

John P. KEENAN, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology*. Maryhill, New York: Orbis Press, 1989. viii+312 pp. Bibliography, index. Cloth \$29.95, ISBN 0-88344-641-3; Paper \$16.95, ISBN 0-88344-640-5.

This work offers a profound and illuminating reinterpretation of Christian themes in light of Yogācāra thought. It also raises several basic hermeneutical problems for the contemporary appropriation of religious tradition.

Keenan begins by tracing the theme of Christ as Wisdom through the Bible and the Fathers, with emphasis on its mystical reaches in “the initial Patristic mysticism of light” found in Origen (knowing subject and knowable objects) and the apophatic “mysticism of darkness” developed by Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius (“immediacy that precedes the subject-object pattern”). His aim is to reconstruct Christology as an explicitation of mystic knowing: “insight into mystic meaning occurs . . . in the immediacy of direct contact. . . . Verbal, theoretical knowledge always follows upon and is evolved from an awareness of mystic unknowing” (p. 113).

In the ensuing account of Yogācāra, Keenan shows an acute sense of the texture of mind and consciousness as he cuts through the scholastic thickets and reveals that this ancient system has much to teach us about consciousness and the process of its conversion. Following Nagao Gadjin, he points out that the Yogācārans built on Nāgārjuna’s “consistent deconstruction of the previous Abhidharma endeavor” (p. 129), but were also “committed to philosophical understanding and resurrected Abhidharma-like attempts at theoretical analysis within their understanding of emptiness” (p. 152). They used theory to cleanse and free consciousness for the immediate experience of things in their emptiness. “Mahāyāna admits a pure and uninterpreted experience of awakening and wisdom, and it affirms a distinction between mystic experience and interpretation” (p. 192). The former is correlated with Nāgārjuna’s absolute truth (*paramārtha-satya*) and the latter with conventional truth.

These appeals to mystic awareness seem to require a more differentiated historical contextualization. “No unmediated experiences even come to expression, for once expressed, they are mediated” (p. 195). How then can Keenan refer so confidently to mystic insight as a constant and universal experience?

Perhaps the pluralism so evident at the level of religious languages cuts deeper than he recognizes, into the intimate recesses of mystical experience. What precise sense can one assign to the assertion that Nāgārjuna and Pseudo-Dionysius were really experiencing the same thing? Both invoke a knowing that is a non-knowing, but this is a vague resemblance. Moreover, the more one realizes the archaic character of their discourses, the less it becomes possible to abstract their mystic awareness as a timelessly recurrent feature of the spiritual landscape. The “immediacy of direct contact” envisaged as capping a Neo-Platonic hierarchy of modes of awareness is located in a quite different place from the immediacy of emptiness. And if immediacy can shift its location, it may not be purely immediate after all. Deep speaks to deep, but across great hermeneutical gulfs. We cannot reenter the world of Pseudo-Dionysius or make his experience of immediacy our own; and the same may be true of all the historical styles of Buddhism. These past worlds challenge us to produce something of equivalent depth today, but they do not provide a map.

Keenan argues against claims that all experience is intrinsically hermeneutical and linguistic; that there is no perception apart from interpretation and language; that all mysticism is culturally conditioned. “We seem to live in a world of immediacy, which only gradually, over the course of one’s life, and only in part, is ever mediated.” “Take, for example, the unpleasant occasion when one touches a hot stove. The interpretation that mediates that experience and identifies the stove as hot follows almost immediately but not soon enough to avoid having a finger burned. No interpretation is given prior to or during the initial duration of the experience itself” (p. 193). But one could respond that even the experience of sudden pain is inserted in advance in a whole web of sensations and perceptions that shape its significance. The search for pure immediacy ends up clutching the wraith of an instantaneous and ephemeral sensation, in the manner of empirical positivism. Contrast HUNTINGTON (1989, p. 124): “Suffering is in every instance contingent on the entire web of relations that forms the warp and woof of the dependently originated, empty world. For the Mādhyamika this is a matter of tremendous import because it leaves open the possibility that even the experience of physical pain could be altered and invested with a radically different significance by fundamentally altering one’s form of life.”

