

Russell H. BOWERS, Jr., *Someone or Nothing? Nishitani's Religion and Nothingness as a Foundation for Christian-Buddhist Dialogue*. Asian Thought and Culture 27. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1995. xi + 251 pp. \$49.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8204-2832-9.

EVEN THE IRREPRESSIBLE Alan Watts, who has been called the Norman Vincent Peale of Buddhism for his ebullient introductions of Zen for Westerners, nearly despaired of marrying Eastern thought to Christianity. Describing Christianity as a "contentious faith" that requires an "all-or-nothing" commitment, he observed: "My previous discussions did not take proper account of that whole aspect of Christianity which is uncompromising, ornery, militant, rigorous, imperious, and invincibly self-righteous."

Bowers's book presents Christian-Buddhist ecumenists with a blunt antithesis—"Someone" or "Nothing" (Christ or *sūnyatā*)—reminding us that the uncompromising, unassimilable aspect of Christianity noted by Watts is anything but dead, and should not be written off as a passing historical deformation of a religion otherwise amenable to the goals of "mutual transformation" and "unity beyond differences."

A Ph.D. from Dallas Theological Seminary, Bowers writes from the evangelical Protestantism represented by authors like Norman Geisler, Carl Henry, John MacArthur, Alister McGrath, Ronald Nash, James Packer, Charles Ryrie, Francis Schaeffer, James Sire, John Stott, and Anthony Thiselton, and by publishing houses like Baker Book House, Eerdmans, Moody, InterVarsity, and Zondervan. This might tempt some readers to dismiss Bowers's unbending (anti-)thesis with a disdainful ad hominem yawn towards "American Fundamentalism," but this would be premature for two reasons.

First, the uncompromising stance towards non-Christian religions found in Bowers's book characterizes not only Protestant Fundamentalism but, ultimately, the entire tradition of the Catholic magisterium down to our own day (one only has to recall the loudly protested remarks by Pope John Paul II on Buddhism in his recent book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*). Even when Catholicism acknowledges the possibility of salvation outside the Christian faith (as in its concept of "baptism of desire"), it insists that its only basis is Christ's atonement. As such, this aspect of Christianity may well turn out to be an ineluctable part of its essential nature, and not a quirk that can, with effort, be removed.

Second, this book, even if a bit plodding and pedantic at times (one chapter has 328 notes, and fully one-third of the book is devoted to endnotes, bibliography, and index), is a carefully researched study of Keiji Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*, the magnum opus of the late great dean of the Kyoto school of Buddhistic phenomenology. As such, its perspective deserves serious consideration. Bowers accurately grasps the seminal significance of Nishitani's work, and while interfaith ecumenists may find his conclusions disappointing, his assessment of the implications of Nishitani's thought for the Christian-Buddhist dialogue is sincere, forthright, and fair. It also provides ecumenists with a clear sense of Christianity's unyielding side, a side that continues to challenge and defy their work toward a higher Christian-

Buddhist synthesis.

Bowers devotes his first two chapters to the nature of interreligious dialogue in general, and to the history and goals of Christian-Buddhist dialogue in particular. He notes how the purpose of dialogue has evolved from mutual understanding (Dumoulin) to mutual transformation (Cobb) and the quest for unity (Ingram) under the influence of various nontraditional theologies and denaturing (kenotic) Christologies. He addresses the lamentable lack of conservative evangelical involvement in the Christian-Buddhist dialogue, the issues of religious pluralism, and the charges of exclusivism leveled against traditional Christianity.

Chapter 3 offers an extensive expository summary of Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*. The analysis is accurate, evenhanded, and reasonably clear, although it naturally mirrors the indirect circularity of Nishitani's own logic. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether Bowers is slipping from exposition to commentary, especially when he takes up Nishitani's view of Christianity. Technical terms like "circuminsessional" and "autotelic" are not defined for the reader.

Chapter 4 is primarily spent showing why evangelical Christianity and Buddhism are incompatible. Admitting that Nishitani makes common cause with Christianity against scientific materialism, nihilism, and atheistic existentialism, the author hastens to show the superficiality of these concerns. He suggests (using Francis Schaeffer's phrase) that Nishitani's own uncritical acquiescence in the modern ateleologic scientific worldview compromises his ability to accurately assess the traditional Christian view of a "personal-infinite God." Consequently, when Nishitani treats such Christian concepts as God's "personal" nature and Christ's compassion, selfless love, and kenotic (self-emptying) self-sacrifice he denatures them and transmutes them into sublated Buddhist concepts utterly foreign to their original significations. Bowers notes that Nishitani, at this point, has more in common with deconstructionist hermeneutics and various "nonevangelical" theologies—Mystical (Eckhart and Heidegger), Radical (Altizer), Liberal (Ritschl, Bultmann, etc.), and Process (Cobb). Meanwhile he continues to write as though "evangelical theology" were something self-evident and unconnected to Catholic tradition.

Chapter 5 summarizes the author's thesis, recapitulating his evangelical concerns. At times he seems to be writing here primarily for evangelicals, as when he suggests that the chief purpose of interfaith dialogue is to "contribute to understanding which will enhance effective proclamation," or calls (in good "altar call" form) for "making a choice." Yet he suggests several profitable topics for Christian-Buddhist discussion, such as the relation between *śūnyatā* in Buddhism and "meaninglessness" in Ecclesiastes, or the human experience of repugnance towards evil in relation to the benign indifference of *śūnyatā* in Buddhism.

For some readers a significant obstacle to appreciating Bowers's thesis will be the seeming harshness with which he states some of his conclusions, such as his description of Buddhist meditation as "a self-induced brainwashing." A more serious difficulty, not of Bowers's general thesis but of the details of his analysis, is the disjunctive logic that he indiscriminately forces upon a whole

range of terms and concepts. If truth can be “propositional,” does this mean it can’t also be “existential”? If humanity’s basic problem is “sin,” does this mean it can’t also involve “ignorance”? If God is “personal,” does this mean his nature is no longer “incomprehensible” (contrary to what theologians from Aquinas to Cornelius Van Til have believed)? If some “mysticism” begins in mist and ends in schism, does this mean that the rich traditions of mysticism from St. Anthony of the Desert to St. John of the Cross and patristic mystagogia (for which the central acts of worship are sacred mysteries) have no place in Christianity? In spite of these and other shortcomings, Bowers’s study presents the Christian-Buddhist dialogue with a challenge that deserves to be carefully considered.

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