

BOOK REVIEWS

Hans Waldenfels,

Absolute Nothingness, Foundations for a Buddhist Christian Dialogue

Trs. J. W. Heisig, New York : Paulist Press, 1980, pp. ix, + 214,
\$ 7.95.

Where Buddhism seems to differ most radically from Christianity is in its conception of "Absolute Nothingness", *sūnyatā*, which seems to stand for an "empty" nothingness, while Christianity is a religion of positive being. But Hans Waldenfels, a highly trained Buddhist scholar who spent long years in Japan as a Jesuit missionary tries to overcome this apparent irreducible opposition by a deeper study of Buddhist nothingness basing it on the contemporary Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani who, along with others like Nishida and Masao Abe standing firmly in the tradition of Zen Buddhism tries to make it intelligible to the West and to answer the important issues raised in world discussion.

Waldenfels starts the study from the beginning of Buddhism, which was particularly marked by its ability to disclose man in his depths through the operational realization of "emptiness" or "absolute nothingness". This stress on emptiness is traced back to the Buddha himself, his homelessness, and silence on metaphysical questions, in order to concentrate attention on his own authentic way of awakening. For, as *Majjima Nikaya* states, speculative questions such as the nature of the world, and the nature of the soul "do not conduce to turning away from, nor to dispassion, stopping, calming, super-knowledge, awakening, nor to *nibbana*." Buddha's silence excludes not only positive metaphysical opinions but also their transcendence in absolute nothingness. Historically, even the Buddhist doctrines of "non-self" and "dependent origination" had a practical meaning: salvation consists in recognizing that everything that is falsely assumed to be self is non-self, and that the entire world in its full assemblage is the logical and ontological grounding of our painful existence. Taken together the two doctrines underline the idea that there is no such thing as an independent, self-supporting world substance. This is not far different, in the opinion of the author, from the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of "*creatio ex nihilo*."

The author then argues that Nagarjuna, who developed the metaphysics of emptiness, was first and foremost a Buddhist and mystic. For him "emptiness" was not a doctrine nor a dialectical tool to refute other opinions but a way of knowing which is not conceptual, a wisdom "that stands silent and unspeakable behind and within all apparent and relative truth." As Waldenfels states quoting the words of Frederick J. Streng, "Emptiness is non-substantial and non-perceptible. As "non-substantiality" does not indicate non-existence, but a denial that things are real in themselves, so "non-perceptibility" does not mean a state of unconsciousness; rather, it serves to check the inclination to substantialize phenomena through conceptualization." (pp. 22-23). Thus for Nagarjuna emptiness is both ontological and epistemological, being devoid of any self-sufficient being.

The main focus of Waldenfels's study is on Keiji Nishitani and his philosophy of emptiness, which forms the second part of the book. A disciple of Nishida, attracted very early in life by Western mysticism and German idealism, Nishitani was concerned with playing a mediating role between Japanese thought and the increasingly dominant forms of thought in the world at large. He applies to world history the message of the ten Oxherding Pictures of the Chinese Zen master Kucan Chi-yuan, namely, that of seeking and finding the unruly ox, taming and riding it, and finally forgetting the ox and the rider in the great emptiness and the final clear sunlike circle. Nishitani listens enthusiastically to Nietzsche, who claimed to be the first nihilist of the West and proclaimed the advent of nihilism as "the history of the next two centuries." For, in the *nihilum* of the death of God, proclaimed by Nietzsche, Nishitani recognizes man's encounter with "an abyss opened at the base of his existence", when he becomes aware of himself as truly free and independent. He also shares Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity, which gave rise to modern science, technology and man-centeredness. He appreciates the original spirit of Christianity represented by the kenotic theology of the Cross and the Christian mysticism of St. Francis of Assisi and of the Rhine mystics. In his view today Japan, faced with the need to absorb Western culture has the task of "creating a fusion of Eastern and Western cultures and of pioneering the way to the world culture of the future."