A second complex issue this work forces us to think about is the status of language and reason. In proportion to his emphasis on mystic awareness, Keenan sees theory as a flimsy, merely functional business, making it difficult to understand how it can generate the massive structure of Yogācāra scholasticism. He allows theory conventional validity as an explication of contemplative insight, but only in the paradoxical sense that it manifests such insight in the way it self-destructs: “The truths enunciated by conventional understanding always stand on the brink of falsification and maintain their validity not as statements of reality, but as trace images that for a time may harmonize with that silent awareness and indicate ultimate meaning before they sink into nothingness” (p. 141). If this is the status of Mahāyāna categories, what hope is there for the categories of less enlightened sciences and philosophies, including the bulk of those of the Western world?

This theory of language chimes with contemporary awareness of the contextuality, relativity, and provisionality of rational discourse. But it is disappointing to anyone who hopes to find in Mādhyamika and Yogācāra the basis for a post-Wittgensteinian or post-Derridean restoration of confidence in language and reason. Keenan is close to those who see Mādhyamika as providing closure to the bad infinity of deconstructive dissemination: "Philosophy cannot grasp what it seeks in any of its categories, but, as language becoming self-conscious of its function, it can learn to 'undo' itself and cease to be an obstruction, in that way allowing what we have long sought to manifest itself" in "a nondual way of experiencing language and thought" (LOY 1988, pp. 251, 250). But the closure in question seems a surrender of theory in favor of practice and contemplation. One writer has attempted to reinstate the metaphysical or "logocentric" within a Mādhyamikan consciousness: "The logocentric and the differential [*svabhāva* and *śūnyatā*] become, then, two 'frequentings.' And the two frequentings are at the command of the 'enlightened person'" (MAGLIOLA 1984, p. 123). "Logocentric formulations, while not having absolute propriety, retain internal propriety as long as the operations within the logical frame are themselves 'logical'" (MAGLIOLA 1984, p. 217). This could lead to a restoration of classical metaphysics and dogmatics in their entirety and could rob the dialectic of emptiness of any critical force in regard to such discourses. Keenan tends to the other extreme in his dismissive attitude to the Christological and Trinitarian discourse of the early Church; this cannot be overcome by a leap to mystic awareness, but only by a far more intensive engagement with the history of dogma.

The theory of conventional truth could justify the dizzying diversity and inconsistency of human religious languages—all inadequate skillful means for indicating the absolute at various contingent historical conjunctures. But can it do justice to the objectivity claimed by these languages? Mādhyamika and Yogācāra do not provide all the equipment needed to deal with this problem, for neither philosophy had our contemporary hermeneutical awareness or our conceptions of cultural pluralism. Even as they stressed the limits of language, Pseudo-Dionysius and Nāgārjuna saw themselves as mapping these limits in a definitive way; they had no experience of what it means to trace the limits of a historical language from the vantage of another such language, or to realize before some language of the past the inevitable limits of one's understanding of past horizons. This is the third major problem Keenan's work raises: the difficulty of retrieving ancient wisdoms, especially from non-Western cultures, in the contemporary pluralistic horizon. It seems quite impossible to set Yogācāra categories directly to work on contemporary questions; an immense labor of historical sifting and conscious reinterpretation is first required.

This historical awareness would qualify the authority Keenan ascribes to the Mahāyāna sources. It is not at all clear that a battle between Nāgārjuna and Western traditions that have a more positive assessment of language and reason must result in a knock-out victory for the former. The jolt occurring when the Western perspective of being encounters the standpoint of emptiness might show up the dogmatic character of both traditions and reveal that the issues in contest are open questions, to which neither tradition has found

definitive solutions. Indeed, the questions themselves are constantly being reformulated within both traditions. The cross-cultural perspective, however illuminating, serves to complicate the discussion further. Even the most suggestive cross-cultural correlations, such as Magliola's identification of *śūnyatā* with Derrida's *différance* and *svabhāva* with the logocentric (MAGLIOLA, pp. 89, 114) quickly unravel in the endless differentiations they call for.

