

MITCHELL, Donald W., and James A. Wiseman, OSB (eds.), *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (New York: Continuum, 1998), pp. xxiii + 306. ISBN 0-8264-1046-4 (cloth). \$29.95.

Having a similar format to *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way*,⁴ to which this book is in many ways a successor, this is a workbook, not a book to be read, digested and put aside. It consists of edited transcripts of talks and discussions by and between 25 Buddhists and 25 Christians invited to a retreat-cum-conference at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey between 22 July and 27 July 1996.

In Part 1 there are talks on 'Journey and Dialogue', with very useful historical summaries by Sister Pascaline Coff and Ven. Dr Havanpola Ratanasara; 'Ultimate Reality and Spirituality', where the tricky question of God and Nirvana is handled in hot-potato fashion; 'Prayer and Meditation', setting out the techniques of *metta-bhavana*, *zazen* and *lectio divina*; 'Growth and Development', treating the spiritual path or *marga* from Christian and Buddhist perspectives; 'Community and Guidance', touching on the topics of Church and Sangha (and, in the Dalai Lama's talk 'Spiritual Guidance and the Attainment of Nirvana' the only discussion, surprisingly, of celibacy in the entire book, with an important but all too brief mention of deity yoga and its possible relation to God); 'Spirituality and Society', with suggestions about the connection between the spiritual life and social action. Part 1 concludes with a masterful summary by Ewert Cousins of the two Axial Ages and a suggestion of where we might be headed at this moment in history when, perhaps, as Fr Pierre-François de Béthune says, '... the monastic orders ... are now able to recognize themselves as forerunners of a spiritual unity that is prophetic for all humankind' (p. xii).

Part 2 contains edited transcripts of discussions that complement the topics of the talks in Part 1, arranged under 3 broad categories and 20 subdivisions such as 'Anger', 'Love', 'Scripture', 'Grace', 'Suffering' and 'Women's Issues'.

An Epilogue contains moving tributes to Merton from Fr James Conner and the Dalai Lama, emphasizing the critical importance of this extraordinary monk's vision for the meeting in peace of these two profound, profoundly different yet mysteriously resonant, spiritual traditions. There is a list of participants (only some of whom gave talks) with brief biographies, and a short glossary which is largely accurate but occasionally misleading.

The editing of the talks and discussions seems (to one who was not present) to be very competent. The highlights are here, there is nothing trivial, yet the sense of oral communication has been preserved. The result is, in this reviewer's opinion, the best volume yet to have appeared to put into the hands of someone who asks 'What is Buddhist-Christian dialogue all about?' and also the best book yet to have appeared to stimulate more dialogue. Individuals and groups can further their understanding of Buddhism, Christianity and their interrelationship, by mining the text for questions, and attempt to go beyond the tentative answers, and approaches to answers, which the retreatants propose.

So much for the plaudits and the kudos. Now for the problems. That there are problems with such a book is no surprise: interreligious dialogue in general, and

Buddhist-Christian dialogue in particular, is still a suckling, unable to leave for long the breasts of its two mothers, and certainly not able to walk around on its own and speak for itself. Criticism of such a book is not, therefore, negative comment on its value but a reflection of the state of the field: at this point, we hardly know enough to know what it is we don't know, or what questions to ask. This book is a great help in defining questions and intimating topics for subsequent dialogue, but its very success makes clear what is yet to be done. What the book does not say, and who does not say it, speaks more loudly than what it says and who says it.

The most obvious problem is with who is talking, and with whom. The title of the book leads us to expect a dialogue of monastics, but this is not the case. Many of the Buddhist teachers are married, one of the celibate Christians is a diocesan priest, and there is a sprinkling of professors, who of course make no pretense of following a monastic lifestyle. What holds this disparate group together? The participants seem to know, but they do not let us in on the secret.

In terms of balance, it is clear from the introduction by the editors that a great deal of work went into making the retreat as balanced as possible between traditions, and it is remarkable and encouraging that the balance is as good as it is. Yet, it is necessarily off, and the reader should be aware of this limitation. The Christians are all Catholic save one (Diana Eck admits to being Protestant) and they are (apart from the professors) mostly members of the Benedictine family. There are no friars, canons or religious, despite the fact that such are, on the surface, closer to Buddhist *bhikshus* and *bhikshunis* than are Christian *monachoi*. The Orthodox Churches, perhaps not surprisingly, are not represented at all. The Buddhists are more widely representative. There are three forms of Theravada, and there is the welcome, because all too rare, presence of the Korean tradition, and there are Chinese monastics. Dominated by H.H. Dalai Lama XIV, Tibetans are restricted to Gelugpas (although Jeffrey Hopkins averts to the Nyingmapas), and Japan is (surprise!) confined to adherents of Zen.