Waldenfels explains in detail the philosophy of Nishitani. The starting point for Nishitani is the "Great Doubt" released in many by the great negative realities of life, by the experience of nihilation and death. This doubt touches the fundamental uncertainty of man, transcending even the distinction between doubter and doubted, leading

to the Great Death and finally, to that turn-about of the "Great Enlightenment." In the Asian tradition there is a constant search for a realization of thoroughgoing negation to reach ultimate reality. The Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* denies the priority of being over to be and not to be. *Sūnyatā* or emptiness cannot be realized conceptually but only holistically or existentially through the realization of one's own existence as a self-contradictory oneness of being and non-being. Even the concept of substance as well as that of subject is established on the field of subject-object duality, which is broken through by nihilism in which things and the self are brought to their ground, and transported to a region beyond the reach of "logical" thinking. Nishitani and his fellow-Japanese thinkers have to a great extent made their own the existentialist thought of Heidegger for whom "Being is not God and not the ground of the world, but wider than all beings." For them *Sūnyatā* is not the nothingness from which God created everything, but the nothingness from which God Himself emerged. (p. 86). Hence according to Waldenfels, Nishitani is very close to Christian thought, except (1) that he pays little attention to the negative theology of the Christian Fathers and to analogical thought; (2) that struggling with the kenosis of God he hardly notices the historical event of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth; and (3) that while stating that the ekstasis of God, His love for all and everything must affect God Himself in his own essence he is not aware of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

One crucial area of dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism relates to world, history and man, to which Buddhism does not ascribe much importance. Here the Japanese thinkers present a criticism of Buddhism itself that it does not finally answer the question of the grounding of man's ethical responsibility and of his social and historical behaviour. Although a positive attitude to the modern world with its science and technology is possible from the standpoint of the Buddhist realization of emptiness, this possibility has not as yet been actualized. (p. 97). Here Waldenfels, instead of examining Nishitani's criticism of Western views of history and his own counter-proposal from the side of Buddhism, concentrates directly on the appreciation of world, history and man developed by Nishitani and other Japanese thinkers from the Buddhist background of emptiness. The positive element of Buddhism in this respect is that its *sūnyatā* doctrine is "the religion of the absolute this-side"; that means emptiness as the true nature of all things refers to this phenomenal world, continuously self effecting and emptying out itself as praxis of the Great Compassion exemplified by the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. (p. 99). *Sūnyatā*

is the original nature of the eternal Buddha, his Dharma Body, which is the ground of the *sambhoga-kāya* (the "reward-body") manifesting Buddha's compassion. The originally formless Buddha takes the form of the Tathāgata (Thus-Come) in self-emptying. This may not be taken merely as an act of compassion and condescension towards the unenlightened, since even "emptiness" is itself a part of the world of phenomenal existence.

The third part of the book details the points of contact for dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism, particularly philosophical reflection on mystical experience, understanding of God as "emptiness" beyond being and non-being, and Jesus Christ as figure of the "Empty" God. There is no doubt that there is much scope for dialogue between Western Christianity and Japanese Buddhism and both sides have willingly initiated such a conversation without stipulating beforehand where it will lead.

But there are limitations to this dialogue. Japanese thinkers tend to identify Christianity with its version given by writers like Eckhart, and Protestant theologians like Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. So they sometimes leave Jesus Christ completely out of the picture. On the other hand, Japan is the most Western of Eastern countries and its version of Buddhism is far removed from the Buddhism of history and especially of the Buddhist believers of the Asian countries. Even if perfect understanding were reached between Japanese thinkers and Western Christian theologians it will not take one far enough in the dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism. There is also the question of the true scope of inter-religious dialogue. If it is to reach the conclusion that Buddhism is saying the same thing about the religious life and goal of man as Christianity, German Existentialism as understood and explained by Nishitani and others in Buddhist terms may be a good mediating system. But if the encounter of religions is to show the unique contribution of each religious tradition in the total divine economy of human salvation one should not be afraid of radical differences in approach between different religious traditions. With a willingness to recognize truth wherever it exists, to admit and reject errors when they are actually discovered even with fundamental differences created by history, social environment, culture and philosophical systems, men of true faith will be able to recognize in the faiths of other men dimensions of their own faith and acknowledge the Divine Providence that guides the histories of peoples and nations in a way to achieve the salvation of all who seek God in spirit and truth.

