

University of Redlands

InSPIRe @ Redlands

Our House Articles, Posters, and Presentations

Our House

4-2018

Jesus and Buddha: Friends in Conversation

Wendy Farley PhD

San Francisco Theological Seminary

Follow this and additional works at: https://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_articles

 Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Farley, Wendy PhD, "Jesus and Buddha: Friends in Conversation" (2018). *Our House Articles, Posters, and Presentations*. 344.

https://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_articles/344



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License](#)

This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Our House at InSPIRe @ Redlands. It has been accepted for inclusion in Our House Articles, Posters, and Presentations by an authorized administrator of InSPIRe @ Redlands. For more information, please contact inspire@redlands.edu.

The Journal of Religion

to find that it, like apophatic theology, seems to be embracing a dizzying, deeply relational uncertainty. While it has become almost fashionable for humanities scholars to gesture at quantum physics, Keller has actually understood the thought of David Bohm, Karen Barad, and the foreparents of quantum entanglement. Through them, she argues that there is a learned ignorance, an exposure of uncertainty, that belongs to scientific investigation too. She is careful to reduce neither theology nor science to the other, nor to insist that they simply tell us the same thing; rather, they weave together a stronger argument for the importance of acting in awareness of our deep relationality. This argument is followed by considerations from philosophy, reading Deleuze and Whitehead to complicate further the multiple folds of Cusanus's cosmology. We then turn to the deeply ecological erotic poetry of Walt Whitman (Keller wryly notes that she tried to fit him into other chapters, but he insisted on one of his own), where we understand that our inseparability from the earth is a matter not just of duty but of delight as well. In the last chapter of this section, Keller notes a worry: "It seems that the question can only continue to press: is all such talk of multiplicities still another way of avoiding commitment?" (216). Taking up the ethical thought of Judith Butler, she argues that it cannot be: by our very inseparability, we are implicated in any degradation. Ethics is already woven into ontology.

Thus we are set up for the third and final section of the book, which sets out the "implications" for politics, action, and modes of living in awareness of entanglement, in knowing unknowing, and in the delicate sustaining of possibility. "Crusade, Capital, and Cosmopolis" reaches back to Nicholas's surprising call for interfaith dialogue. Keller takes him beyond his own underlying sureness of Christianity's rightness in order to take him at his word that an ultimately unknowable divinity can be approached, never reached, from many different directions. She points out that the "unapologetic exclusivism" that characterizes much of both Christianity and Islam is implicated in religious violence, which is not the same as claiming that it is causal. The corrective turn is not only away from religion: "The imaginary of a convivial, all exceeding and enfolding Mystery may help more than mere arguments for democratic tolerance, allied with secular pluralism" (252). The cloud, the insistence on a sense of mystery rather than an obfuscation, shows its value here. The next chapter moves from religiously related or motivated violence to a desperately urgent ecology, a realization that we are not separable from the planet we desecrate. Finally, "Questionable Love" asks, "How shall we greet the unknown before us?" (286). This variation on the question of hospitality emphasizes a mindful, careful, always-in-question response, aware of the implication of the responder and the cloudy uncertainty of any possibility, but with a love that is able to exceed knowing.

A brief "after" argues for theopoiesis: "What matters, what might matter endlessly, is what we earth-dwellers now together embody. Not what we say *about* God but how we *do* God. In traditional language: *theopoiesis*, 'God-making'" (306). *Cloud of the Impossible* cannot provide us with a pattern for that making, but it shows us some of the ways in which it may be possible, after all.

KARMEN MACKENDRICK, *Le Moyne College*.

KNITTER, PAUL, and HAIGHT, ROGER. *Jesus and Buddha: Friends in Conversation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015. 272 pp. \$26.00 (paper).

Paul Knitter and Roger Haight have made an important contribution to interfaith dialogue by structuring their text around conversation itself. They highlight the spirituality of Christianity and Buddhism as an entry point for interpretation. Their ap-

proach offers an irenic model for religious dialogue that complements other methods.

Their method is distinctive because it portrays Buddhism and Christianity as living entities characterized by nonstatic similarities and differences. Each chapter is organized by a conversation around a common theme. In the course of the conversation, one gets a sense of the meaning of the topic in each tradition but also the way that meaning shifts in light of dialogue. Contrasts may sharpen or underlying resonances (“functional analogies”) appear. Topics are presented as objects of ever-deepening understanding, an understanding that emerges in part from the dialogue itself.

