
Pro Rege

Volume 11 | Number 3

Article 10

March 1983

Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue (Book Review)

Gordon Spykman

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Spykman, Gordon (1983) "Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 11: No. 3, 30 - 31.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol11/iss3/10

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

People's Party. The distinctive Protestant Kuyperian notion of the confessional parties and organizations has been replaced by the open CDA. The first book points out that the Christian Historical Union led the way to the open party concept among Protestants. The second book narrates the movement of the Anti-Revolutionary Kuyperians to the open CDA. The third book gives some impressions of the hesitant centrism of the CDA leader, Premier Van Agt. These books make clear that the firm principles and political spirituality of Kuyper have been unfortunately replaced with vaguer attitudes. This may lead to a loss of support for the CDA in the future, or it may bring a certain political stability to the

Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, by Hans Waldenfels, New York: Paulist Press, 1980. 214 pp. \$7.95. Reviewed by Gordon Spykman, Visiting Professor in Theology.

The Japanese thinker, Nishitani, who sees himself as "a becoming having-become Buddhist" and at the same time as "a becoming not-having-become Christian" (pp. 62-63), quite conceivably personifies in large measure the very spirit of this book. He writes in the foreword that Waldenfels' work "represents perhaps the first attempt on the part of the West to enter deeply into the heart of the problems that have become the focal point of the contemporary discussions between Christianity and Buddhism" (p. v.). Waldenfels, like other participants in this trans-global dialogue, agrees that colossal obstacles stand in the way. For, as Nishitani puts it, there is in the Buddhist religion such "a degree of reciprocity that nothing in the West can approximate it" (p. 105). This prompts the question, therefore, whether participants on both sides "are sufficiently prepared for this kind of discussion" (p. 121).

Accordingly, this review probably calls for another. For only a thoroughly schooled orientalist can really size up a book like this. Reading it is like journeying into a faraway country with strange-sounding names, a distant civilization with a radically different universe of discourse, where the landscape of ideas is wholly rearranged, where the familiar landmarks are re-written in a foreign language, where the very dimensions of time and space and the contours of human experience and reflection are judged by other standards.

How then are we to go about constructing "foundations for a Buddhist-Christian dialogue"—the theme held forth in the title? Given the yawning chasm of religious disparity between these two traditions, can these two utterly remote horizons be fused? Is not the author's stated intention of "laying down a few stepping stones for dialogue" (p. 157) a misconceived venture from the very start? Indeed Waldenfels, while exploring very intensively countless possible points-of-contact, also reckons with the possibility of eventually reaching a fundamental impasse. "In the search to build bridges

Netherlands. At the same time Van Agt has exercised power for a number of difficult years. It is clear that he is not a Christian Democratic statesman of the stature of Germany's Konrad Adenauer or France's Robert Schuman. The lack of both clear Christian principles and Christian Democratic statesmanship may cause problems for the CDA in the future, or such modest but uninspiring Christian Democratic leadership may continue for some time. But a lack of continuing discussion on a politically spiritual perspective as well as an uninspiring leadership may mean hard times ahead for the CDA.

of understanding," he says, "themes such as these (man's consciousness of sin and death, Christ's redemption for them, and the idea of eschatology) can be set aside for the moment, but cannot simply be struck from the agenda" (p. 159). Yet, "for both sides the only radical point of encounter is the point of the radical letting go of self" (p. 124, cf. p. 161). His parting word is this: "Do not the smile of the enlightened Buddha and the tortured countenance of the crucified Jesus really come face to face when we share in the depths where the true self resurrects in poverty, death, and absolute nothingness?" (p. 162).

Nowhere does this book explicitly address the methodological question of a proper Christian apologetic. Yet this issue surfaces implicitly on nearly every page. Where are we to locate the common ground for a Buddhist-Christian dialogue? Is there a "middle way" (p. 16)? Appealing to the theology of his fellow Roman Catholic scholar, Rahner, Waldenfels leans heavily in the direction of a synthesis model of apologetics, taking full advantage of the wide-ranging ecumenical openness created by Vatican II. A mild and sympathetic confrontational approach is not wholly absent. Yet, throughout this painstaking critical analysis, his over-riding tack is to press persistently for possible points-of-contact.