John B. Chethimattam

Gerard J. Hughes, S. J.,

Moral Decisions

London : Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980, £1.50.

Moral Decisions is a bold, yet cautious venture in Christian moral thinking. Deriving inspiration from the new developments in Christian thought since the Second Vatican Council, the author tries to present the best of modern scholarship and theology in an intelligible way to the Christians at large. The book is divided into two parts consisting of five chapters in all. Part one is set apart for the consideration of certain important dilemmas in Christian moral thinking. The tendency to reduce Christianity to ethics, and theology is pronounced faulty and misleading. Christian morality is considered as the imitation of Christ in fidelity to his teachings and in fidelity to the Spirit. It is also understood as obedience to one's own conscience as well as to social authority. The inadequacies of these traditional concepts in making believers grow towards the truth in God are discussed and remedial measures suggested.

In the second part of the book an attempt is made to construct a basic framework for moral thinking. Christian morality is envisaged as our true fulfilment, based on the twin qualities of love and justice. The need to ascend from the level of wants to the level of true needs is brought to our attention. We must discover where our true needs lie, for it is in satisfying our true needs that our fulfilment is to be found. The book ends with an exploration of the possibility of a universal morality — a morality for all nations and all men. Men who seek to live a life according to their conscience will find the book as a useful guide in making moral decisions in the practical situations of life.

J. Thadavanal

Roger Grainger,

Watching for Wings Theology and Mental Illness in a Pastoral Setting

London : Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979, pp. xiv + 152, £2.95.

Watching for Wings is an inspiring work which endeavours to create in us a greater understanding of, and sympathy with the men

and women who live and work in the large, old-fashioned mental hospitals, whether they be patients or staff. The work reflects a mental hospital chaplain's genuine love and anguished concern for the patients to whom he ministers.

The author's concern in the book is with human relationships in particular and the organization of society in general. For the patient in a large old-fashioned hospital, the hospital is the universe. The hospital has the tendency to 'be its own universe', and this is the major theme of the book. Most of the things said in the book become relevant and intelligible only when viewed from this particular perspective. The author tries to discover, in what way the understanding of life in a mental hospital can contribute to our understanding of life in the world. The hospital, in the author's view, is subject as well as object. He argues that the hospital community has a right to be regarded as an active contributor to the life of men and women in the world, and not simply as a symptom of the presence or absence of social changes. As a living organism the hospital possesses its own unique identity.

The book can very well serve as a bridge between theology and other disciplines. In analysing the hospital-situation the author has taken into account what theology and psychology and other related disciplines have to say about human behaviour and experience. Parish clergy and theologians of all schools, psychologists, members of the medical and nursing professions, social workers and even students of sociology may find this book interesting and useful.

J. Thadavanal

Cardinal Suenens and Dom Helder Camara,

Charismatic Renewal and Social Action: A Dialogue

London : Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980, pp. 98, £1.95.

The present work is the third one in the *Malines Document* series, which is devoted to the study of the renewal in the Holy Spirit and its human implications in the life in the society.

The authors show how the movements for charismatic renewal and for social justice form the two strands of a single cord. In the

view of the authors, the true Christian should be at the same time a charismatic and a socially committed person. A Christian who is not a charismatic is not open to the Spirit; a Christian who does not endeavour to promote social justice is guilty of disregarding the commandments of God.

The book has an introduction and four chapters. Cardinal Suenens introduces the problem. In the chapters that follow the two authors work together—in musical terms, by playing a kind of duet: each of the authors takes turns in exposing how he envisages the Christian of today, and brings in his own personal experience, yet not losing the proximate unity of vision of the central theme.

The authors deserve credit for striking a balance between orthodoxy (theological reflection on the doctrinal issues) and orthopraxy (incarnation of the Christian faith in socio-political deeds). The work also shows cogently that there can be no polarization between the spiritual and temporal commitments of a believer.

The gospel is a message of both salvation and liberation; it embodies in it a religious revelation and a socio-economic and political revolution. By uniting the “socially committed” and the “charismatic” Christians the authors have once again cemented together what God has united, *viz.*, the first and the second commandments.

