

Book Review

Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way, Edited by Susan Walker. New York: Paulist Press, 1987

Reviewed by Stanley Krippner

This book began as a stack of verbatim transcripts documenting five conferences that were hosted by Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado between 1981 and 1985. The transcripts have been skillfully edited by Susan Walker, an Anglican-turned-Buddhist writer who attended each of the conferences. The book is valuable in that it focuses on Christian and Buddhist meditation, contemplation, and the monastic life, identifying points of congruence as well as areas of divergence. There is agreement that Buddhist and Christian contemplatives are on a similar journey but not the same journey.

Both traditions seem to hold in high regard such traits as humility, compassion, and simplicity. Both value transcendence; both allow the inevitability of death to motivate their actions; and there may even be a similarity between the Buddhist "void" and the Christian "dark night of the soul." Their differences are not so well articulated; sometimes it appears as if a deliberate attempt has been made to mute obvious differences. For example, there is a consensus that sin implies disharmony and disruption -- but the Christian image of sinners cast into hell is never evoked. There is a thoughtful discussion regarding the appropriateness of celibacy in monastic settings, but the Roman Catholic dogma limiting sexual behavior to marriage remains unquestioned.

Dreams are mentioned twice -- both negatively. A Christian spokesperson advises, "if you have a dream, don't follow it.... The voice of the devil and the voice of one's own nature speak all the time, and it is easy to be misled" (p. 57). A Buddhist representative recalls a saying, "All dharmas should be regarded as dreams" (p. 196); in other words, one should beware illusion and delusion. The idea that working with dreams might contribute to a person's spiritual growth is completely absent.

One highlight of the book, for me, was a perceptive differentiation between one's "superego" and one's "conscience," the former representing the punitive voice of externally imposed value systems of authority figures, the latter representing one's basic spiritual nature. I also was impressed by a delineation of the hallmarks of saintly people (which included zest for life, passion, hilarity, contemplation, and human frailty). I enjoyed discussions of the Buddhist emphasis on personal experience as the ultimate authority, and a Christian spokesperson's description of the role emotion can play in spirituality.

The major participants in these conferences included four Roman Catholics, two Eastern Orthodox priests, one Anglican, one Quaker, but no representatives of mainline Protestant denominations. Of the Buddhists, eight were members of Tibetan lineages and two were Zen practitioners. There were no Christian equivalents to the eminent Dalai Lama and Chogyam Trampa. Only three of the spokespeople were women. Although these individuals can hardly be called a representative sample of contemplatives, they

were exceptionally articulate. Their talks, discussions, and dialogues are interesting to read -- and often inspirational. One can conjecture what would occur if a future conference brought together Moslem and Jewish (or Hindu) spokespeople to discuss their spiritual values.