Keenan acclaims Yogācāra as "a valid and insightful way of philosophizing" (p. 153), but he does not address the question of the limits of its validity, both in its time and in the present day. What is living and what is dead in the Yogācāra philosophy? Much of the system is evidently archaic, e.g., "the constant interplay between a latent, fundamental container consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*) and the manifested, active consciousness (*pravṛtti-vijñāna*) of sensing, perceiving, and thinking" (p. 157). Moreover, it is still hard to see how this insistence on consciousness can be compatible with the doctrine of emptiness. Has the ancient intra-Buddhist controversy on this issue been resolved? The controversy has been renewed by those who see Yogācāra as a logocentric regression from the radicality of the Mādhyamika standpoint. Consciousness, the element and medium of philosophical truth in Hegel and Husserl, has been a primary target of those who would overcome metaphysics (Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida). What is special about Yogācāra notions of consciousness that could make it immune to these attacks?

It is true that the Yogācāra critique of deluded consciousness and limited validation of "clear and consistent doctrinal discourse as an expression of wisdom" (p. 163) resonate with vaguely analogous enterprises in post-Kantian philosophy. Keenan seems needlessly shy of relating Yogācāra to idealism, the tradition with which it has the most obvious affinities. Historical comparativism, however, is likely to clog efforts to define the ways in which Yogācāra can enhance Western understandings of consciousness and thinking and in which Western critiques of consciousness can correct and refine the Yogācāra understanding of mind. We must rethink them on their own terms, drawing freely on both traditions. In the meantime, Keenan's Lonerganian entente enables an empathetic penetration of Yogācāra thought, even if in the end it turns out to be a ladder that must be thrown away. Derrida and Wittgenstein, the currently fashionable ladders, may also have to be thrown away once they have served to illustrate the otherness of Mahāyāna concerns.

When Keenan finally proceeds to apply to Christian theology the Mahāyāna "step back from essentialist thinking toward an understanding of religious and theological consciousness" (p. 196), he makes a number of correlations that raise further hermeneutical problems. Had he highlighted the differences between the Yogācāra return to consciousness and analogous Western procedures (from Schleiermacher to Lonergan), he might have found that they undermine his globalizing discourse on "conscious interiority" and his rapid enlisting of Yogācāra for the "expressivist" view that dogmatic language is a mere convention evoking "an awareness and experience of God" (p. 207). "The Mahāyāna understanding of truth is directly opposed to those Christian thinkers who hold that creedal statements do actually express, however imperfectly, the absolute truth. The doctrine of the two truths rejects all literalism and bib-

licism that would treat words or concepts as capturing or embodying the truth" (p. 206). It would be dismissive to treat Aquinas's insistence on the objective reference of creedal statements (*Fides attingit ad rem*) as literalism or biblicism. Meanwhile, Keenan is in danger of erecting conscious interiority into an objective "transcendental signified." One may question whether he has sufficiently "emptied" this realm, which is always interwoven with contingencies of language and physical existence and never establishes itself in the crystalline purity that he seems to claim for it. Perhaps the standpoint of emptiness would be better represented by a Christian language that continues to trust in the objectivity of its affirmations despite a sense of the historical relativity of all its terms.