This is no easy undertaking. Consider the following typically Buddhist ideas, which are baffling to most traditional Christian thinkers: "absolute nothingness" (which has nothing to do with western nihilism), "homelessness," "reaching beyond the beyond," "negative identity," "the Great Death," "the Great Doubt" (which has nothing to do with Descartes's doubt), "the great Enlightenment" (which has nothing to do with Kant), "pure relationality," "the absoluteness of subjectivity," "absolute opposition which is the same as absolute harmony," "impersonal personality" and "personal impersonality," "absolute nothingness which is

the essence of God," "emptiness emptied of itself," "a circumference-less circle," "a center on a field of emptiness," a realm of "knowing unknowing" which leads to "pure thoughtlessness" and "utter speechlessness."

The probing question has been put to Christian participants in this encounter, whether "their view of God . . . is Christian enough?" (p. 143)—and not only their view of God, but also their views of creation, man, sin, redemption and all the rest. Waldenfels, while interjecting critical comments, quarries his Christian theological building-blocks for this foundational project largely from the teachings of mystics (Eckhart), existentialists (Heidegger), monists (Tillich), and generally those contemporary thinkers who reflect the current revolt against Barth's theology of transcendence. In his Biblical appeal he turns to the *kenosis* doctrine (Philippians 2:5-8)—the "self-emptying" act of God in the incarnation. From this passage he concludes that "in Jesus of Nazareth the self-emptying of God and the self-emptying of man coincide" (p. 158).

Gilligan, Carol. *In A Different Voice*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1982. Reviewed by Gloria Stronks, Associate Professor of Education.

"It is obvious," writes Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, "that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex. Yet, it is the masculine values that prevail." In her book, *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan, associate professor of education at Harvard, indicts psychologists and sociologists from Freud to Kohlberg for having built developmental theories of human life on observations of men's lives only. Readers of *Harvard Educational Review* and *Psychology Today* who have come to appreciate Gilligan's scholarly style in carefully working out her thesis concerning women's development will welcome this continued research into that area.

The "different voice" which the author describes is not a voice of gender but of theme. Gilligan works with the assumption that the way people talk about their lives is of significance and that the language which they use reveals the world as they see it. On the basis of her interviews she concludes that women view the world in a different way than men do, and that this difference in view originates from and is shaped by the different experiences which males and females have. Given that for both sexes the primary caretaker during the first three years is usually female, the dynamics of gender identity formation will be different for girls than for boys. Girls experience themselves to be like their mothers, and this attachment fuses with the process of identity formation. Boys and mothers tend to view each other as opposites, causing boys to move toward separating themselves from the attachment, and this separation encourages a more emphatic individuation. Gilligan cites Chodorow's studies which show that girls emerge from

This style of East/West interchange involves two conflicting kinds of "logic." Western questions, let alone answers, hardly make sense within the framework of an Eastern mentality. It is therefore valid to wonder whether the so-called points-of-contact can yield an agreed-upon meaning.

Yet there seem to be some subtle forms of structural analogy between a Buddhist paradox and the Christian gospel—for example, on the Biblical teaching that the way to find one's life is to lose it (Matthew 10:39). Perhaps this should not surprise us. For Buddhists and Christians both live in the same world, which is God's world, and which he still upholds by his perserving and redeeming grace. His Word impinges itself upon all men alike. Yet, on the response side, Buddhist thought is so permeated with the distorting effects of its heavy dialectic as to set it on collision course with the historic Christian faith. Waldenfels' book, while overloading the notion of solidarity, underplays the reality of the antithesis.

this period with a basis for empathy which boys do not have. Girls have a stronger bias for experiencing another's needs or feelings as their own. Consequently, relationships are viewed differently by women than by men. Since masculinity is defined by boys through separation, males tend to have difficulty with relationships and intimacy. Since issues of feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the caretaker, girls grow up with lives embedded in social interaction and personal relationships but tend to have difficulty with individuation. These differences affect the way males and females view all areas of life.

An example of the way in which research in life development may be biased to exclude a description of the development of females is found in Piaget's stages of cognitive and moral development. Piaget was clearly aware of the fact that girls and boys play differently, with boys demonstrating a strong regard for and appreciation of the rules of the game and girls regarding a rule as worthwhile only so long as the game repays it or so long as the rule does not damage the relationships of the players. Piaget recognized that girls are more tolerant in their attitudes towards rules and more easily reconciled to innovations, but he considered that this hampered their legal sense and therefore considered moral development to be at a lower stage in girls than in boys. His description of cognitive and moral development, then, followed the pattern seen in boys.

This bias of equating child development with male development is a characteristic not only of Piaget's research but of the research of many other developmental theorists, according to Gilligan. Lever's work