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Review of *The Monk and the Philosopher*

The Monk and the Philosopher: East Meets West in a Father-Son Dialogue By Jean-Francois Revel and Matthieu Ricard. Translated from French by John Canti. London: Thorson, Harper Collins 1998, and 1999. 310 pages, ISBN 0-8052-4162-0 (paperback), US \$14.00

Reviewed by Seyed Javad

University of Bristol
seyedjavad@hotmail.com

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For those interested in political philosophy or social philosophy, Revel is not an unfamiliar voice. Those who have read his *Pourquoi des philosophes?* (Why Philosophers?) or contemplated his tireless concern with the underlying mechanisms of democratic systems and his profound explication and explanation of the notion of the “decline” of the democratic ethos as explained in *How Democracies Perish* will meet the same man of high intellectual acuity and sharpness. Although he has traversed far away from socialism as his favorite politics, nonetheless it is not hard to detect a Revel who is committed to the metaphysics of modern socialism. In other words, readers are confronted with a man who takes “agnosticism” as his onto-epistemological point of departure, and this in turn colors and underpins his existential *Weltanschauung*. However, it is undeniable that readers also encounter a man who is critical of current philosophical modes and soberly reevaluates the history of Western philosophy. He does so, not in the light of fads and foibles (like those that Aleksandrovich Pitirim Sorokin told in relation to social theory and philosophy), but in the light of the inherent merit of philosophy as a way of life: an outlook that might, should or must lead to Sophia.

On the other hand, readers will encounter a son, Matthieu Ricard, who is well-versed in modern science and who has “lived” Buddhism as a way of life. In other words, in this work we are confronted with two poles of reflection and thinking that, in the final analysis, are based on “life-experience”: one as a monachus and the other as a philosophos. The themes of this dialogue are as wide-ranging as the geographical locations from which these two people originate and inhabit. Old and New, East and West, Ancient and Modern, Greek and Pali, Latin and Tibetan, Plato and Lamas: all come in one enlightening dialogue by two great minds from each world tradition. And the most significant aspect of this dialogue is the manner of presentation in which the philosopher asks and the monk replies and in turn puts a question to the philosopher and so on and so forth.

The book is composed of nineteen chapters, one lucid introduction in which the philosopher opens up his heart as a father and talks about his own son, and two conclusions. The first conclusion is by the philosopher, who sums up his own intellectual odyssey after encountering Buddhism from his own horizon. I hasten to add that the philosopher demonstrates in a pedagogical manner what a true and enlightening dialogue really is. A dialogue is not something that allows you to lose yourself or to loosen up the other, but rather is conducted in a poetical dimension in which men of discernible understanding and intellectual acuity attempt to meet each other at the meta-level of horizons. The last conclusion is the monk’s, in which he reaffirms the value of spiritual tradition and, most importantly, the significance of “metaphysical choice,” from which even those so-called natural sciences are not exempt.

Although one has come to understand that in modern times one should make a choice between “scientific pursuit” and “spiritual quest,” nonetheless the monk argues otherwise. His increasing attraction to Buddhism should not be understood as a renouncing of his scientific reasoning, but rather a rejection of the scientific ethos. That is to say, if to be a scientist entails that one should spend a whole life finding solutions for grand issues within the narrow paradigm of normal science and

relegating the individual quest for wisdom, then that attitude, which has become so deeply institutionalized, should be renounced.

Another important aspect of this work is what one might in sociological parlance call “operationalization” of grand issues within both Buddhism and wisdom philosophy. Although Revel has a hard time understanding how Buddhism is different from a religious tradition since ordinary Buddhists in Katmandu behave as any pious Catholic or Hindu would do, nevertheless it is not hard to discern how Ricard takes the teachings of Buddhism into the realm of politics and the philosophy of the Dalai Lama’s non-violence at an international level. In other words, the discussions are not just conducted at the metaphysical level, but instead the whole dialogue is a metaphysically oriented approach to the phenomenal world. Although Revel has a hard time comprehending the non-self philosophy of Buddhism due to his commitment to individualism, nevertheless one should credit the monk when he takes issue with the founding fathers of modern social theory such as William James and Sigmund Freud by putting forward the notion of the “Contemplative Science of Mind.”

