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Reverent Skeptic: A Critical Inquiry into the Religion of Secular Humanism (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

University of Southern California School of Religion, addresses his book not first of all to those who call themselves Christians, but to all well-informed, thoughtful, and responsible men and women who wonder about the meaning of life and the adequacy of their world view. More specifically, Robb wants to enter a discussion with those who hold to a secular, naturalistic position devoid of reference to a transcendent ground of meaning. Does such a position, he asks, provide an adequate frame of reference for the richness of our experience?

Robb sets himself to the task of demonstrating in four chapters the inadequacy of a secularistic world view. The first chapter, by far the briefest, sets the stage. Robb defines various sorts of humanism and secularism, and concludes that secular humanism represents both a philosophy and a religion; a philosophy because "secular humanism attempts to develop a coherent understanding of the whole of human experience as reflected in man's relationship to the world" (p. 13), and a religion because it represents "an attitude towards that which is believed to be Ultimate evoking responses of awe and reverence which in turn affect and set standards of behavior" (p. 18). Though Robb's definition of "religion" strikes us as somewhat narrow, and although his use of terms is not always precise, we surely agree that secular humanism is both a philosophy and a religion.

In the second chapter Robb discusses the modern philosophical roots of secularism. He focuses particular attention on Francis Bacon, David Hume, August Comte, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud. His main point is the obvious one: all of them—with the exception of Bacon, who is included because of his emphasis on empirical investigation—rejected the need for a transcendent ground of meaning. Their stress on an empirical and scientific understanding of the world prepared the way for contemporary secularism. Impressive is Robb's articulation of the typical reductionism that characterizes a scientific world view.

In chapter 3, entitled "The Religion of Secular Humanism Examined," we approach the heart of Robb's critical inquiry. The author rightly points out that the rejection of a transcendent Ultimate transcends, by its very nature, the self-imposed limits of scientism. The typically positivistic idea of verifiability as a criterion of meaning is itself unverifiable. Thus Robb clears the way for an examination and exposition of the fundamental beliefs which underlie all claims to the adequacy and reliability of an empirically described universe. There are two epistemological realms of meaning, Robb explains, the one scientific and the other essentially religious. What both have in common is that they are "grounded in certain beliefs about man and nature as well as in the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived" (p. 97).

The epistemological issue brings Robb to a consideration of what he regards as the central reason for conflict between science and religion. Those who promote scien-

tific knowledge often forget that science, at its best, thinks in terms of hypotheses, probabilities, and open systems. Biblical literalists, on the other hand, by declaring certain Scriptural statements to be absolute truth, forget that we "see through a glass darkly." Thus the conflict between science and religion is inevitable, according to Robb, when both are closed to the interpretive element that enters into all claims for knowledge, whether scientific or religious knowledge.

What is the relationship between faith and knowledge? Robb does not accept the commonly assumed dichotomy between them. Faith does not eliminate the intellect. On the contrary, faith is a kind of knowledge, a response and commitment of the whole person in which analytic reflection is a steady component. Hence Robb argues that a posture of "reverent skepticism" is appropriate to the life of faith. A self-critical and reflective attitude should always accompany our commitment. Responsible human action in faith requires that we avoid mere uncritical credulity.

In his fourth and final chapter Robb sets out to describe the ways in which a theistic world view informs and illuminates human experience. A secularistic, naturalistic humanism, which reduces life to the empirical and the rational, will not do. What is needed, says Robb, is an "existential sense of wholeness and meaning that includes both the rational and the non-rational aspects of experience" (p. 147). A theistic world view, he claims, can fill this need. "A theistic construct provides a symbolic framework that serves a needed unitary ontological ground for understanding the universe of which we are a part" (p. 159).

But what is such a theistic world view? Robb lists and describes a number of them: classical or conservative supernaturalism (orthodoxy), radical supernaturalism (fundamentalism), neo-supernaturalism (neo-orthodoxy), and naturalistic theism (liberalism). In the subsequent discussion it becomes clear that to Robb naturalistic theism must surely be the most acceptable philosophy for a "reverent skeptic." Both the natural order and human experience, Robb argues, clearly point to the existence of a transcendent Being. Thus the conclusion of this interesting book is disappointing. While we surely want to applaud the author's critical and helpful exposition of the limitations and fallacies of secularistic reductionism, and while we share his stress on the inevitability of presuppositions and his sense of integrity and his wholistic approach to understanding the world, we want to take some distance from his concluding invocation: "Whatever our world views might be, may we be honorable persons living our lives with integrity and openness—openness to each other and to that Ground and Source of Being called by countless Names" (pp. 212-213). Yes, let us remove from our lives blind bigotry and senseless intolerance. But let us also affirm, with Peter and without apology, that outside Jesus Christ—no matter what He may be called—there is no name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12).