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Buddhism: The Path to Nirvana (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

From a Monastery Kitchen. Brother Victor-Antoine D'Avila-Latourrette. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1989, 128 pp. Reviewed by Arnold Koekkoek, Associate Professor of History.

This delightful book will dispel any notion you might have had—if, indeed, you ever thought about the matter—that a monastic diet meant bread, water, and oatmeal, with a few vegetables and perhaps an occasional piece of fish thrown in. Brother Victor is a monk and cook at a priory in the state of New York, and his collection shows that some modern monks, at least, eat quality meals. From soups to salads to main dishes to desserts, this volume focuses on healthful, natural foods, simple but definitely not plain or dull. In keeping with the Benedictine prescription, there are no meat recipes, but there are a number of recipes for fish and for crops harvested from the monastery gardens. On the last few pages are basic recipes for sauces, pastries, and spice mixtures that can be used by any

cook, whether the rest of the book is used for cooking or just read for pleasure.

The recipes appeal to the taste buds; any number of them made me want to rush out and try them at once. But there is much more, for the book appeals to the eye as well. On each page a medieval wood cut illustration is featured, along with poetry and quotations, all of which enhance the monastic mood. One not only learns about good food, but one can learn something about monasticism as well.

In every way Brother Victor's book is a pleasure to read, and I anticipate its practical value in our kitchen as well. If you like good food, if you want a different slant on monasticism, if you enjoy a beautiful book, I recommend *From a Monastery Kitchen*. I couldn't put it down.

Buddhism: The Path to Nirvana. Robert C. Lester, Religious Traditions of the World Series. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1987. 160 pages. \$7.95. Reviewed by Anne C. Kwantes, visiting instructor in history/theology.

Robert C. Lester, professor in the religious studies department of the University of Colorado at Boulder, presents his readers with a detailed, yet clear, exposition of Buddhism. Claiming that both the philosophical and mystical aspects of Buddhism have appeal for contemporary Americans (143), Lester weaves the themes of monasticism and meditation throughout this exposition.

It has been estimated that some five hundred thousand Americans, most of them of non-Asian descent, profess to be Buddhists (140); the purpose of this work is one of helping its readers to understand living Buddhism (17). This volume ably serves as an introduction to the complex Buddhist religious movement. Covering more than two thousand years, and several Asian countries, the author systematically explains the tenets and history of various strains of Buddhism.

In an introduction of a mere seven pages he covers central Buddhist concepts. The next two chapters

relate the historical growth and the spread of Buddhism, and deal with Buddhist thought and practices in greater detail. As the author discusses the Buddhist system of beliefs and practices, he reminds us repeatedly that Theravada Buddhism, with its emphasis on self-discipline, is intimately related to Mahayana Buddhism, which stresses compassion.

Chapter 4 concerns the dynamics of the Buddhist life. It portrays in great detail how Theravada Buddhism is practiced in a village of Thailand and portrays the delicate balance of the "making" of merit by monks and the "sharing" of merit by the laity. We see then how Mahayana Buddhists, here represented by Zen monks in Japan, seek enlightenment through meditation. The author then briefly reviews the major experiences of Buddhism in Asia, and notes how certain Buddhist teachings have come to America.

In his concluding reflections Lester discusses the inclusivity of Buddhism, and its dual focus on self-

power on the one hand, and that of reliance-on-other-power on the other hand. In a provocative, and rather startling final observation, he argues that the traditional Western characterization of Buddhism as a basically pessimistic worldview has been inaccurate; in Lester's view, Buddhism is strongly world-affirming (145).

The map and chronology in the front part of the book, and the glossary at the back, are useful in understanding facts concerning Buddhism, and in

The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam. Cyril Glasse. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., March 1989). Introduction by Huston Smith. Hardcover, 472 pp. \$59.95. Reviewed by Anne C. Kwantes, visiting instructor in history/theology.

Islam is said to be the fastest growing world religion today; it is expected that, by the year 2000, the world's Muslim population will number one billion. In spite of this, Islam is generally not well-known in the United States many Americans are surprised to discover that there are some three million Muslims in the United States. Into this general lack of knowledge regarding Islam Dr. Cyril Glasse's *Encyclopedia* is a welcome newcomer.

The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam is especially welcome because it is directed at a Western audience, and readable even to a beginning student of Islam. This becomes obvious when, e.g., one notices both Hegiran and Gregorian calendar dates recorded for historic events. The Western reader is given an unexpected bonus in the literal English translation of Arabic terms, furthering an understanding of these terms. Notes (page 7) explain the system of Arabic transliteration as it is used in this volume. Non-Arabic speakers appreciate entries entitled, "Koran," or "Mosque," rather than their Arabic equivalents.

A chronology of significant events in Islamic history forms a convenient and quick reference section; it is featured in fourteen pages towards the end of the book. The many and detailed cross-references

placing this world religion within its context of time and space.

Books on Asian philosophies and religions are often difficult to comprehend. This one is different. One is not expected to have prior knowledge of Buddhism in order to profit from the book's discussions. This volume is in the *Religious Traditions of the World* series, edited by H. Byron Earhart, the well-known scholar in Asian religions. To date, this series includes nine monographs on various religious traditions.

in this volume encourage readers to continue research of their topics, while the five-page bibliography at the end of the *Encyclopedia* offer information concerning other available works on Islam.

Numerous entries (e.g., "Arabic" and "philosophy") constitute comprehensive essays by themselves in both scope and content, while current entries include up-to-date facts and information even of the late 1980s.

This handsomely bound book is made more attractive by its numerous color photographs. Forty-five superb plates exhibit Islamic subjects such as art, architecture, people, and calligraphy, realistically and in vivid color. Maps, schematic presentations, and genealogical tables provide clear illustrations of important themes.

The author, who is affiliated with Columbia University's Department of Middle East Languages and Culture and with the Middle East Institute, has done a real service to students of Islam in presenting the *Encyclopedia*. It is an excellent reference work, is heartily recommended for general reading and more serious research, and will be an asset to any library which houses works on the world's religions.

Returning: A Spiritual Journey. Dan Wakefield. New York: Penguin Books, 1989, 250 pp., paperback. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Associate Professor of English.

Something in Dan Wakefield's spiritual biography, *Returning*, is all too familiar and thus predictable to readers who are professing Christians: his bittersweet Sunday School memories of early childhood, his flirtation with mysterious religious experience in adolescence, his liberation as a

headstrong young scholar who quite gleefully rejects God and all such parochialism once he steps into in the spirited intellectualism of academia.

If there is anything unique about Wakefield's pilgrimage it may be his own vitae. Wakefield is a celebrated journalist, screenwriter, and author,