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REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Buddhist Nonduality, Paschal Paradox: A Christian Commentary on the Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa). By Joseph S. O'Leary. Christian Commentaries on Non-Christian Sacred Texts. Leuven: Peeters, 2017. vi + 291 pages. Price not available.*

FOUR PERSPECTIVES

I

Wilfred Cantwell Smith used to say that the term "dialogue" in the much-used phrase "interreligious dialogue" is actually a misnomer. For him a conversation that ranged across religious boundaries engaged more than just two voices: it was a "colloquy," involving many voices, not merely a dialogue. Sometimes this was a literal colloquy, where a group of people met together to explore a topic of common interest in the study of religion. But it could also be a colloquy in the mind and heart of a single individual, when the study of a topic or a text engages multiple voices in the tradition that gave rise to the text and awakens an internal conversation in the mind of the scholar who engages the text. A colloquy like this can be rich and unpredictable, and it can be immensely satisfying as a way to generate new insights not only about the text that is perceived as "out there," different from one's self, but also about the multiple voices that shape us as observers and interpreters in a multireligious landscape.

Joseph S. O'Leary's *Buddhist Nonduality, Paschal Paradox: Christian Commentary on the Teaching of Vimalakīrti* is a classic example of this kind of internal colloquy. It is not just the record of a single scholar engaging a single text; it ranges widely and fluently across Buddhist and Christian sources and draws all of them into conversation. At one moment it may be Paul engaging one of Vimalakīrti's strikingly antinomian utterances; at another it might be Jesus' practicality and impatience with conventions engaging an insight from Zen. The multiplicity of voices—Buddhist as well as Christian—that have shaped O'Leary's own religious imagination speak together in a colloquy into

* O'Leary's book is the seventh in the series Christian Commentaries on Non-Christian Sacred Texts published by Peeters Press and Eerdmans. The founder and general editor of the series is Catherine Cornille.

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what he eloquently calls “the concern with reality itself, by which the truth and value of any religion will stand or fall” (441). The book is elegant; it is stimulating; and it has a great deal to teach, not only about *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti* and Christian tradition, but also about the search for truth.

The Teaching of Vimalakīrti creates an ideal space for this kind of cross-cultural search. Vimalakīrti himself is such an engaging and elusive figure that he moves naturally from one culture to another. It was this elusiveness that made it so easy, in the early years of Chinese Buddhism, to imagine Vimalakīrti in the role of a Chinese sage. Paul Demiéville commented about this quality of the text at the start of his appendix to Étienne Lamotte’s French translation of *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*: “Apart from its importance from the perspective of Indian Buddhism, the Vimalakīrti Sūtra is notable for being one of the rare Buddhist works that was truly integrated in the cultural patrimony of China. . . . In its content as well as its form, there is hardly any foreign text, before modern times, that was able to come so close to a Chinese sensibility” (*L’enseignement de Vimalakīrti* [Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, Institut orientaliste, 1987]).

The text not only made its influence felt in Chinese literature and religion; it also was represented widely in Chinese Buddhist art. Such images often focused on the scene in chapter 6, where Vimalakīrti is conversing with Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom. While they are talking, a goddess showers the assembly with flowers. The flowers fall off the bodies of the bodhisattvas, but they stick to the bodies of the great disciples, especially to the body of Śāriputra, who is the spokesman and symbol of traditional monasticism. In effect, he is the straight man in the sūtra. Śāriputra and the goddess engage in a spirited repartee, centered on the concept of false discriminations. Finally the goddess uses her “magical power” (*adhiṣṭhāna*) to teach Śāriputra a lesson in nondiscrimination by changing herself into Śāriputra and Śāriputra into a goddess.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has a painting of this scene in its collection, executed in the style of a wall painting from Dunhuang (MFA number 58.1003). Years ago, the museum put it on display, along with correspondence between the museum and the New York dealer who sold it to the museum. Clearly the museum was proud of its acquisition. A few years later the painting was shown to a visiting Chinese artist named Zhang Daqian. He said: “Now that you have one of my forgeries, let me give you one of my real paintings!” For the museum it is a story of acute embarrassment, but for readers of *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, it is a perfect image of the illusion making that characterizes the story of Vimalakīrti himself. It also shows how amusing and ironic the story of Vimalakīrti can be when it is approached with a sense of lightness and sensitivity to the play of the illusions that characterizes great texts of the Mahāyāna.

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This same sense of lightness and sensitivity infuses Joseph O'Leary's fine commentary on *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*. O'Leary moves very gracefully between the Buddhist and Christian traditions, touching down in places where they illuminate each other, but not getting stuck in rigid points of dogma or tradition. He moves more in the spirit of the goddess than in the spirit of Śāriputra. We can think of his comparison of these traditions as a way of striking them against each other, like flint against steel, and catching the sparks. But it might be better to think of this book as a way of sprinkling flowers and watching for the points where they stick.

What are some of these points? First, O'Leary makes several helpful comments about genre. He notes that *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti* has a unity of style and composition that suggests a single literary performance. In this sense, it is closer to the book of Job than it is to one of the gospels. This text, and many like it, seem to be a religiously engaged form of imaginative literature, and force us to ask about the role of imagination in Buddhist literature and in religious literature more generally. In his recent book *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), David Shulman tells a story about a South Indian brahmin who constructs a temple for Śiva out of his imagination. Nearby there is a king who constructs a temple out of bricks and stone. When the time comes for the king to invite Śiva to take up residence in the temple, Śiva sends the message that he is already busy with the temple created by the brahmin in his own imagination. The brahmin's imaginative act turns the king's reality into a shadow, just as the imaginative play of stories in *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti* turns the structure of conventional reality upside down.

