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Keith Yandell and Harold Netland, BUDDHISM: A CHRISTIAN EXPLORATION AND APPRAISAL

Mark D. Linville

will not be a question preying on the mind of many of Trakakis's readers. For those that do decide that they need more time for contemplation than a university environment allows, there are plenty of empty rooms in the monasteries of the world. Trakakis would no doubt object, though, that swapping one institution for another is to miss the point of his argument.

Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal, by Keith Yandell and Harold Netland. InterVarsity Press, 2009. Pp. 230. $22.00 (paperback).

MARK D. LINVILLE, Clayton State University

G. K. Chesterton once observed that it was fashionable in his day to suppose that "Christianity and Buddhism are very much alike, especially Buddhism." Though he risked being found out of step with his times, Chesterton went on not only to challenge the equivalence, but also to argue for the greater plausibility of Christian orthodoxy.

The authors of *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* are at similar risk. They describe their book as being a "part of a genre known as interreligious polemics or interreligious apologetics," which, they note, "strikes many as inappropriate" (xv). A chief end of interreligious dialogue by many students of religion is the promotion of mutual understanding and respect among adherents of the different world religions. To many such readers, the very idea of urging reasons for thinking that the religious beliefs of others may be false is anathema.

However, Yandell and Netland argue that it is more respectful of a tradition to take its central truth claims seriously—and to engage them as such—than it is to downplay the doctrinal differences that adherents themselves regard as being of great significance. And they observe that there is no necessary connection between thinking a religious belief false and treating those who hold the belief in a manner that is inappropriate. (One might add that thinking some religious doctrines false is a necessary condition of thinking any of them *true*. To believe a thing is to believe it to be true, and to believe it to be true entails thinking any and all contrary beliefs false. If there is anything inappropriate about thinking any religious beliefs false, the only remedy would thus seem to be to refrain from believing anything at all.)

Further, it is commonly asserted that, while exclusivism appears to be a hallmark of Western religious traditions, such is not to be found in the Asian traditions. The authors do much to dispel this notion—which seems itself to be a hallmark of Western religious studies departments—noting that there is a long tradition of interreligious polemic among the Asian traditions themselves. This point is argued explicitly in the introduction and amply illustrated in the ensuing discussion of the various schools of Buddhism as they have encountered other traditions.

Yandell and Netland divide their book into six chapters. The first three provide a nice account of the origins of Buddhism against its Vedic backdrop, and its subsequent migration to China, Japan and the rest of Asia, and, much later, to the West. The reader will find a helpful summary of the various schools of Buddhism—Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, etc.—and will have a sense of how Buddhist thought evolved as it encountered other religious perspectives, such as Taoism. Perhaps of particular interest to Christians is the authors' comparison of Pure Land Buddhism, with its doctrine of grace, to Protestant Christianity. There are also helpful discussions of Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism—arguably the two varieties best known in the West—and the relation that they bear to classical Buddhism. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of the profound influence of two scholars of Zen Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki and Masao Abe, and the way in which their scholarship has come to shape the Western perception of Zen, as well as Buddhism in general. The discussion of Abe notes some controversy among Zen scholars regarding the moral implications of Abe's metaphysics, as ultimate reality is said to transcend all distinctions, including that between good and evil.

Chapter 4, "Aspects of Buddhist Doctrine," opens with a defense of the approach that is to follow. The claim is that Buddhism, though often viewed as being practical in its concerns, with a soteriological rather than metaphysical focus, *does*, in fact, make assertions about the nature of reality. As with all religions, Buddhism begins with a diagnosis of the human predicament and then goes on to prescribe a remedy. As with most Indian religions, Buddhism diagnoses the fundamental problem as ignorance of the true nature of reality, and prescribes a cure in the form of enlightenment—an overcoming of ignorance through a full realization of the true nature of things.

