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Beyond Buddhism (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by Russell Maatman

Beyond Buddhism, by J. Isamu Yamamoto. Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 1982, 141 pp., paperback. Reviewed by Wayne A. Kobes, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Working from the well-founded assumption that American Christians do not understand Buddhism, J. Isamu Yamamoto sets out to present a clear view of its basic teachings and forms. Unlike many other books on Buddhism, Yamamoto's approach is not intended to be a scholarly study of one particular school of Buddhism, but rather a brief overview of the history of Buddhism written in a straightforward and easily-understood fashion.

Yamamoto is a Japanese-American Christian whose Buddhist roots enable him to approach this study with both sympathy and biblical insight. His book effectively draws on his personal experiences and his own struggle to understand his Christian faith in relation to the Buddhism of his grandfather and homeland.

Yamamoto begins with a portrait of his grandfather. In this way one is immediately made aware of Buddhism as a living faith. From this introduction the reader is transported back to the birth, life, and teachings of Sidhartha Gautama, the Buddha. With great clarity and simplicity the author captures the main elements of the teachings of the Buddha and then traces the development and form of three major philosophies of Buddhism: Theravada Buddhism, Mahayoma Buddhism, and Vajrayan Buddhism. At once the reader is made aware of the wide range of beliefs and lifestyles among those who claim the religion of Buddhism.

The author then briefly notes the spread of Buddhism from India to China, Tibet, and finally Japan, noting major contemporary Buddhist movements. Especially

relevant to North American Christians is his discussion of Zen, a form of Buddhism which has had far-reaching influence and appeal in the West.

Yamamoto has made perhaps his greatest contribution in his chapter on Jesus Christ, a chapter in which he compares the two great world religions of Buddhism and Christianity. It is especially in their views of suffering, states the author, that the difference between Buddhism and Christianity becomes clear. Both religions realistically acknowledge suffering in human life. But the Buddhist achieves serenity through the elimination of man's desire, while the Christian, as a follower of Jesus Christ, the suffering servant, sees suffering not as wholly evil nor as an obstacle to salvation, but as part of God's plan of salvation. The two ways stand before every person: the way of the serene, passionless Buddha, or that of the suffering, compassionate Savior. As Yamamoto aptly expresses it, Christianity and Buddhism represent different paths to different summits.

Beyond Buddhism is an exceptionally well-written introduction to the Buddhist tradition. The reader is not only led to a deeper understanding of the Buddhist religion and way of life, but also brought to a deeper and more profound understanding of and appreciation for the unique gospel of Jesus Christ. I highly recommend *Beyond Buddhism* as a book which will expand Christians' horizons and better equip believers for their calling in today's world which more and more sees a meeting of East and West.

The Reverent Skeptic: A Critical Inquiry into the Religion of Secular Humanism, by J. Wesley Robb, Philosophical Library, 1979. 222 pp. Reviewed by John Van Dyk, Professor of Philosophy.

There can be no doubt that for us, Christians, insight into the nature of the secular spirit is of paramount importance if we are to function effectively as the Lord's witnesses in the world. Without such understanding the forces of secularism may find us defenseless, and subtly

pervade and distort our perspective. Lack of knowledge may well destroy God's people, as the ancient prophets pointed out. Robb's *The Reverent Skeptic* assists us in deepening our insight into the character of secularistic humanism. The author, a member of the faculty at the