



Christianity and Buddhism: A Multicultural History of Their Dialogue.
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The Buddhist-Christian dialogue is one of the liveliest expressions of
global interreligious dialogue today. Scores of works, both academic
and popular, have addressed its opportunities and challenges, but the
history of that dialogue, especially in its international dimensions, has
received only slight scholarly scrutiny.

This impressive volume, the product of the collaboration between
an expert in Chinese religions and a theologian specializing in Christian
relations with Asian religions, represents an attempt to remedy the
situation. An abridged translation of the original 1997 German
publication, the book sets the Buddhist-Christian encounter in a
narrative framework that spans over five centuries and covers
developments on three continents. Neither a history of Buddhism in the
West, nor a chronicle of Christianity in Asia, it ambitiously seeks to
capture the range and pattern of the traditions' multicultural
intersection. Issuing from the authors' sense of the urgent need to foster

interreligious dialogue in contemporary society and reflecting a commitment to the best principles of comparative religious studies, the book is an engaging experiment in cross-cultural history.

A prominent feature of the work is its self-conscious attention to methodology. Rendering an account of the dialogue between two massive historic world religions requires an extraordinarily rich database, critically informed historiographical skills, and an empathetic imagination capable of inhabiting multiple points of view simultaneously. The authors bring these resources to bear upon their research, and the result is a highly nuanced, interdisciplinary effort in the history of religion. The book's broad approach to dialogue, entailing all forms of encounter, from missions, polemics, and apologetics to the "international conference culture" (p. 132) of contemporary academia, avoids a false idealism that would skirt potentially embarrassing or disturbing issues of conflict, intolerance, exclusivism, and misunderstanding. Christianity's theological arrogance and imperialist heritage, as well as Buddhism's lackluster social record and often self-declared superiority in the face of Christianity's allegedly irrational doctrine, are tackled carefully and honestly. Likewise, the book's sensitivity to multiple forms of religious identity, shedding new light on modes of interspirituality and "religious dual citizenship" (p. 2) only beginning to find a place in mainstream Western culture, yields an intriguing and fully orbed portrait of various Buddhisms and Christianities interacting in complex patterns of inter- and intrareligious relationship.

Organizationally, the book takes both a diachronic and a geographical approach to its subject matter. Six chapters trace the narrative of Buddhist-Christian encounters through representative geographical and cultural zones. The meetings between Buddhists and Christians in India, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Germany, and the United States receive in-depth and rigorous treatment. Each chapter begins with a section of historical background—setting the parameters for

dialogue—and concludes with both an assessment of the current status of Buddhist-Christian relations and specific proposals for future dialogue given the particulars of the regional situation. Despite the authors' disclaimer referring to the chapters as distinct case studies in a global story, the failure to treat the Buddhist-Christian conversation in areas such as Korea, Southeast Asia, and Great Britain significantly limits the overall effectiveness of the project.

Each case study concentrates on a concrete set of historical problems. The chapter on India, for example, focuses on the overwhelmingly monastic character of interfaith exchange in that context and exposes a disappointingly low level of self-criticism exhibited by both Christian and Buddhist participants. By contrast, the chapter on Sri Lanka, credited with the "longest and most continuous history" (p. 51) of national dialogue, explores the impact of Christianity's colonial legacy and Buddhism's contemporary politicization on the quality and direction of a dialogue that in the twentieth century began to include a third significant party, Marxist ideology. Ironically, the chapter on China, where according to the authors Buddhist-Christian dialogue is "only very weakly developed" (p. 102), provides some of the most fascinating and invaluable material, as it reconstructs the dynamics of historic confrontations between under-studied figures such as Buddhist monk T'ai-hsu and Lutheran missionary Karl Ludwig Reichelt, as well as Taiwanese Buddhist Chu-yun and his Protestant fundamentalist counterpart Wu Yin-po.

By far, the strongest sections of the book are the chapters on dialogue in Japan, Germany, and the United States. The authors characterize the Japanese Buddhist-Christian dialogue as vigorous and productive, due in large part to the common use of historical-critical methods and the categories of post-Enlightenment science and philosophy. Their discussion of the Kyoto School, highlighting the contributions of Nishida Kitaro, Tanabe Hajime, Nishitani Keiji,

Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, and Ueda Shizuteru, is especially helpful for its perceptive analysis of problematic ideas, such as the relation between God and humans and the theme of divine kenosis. Likewise, the balanced coverage of the Zen-Christian dialogue and the dialogue between Christians and Pure Land representatives is a refreshing alternative to more conventional and often partisan Zen-dominated accounts of interreligious contact.

The book's examination of the multi-faceted Buddhist-Christian encounter in Germany and America opens a provocative discussion of contemporary issues dealing with Western religious identity, immigration, ethnicity, conversion, and the "de facto penetration of the [Christian] church with Buddhist thought and Buddhist praxis" (p. 191). The chapter on Germany documents not only the significant degree to which German intellectuals contributed to the formation of academic Buddhist studies but also the different strategies by which Protestant and Catholic theologians have approached dialogue with Buddhist traditions. The chapter on the United States, described as the "showplace of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in the world today" (p. 193), acknowledges the crucial role of the discipline of religious studies in that dialogue, accenting the work of individuals such as Masao Abe, John Cobb, and David Chappell. In both chapters, the authors generally concentrate on academic and ecclesiastical venues for dialogue, giving less attention to the spiritual cross-fertilization occurring in popular culture and the more informal types of dialogue developing between immigrant Buddhist communities and their Christian or post-Christian neighbors.

An aspect of the work that especially enhances its value is its concern for the hermeneutics of dialogue. Throughout the study, the notion of skillful means is exploited as a heuristic device to spark theoretical reflection on the creative interplay of doctrines and the relativity of all doctrinal formulations as provisional and practical constructions. The concluding section on the "hermeneutics of

identity" (p. 244), revisiting the concepts of the "other" and the "foreign" in light of both contemporary pluralism and the globalization of fundamentalism, is one of the best ventures into these topics in the scholarly literature on interreligious dialogue.

There is much to recommend this volume. Buddhist and Christian readers will discover new dimensions of the interface between their respective religious traditions, and participants in any form of interreligious dialogue will gain fresh insights into the principles and history of the wider ecumenism. English readers particularly will profit from this lucid translation of the original. The work invites further investigation into the Buddhist-Christian conversation at the grassroots level and more research into the post-colonial and post-missionary transformations of the dialogue at all levels. Even with its limitations, Christianity and Buddhism is bound to set a new standard for the historical examination of interreligious dialogue on a global scale.