J. Thadavanal

Antony C. Thiselton,

The Two Horizons

Grand Rapids: B. Eerdmans Publishing Company
MI 49503, 1980, pp. xx + 484, \$ 22.50.

One of the central concerns in recent theology and biblical studies has been the interest in hermeneutics and linguistics. It has been widely acknowledged that no genuine scientific study of the Bible is possible without the application of the principles of hermeneutics—the science of interpretation—which is mainly concerned with the nature of knowledge and the scientific pre-suppositions operating in the mind of the interpreter.

The crux of biblical hermeneutics is said to be the fusion of the context of the original "author" and that of the contemporary interpreter. It is these two contexts which are generally known in hermeneutical discussions: *the two horizons*. The word "horizon" indicates the limits of thought dictated by a given view-point or perspective of the original writer who formulated what he had to say out of a particular historical and intellectual context on the one hand, and on the other, the limits of the perspective of the contemporary interpreters who also have a field of vision, in which they wish to respond to what they read. The main issues which the problem of hermeneutics raises are: (1) the problem of historical distance between ourselves and the biblical writers; (2) the questions about the role of theology in interpretation; and (3) the relation of hermeneutics to language. Any serious work on hermeneutics has necessarily to deal with these crucial issues. In this book *The Two horizons*, Dr. Thiselton makes an excellent survey in the light of the above concerns of hermeneutics, and an assessment of the scope and limits of the contribution which philosophy can make to biblical interpretation.

The Two Horizons is a revised edition of the Doctoral Thesis of Dr. Thiselton, who is the senior lecturer in biblical studies at the University of Sheffield (England). The book is divided into three parts. In the first part the author introduces the various issues he is going to present in this work. Here, first he introduces some hermeneutical problems in general and then the ideas of Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein indicating their importance for biblical hermeneutics. In the second part the author deals with the various issues in the New Testament hermeneutics: The relation between hermeneutics and history, hermeneutics and theology and hermeneutics and language. In the chapter on Hermeneutics and History, Dr. Thiselton presents and analyses the views of Gadamer, Dilthey, Dr. F. Nineham, Ernst Troeltsch, and Wolfhart Pannenberg on the subject. In "Hermeneutics and Theology", he discusses the views of important theologians like Bultmann, Ernst Fuchs, Robert Funk, Walter Wink, Pannenberg, Paul Tillich, Schleiermacher, Bernard — Lonergan and others. Similarly in "Hermeneutics and Language", the author sets the broader issues of the relation between hermeneutics and language, the hermeneutical role of linguistics and semantics, the relation between thought and language and its bearing on preunderstanding in hermeneutics.

Part three is the most important Section of this work. It is devoted to a discussion of the place and contribution of Bultmann, Gadamer,

Heidegger and Wittgenstein to hermeneutical philosophy, especially to New Testament Hermeneutics.

As J. B. Torrance has rightly pointed out in his foreword, the book shows thorough familiarity with the many authors examined and a firsthand acquaintance with the work of writers in linguistics, New Testament language and literature, and contemporary Western Philosophy. The issues raised here are numerous and complex. But Dr. Thiselton has given a very clear exposition of these hard and complex issues. This, coupled with a dialectical ability and critical insight, gives the work a remarkable unity and sublimity.

The most distinctive contribution of this work is the chapters on the works of Bultmann, Gadamer, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, where he also compares and contrasts the works of the last two philosophers each in the light of their earlier and later works. The chapter on Wittgenstein deserves our special attention partly for his comments on the significance of Wittgenstein and partly for his use of Wittgenstein's writings to clarify conceptual problems in the New Testament itself.

The general limitation and bias of the Western authors can be seen in this work too. The failure of Western thinking to recognize the divine dimension of man and the immanence and presence of God in the universe and in every creature and especially in man is evident in the attitude of Dr. Thiselton also in his evaluation of the hermeneutical philosophy of the modern interpreters like Bultmann, Gadamer, Heidegger and Wittgenstein.