Different Indian religious systems offer different accounts of what that true nature amounts to. A standard Buddhist account has it that everything is radically impermanent. The fundamental and pervasive error that holds us in bondage is the false belief that there are enduring substances, and, more specifically, that we are enduring, substantial selves. (This false belief is responsible for selfish grasping and a futile search for lasting happiness in a world that is inherently unsatisfactory.) The truth is that composite existing things, such as people and pagodas, are mere constructs. Only the simple constituents of such things exist, and these are momentary. Each originates in dependence upon its causal antecedent, endures for only an instant, and is replaced by its causal descendant. At any given time, what we call a person is a bundle of these constituents, and a person *over* a period of time is a causally linked series of such bundles.

Much of chapter 4 is given to the question of whether there is a coherent way of putting the requisite metaphysics that is also capable of accommodating other essential Buddhist tenets. Perhaps the most crucial concern is that *something* must exist in order to manifest the allegedly erroneous belief, *There are enduring conscious minds*, and in order for the Buddhist

account to be true that something must be other than such a mind. Essentially, it must be possible to account for such beliefs by appeal to a variety of "unowned" *conscious states*.

The chapter also considers whether the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination is compatible with the sort of freedom that is presupposed by Buddhist talk of karma and enlightenment. The doctrine requires that, at any time, every momentary state that constitutes a bundle that we think of as a "person" is the inevitable consequence of prior momentary states (which, in fact, are a part of a beginningless sequence of such states). But then it is difficult to see how any account of free will—short of compatibilism—can be accommodated, for it would seem to require *unconditioned* states within the sequence, which are precluded by the doctrine. The authors explore the sort of account that might be available given the constraints of other Buddhist metaphysical commitments.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of several possible Buddhist approaches to accounting for the doctrine of Nirvana. Among them is the suggestion that there *is* no accounting for it, as it is, in fact, *ineffable*. But, the authors argue, if the ineffability of Nirvana *ends* all such discussion, it serves equally well to "preclude any beginning of the discussion of Nirvana." Buddhist traditions typically describe Nirvana in "honorific terms." But "if it is literally ineffable, then it is not better described in one way better than another. It is as accurate to describe it as hell in which torture is carried out by gods and goddesses who are masters of their wicked trade as it is to describe it in terms that might make it desirable to a sane person" (142). People who like to speak of their religious ultimate as "ineffable" tend to cheat, as they violate the ineffability ban on property ascription just long enough to say what their religious beliefs otherwise require.

Generally, the discussion is valuable for looking past common metaphors and asking hard questions about what the actual metaphysics must look like if the doctrines are to be taken literally and with any seriousness. Some may object to the somewhat ahistorical nature of the discussion, as the focus is more upon what the Buddhist might *possibly* say, given certain commitments, as opposed to exegesis of what any particular Buddhists have, in fact, said. In my opinion, this is the very charm and strength of the chapter as it is precisely what is required in order to understand the philosophical implications of the doctrines.

Chapter 5, "Some Buddhist Schools and Issues," considers three varieties of Buddhism: the "heretical" Personalist school, which appeared in the third century, Nagarjuna's Madhyamika school, which is one of the more influential Mahayana traditions, and "Buddhist Reductionism," which includes a number of traditions claiming that the objects of common sense belief are mere constructs, and that reality is exhausted by more basic constituents, such as fleeting mental or physical states.

The Personalist school emerged, and, for a time, enjoyed a great deal of popularity, largely because some philosophers within the Buddhist

tradition concluded that adequate accounts of personal identity, action, karma and rebirth, or enlightenment cannot be had on the standard Buddhist views of dependent origination, impermanence and no-self (anatman). It is enlightening to discover that such philosophical worries are not limited to Western analytic—and Christian—philosophers. But here is where closer attention to actual texts might have been desirable instead of textually unsupported references to this or that "Personalist argument." Perhaps a running discussion of such texts could have been included in the footnotes.