As to the topics covered, we might say that they are essential at this stage. To be frank, they are elementary, but it is still uncommon to find a person whose control of both Buddhist and Christian material allows them to go beyond questions such as 'What do you mean by suffering?', 'How do you deal with anger?' and 'How do you meditate?' Buddhists know the Buddhist answers and Christians know the Christian answers, but they seldom know even if the other side addresses the issue. Thus, the book is useful to Buddhist and Christian practitioners and scholars, but not to specialists in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, who will find little that is new to them.

Finally, a mischievous remark about how excruciatingly *serene* the book is. Everybody is trying to be nice to everybody. Only once do we hear a hint of discord—from the irrepressible Ven. Ratanasara, as we might expect, who chides non-Buddhists who 'express opinions on Buddhism' without 'tak[ing] care to do their homework' (p. 13). At the international conference on Buddhism and Christianity at De Paul University, Chicago, sponsored by the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies between 28 July and 3 August 1996, which followed the retreat, there was a panel on the Gethsemani Encounter. Speaking from the floor after the presentations were finished, I tried to set the Gelugpas against the Jesuits and get a

4. Ed. Susan Walker; New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

debate, an argument, a *real encounter*, going. My attempt was adroitly deflected. Peace once more descended upon the auditorium.

We were all, it seemed, brothers and sisters who had never squabbled and would go forward in lock-step towards the shining dawn of interreligious cooperation. We were not, it appeared, to bring up the fact that the Christian God seems, to most Buddhists, like Santa Claus, or that most Christians see Buddhists as wimps who run away from suffering rather than transfiguring it by allowing themselves to be crucified. Nor were we to mention that Christians have killed each other over differing interpretations of central doctrines or that Buddhists have attacked and suppressed other Buddhists whom they have regarded as incapable of attaining liberation due to their 'perversions' of the Buddha's Word.

But, if we don't acknowledge our differences honestly, our dialogue will be trivial and vapid, it will not help us to move towards 'the transformation into the global consciousness of the Second Axial Period' to which Ewert Cousins calls us (p. 165), we will be lost in a mist of monastic monism. I have argued elsewhere that we see only limited progress in dialogue when the participants are Benedictines and Zen practitioners. Benedictines are (as Br David Steindl-Rast said on another occasion) very irenic people, not given to Dominican debate, and Zen practitioners are apt to answer a logical question with a poem or an artistic flourish of the writing brush. Where are Aquinas and Dignaga in all this? Perhaps they will be invited to the next Encounter.

Roger Corless

BONAZZI, Robert, *Man in the Mirror: John Howard Griffin and the Story of Black Like Me* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), pp. 208. ISBN 1-5707-5118-8 (paperback). \$14.00.

Book reviews, as a genre, depend entirely on context. They are composed and published because a certain venue, like *The Merton Annual*, thinks that its readers will be interested in the book reviewed. It is not surprising, for instance, that of the seven books reviewed in Volume 10 of *The Merton Annual*, four directly dealt with Merton. The other three books reside within a familiar Mertonian orbit: Michael Casey's books on prayer and *lectio divina* and Kathleen Norris's memoir, *A Cloister Walk*.

So, one might ask, why is this volume of *The Merton Annual* publishing a review of Robert Bonazzi's study of John Howard Griffin and his germinal book *Black Like Me*? Bonazzi's book certainly does not fall under category one, at least as it is defined by Volume 10 of *The Merton Annual*: books by and about Merton. Nor does it fall under category two: books dealing with the contemplative life in general.

One might suggest that a review of *Man in the Mirror* belongs in *The Merton Annual* because the book offers fascinating bits of information about the man who was chosen by the Merton Legacy trust to serve as the first official biographer of Merton and who later had the project taken from him (pp. 156, 167). Thus, those interested in the history of Merton biographies might gain some insight into the beginning of that industry.

One might also suggest that a review of *Man in the Mirror* belongs in *The Merton Annual* because the book offers fascinating bits of information about a man who served as Merton's tutor in photography. Indeed, it was a camera loaned by Griffin