

Book review: *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus*, edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel in cooperation with Thomas Josef Gotz and Gerhard Koberlin (St. Ottilien: EOS-Verl., 2001), pp 179, in *The Australasian Catholic Record*, vol 80, no 4, October 2003.

by Trish Madigan op

This book provides a concise yet quite comprehensive introduction to the context and historical background of Buddhist - Christian dialogue as well as an overview of its current issues and directions.

The chapters of the book consist of papers given at the third conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies (ENBCS) held in Germany in 1999. It is the first publication of this organisation. The papers deal with Buddhist perceptions of Jesus in three contexts - China/Japan, Southeast Asia and Europe, although 'Europe' is limited to a German perspective. There is no attempt to introduce the 'New World' experience of countries such as USA or Australia.

Also, this volume represents only one side of the coin - Buddhist perceptions of Jesus and Christianity - despite the inclusion of some insightful Christian responses in the final section. It needs to be completed by an examination of how Christians perceive Gautama Buddha. No doubt that will be the topic of a future conference and publication.

The introduction, drawing on terminology used by Piet Schoonenberg, provides a helpful summary of the complex dynamics involved in any interfaith dialogue. A four-way interaction takes place between a person's understanding of their own religion (*auto-interpretation*), that person's understanding of the other's religion (*hetero-interpretation*) which in the process of dialogue meets the auto- and hetero-interpretation of the other. This encounter normally stimulates change and development in both parties in the dialogue.

The two papers presented within each section are illustrative of the development that has taken place in Buddhist-Christian dialogue in each context. The first essay represents a relatively early phase of Buddhist-Christian encounter, exposing a predominantly polemical Buddhist attitude, in historical circumstances often marked by the uneasy power relationship of European missionary outreach allied with colonial interests. These older primarily critical attitudes are still quite influential today. The second essay is by an author who describes emerging attitudes in Buddhist views of Christianity and is representative of these changes. In these papers the reasons for the enduring Buddhist reservations about Christianity as culturally and ethically inferior, lacking interior depth, and often identified with the greed and hedonism of the Western world, become clearer for the Christian reader.

The final responses by two Christian scholars suggest that a Buddhist path to understanding Jesus might be through the concept of Jesus as a Bodhisattva who becomes empty in order to serve undeserving humankind or a wise teacher who leads people into the wisdom of selflessness. While Buddhists find the various Christian atonement theories repulsive and are puzzled by Christian claims that Jesus is a 'unique' saviour, the presentation of Jesus as a fully enlightened human being or a Bodhisattva with a high degree of spiritual realization is consistent with the Gospels and more accessible to the Buddhist mind.

The overall impression left by this collection of essays is that inter-religious dialogue between Buddhists and Christians is still in its infancy, though it does outline some promising future directions.

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