Dr. Thiselton is writing from within the evangelical community. The theological thinking of that particular community seems to have exerted great influence on him in his assessment of the relevance and importance of the hermeneutical philosophies of modern authors. This is particularly visible in his treatment of the concept of justification by faith in St. Paul and his comparison of it with Wittgenstein's idea of grammatical and analytical statement in language (419 ff).

Barring these minor weaknesses this book provides an admirable survey in depth of important issues connected with the contemporary hermeneutical philosophy and biblical hermeneutics and brings to light the relationship and contribution of the former to the latter. The book will be welcomed by students and scholars of different disciplines as

it gives a very good account of some of the major areas in modern theology.

Jose Pereppadan

Chacko Valiaveetil,

Liberated Life

Madurai: Arul Anandar College, Karumathur 626 514, India, pp. xvi-204, Paperback.

Liberation is a key-word in political thinking to-day. Everywhere people are seeking economic, social and political liberation. But there is a more fundamental liberation which has been sought in India from the earliest times, liberation from not only political but all human bondage: from sin, suffering and death. In India the ideal man has always been the '*Jīvanmukta*', the man who is liberated while still alive and has achieved total freedom. This is the subject of the book by Chacko Valiaveetil. He studies the concept of the *jīvanmukta* from the earliest times in the Vedas and Upanishads and in Jainism and Buddhism. But his chief concern is with the concept of *jīvanmukti* in Saiva Siddhānta.

The commonly accepted view of *jīvanmukti* is that of Advaita Vedānta, which stresses the unreality of this world and suggests that the *jīvanmukta*, once liberated, has no further use for this world. He has passed finally beyond, and for him this world no longer exists. But for Saiva Siddhānta the world is not unreal and once liberated from the three bonds of *āṇava*, *karma* and *māya*, the *jīvanmukta* is able to see the world permeated by the presence of God and to act for the benefit of the world. This comes to him through the grace of the Lord, who is now permanently united with him.

It is obvious that a doctrine like this stressing the reality of this world and the need for service of the world is particularly meaningful to-day. There is a greater realization to-day of the values of secular life, of the importance of economic and social change. What is required is a doctrine which shows how God can be realized not by inaction but in the midst of action. This is the first time that a serious study has been made of this aspect of the doctrine of Saiva Siddhānta. It is a work of solid scholarship—it was, in fact, originally a Doctoral

Thesis—but it is presented in a clear and attractive style to bring out the significance of the doctrine of spiritual liberation called *jīvanmukti*.

Bede Griffiths

Jacob Kattackal,

Religion and Ethics in Advaita

Freiburg : Verlag Herder, 1980, pp. ix + 260.

The aim of the book is to “show that the Advaitic system of religion and ethics stands firmly on a thoroughly rational foundation”. Such a need arises from the relentless criticisms levelled against the religio-ethical aspect of this system, for the critics believe that it lacks all rational foundation for religious practices and moral life.

The book has four parts: the first part is the preamble and gives a general account of the age-old search of Indian thinkers for knowledge and mystical experience. The question of free-will is very crucial in any discussion of moral philosophy. Of the many objections raised against the concept of free-will in the Indian thought the *Karma-Samsara* theory is the most important. The *Karma-samsara* theory, if pressed to its logical conclusion, will certainly involve the denial of freedom of will and free action. But, in fact, along with the belief in the *Karma-samsara* theory we find everywhere in the Hindu religious scriptures statements extolling human freedom. The Hindus and Buddhists use the Karma-theory, without pressing it too far, to inculcate the idea that the future well-being of each person will depend on the way he or she lives his or her present life ; therefore each one should abstain from evil and do good. The fundamental moral concepts, namely, *ṛta* and *dharma* are discussed in the context in which free-will is being recognized. The Gaudapādā's advaitic position comes as a contrasting conclusion to the first part.