Roger Haight is an American Jesuit with a long teaching career and many publications behind him. Paul Knitter is a former priest who identifies ever more strongly as a Buddhist and a Christian. They each bring academic training, commitment to liberation theology, and a lifetime of spiritual practice to their analysis. They have entered deeply into the meaning of these traditions, and that is the focus of their dialogue.

Their interest in religious dialogue is ethical and theological more than theoretical. Several key features emerge in their conversation: a focus on spiritual efficacy rather than philosophy or institutional authority, a deep awareness of the apophatic dimension of both traditions, and attention to contemporary Buddhism and Christianity as resources in the struggle for peace and justice.

Much academic comparison focuses on particular figures or themes: Lee Yearley’s comparison of Mencius’s and Aquinas’s views of virtue, John Thatamanil’s juxtaposition of Tillich and Sankara, Michelle Voss Robert’s dialogue between Mechthild of Magdeburg and Lallewari. The significance of starting with spirituality only gradually emerges in this text.

One difficulty with religious dialogue occurs when the meaning of religion is identified with static metaphysical formulations that inhabit different symbolic universes, practices, rituals, and authority structures. Metadebates are often structured by the issue of incommensurate worldviews or models of salvation. But if one begins with the spiritual and ethical effects of traditions, a different conversation emerges.

Spirituality is used here to express the existential significance of religion. From this perspective, religious truth is not something external—metaphysical principles defined by some authoritative body. It is rather something that is existentially appropriated. Knitter describes spirituality as those things that help one stay connected to other beings and to some ultimate sense of meaning. It is some combination of “meaning and energy” (2). “My Buddhist teachers use the words *held by*, even *cradled by*, an interconnecting energy” (3). This involves an awakening (Buddhism) or conversion (Christianity) in which the self is decentered by radical relationship, reoriented by commitments to compassion and justice. Haight also identifies “engaged existential encounter” as central to the basic meaning of religion: “the idea of God is such that recognition of its meaning entails an existential relationship with the one who entertains it” (228).

Essential to their views on spirituality is awareness of its nondual or nonconceptual dimensions. Haight argues: “the epistemology of transcendence is unique because its object is not a sensible or finite object among others. Spiritual encounter thus refers to a process of being drawn into a sphere that utterly transcends representations” (228). This apophatic element is crucial to the project of the book. Buddhism and Christianity agree that reality can be expressed in deep symbols and metaphysical systems—this is the basis of disagreement and a level of incommensurability between them. But they also agree that the ultimate nature of reality eludes conceptual capture. This aspect of religion is less central to its authority structures and perhaps also to religious studies. But theologically, it is the very heart of religious truth.

The Journal of Religion

For Buddhists, “the more the experience of awakening begins to dawn and become real, the more we will feel that it comes out of and leads back to silence.” This is something Christian theologians also recognize: “Saint Thomas tells us that ‘the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches’” (156, citing *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.14.3).

Both traditions recognize “that all religious language is meant both to stimulate and communicate religious experience, recognizing also both the inadequacy and the vitality of religious language” (93). One of the perceived fruits of religious dialogue is a reminder to Christians of their own apophatic spirituality, a dimension that is less well known in the modern period (94).

The emphasis on the apophatic nature of religious language underpins the possibility of religious dialogue. Impasses that occur at the level of metaphysics soften when engaged through spiritual practice: “Although we talk very differently about what we experience—Abba or Sunyata—the personal-practice effects of the experiences seem to be analogous: a groundedness that produces peace and freedom of heart and a connectedness that produces compassion or love for all our sentient neighbors” (95–96). It is also a principle of religious co-belonging: “there is always more to Mystery than any one path can find” (225). While both men affirm the possibility of co-belonging and the necessity of dialogue, Haight emphasizes the commitment to a single community that, like (difficult) relatives, remains nonnegotiable. For Knitter, Christianity in its current form is undernourishing to many adherents; the practice of another tradition can feed what is lacking even as it reminds one of elements that were already there but overlooked.

