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Book Review: *The Ethics of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva: A Selfless Response to an Illusory World.*

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invites the contemporary readers to learn lessons from our cultural past to become active agents in promoting an atmosphere of mutual trust and friendship with the religious other.

This book provides excellent resource materials for further research in the field of

Cross-Cultural Studies, Mission History and Hindu-Christian Dialogue.

James Ponniah

Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune.

The Ethics of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva: A Selfless Response to an Illusory World.
Warren Lee Todd, Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2013,
220+xii pages.

THE difficulties of the eighth-century CE teacher Śaṅkara's ethics, and the moral consequences of non-dualism more generally, will be familiar to many readers of this journal. The so-called *tat-tvam-asi* ethic—contending that one serves others because of the same ultimate self in all beings—has been roundly criticised by interpreters such as Karl Potter and Paul Hacker. It generally founders on the Advaita insistence on the illusory or sublatale character of all phenomenal, individual selves. How is it possible to serve the interests of others, when there are—ultimately—no others to serve? At least in theory, the doctrine of no-self (*an-ātman*), such as that propounded by Śaṅkara's rough contemporary, the Mādhyamika Buddhist Śāntideva, would seem to complicate the non-dualist ethical quandary still further.

In *The Ethics of Śaṅkara and Śāntideva*, Warren Lee Todd seizes this dilemma by the horns in a more than figurative sense, insofar as he suggests that altruism can be sought and found in these non-dualist teachings only by placing their shared doctrine of Two Truths or two levels of understanding at the center of their respective worldviews. The realized sage and even more so the aspirant on the path, on

this reading, “flickers” back and forth between conventional and ultimate perspectives—either voluntarily, in the case of Śāntideva, or due to the residual effect of *prārabdha karma*, in the case of Śaṅkara (24-25, 139-40). From Auguste Comte (1798-1857), via the contemporary ethicist Samuel P. Oliner, Todd defines altruism as “1) the eradication of self-centred desire, and 2) a life devoted to the good of others” (37). Whereas “Western altruism” presumes the reality of self and others and then “demands a temporary ‘sacrifice’” of this self (143), the altruism of the Buddhist *bodhisattva* or Advaitin *jīvan-mukta* presumes instead the ultimate selflessness of all beings and then demands a temporary construction of other selves for the purpose of service or liberative instruction. “This is not a simple ‘other-regarding’ ethics; it is an ‘other-constructing’ ethics” (142-43). Or, as he restates the same idea in his conclusion, “The initial task [is] to deconstruct the self so as to become selfless. The further task [is] to then reconstruct the suffering other, so as to be capable of empathising with their confused condition” (199).

Taken only thus far, Todd's proposal is already worth serious consideration, pressing beyond simplistic truisms about these

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traditions toward a more nuanced assessment. The proposal is all the more impressive for the detailed textual work that supports it. The first two chapters set up Todd's project, first in very general terms (ch. 1) and then with reference to "flickering consciousness" as a new, constructive ethical model (ch. 2), developed initially from the teachings of Śāntideva and Śāṅkara themselves and then in dialogue with continental philosophy and contemporary virtue theory. Four subsequent chapters draw out the comparison in more detail, noting both similarities and a fundamental, ontological difference in their respective systems (ch. 3); identifying common threads in their shared refutation of Yogācāra, their shared "denial of the ultimacy of the individuated self" (81) and their shared, seemingly paradoxical renunciation and affirmation of traditional codes of conduct (ch. 4); tracing their respective visions of knowledge, liberation, and the practical necessity for continued action in the form of teaching (ch. 5); and, finally, reconstructing the "selfless," compassionate ethic that motivates such continued striving, even on the part of the liberated sage (ch. 6). Throughout the discussion, the Buddhist Śāntideva emerges as the true altruist: his ethic of other-construction is more clearly developed in his exposition of the Bodhsattva Vow, and his vision of service more all-encompassing. Śāṅkara's ethic only approximates such a universal view. Nevertheless, as Todd demonstrates in chapter 7, both teachers upheld traditional gender and caste restrictions. This paradoxically reveals both the ethical seriousness with which they regarded the empirical world and their mutual failure to extend the selfless altruism of their own teachings to its fullest extent. Whether

the coherence of Śāṅkara and Śāntideva on these matters is quite so surprising and remarkable as Todd repeatedly insists—Bhāskara, among many others, labeled Śāṅkara a crypto-Buddhist, and Todd himself freely traces core ideas from both teachers to Nāgārjuna (e.g. 128)—his comparison nicely highlights their respective teachings as a distinctive, credible alternative to Western ethics of altruism and self-gift.