The least convincing correlation is that between the three bodies of Buddha and the stages of a Trinitarian path of awakening: the transformation-body becomes "the embodiment of the transforming experience of living in the Spirit," the enjoyment-body becomes Jesus Christ, "the embodiment of the experience of God as Abba," the dharma-body becomes God the Father, "the embodiment of ultimate meaning as grounded upon its ineffable content" (p. 213). Given the mixed origins of this part of Yogācāra theory (p. 181), it is hard to see why it should be thought so useful for retrieving the "economic" Trinitarianism of the early Church, a retrieval often effected in modern theology and to which this use of Buddhist categories brings no new precision. The analogies are forced and vague; the word "transformation" is used equivocally; and the most physical of the three bodies is unconvincingly associated with the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, Keenan's focusing of "Christ as empty of any essence and engaged in the dependently co-arisen world in all its radical contingency" (p. 225) promises a breakthrough to something decisively new. "His being is the being of emptiness, the negation of all clinging to selfhood and essence in an awareness of the dependently co-arisen being of life in the world" (p. 226), and as such can be known only in conversion-experience. The difficulties of revising classical Christology in terms of emptiness are not alleviated by taking potshots at "propositional theology," caricatured as "a manicurist, sprucing up the human nails and trimming the divine cuticles without taking notice that the moon of Christian awakening was fast setting" (p. 228), or by preaching against "the imagined security of cherished beliefs" (p. 231); here, readers are likely to feel they have been left in the lurch. Similarly, the effort to think God as empty is not helped by assaults on "the Sunday-morning God who assures us of our goodness . . . a supernatural insurance broker at the service of selfhood" (p. 245). But these blemishes take little from the visionary power of Keenan's discussion at this point.

Yet, powerful as these correlations are, they may still be hermeneutical shortcuts. Keenan comes close to reducing "the meaning of Christ" to Mādhyamika doctrine: "The transcendent dimension of Jesus . . . is ultimate truth as an awareness of existence just-as-it-is. . . . The incarnational dimension is conventional truth as an awareness 'as-far-as-the-limits-of-existence'" (p. 234). This correlation seems rather makeshift. Perhaps a siting of the two-truths doctrine in Western philosophical terms would be the necessary preliminary of any attempt to exploit it for Western theology. Again, the equation

between the experience of God and the experience of emptiness may be a premature conflation: "The very arising of all things in inter-dependency is itself directly and immediately the presence of Abba" (p. 244); "The basic structure of consciousness is already directed toward ultimate meaning and rejects God-conceptions because of their failure to ground themselves in that structure. . . . In awareness of the original structuring of consciousness oriented toward ultimate meaning one becomes aware of God as prevenient and encompassing" (p. 249). The notion of emptiness powerfully solicits our discourse about God, but it is far from clear what the upshot of this solicitation is to be. The confident identification of God as "He who is" has been undermined by the critique of onto-theo-logy; an equally confident description of God in terms of emptiness is likely to suffer the same fate. What is required first is a subtler critical reflection on the status of all such languages and on their experiential foundations.

Keenan has greatly advanced such reflection by his insistence that the languages of Christian and Buddhist doctrine are empty, conventional, provisional constructs, skillful means indicating a dimension that always eludes their grasp. But his reflection is impeded by belief in that ineffable dimension itself as a court of last appeal that regulates the interaction between the languages of the two traditions, enabling one to step outside the pluralistic interplay of religious languages to a referent beyond them. It is also impeded by a method of correlation that presupposes a necessary structural parallel between Christianity and Buddhism, on the basis of a Lonerganian and Yogācāran notion of the invariant structure of human consciousness. But suppose that the philosophical analyses of consciousness, East and West, are also flimsy, self-destructing sketches; or merely suppose that they are always shaped and limited by their cultural context. Then the pluralism of religious systems cannot be controlled from the vantage of such a construct, and there is a much wider field for free creative invention. One tradition creates its world of spiritual vision through detachment and emptiness, the other through calling on "God," a term having meaning only in the context of the total culture that produced it. Correlation of God-consciousness and emptiness-awareness cannot be an encounter of abstracted mystic states, but implies the confrontation of the entire historical traditions in play on each side. That confrontation cannot issue in a clear systematic overview; it is a free creative play in which all sorts of hybridization are possible. Keenan's book is such a free play between one form of Buddhism and one form of Christianity, and has the strengths and limits of the genre. Its creative invention needs to be checked by a more vigilant historical sense of the culture-bound contingency of every term employed in the discourses of each tradition. Let us hope that such hermeneutical adjustments will add to the fertility of the interaction that has taken place here and that is a major contribution to the formation of a contemporary Christian-Buddhist wisdom.

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