This text could be useful to add to a bibliography for undergraduate or seminary students. Complementing historical, ethnographic, or philosophical approaches, it emphasizes the existential quality of religions and their underlying ethics. Perhaps equally significant is its depiction of the dynamic quality of religious concepts. Through conversation, understanding of a religious tradition changes. Rather than reified statements about the nature of reality, one discovers that meaning is mutable, language produces existential effects, and sameness and difference are unstable. It is written by two constructive theologians who have spent their lives interpreting Christianity for the contemporary period, rather than scholars committed to pure description. Perhaps most important, it models a respectful, even affectionate, encounter between traditions and ways of thinking. We witness in this book the wisdom of long study as well as a model for irenic curiosity and mutual nourishment in the encounter of the world’s religions.

WENDY FARLEY, *San Francisco Theological Seminary*.

MAHMOOD, SABA. *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. 237 pp. \$80.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

Saba Mahmood’s book *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* has been applauded as a major contribution to the study of secularism since its publication. The first two chapters provide a historical survey that prepares readers for the case studies in the second half of the book. Chapter 1 tracks the genealogy of two concepts in political secularism—religious liberty and minority rights—in the Middle East as intertwined with their evolution in Europe. Mahmood argues that the discourse of religious freedom and national minorities “belongs . . . to a far broader field of secular political praxis that secures the prerogative of the modern state to serve as the arbiter of religious differences, to remake and regulate religious life while proclaiming its sanc-

theless, James's pursuit of toleration evoked the deeply entrenched anti-Catholicism that permeated English culture. Even the most advanced advocates of toleration remained adamant that Catholics ought not to fall within the scope of any toleration scheme. Interpreting this heated contest, Murphy points out that "popery" had become a protean term, frequently carrying the explicitly political connotation of support for "arbitrary government." Thus, "according to one account, religion is 'but the mantle which covers the design of the popishly affected party and their leaders, to keep off the sitting of Parliaments'" (108). James II, William Penn, and others who favored repealing the penal laws and Test Acts had unsuccessfully attempted to bring about an "enormous cultural shift," especially given the king's own Catholicism. By the end of 1688, William and Mary would be sovereigns, "James would be in France and the new government would be seeking William Penn for questioning" (171).

In the process of interpreting William Penn as both political theorist and political activist, Murphy not only examines the importance of William Penn for understanding political theory and action in the early modern Atlantic world but also employs Penn's career as a model for understanding "the importance of social roles and locations in the genesis and reception of political theory" (11). He has developed a productive strategy for interpreting early modern religious and political thought. W. CLARK GILPIN, *University of Chicago*.

PATTISON, GEORGE. *Eternal God/Saving Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. x+355 pp. \$105.00 (cloth).

George Pattison begins *Eternal God/Saving Time* by observing that everyone from Protestant church-goers to Hollywood movie publicists, from funeral directors to Soviet political leaders, seems to deploy the concept of eternity (1). At the same time, Pattison notes, the concept is at best problematic and at worst empty. "What could it possibly mean," he asks, "to speak of God or any being as *eternal*, when our human experience and knowledge seem in manifold ways to be bounded and pervaded by time? What are we human beings if not 'mortals,' that is, pervaded by time?" (1). According to Pattison, the concept of eternity appears perennially even in the face of these objections, because of a countervailing psychological need to be "saved" from time and thus to be spared the unpredictability and loss it brings. Because of this perennial need, Pattison argues, something still "calls for thinking" in the theological concept of eternity. Pattison's wager is that this call can be clarified, if not fully answered, through a rereading of European philosophy.

Pattison begins chapter 1 by announcing his turn away from analytic philosophical methods in favor of the so-called Continental tradition. Pattison groups his sources into two conceptual groups: In chapters 2–3 Pattison considers thinkers who frame human time in eternal terms (including Spinoza, Hegel, and Nietzsche). In the following two chapters, he considers figures for whom human time is the only possible way of thinking coherently about eternity (Schopenhauer, Barth, Kierkegaard, and Levinas). While Pattison groups the thinkers thematically, within each chapter he presents them in a progressive conversation. Virtually all of the reconstructions end with a series of rhetorical questions designed to show the reader the principal vulnerabilities of each view, and each subsequent thinker is introduced as addressing the problems the previous thinker left unresolved. This style highlights key tensions within the problem of eternity, as Pattison presents it, but makes it difficult to see how the texts might open up new conceptual directions.

Copyright of Journal of Religion is the property of University of Chicago Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.