As a student of social sciences, I could not help being excited when the monk critically assessed the essential aspects of modern social theory in general and William James in particular. In examining the current debates within social theory in particular those where one thinks of identity and self as a social construction and where the very ideas of “consciousness” and “streams of consciousness” are accepted at their face value one can see how the monk takes us to a higher level of understanding. The lack of proper understanding of the functioning of the mind on the part of analytical philosophers or scientists is not of an “analytical” nature, Ricard states. On the contrary, he argues that for the last two centuries, the West has taken very little interest in contemplative science. In other words, the road to liberation is not via analysis alone. One, as Rumi states, is in need of gnosis or as the monk puts it: the science of mind. As Ricard time and again argues, Buddhism’s choice is based on experience through contemplation. This is because the ultimate nature of reality which ultimately informs our epistemology, constitutes the very basis of our ontology, and at the end colors our very personal ethos cannot be comprehended through mere discourse analysis. Although the philosopher is aware that within the Western philosophical tradition the very idea of theory, before its modernization, did mean a “direct vision” of reality, nevertheless he cannot commit himself to the idea of a non-material consciousness. And it is at this point that the monk puts forward what he calls the “metaphysical choice.” By this the monk means that if the very nature of consciousness within a neurobiological model is considered to be “material,” that is not established by hard scientific proof. On the contrary, the neurobiologists assume that this approach would shed more light on the functioning of mind as a brain than the contemplation of sages or hermits does. By arguing that Buddhism, like all other sacred traditions, holds that nothing conscious could arise from something that was inanimate, the monk neutralizes the “argument by empiricity” put forward by the philosopher.

Could one think of a morality that is not based on any sacred tradition? And how would such a morality encounter the current waves of violence in the modern

city? These questions lead to the problem of modern policy and politics and the role of spiritual traditions. The philosopher argues, in contrast to Buddhism, that the majority of intellectuals over the last three hundred years have accepted that making man more moral and achieving justice can only be done by creating a new society that is more just, more balanced, and more egalitarian. But the monk would not agree that a healthy communal life is possible without the pursuit of wisdom by all the members of the community, regardless of the degree of attainment.

Within a postmodern frame of thought, issues such as “progress,” “secularism,” “ideology,” “religion,” “public,” “private,” and so many other aspects of modernity have come under severe attack. But so far, one cannot find any coherent thread of thought that could shed a light on the life of man as a temporary resident on this planet. As a matter of fact, some have made public that the very creed of postmodernism is its declaration of “fragmentalism” as the real fate of man. One of the major issues, which necessitate that one consider both postmodernism and modernism as similar expressions of secular ontology, is the notion of human nature as presented by psychoanalysis. Here again the monk objects to the philosopher’s perspective by stating that Buddhism does not agree with Freud’s notion that spiritual method cannot reach the inner realm of man. Buddhism’s approach diverges from that of psychoanalysis in terms of the means used to attain liberation. I hasten to add that the very idea of liberty is different in Buddhism and psychoanalysis, because the latter does not identify the basic causes of ignorance and inner enslavement that are the main concerns of Buddhism.

The idea of science is what the philosopher refers to time and again. As a matter of fact, it is the basis of his metaphysical agnosticism. But the assumption by the philosopher in relation to science is worth considering. It seems that Revel defines “science” as an act of “knowing” about the mechanism of life, but calls “religion” a way of “being” in life. To say the least, this categorical distinction between knowing and being (and referring the former to the cognitive aspect of man and the latter to the emotional or metaphysical) is more of a recent secular ethos than a universal and absolute category. And one more unconvincing aspect of Revel’s argument was that he keeps forgetting one tremendously essential aspect in Buddhism (as in all sacred traditions), namely to “live” the teachings of Buddha and not theorize about that teaching. Or as the monk puts it very eloquently:

. . . no dialogue, however enlightening it might be, could ever be a substitute for the silence of personal experience, so indispensable for an understanding of how things really are. Experience, indeed, is the path. And as the Buddha often said, ‘it is up to you to follow it,’ so that one day the messenger might become the message.

This is the wisdom shared by all sacred traditions wherein man is not an insignificant accident but rather a cosmos in miniature. Hence the experiential dimension cannot be dispensed with due to either sociopolitical engineering or utopian projects. On the contrary, as long as man is a man, he is in need of spirituality, and the spiritual path as the monk advises us begins with a period of retreat from the

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world, like a wounded deer looking for a solitary, peaceful spot where it can heal its wounds.

However, I would like to sum up this review by noting that at the end of the dialogue, I came to realize that the father surely met his son. However, I am doubtful about any “meeting” between East and West having taken place, in particular when these terms are taken more in terms of metaphorical designations rather than geographical locations. Could the East meet the West? Maybe!