

1982

Buddhism and Christianity by George Siegmund

Philip Novak

Department of Religion and Philosophy, Dominican University of California,
philip.novak@dominican.edu

Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Novak, Philip, "Buddhism and Christianity by George Siegmund" (1982). *Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. 133.

<https://scholar.dominican.edu/all-faculty/133>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty and Staff Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact michael.pujals@dominican.edu.

Some of this inconsistency plagues *Zen Action's* philosophical post-script which proposes to establish contemporary Zen-influenced Morita psychotherapy, whose nonself-centered acceptance of phenomenological reality (*arugamama*) is action- and present-oriented rather than retrospective and introspective, as a "new basis for humanism" applicable to Western individualism and secularism. The intriguing and potentially rewarding epilogue overlooks three main concerns: what exactly is the Zen foundation of Morita doctrine; isn't the central Morita analysis of the condition of *shinkeishitsu* or interpersonal tensions and phobia (Kasulis: "nervousness") uniquely pertinent to the Japanese social context; and finally, is it philosophically appropriate to speak of "Zen humanism" without distorting the meaning of nothingness? Concerning the latter, it would perhaps be helpful to refer to Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," which exposes the subjectivist/substantialist underpinnings of existential psychoanalysis, to clarify and connect Eastern and Western nonhomocentric approaches to authentic personhood.

Yet, these drawbacks do not interfere with the central premise or observations of the work, which functions on several levels simultaneously. First, it offers a solid and provocative introduction to the historical and doctrinal development of Zen, surpassing previous studies which are uncertain about their own philosophical presuppositions in interpreting Zen doctrine. Also, the impeccable scholarship of *Zen Action* informs the specialist on the interrelatedness between the classical and modern stages of the Japanese philosophical tradition as well as laying the ground and showing the directions for continuing comparative philosophical encounter and dialogue.

STEVEN HEINE
Temple University

Buddhism and Christianity. By George Siegmund. University of Alabama Press, 1980. Pp. 197. \$19.50.

Influenced by the sympathetic explorations of Thomas Merton, William Johnston and Hugo Enomiya-LaSalle (to name but a few) Christians have over the last decade or so shown an increasing willingness to learn from the Buddhist tradition. An environment in which interest is accompanied by a deep bow of respect is precious and worthy of preservation, and it is for this reason that *Buddhism and Christianity* deserves attention. It threatens that environment.

This republication of a work written in 1968 and translated from the German by Sister Mary Frances McCarthy is subtitled "A Preface to Dialogue." It is a gross misnomer. If there is a recent work that can stop dialogue dead in its tracks, it is this one. This book is a display of error, caricature, and oversimplification that seems inexcusable in light of the scholarship of the last thirty years. Equally disconcerting is the disdainful arrogance that Mr. Siegmund shows toward non-European and non-Christian modes of thought and action. This is not comparative religion but competitive religion of a sort I thought had died long ago. Though Siegmund alone is criticized below, perhaps large parts of the blame lie with his translator and publisher who, twelve years after its original publication, during which time more carefully considered dialogues between Buddhism and

Christianity have been published, still thought the book worthy of presentation to an English-speaking public.

Siegmund seems to put Buddhism on trial for not responding to the spiritual life in Christian categories. "Buddha demanded no 'faith'" (p. 11), he tells us. This is simply false. Faith (*śraddhā*) is one of the five cardinal virtues of early Buddhism and is highly extolled in all of its later schools. Though Buddhist faith may have some connotations not shared by Christian faith, its fundamental meaning points to that radical openness and commitment of the heart that characterizes Christian faith at its best. To imply that the Buddha discouraged or even downplayed this human capacity is wrong.

We are also told that the Buddhist has no adequate notion of sin. Siegmund accuses the Buddha, perhaps history's ideal contemplative, of a "premature cessation of reflection on his own being" (p. 86), which then "deprived him of an understanding of the fact that there *must* have been a first, original sin" (p. 86; emphasis mine). For Buddhists, "sin" is the state of being alienated from Truth. They call it *avidyā*, ignorance, and describe it as beginningless. I find no reason, other than an a priori dogmatic one, for calling this notion of sin inadequate.

Siegmund betrays his lack of scholarship when throughout the book he calls Buddhism life-denying, nihilistic, despairing, and pessimistic. This perspectival error has been repeatedly corrected by numerous modern scholars. A similar obfuscation occurs regarding the Buddhist goals of Enlightenment and Nirvana. The author describes them as quests for or experiences of absolute nothingness. Few warnings in Buddhist literature are as prevalent as the one regarding the mistake of identifying *nirvāṇa* with emptiness or nothingness. Siegmund seem not to have heard them.

The Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* is also misconstrued. Siegmund charges the Buddhist with a rejection of individuation and a denial of personhood due to a "lack of personal maturity" (p. 85). The Buddhist, he says, is like a spiteful child who, if he can't have everything, that is, absolute possession of self, wants nothing.

Siegmund's denigrations extend even to the Asian intellect. "The East," he says, "has already decided . . . that intellectual awareness is a negative value it seeks to avoid" (p. 131). He argues that "Buddhism holds itself aloof from every form of critical reflection and is unable to draw basic distinctions" (p. 84); it is "incapable of differentiated thinking" (p. 87). Those familiar with the long and still vital tradition of Buddhist philosophy will find these assertions appalling.

Siegmund's charges are so consistently false that one begins to suspect not error, but malice, lurking between the lines. Buddhist humanism "contains no demand for positive action . . . no stimulus to the work that leads to culture" (p. 57). "Buddhism lacks the concept of an objective mission to which man must do justice and the achievement of which brings positive happiness" (p. 105). And finally, "in contrast to Jesus Christ, Buddha is not a well-defined individual from whom there issued positive impulses for the genuine healing and conversion of mankind" (p. 163).

Occasionally Siegmund offers to mitigate a harsh or absolutistic pronouncement he has made. After blaming Buddhism for unrelieved negativity, he might demure a bit with "a positive absolute is dimly perceptible" (p. 57). But these concessions are so weakly and infrequently stated that their impressions in the reader's mind are easily overpowered by the force of their antitheses.

There are some bright spots in the book. Some of Siegmund's ideas—for example, that

comparative religion should be approached from an existential angle (the “restless yearnings of the human heart”) rather than from a purely doctrinal one—are potentially very helpful. But in a time when there is no dearth of wholly excellent material, I cannot recommend a work whose chaff makes its wheat all but invisible.

PHILIP NOVAK (Ph.D)

Dominican College

Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions. Edited by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980. Pp. xxv 342. \$27.50.

If one were asked to name the most important elements of the Indian conceptual scheme, there is little doubt that karma and the related concepts concerning rebirth would hold pride of place. And yet, until now there has been no reliable book-length examination of the complexities of karma. This valuable volume has now filled that gap. Twelve essays, all by noted scholars, present us with, as editor and contributor Wendy O’Flaherty remarks in her insightful introduction, “the fruits of our preliminary treasure-hunting: all you wanted to know about karma and never dared (bothered?) to ask” (p. xii).

This is an excellent and important book: important because it systematically addresses a central though much neglected topic of the Indian tradition; excellent because it attains a high standard in each of the twelve essays: clear presentation, a wealth of information, and an overall theoretical coherence which allows for a comprehensive presentation of the ideas about karma as they appear in the Classical Indian texts.

The book is the product of several scholarly meetings known as the “Karma Conferences” which were organized by Karl Potter of the University of Washington (Seattle). Editor Wendy O’Flaherty has expertly crafted the results of these conferences into an organized and highly useful collection. O’Flaherty informs us that at the first conference the search for a definition of karma and rebirth was “lively but ultimately vain” (p. xi). At the end of the second conference a year later, some agreement had been reached. Says O’Flaherty,

the general consensus that we were dealing with a theory of rebirth based on the moral quality of previous lives was further refined by A. K. Ramanujan (A) and Charles Keyes (B): The three essential constituents of a karma theory are A: (1) causality (ethical or non-ethical, involving one life or several lives); (2) ethicization (the belief that good and bad acts lead to certain results in one life or several lives); (3) rebirth. B: (1) explanation of present circumstances actions prior to birth; (2) orientation of present actions toward future ends, including (possibly) those occurring after death; (3) moral basis on which action past and present is predicated (p. xi).

Undercutting this consensus, however, is an important theoretical ambiguity which clearly is found in the tradition itself: whether karma or merit can be transferred from one individual to another. In attempting to resolve this issue, two opposing lines of thought emerge. The first, the transference, or transactional *pravṛtti* model of Hindu society is set forth by the anthropologist McKim Marriott (Marriott did not contribute to the volume, but was present at the conferences, and the influence of his thought is apparent in many of the essays in the book). The other, the non-transference, non-transactional *nivṛtti* model,