The role of the imagination in *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti* helps illuminate one of the sticky points in O'Leary's introduction to the text, his discussion of "miracles." The text has many references to seemingly miraculous manifestations. In the first chapter, for example, the Buddha touches the earth with his toe and transforms the "billion-world-galactic universe" (in Robert A. F. Thurman's translation) into a huge mass of precious jewels. In a later chapter, Vimalakīrti transports innumerable thrones into his empty room without causing anyone to be cramped. Later in the text, Vimalakīrti sends out an order for food to a distant universe and brings it back for the assembly to be fed. Should these stories be read like the miraculous healing stories of the gospels, or even like the miracle of the Resurrection? This is not clear. Another way to read them would be to situate them in the context of the religious practices that lie behind them. In the case of the Vimalakīrti, they are associated often (though not always) with the practice of *samādhi* or "concentration," a practice that even in early Mahāyāna

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sources is associated with the imaginative visualization of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. These acts may be less "miracles," in our sense of the word, than expressions of the Mahāyāna imagination, like the imagination of Shulman's South Indian brahmin, in which reality is turned upside down. If so, could the same be said about the "miracles" in the gospel? Could they be viewed through a Mahāyāna lens, less as statements about what actually happened than as imaginative expressions of the way the gospel turns ordinary reality upside down?

The mention of the word "reality" inevitably raises the major theme of the book, "Buddhist nonduality and the paschal paradox." O'Leary explains: "Nonduality is closely linked with the doctrine of emptiness of all *dharma*s. But the latter is not allowed to congeal into a fixed metaphysical principle. The spiritual freedom of the bodhisattva is shown in a constant mobility of thought and action, for which 'emptiness' and 'suchness' function as ciphers" (26). One of the dangers of articulating a "doctrine" of nonduality is that it easily congeals in just this way, into a static metaphysical principle. In study of these sources, it is useful to pay attention to the way these supposed "doctrines" are named. The Madhyamaka philosopher Bhāviveka speaks less about a "doctrine" than he does about a *naya*, a word that that I translate as "approach." He also speaks of the "single approach" or *eka-naya* of the Perfection of Wisdom. This terminology is common in *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*. In fact, one could argue that it is fundamental to the Vimalakīrti, and it is related, by a simple transposition of consonants, to the *eka-yāna* or "one vehicle" of *The Lotus Sūtra*.

What these words have in common is a sense of movement, or "mobility of thought and action." Following this idea to its conclusion offers a much more fluid understanding of formulas like the "nonduality of samsara and nirvana." Here the key concept does not have to do with their "identity," since there ultimately is no reality to which they can be identical, but an "approach" in which one is not fixed in either *saṃsāra* or *nirvana*. In other words, in the terminology of the Mahāyāna, true nirvana is an *apratiṣṭhita-nirvana*, the nirvana that is "not fixed" in either *saṃsāra or nirvana*.

This way of speaking about nonduality allows a different formulation of the "paschal paradox": it is not that Jesus displays two natures, divine and human, but that Jesus is not located in a static sense as either divine or human. As O'Leary points out in his initial account of nonduality, this attributes to Jesus the spiritual freedom of the bodhisattva. It would then connect naturally the images of freedom in the letters of Paul, as in Romans 8:21: "Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of the children of God." How is this freedom realized? In a nonduality of Christ and believer: "I am

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crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). Nonduality comes down to earth in these particular images of Pauline salvation.

One could go on from here and talk about the nonduality of wisdom and compassion. There is no question that compassion plays a role in the Vimalakīrti, as it does in the Mahāyāna more generally, but it is important not to sentimentalize it. In Aśvaghoṣa's *Life of the Buddha*, Siddhārtha grieves and feels pity for the worms and insects who are broken by farmers' plows, as he sits in his first meditation. This pity (*kṛpā*) is in direct contrast to the teaching of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, where Krishna tells Arjuna precisely that he should not feel pity. Vimalakīrti's compassion may be closer in tone to the detachment of Krishna than to the emotional engagement of Aśvaghoṣa's Siddhārtha. It is cooler, more intellectual, and more awake to the play of irony in the concept of emptiness. The stories told at the start of the text by Disciples and Bodhisattva to explain why they would prefer to avoid Vimalakīrti sound more like the stories of a harsh and demanding Zen master, than of somebody who is looking for ways to lay down his life for suffering beings. Certainly there are moments of great sympathy in the life of Jesus, even moments of tears, but he too has the power to slice through conventional categories in a way that his disciples find deeply challenging. Karl Potter once said that the attitude of liberation (*mokṣa*) involves "greater and greater concern with less and less attachment" (10, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*, [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963]). Vimalakīrti's "concern" has much more to do with posing cognitive conundrums than relieving pain.

Much more could be said about this rich and sophisticated book. I hope these comments will serve to pay homage to Joseph O'Leary's impressive addition to the continuing "colloquy" of the Buddhist and Christian traditions.

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II

Joseph O'Leary's book is a tour de force of scholarship, firmly focused on the transformative purpose behind this Mahāyāna scripture. He invites readers to let the theme of nonduality "lay claim on our minds in such a way that we are both haunted by its elusive resonances with what some in the Christian tradition have glimpsed and at the same time challenged by

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