



John D'Arcy May, ed. *Converging Ways: Conversion and Belonging in Buddhism and Christianity*

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THIS BOOK AROSE out of the sixth conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies at the abbey of St. Ottilien, 2005. Half of the text is devoted to an argument about Paul Williams's book on his conversion from Buddhism to Catholicism. Through the point-scoring, something of the deep logic of Christian and Buddhist belief glimmers, thanks especially to the contribution of Perry Schmidt-Leukel. He rejects Williams's claim that Buddhism is atheistic, in the sense of lacking a transcendent entity that is immediately relevant to our salvation, the creator of all things, and a loving being. While not identifying nirvana with God, Schmidt-Leukel sees it as irreducibly transcendent of the samsaric world, and as having a creative role in that it is the goal to which all beings strive—and thus similar to the Unmoved Mover of Aquinas whose role as final cause is the ground of its role as efficient cause. He points out that notions such as “cause,” “love,” and “person” when applied to God have a merely analogical sense, making it difficult to formulate a stark opposition of impersonal Buddhism to biblical personalism; moreover, the Buddhist ultimate is manifested in gracious Buddhas and thus given a personal, loving inflection. Schmidt-Leukel could enrich his argument by consulting Helmut Glasenapp, who shows that elements of the idea of God are scattered in various

parts of Buddhism, instead of being gathered up into the monotheistic formation (which itself is viewed critically by Christian thinkers such as Stanislas Breton).

To pit propositions in Buddhism against propositions in Christianity one has to take into account the entire scaffolding of conditions and historical contexts and developments that give the propositions their sense; the hermeneutic delicacy of this task is such as to defer the clash of propositions indefinitely. Williams persuades himself that we face a blunt clash of orthodoxies: “What Christian orthodoxy etc. affirm concerning God, the Buddhist denies” (138). He replies to Schmidt-Leukel that while nirvana has some qualities in common with God this does not logically entail that they are “the same thing or even significantly the same type of thing” (121). This rather misses the point, as if one were to argue that the Good or the True, just because they share some qualities with God, are not necessarily the same sort of thing. Williams also points to the deabsolutization of nirvana in Mahayana Buddhism, as undercutting its relevance to the idea of God. He says that Buddhists such as Sāntideva explicitly reject God in the sense of a being who is “pure, worthy to be worshipped, permanent, one only, and creator of everything,” since “an eternal cause could not assert causal efficacy, or if it did its effect would be eternal too” (125). But as Schmidt-Leukel argued, God as first cause, in the Thomist sense, is infinitely other than any secondary causality, and exerts efficacy in an inconceivable manner, drawing things into existence by inspiring desire; Sāntideva’s arguments do not begin to address such a God. Williams says that “the Buddhist causal arguments against God do not touch Thomas’ position” (127); but this could entail that the Buddhists are not arguing against God the Creator at all, but only against a caricature of God, so that they are not really atheists. Williams denies that God creates only as final cause, and shows that Schmidt-Leukel is giving a truncated reading of Aquinas on this point. However, Williams himself fails to grasp the force of a reading of the argument from motion in the key of final causality, wherein motion is passage from potency to act. He tries to state the argument in the key of efficient causality: “*Qua* unmoved mover God is creator of all things inasmuch as He is creator of all change from potency to act” (128–29). This is an inelegant distortion of the first of the Five Ways (*Summa Theologica* I, q. 2, a. 3—not 1a 2, 3, as Williams writes, which suggests unfamiliarity with the text); it also robs the argument of probative force.

José Cabazón’s arguments against Williams have weak spots, and Williams refutes them thoroughly. Cabazón agrees with Williams that Buddhism is atheistic, and that its doctrines are often incompatible with those of Christianity. But when he offers a naïve list of differences between God and a Buddha (95), he shows himself entirely incognizant of the refinements of Christian theism. Against Williams’s claim that Buddhism has no supernatural wonders “so clearly and plausibly demonstrated as the resurrection” (92), he claims that the Buddha’s dramatic levitation is a good rival, apparently oblivious to the question of historicity. Cabazón gives an idealist account of Buddhism, according to which nothing can exist if consciousness doesn’t; Williams has a similar view: “In Prāsanghika Madhyamaka, for example,

all things—absolutely everything—exist in dependence upon the imputing mind. Their very existence is mind-dependent. This includes the existence of the mind itself” (143). It would be more correct to say that the *conventional* existence of things is mind-dependent, whereas one would not say that their ultimate reality, or emptiness, or thusness, is “dependent” on the Buddha-mind that apprehends it.

I am sorry to say that the three quarreling Buddhologists easily steal the show in this volume, as the editor in his introduction and blurb seems rather ruefully to admit. The remaining essays suffer from heterogeneity, not only in relation to one another, but in some cases in their internal composition as well. Elizabeth Harris, Thomas Timpte OSB, and Kajsa Ahlstrand offer sociological information about conversion and religious identity in Sri Lanka, Korea, and Sweden respectively. Jorgen Skov Sorensen advocates fuzzy religious boundaries as giving much-needed “relief from some of the stubborn theological questions of our time” (63). Ruben Habito recounts his spiritual autobiography, engagingly enough. Michael von Brück concludes with a philosophical-cum-psychological discussion of identity and an anatomy of different senses of “pluralism.” In his set of thirteen theses on “multiple religious identity” there is a curious *mélange* of registers, from mundane sociological observation to rather sweeping religious statements, such as the claim that religions are true “only in as much as God is present in them” (204). This is a common flaw in interreligious disquisition; we need to differentiate levels of discourse more precisely and to be chary of sudden transition from one level to another. The angles of philosophy, theology, missiology, confessional preaching, sociology, psychology, history of religions—all have their distinctive concerns; an encyclopedic—or post-modern—brew or smorgasbord can lose the force and clarity of all of them.

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