



Spirituality without God

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Now and Zen

SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT GOD

Buddhist Enlightenment and Christian Salvation

By Harold A. Netland & Keith E. Yandell

Paternoster. 230 pages. £14.99

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This excellent text is written by two American evangelical scholars who are expert in both philosophy and Buddhist thought. It is an exercise in inter-religious apologetics, that is, they not only point out the similarities and major differences between Christianity and Buddhism, but also press hard the philosophical problems inherent in Buddhist thought.

The reader will be taken on a journey back to the roots of Buddhism in the Hindu worldview, on through the Buddha's life and teaching and then a trip through its developments as it moved East to countries like Japan and Tibet, and finally westward to American beat-Zen, changing and diversifying in the process.

The philosophical knives are then sharpened and the Buddhist notion of the non-self (the non-existence of an enduring self or soul) is rigorously probed and found incoherent. According to Buddhism, we are merely a series of momentary states, a bundle of thoughts and sensations without a subject, but, the authors ask, how can compassion be the goal when the notion of compassion requires both a self that is motivated by love and also other selves for whom one feels compassion? Buddhism is a do-it-yourself religion with no concept of grace (it is basically atheistic), but how can there be freedom of the will when there is no person and therefore no will? We are

then presented with a robust defence against Buddhist attacks on Christian theism, such as the existence of evil and suffering.

If I have one criticism it is the failure of the authors to tackle the phenomenon of Buddhist enlightenment, which, from looking at the subtitle, one would have expected to be covered. What is happening, for example, when the Zen student suddenly laughs uproariously and cries, '*empty and marvellous!*', testifying that everything has been transformed by the enlightenment experience? We are not told.

This short review cannot do justice to the book's subtle and nuanced treatment of the various Buddhist schools, nor to the penetration of the theological and philosophical critique. This is, indeed, an exceptional work of scholarship accessible to the thoughtful layperson.

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