



Rita M. Gross and Terry C. Muck, eds. *Buddhists Talk about Jesus, Christians Talk about the Buddha*. New York: Continuum, 2000, 144 pages, ISBN: 0-8264-1196-7 (paperback), US \$14.95.

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This book is a republishing of a series of articles from the journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (1999). The title describes the structure: four essays on “Jesus Christ through Buddhist Eyes” with two “Christian Responses,” then four essays on “Gautama the Buddha through Christian Eyes” and two “Buddhist Responses.” There is also an introduction and a bibliographic essay at the end. Last spring I used this book in my “Introduction to Religion” course on Buddhism and Christianity. It was a popular reading assignment, and students enjoyed the personal perspectives. Twelve writers are represented, but the essays by Rita Gross, Marcus Borg, Elizabeth Harris, Terry Muck, and Grace Burford got the most attention.

Perhaps the central, recurring issue of the book is that of exclusivism. Rita Gross in particular attacks the idea that Jesus is the only way. She says that it is “among the most dangerous, destructive, and immoral ideas that humans have ever created” (p. 34) and finds it “offensive” (p. 35). She says that no change to Christian theology can “undo the emotional damage done by exclusivist indoctrination, [or] atone for the historical record of inhumane acts and attitudes motivated by exclusivist attitudes” (p. 36). John Dominic Crossan also agrees: “I find such exclusivistic claims for Christianity, or any other religion, insulting in theory and lethal in practice, objectionable in history and obscene in theology” (p. 83).

The assertion of “Truth” (which makes any other “truths” false) be-

comes highly problematic in these essays, most of which show a basically relativistic conception of truth as utility. Christians usually think that their doctrines are “true,” but in contrast, Gross sees doctrines as having “utility rather than truth”—i.e., as *upāya* or expedient means (p. 37). There is also a strong commitment to pluralism: “religious symbol systems could coexist and complement each other like colors of a rainbow” (Gross, p. 39). Doctrines are “ultimately mythopoeic” (Gross, p. 40). Gross and others want a way to “appreciate” Jesus without the exclusivistic truth claims about Jesus.

Jesus’ history is therefore de-mythologized and psychologized: the path to Golgotha “dramatically symbolizes the hardships that anyone is likely to experience in the process of psychological growth” (Machida, p. 65). Hence, he was not really resurrected; it is a “myth” that “symbolizes the birth of a new consciousness in mankind” (Machida, p. 67). As for the exclusivist and absolutist views of Jesus, Marcus Borg notes that “I do not think they are intrinsic or necessary to Christianity” (Borg, p. 79). He affirms a “nonabsolutist, nonexclusivist, nondoctrinal, and nonliteral understanding of Christian scripture and tradition” (p. 81).

Similarly, through a selective reading of Buddhism, the Buddha is resolutely treated as human and de-mythologized. For example, “There is no assumption that the Buddha was pure and immaculate from the moment of birth” (Machida, p. 62). “Buddhist teachings dogmatize a different understanding of the Buddha—that he was human through and through” (Muck, p. 97).

Most, but not all, of the essays have used the Pāli Canon and other Theravāda sources. Donald Swearer notes in the Pāli sources a tension in the views of Buddha. Although he notes the Pāli Canon’s tendency to view Buddha as human, he also describes his reactions to image consecration in Thailand; “it was as though I experienced in the fullness of time not only the instantiation of the universal dharma, but the enfleshment of the universal Logos” (p. 111).

For some, the Buddha’s humanity then becomes a problem: Bonnie Thurston praises the Buddha, who has helped her be a better Christian. “I admire and am attracted to the Buddha, but he pushes me away,” because she feels that she falls short of his “radical self-sufficiency” (p. 123). She finds Jesus more ready to help: “I need help from outside myself” (p. 125). Throughout most of this book, representations of Buddha as cosmic and eternal, as “godlike,” are ignored or regarded only as “popular religiosity” (Muck, p. 98). It takes a Japanese Pure Land Buddhist to recall these aspects: Taitetsu Unno notes that the appreciative Christian essays all focus on the human image of Buddha, not the “numinous” (p. 138). Buddha is more than just “human, through and through” (p. 138, quoting Muck). Unno qualifies

the common idea of Buddha teaching every person to do things for himself/herself. Here we have references to Amida and the *trikāya*. To be fair, Jose Cabezon entertains the magic dimension both of Buddhist saviors and of Jesus, and Elizabeth Harris starts her essay with an account of meditating, seeing a Buddha image, and feeling it “communicating” with her (p. 89).

By the time I got through all the Christian essays on Buddha, with Muck exclaiming “I love both the Buddha and Jesus” (p. 93) and “I would have liked to spend time with the Buddha” (p. 102), I could understand the title of Grace Burford’s essay, “If the Buddha Is So Great, Why Are These People Christians?” In contrast, she is not at all bashful about rejecting Christianity. “I honestly do not expect my predominantly Buddhist worldview to be enriched by learning more about Christianity” (p. 132). My students, even those who were personally hostile to Christianity, were a little embarrassed by the apparent weakness of the Christian arguments. Some students, not all of them Christian, felt Christianity had been “stereotyped.” Another complained of certain “bitter essays” and “harshly biased views.”

When I was preparing to teach my comparative course, I was disappointed by the available publications on Buddhism and Christianity. I found a great number of books taking more or less theological, philosophical, or ethical approaches. What I did not find was anything particularly historical, at least not in a single volume suitable for classroom use. A historical survey of Buddhist-Christian relations has yet to be written, apparently. This book is not intended to give us historical insight on how Buddhists and Christians have perceived each other. Rather, it is closer to a collection of intellectual and religious autobiographies. My orientation as a historian accounts for much of my frustration, rather than the failings of this book, which is interesting, lively, and clearly articulated.