

Harold A. Netland and Keith E. Yandell, *Spirituality Without God?: Buddhist Enlightenment and Christian Salvation* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2009); alternative title, *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), paperback, xix pp. + 230 pp., ISBN: 978-1-84227-642-6, GB£14.99, US\$22.00.

This volume is written by Netland and Yandell with the western audience in mind. The title of the book called *Spirituality Without God?* precisely defines Buddhism which is a religion that “does not teach the existence of an almighty creator God” but instead “it offers the prospect of deep spirituality without having to bother with God.” (xii) It starts with the description of the origins of Buddhism which entails the life and teachings of Gautama the Buddha. It brings the discussion to the growth of Buddhism in the eastern and western hemispheres. It moves the discourse to the characteristics of Buddhist teachings and the various branches of this religion and the issues entailing the formation of different schools of thought. The final section of the book deals with Christianity and Buddhism. In the first few pages of introduction, the authors depict the current demography and sociology of Europe, Australia and North America. Netland and Yandell admit that there are more Asians, Africans and Latinos who are Christians now than the traditionally Christian West. Buddhism, which came from Asia, has gained attention and provided alternative religion for the western people. Partly, this attraction to Buddhism is due to huge Asian migration into the West and the stressful materialistic consumer societies in North America, Europe and Australia receive “promise [of] a spirituality and serenity that enables one to transcend the pressures of modern life, but without the ecclesiastical structures, dogma, and authoritarianism of traditional Western Christianity.” (xi-xii) The authors also note that Buddhism and other Asian religions are new to the West and what is known about them is very slight. Thus, *Spirituality Without God?* is a modest endeavor to fill the gaps of understanding the nature of Buddhism and its contrast with Christianity.

From the beginning chapter it could be sensed that the book is not primarily for apologetic purposes. It is sincerely attempting to understand Buddhism and its origins and appreciate it as a religion seen from the lenses of Christian authors. In other words, the discussion is a plain description of the spirit and makeup of Buddhism. The approach of Netland and Yandell in emphasizing the contrasting natures of

Buddhism and Christianity in terms of a belief system is due to their targeted audience:

In highlighting some differences between Christianity and Buddhism above, we provided examples of differences in the two religions' *beliefs*. Some, however, will object that focusing upon beliefs in this manner is to misconstrue what religions are all about. Religions, we are told, are ways of life and should not be understood in terms of truth claims. Many of those in the West who are attracted to Buddhism are not primarily interested in its metaphysical claims but rather in the practical benefits that accompany meditation and a Buddhist way of life. Buddhism seems, for many, to be a form of spiritual therapy that can be embraced quite apart from accepting the particular doctrines Buddhism traditionally has advanced. (xiii-xiv)

The preceding quotation from *Spirituality Without God* captures the authors' approach, attitude and analysis of Buddhism as a religion. They are essentially responding to the contemporary attitude of the western mindset. The proper understanding of Buddhism as a religion must be presented without any reservation. It is notable that the account given in chapter one about the historical milieu of ancient Buddhism as well as the doctrines and development of this Asian religion is generally informative. Netland and Yandell describe Buddhism that thrived since its inception over two and a half millennia ago. They also depict the clear connection of Buddhism to Hinduism. (1-9) The authors historically affirm Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, in terms of his existence as a human being. The representation of the different ideas about the historical Gautama Buddha is balanced. (9-14) The Buddhism's system of belief such as the "four noble truths" as well as "impermanence and no-self" including "spiritual goal of nirvana" are clarified to avoid Christian misunderstandings. (14- 26) This chapter provides an informative historical understanding of Buddhism.

The last pages of the first chapter talk about the historical growth of the Buddhist faith where the account highlights the early years of Theravada Buddhism. (26-32) Chapters two and three continue the narration of the historical expansion of Buddhism as they account for "The Dharma Goes East" and "The Dharma Comes West" respectively. The titles of these chapters highlight the notion of dharma which

traditionally refers to the Buddha's sayings and traditions and their virtuous truths. On the one hand, the important personalities such as Nagarjuna, Honen and his follower Shinran as well as the present Dalai Lama are placed in the wide picture of Buddhism historical record according to their contributions. Buddhist groups such as Mahayana, Zen and Tibetan as well as Indian and Sri Lankan, Chinese and Japanese interaction with the coming of the Dharma are doctrinally described and historically illustrated in the second chapter. (33-67) On the other hand, the third chapter starts with the missionary nature of Buddhist religion. (69-70) It paints the picture of Japanese and Chinese immigrants who brought their Buddhist religion with them in America. (72-79) The influential writings of Suzuki on Zen and Abe's contemporary representation of Zen Buddhism attracted the westerners to this Asian religion. (83-103)

In the next two chapters Netland and Yandell draw the attention of the reader to "Aspects of Buddhist Doctrine" and "Some Buddhist Schools and Issues." Chapter four explicitly describes that Buddhism teaches "religious exclusivism" and further explanations which are "incompatible with Buddhist teachings are said to be mistaken, resulting in ignorance and further suffering; only Buddhism leads to release from suffering and the ignorance from which suffering arises." (106-107) The same chapter talks about Buddhist understanding of truth linked with "rebirth and karma," "impermanence and no-self," "appearances and reality," "dependent co-origination and determinism," "enlightenment and nirvana" and "conscious states." (111-144) Chapter five takes a few versions of the Buddhist religion. They speak on the essential problems of humanity that caused the need for a Buddhist answer in dealing with age old religious illness. (145) The authors chose to speak about "the Pudgalavada or Personalist tradition," emphasizing the "self or soul" during the life now, the reincarnation later on and reaching the state of Nirvana. (147-157) Then, they present "the Madhyamaka tradition" as pluralistically interpreted by the Buddhists in terms of "nihilism" or "absolutism" or "ineffabilism. (157-166) Lastly, "Buddhist reductionism" is depicted by the writers as a religion of "momentary states" which means that everything in life is dependent on "the mental states." (166-174)

The final chapter is the only chapter in the book that makes comparison and contrast between Christianity and Buddhism. Netland and Yandell also articulate the similarities and differences between "The Dharma [and] the Gospel." For example, they call attention to the similarity of Buddhist and Christian claim that both Buddha and Christ

expect allegiances from their followers to their persons and teachings as well as their necessary inclusions to the communities that put their faith on their founders. (176) However, the big difference is that for a Buddhist to be healed of “unsatisfactory states” it is believed to be “enlightenment,” while for a Christian to be delivered from sin, is “thought of in terms of repentance.” (180-181) Another crucial point that the authors stressed is that Buddhism does not include the existence of God in their religious system but Christianity places God and his Christ at the center of its belief. With other specific examples given by the authors they were able to show that: “The choice here is between two radically different perspectives on reality, on the nature of the human predicament, and the way to overcome it.” (212)

Spirituality Without God? is an informative book to peruse. It is recommended to be read by Christians who are interested in Buddhism as well as those who may not be attracted to this Asian religion but are acquainted with friends who have a Buddhist background. Although this book as written by Netland and Yandell presupposed an audience with a western mindset Asians and non-Western Pentecostals will get much substance from this volume. The book is readable and was successful in communicating the essence of a religion that developed apart from the English language that is used to describe it. The references are adequate for further studies, and the documentations are showing the scholarly research done by the authors. This volume is a welcome contribution to a better understanding among Christians of what Buddhism is all about.

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