Though this work is not explicitly directed to Hindu-Christian studies, it begins with Nietzsche's challenge to Western theism, and the dialogue with Greek, Jewish and Christian ethics serves as a backdrop for the project as a whole. This is most explicit in chapter 2, particularly in its discussion of virtue theory. Todd insists that "active altruism *does not* represent a virtue ethics" (31), but he does this by focusing primarily on one element—that is, the cultivation of happiness. This he does at the expense of what I would regard as a more fundamental emphasis of most virtue ethics on character-formation through habituated practice, which seems to be at the very center of the ethic Todd discerns in Śāṅkara and Śāntideva. It is trivially true that Hindu and "Buddhist ethics 'cannot be satisfactorily analyzed through Western categories' (40, quoting Gunapala Dharmasiri) in the sense of semantic equivalence, but this book itself reveals that such categories can be stretched, re-signified and fruitfully employed for the purposes of comparative study. Todd's creative and constructive work is, at the end of the day, more convincing than his apologetics.

Though ostensibly a comparison of these two very particular eighth-century teachers from Buddhist and Hindu traditions, this work stands out as a useful resource for anyone

interested in comparative religious ethics—and, particularly, the ethics of self-gift, altruism and social egalitarianism. A preface by the Dalai Lama adds gravitas to the study, and helps to situate it more firmly as the truly constructive proposal that it is. It will reward close reading

by students of Advaita, Buddhism and moral philosophy.

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***His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence.*
Francis X. Clooney, S.J. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013,
208pp.**

WITH his opening words, Francis Clooney indicates to his reader that the content of *His Hiding Place is Darkness* is “first of all” a reading of the Hebrew *Song of Songs* alongside the Hindu *Holy Word of Mouth*. Nevertheless, he maintains, what “matter most” throughout the text are the themes of “love and the absence of the beloved” (ix). These two components form an apt description of the book, the body of which is divided into three “Acts” and two “Entr’actes.” Each of the Acts is constituted by a reading of these sacred texts together, while the “Entr’actes” draw on theologians and poets in order to highlight the aforementioned themes Clooney wishes to emphasize in carrying out his comparative theological task.

True to form, Clooney does not read these works in a vacuum, but rather according to dominant traditions of interpretation in his native Roman Catholicism and in Srivaishnava Hinduism. Accordingly, he explores the *Song of Songs* in dialogue with Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Gilbert of Hoyland (twelfth-century), and John of Ford (1140-1214), while reading the *Holy Word of Mouth* with Nanjiyar (1182-1287) and Nampillai (thirteenth-fourteenth century). By employing this strategy, Clooney engages in the comparative

theological task while remaining firmly grounded in the hermeneutics set forth by authoritative interpreters within these respective religious traditions. According to these interpretive traditions, both texts concern a woman’s longing after her sometimes absent beloved, but the deeper importance of these poems is that they allegorically represents the relationship between the believer and their beloved divinity (here, Christ and Krishna, respectively).

What both texts intensify in each other, when read together, is the sense that the beloved divinity, whether it be Christ in the medieval Christian reading of the *Song* or Krishna in the Srivaishnava reading of the *Holy Word*, is absent and longed for because he often appears absent. Both texts emphasize “*being alone, searching, and in the face of absence, conjuring the beloved in fierce remembrance*” (45). Reading these texts together helps to further unsettle the reader’s sense of the identity of the divine, Clooney argues, because it ensures that “we escape with no easy discovery of the beloved” (31). In order to demonstrate how it is possible to so deeply unsettle even the identity of the divine and still be engaging in theology, Clooney draws, in the