The central theme of the book lies in the second part. The next part takes up the post-Sankara philosophy, and the last section examines the practical expression of advaitic thought in the lives of Ramakrishna Parmahansa and Swami Vivekananda. For the purpose of this review we shall concentrate on the eighth chapter which speaks about the ethical content of Sankara's *Advaita*. The main conclusions of the chapter are the following : The view that Sankara holds, namely,

the world is sheer illusion is untenable. His metaphysics rests on a two-level consciousness theory, that is, the empirical consciousness and transcendental consciousness. The world ceases to be real only in the latter state of consciousness. He vigorously defends the reality of the world on the *vyavahāra* level, that is, in the normal working consciousness. This is clearly seen in his combat with the Mahāyāna Buddhists, who denied the empirical reality of the world.

Moreover, Sankara does not advocate strict identity between the *Jīvātman* and the *Paramātman* unconditionally. In fact, he emphatically affirms that Brahman is beyond ignorance and *vyavahāra*, whereas the *Jīvātman* is in state of ignorance and *vyavahāra*. He affirms the identity of soul and God only in the transcendental experience. In this experience the distinction and separation, difference and duality has no place. Hence the author concludes that Sankara's world-view and identity-doctrine do not militate at all against his Religion and Ethics.

Further, the author points out that what is meant by the technical terms such as *Paramārtha-avastha*, *Brahmasākṣātkāra*, *Brahma-Jñāna* "might be what is commonly called the highest stage of mystic experience or ecstasy, or an experiential knowledge of God, an intuitive vision of the Supreme Reality." If these conclusions hold good and are acceptable to the advaitins of our land, we have come a long way in understanding the rational foundation for religion and ethics in *Vedānta*. But these conclusions are not beyond dispute.

To a certain extent, it is also possible to understand Sankara's position that duties or activities of any sort are possible only in the *Vyavahāra* sphere, and that the contemplative who enjoys the mystic rapture cannot engage himself in external activities. In Sankara's own words "No obligation exist for him who attains the unity of the Atman." This does not mean that the *Jñāni* who has arrived at perfect knowledge can act as he likes. The genuine *Jñāni* coming out of his mystic rapture will spontaneously do only the right thing. Mind has no freedom in recognizing what has already been seen as true. If the *Advaita* is speaking of the freedom of the *Jñāni* only in the restricted sense mentioned above, it is certainly intelligible. The book under review, thus, throws much light on many aspects of the problems in the *Advaita* and therefore a close study of the same would be highly rewarding.

K. T. Kadankavil

Thomas Vellilamthadam (ed.),

Despair, Hope and Bliss

Kottayam : Oriental Institute Publication, 1980, pp. 152.

The vision of Eliot, Boch, Buber, Fromm, Woytyla and Aurobindo on man and his destiny is discussed in this book by six eminent writers, all specialists in the subject. The opening citation from Kamala Das that "each truth ends thus with a query... They are lucky who ask questions and move on before the answers come..." itself prepares the reader to understand the changing, awesome, exciting, confident, open, self-perfecting, acting and totally integrating and blissful picture of man. Man is a mystery and no amount of description can exhaust the riches of this mine. But we can learn something new at the feet of every Master.

Here is a picture of man in the presence of which he finds himself a stranger. He is in exile in a world in which he holds no control. He feels alienated interiorly because the heart has become a "waste land." There is an inner emptiness in man. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* depicts a world of man which has lost its light, its transcendence. The truth is that man by his very nature is transcendence. The problem is, who can bring him back to this transcendence. While Ernest Bloch find a way out of this emptiness and consequent despair in hope which is to be lived in a future which is not yet, Martin Buber would tell us that to live as a man is to live with another, a thou. Here one opens himself to the other so that his partner may discover his myths, his underlying assumptions, and criticize the very foundations of his convictions, and *vice-versa*. Yet in this process man should not lose himself: he should remain for himself, warns Erich Fromm. In stressing the concept of "Man-Person" what Karl Wojtyla brings to light is that man is revealed to himself through his knowing activity. He becomes what he is through his "lived experience." Of course, these scattered life moments are to be brought into a total integration, a vision Sri Aurobindo preaches through his life and writings.

Thus the book offers a study of man in the perspective of his transcendence. Transcendence, of course, defies definition and so any claim of completeness of the picture of man presented here would be unrealistic. Yet these essays will certainly help a reader to raise more questions about the mystery of man and that is a notable contribution of the book.

K. T. Kadankavil