Discussion of Madhyamika is given largely to three interpretations. On a nihilist interpretation, nothing whatsoever ultimately exists. Not only is this suggestion rife with difficulties (for one thing, were it true there would be no one around either to affirm or deny it), but it is generally not thought to be a correct interpretation of Madhyamika. On an Absolutist interpretation, which strongly resembles Shankara's doctrine of Brahman, all that exists is a qualityless and immutable ultimate. This faces the objection once implied by Ramanuja's challenge to Advaita Vedanta: If nothing but this qualityless reality exists and the experience of plurality is an illusion, then who or what suffers from the illusion? The "ineffabilist" interpretation has it that reality is such that no linguistic concepts whatsoever apply to it. Here, the troubles with the notion of ineffability are revisited and developed further.

Finally, in discussing Buddhist Reductionism, the very idea of reductionism, as applied, for instance, to artifacts, is explored as is the notion of emergent properties. (Are there cases in which the right recipe of basic ingredients may result in a property of the whole that is not possessed of its individual parts, such as when a living or conscious being appears to be made of non-living and non-conscious elements?) There is some overlap with a portion of the discussion of chapter 4 here, but, on the whole, this is a metaphysical feast.

The final chapter, "The Dharma or the Gospel?" accomplishes two main purposes. First, it highlights significant differences between Buddhist and Christian doctrines, thus offering strong counterevidence to the still popular claim that they are "very much alike." To take just one of the examples given, whereas Buddhism identifies the root problem of humanity as *ignorance*, Christianity insists that our trouble is sin—willful rebellion against God. If the Buddhist holds that knowledge—in the form of enlightenment—is sufficient for virtue, the Christian denies this. The demons believe and tremble. Second, the authors consider a number of historical Buddhist challenges to Christian doctrines and offer a defense.

Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal fills a void in the available literature. There is an abundance of discussions of Buddhism that are largely descriptive and comparative in nature, or that focus upon various cultural aspects of the religion as opposed to the doctrines themselves. As noted above, there is resistance among many religious scholars to engage in, or even countenance, the rational assessment of religious

doctrines and their supporting considerations. This is a work in philosophy of religion that manages to include the *philosophy* side of that equation. Readers new to philosophy may find portions of the book—chapters 4 and 5, in particular—to be challenging, but the fruit of such labor is not merely a grasp of what Buddhist doctrines might or do mean, but also a sense of what it is to offer careful and respectful assessment of those doctrines, for this book is a model of such. One wishes that the publisher would see fit to regard this text as but the first in a collection of similar books on world religions.

The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology, by Paul K. Moser. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xi + 292. $90.00 (hardback).

CHAD MEISTER, Bethel College

The objective of *The Elusive God* is bold—no less than a "Copernican Revolution" in cognitive matters with respect to divine reality. The primary thesis is that one should expect that evidence of divine reality is available to human beings only in a manner fitting to the purposes of an authoritative and perfectly loving God. Given that such evidence is only *purposively* available, we should not be surprised, argues Professor Moser, that it is (oftentimes, at least) subtle, incognito, or elusive, for it entails volitional surrender to divine authority and "attunement" to the will of God. It is only when we turn from our selfish ways, through divine aid, that we advance evidentially and therefore cognitively—learning to entrust ourselves to the One who can save us from selfishness and imminent death. This reorientation of religious knowledge also shifts the explanatory burden to skeptics, Moser contends, and removes the threat of skepticism to the central argument of this book for the reality of the elusive God.

The book centers around three questions about evidence for God's existence: 1) If God's existence is elusive, why should we believe that God exists after all? 2) If God does exist, and if God desires to commune with us and to guide us into a mature, moral life, why is God elusive? 3) What are the implications of divine hiddenness with respect to knowledge of God? The opening chapter begins by arguing that religious skeptics—those who maintain that the evidence for God is inadequate for belief in God—have been focusing on "spectator evidence" and have overlooked "perfectly authoritative evidence" of divine reality. The former points to a particular truth but does not demand that the recipients of that truth yield their wills to its source. The latter is evidence that requires an authoritative call on one's life, most significantly on one's will to non-coercively yield to God's moral character and perfect love. Spectator evidence is the kind proffered by natural theology, and Moser dismisses it as the kind of evidence unbefitting the Jewish/Christian God. For one, he maintains, it is nonbiblical.