberation can contemporary religious discourse be so purged that it really becomes ours, rather than Śāntideva's or Calvin's. Those who have the dedication to attempt all this may make their own the bodhisattva's prayer:

May I be Savior of those without one,  
A guide for all travelers on the way;  
May I be a bridge, a boat, and a ship,  
For all who wish to cross the water!  
May I be an island for those who seek one,  
And a lamp for those desiring light! (p. 75)

Joseph S. O'LEARY  
*Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture*