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I am Food: The Mass in Planetary Perspective (review)

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I AM FOOD: THE MASS IN PLANETARY PERSPECTIVE. *By Roger Corless.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004. 104 pp.

In this timely reprint of *I Am Food: The Mass in Planetary Perspective* (originally published by Crossroad in 1981), the late Roger Corless demonstrates the potential for spiritual and intellectual creativity contained within a stance of dual religious belonging. Corless passed away in January 2007, but this book remains as a way for us to know him and to appreciate, as he did, the possibilities for spiritual revitalization and transformation that may be generated at the intersection and interpenetration of Christian and Buddhist traditions.

Corless was raised as a Protestant but as a teenager became deeply engaged with the study of world religions and claimed Buddhism in particular as his own. Eventually he would become a scholar of Chinese Buddhism and a practitioner within the Gelugpa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. At the same time, however, that the young Corless was being drawn to Buddhism, his connection to his Christian faith was also deepening; his profound experiences of the loving power of God could not be denied even if Christianity's theism could not be easily reconciled with Buddhism's doctrine of emptiness. Instead of leaving one religion for the other, he deepened his engagement with both. He did not seek to synthesize or reconcile Christianity and Buddhism but rather held these traditions together in a dynamic, creative tension and lived each one fully in its turn. When asked about his religious affiliation, Corless would respond playfully that he was "a Buddhist on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, a Christian on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturday, and a Gaia worshipper on Sundays." In *I Am Food*, however, Corless shows us that on some Sundays, specifically at the celebration of the Mass, he was both Christian and Buddhist at the same time. The great contribution of this book is in its offering of a fresh and transformative approach to the Mass through the application of the symbolic structures of Tibetan Buddhist mandala visualization as a template for active participation in the communion ritual.

Corless's focus in this book is the ritual of the Mass as celebrated within the Roman Catholic tradition. His conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism occurred much to his "own surprise," prompted by his discovery in Catholicism of "a curious *growing center* which had great power and potential." This center "brought together many insights which I had picked up from other religions, and moved them to a new synthesis. This synthesis was concentrated in the oddly named 'Mass'" (p. 13). *I Am Food* offers a scholarly and personal meditation on the meaning, symbolism, and power contained in this central ritual of Catholicism. This project is signaled in the grammatically awkward but intriguing title of the book's first chapter, "Why Is the Mass?" Corless knows that many routine churchgoers never think or dare to ask this question, and the few who do ask it rarely find satisfactory answers. His book seeks to encourage such questioning among those who are in search of a personal religious experience "away from the dullness of minimalist routine" (p. 34). His very lively, humorous, and slightly irreverent style is intended to take the boredom out of the Mass, providing a very personal and original guide to it, different from the series of "excellent, but ultimately claustrophobic, devotional books on 'the spiritual meaning of the Mass'" (p. 13).

Among Christian writings that were influential for his understanding of the Mass, Corless names *The Mass in Slow Motion* (1948) by Ronald Knox, which attempts to describe the inner meaning of the Mass, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *Hymn of the Universe* (1965), which describes a vision of the world as sacrament and celebrates Mass as a cosmic event. While Teilhard de Chardin inspires Corless's "planetary perspective" on the Mass, Nicholas Casabilas's *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* (1978) sharpens the focus on "the mystical significance of each and every act of the priest and people" (p. 13).

Corless argues that what makes the Mass seem stifling is the notion of a transcendent God, the "Great Provider who sends me TV Dinners when I am hungry" (p. 16). The "why" of the Mass can be fully apprehended only through an incarnational theology that sees the whole cosmos as the body of Christ, who "took on the vesture of the seas, the mountains, the fish and the birds . . . The world is now divinized, because it formed the robe of the Godman. Becoming divine ourselves . . . we then participate in the divinization of our planet, acting as the cosmic priests, which was our destiny from the beginning" (p. 19).

Corless also notes that none of the approaches to the Mass that he considers address the question of those outside the fold, "the pagans." "One is left wondering" writes Corless, "if God created them by mistake" (p. 15). After a light-hearted excursion through the basics of the inclusivist versus exclusivist positions as exemplified by theologians such as John Henry Cardinal Newman and Karl Barth, respectively, Corless comes out on Newman's side, affirming that "the Catholic God is a much happier God than this one [i.e., the God of Barth's theology]. He likes His creation, and He cares as much for the flu virus as for Karl Barth. He laughs a lot" (p. 16).

In his second chapter, titled “Mass, Mystery, and the Idolatry of Relevance,” Corless points out the dangers of the new (post–Vatican II) liturgy, which attempts to make the Mass “relevant” by emphasizing so much the immanent aspect of God in the world that both mystery and transcendence get lost in the process. Priests are taught how to operate a church but seldom how to meditate, and seem from the outset more shallow than their predecessors who “mumbled the Mass in Latin, for the very mumbling was somehow magical” (p. 28).

Stating that it is the exception rather than the rule to find an inspiring Mass nowadays, Corless encourages us readers to learn how to develop our own priestly spirituality: “In this situation, when the priests have by and large lost the mystery, it is up to us laypeople to retrieve it. The priest is the chairman of the Mass but not the dictator. We are also priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9)” (p. 28).

The third and last chapter, “The Pilgrimage of the Mass,” considers each step of the liturgy by using the Buddhist practice of mandala visualization, with its spatial symbolism of a progression from periphery to sacred center, as model for meditative orientation. The mandala of the Mass leads communicants toward the sacred center of the cosmos, the “placeless mountain on whose summit is Christ” (p. 31). The whole chapter, comprising about seventy pages, is summarized in a one-and-a-half-page outline at the end, which helps the reader to remember the five essential parts or steps in the process. These are setting out, entering the mandala, speech, food, and living in the mandala.

The first step involves spiritual readings in preparation for participation in the Mass. Every following step involves visualizations. For the second step, Corless recommends familiarizing oneself with Ezekiel 40–48 and Revelations 21–22 in order to systematically build up a “visionary temple.” Another resource for imagining the heavenly temple or palace is St. Theresa’s *Interior Castle*, which Corless sees as “a remarkable adaptation of the Buddhist Tantric ritual of entry into the Palace Mandala” (p. 39).

In the third step, called “I Am Speech,” Corless explains the different parts of the Liturgy of the Word, noting that “the Logos first comes to us as Speech and then as food” (p. 43). The recommended visualization during the Gloria is that of “God the Father as a King seated on a magnificent throne in front and slightly above you. God the Son sits to his right, and God the Spirit to his left. Each Person has the same features (since God transcends gender, “his” features are best visualized as androgynous) but wears different robes. . . . You may add as many angels as you can fit” (p. 47). This visualization serves to let the participants know in whose presence they are praying. After having fulfilled its purpose, the visualization has to be dissolved (as visualizations always are in Tibetan Buddhist meditations).

As the Gospel reading is announced, congregants trace the sign of the cross on the forehead, lips, and breast, spatial foci on the physical body, which, interestingly enough, correspond to the centers of body, speech, and mind in Buddhism. Explaining that wisdom is symbolized in many religious traditions

through the sword, Corless describes the tracing of the cross on the forehead, lips, and breast as follows: "By making the cross on ourselves in these three places we draw the incarnate sword down through our bodies, like lightning piercing the clouds of ignorance, and prepare ourselves to hear the words of Wisdom himself" (p. 52). Christ, as Logos incarnate, is Wisdom incarnate, which we symbolically inscribe upon our bodies in preparation for hearing the Word.

The third step further covers the Homily ("how to make the best of it"), the Creed ("a curious check-list"), and intercessions ("transferring the merit"). In the section on Creed, Corless considers why many people who hunger for direct religious experience and who are turned off by the dogmatism of the Catholic Church often join charismatic groups instead. He attributes the root of the problem to Christology: "In Christianity, the problem came up: 'Who is Christ?' and instead of answering by *actions*, as Christ himself had done, the church turned the matter over to philosophers, who came up with theories as elaborate and generally unintelligible as the babblings of the Philosopher in *The Yellow Submarine*. The theories were then adopted by the hierarchy as a test of who was in the church and who was not" (p. 56).

While sympathetic to their quest for a more embodied and experiential faith, Corless offers a critique of charismatic groups: "they seem to me to make an excellent beginning but not go anywhere. After getting born again, all you can do is try to convince others to join and watch them get born again with the weepy satisfaction of a mother who remembers her own wedding as she marries her daughter off" (p. 57). Rather than turning away from the Church, Corless suggests that the spiritually hungry re-vision their engagement with the sacraments: Christ may be encountered "organically, physically, through the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of the Mass which his Mystical Body wears in the place of the skin which his fleshly body wore" (p. 56). Here, at the heart of the Catholic Church, is a Way that cuts through stale dogmatism and leads us into the center of reality, into "the deeper and deeper recesses of the mandala" (p. 57), that is, into the incarnate Wisdom of the Christ.

The fourth step, "I Am Food: The Status of the Deity," moves the participants one step closer to the center of the mandala. The visualization recommended for the offertory is the Buddhist mandala, schematically encompassing the entire universe, with Mount Meru at its center. In Tibetan Buddhist visualization practices, this cosmic mandala is offered to all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future; applied as a template for the offertory, Corless writes, this mandala visualization "helps the Offertory at Mass to become more than just the setting of the table which, of course, it also is. But the table of the Mass is not just a table, it is *the* Table, the Cosmic table" (p. 69). The altar becomes the cosmic mountain, the inclusive center of all that is, which one enters into and offers up through experiential and embodied participation.

The sharing of bread and wine, symbolizing the basics of human sustenance and commensality (bread and wine being "the coffee and doughnuts of antiquity") adds the human dimension to the cosmic mandala. The humanized uni-

verse, in turn, becomes the divinized universe in Christ. Corless also emphasizes that the celebration of mass should display both the human and the cosmic aspect, commenting that “the Tridentine Mass . . . glittered with cosmic significance, but was hardly very cozy. In reaction to this, some masses today are so much of the ‘y’all come’ variety that they are, as I have lamented, indistinguishable from a coffee break that happens to have bread and wine” (p. 72). The author reminds the reader that “we are all priests,” which means that “all of us are involved in the priestly activity of mediating God to the world and the world to God.” Therefore, our mental offering of the universe during the offertory is “just as important as the priest’s physical offering” (p. 72). The Mass becomes meaningless if the participants remain mere passive spectators to the movements of the priest.

The acclamation (ascending the mountain) and Eucharistic prayer (myth in action) lead to the entry into the heart of the mandala, the altar where “the king of the universe awaits us on his throne of bread and wine” (p. 81). Corless describes an interesting parallel to the Eucharist found in a Tibetan Buddhist ceremony in which a deity is visualized as inhabiting a piece of *torma* and beer. By partaking of the food and drink, the practitioner becomes one with the deity. When receiving communion at the altar, “we accept our own divinization as the Humanized Universe Mandala is returned to us as the divinized microcosm of Christ, and as such we are offered back to the Father.” Put in more simple words, “we have eaten the Food, but the Food is God and has eaten us” (p. 88).

The fifth step is “Living the Mass.” In this part, Corless takes the reader on an excursion from dogmatic theology based on Greek concepts to process theology, which “made Christian theology very much look like Buddhism” (p. 99) because it takes constant change seriously. Process theology offers much-needed liberation from the doctrinal inflexibility that drives many people away from Christianity. “Supposing,” Corless writes, “we take flow seriously, as Ultimate. There is nothing behind the flow. Flow is. Flow flows. Change, then, would be expected. We would seek to move the flow by means of the flow which is in us, in useful directions, and not in useless directions. We would seek The Best” (p. 99). Living the Mass in daily life is just that, “seeking the best” for the Self and Other, for the entire planet, in intimate cooperation with God. It means letting “the flow which is in us” transform and divinize the Earth. Quoting Teilhard de Chardin, the author concludes that “the only sin now is to block the evolving purposes of God” (p. 100).

One of the basic insights Corless “picked up” from Buddhism is the questioning of everything, including the inquisitive mind itself, which leads to freedom from concepts, dogma, and tradition. Looking at dogma and tradition from the perspective of Emptiness creates a new freedom for tradition, which can now be embraced in new ways. *I Am Food* exemplifies the creative possibilities for religious re-visioning that may be born of such freedom. This is a compassionate, engaging, and inspiring book that could have been produced only by an inquiring mind situated at the intersection of two or more religious worlds. While its

lighthearted, sweeping account of complex theological and historical issues may raise eyebrows in some, it keeps the book a page-turner. The book will especially appeal to those spiritual pilgrims who are willing to try out the recommended visualization techniques. But even for the less adventurous, this book is fascinating for its daring interpenetration of Christian and Buddhist symbols and ritual practices.

I Am Food stands as a fitting memorial to its author, reminding us of his spiritual and intellectual creativity and inspiring us to keep exploring the fresh insights and paths opened by Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

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CONFLICT, CULTURE, CHANGE: ENGAGED BUDDHISM IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD. By Sulak Sivaraksa. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005. 145 pp.

Sulak Sivaraksa's *Conflict, Culture, Change* is a useful if uneven collection of essays that touch on many of the basic aspects of Engaged Buddhism. The book does not make an original contribution to the field, yet it serves as a good introduction to the tenets and practice of socially responsible Buddhism.

Though not as prolific as Thich Nhat Hanh or the Dalai Lama, Sulak Sivaraksa's contributions as a grassroots organizer and spokesperson are widely recognized, and he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his resistance to Thailand's military dictatorship. His few books bear witness to the ways that he and similar peacemakers have found innovative methods to prevent globalization from destroying traditional ways of life.

It does not seem entirely relevant to criticize a book that is so well intentioned and written by such an exemplary human being. Nonetheless, *Conflict, Culture, Change* is an odd collection of essays. Most have been published elsewhere, and taken together they tend to be repetitive. They are loosely grouped into three sections; the first two—"Peace, Nonviolence, and Social Justice" and "Simplicity, Compassion, and Education"—lay out a range of ways that classic Theravada Buddhist values could bring sanity to a world out of balance, discussing global conflict, nonviolence, reconciliation, consumerism, and environmentalism. What ties them together is the use of Buddhist ideas to analyze and respond to current problems, but the ensuing discussion does not progress beyond an introductory level. While it is certainly true that the onslaught of capitalism is traceable to the three poisons (greed, hatred, and ignorance) and that sincere humility on the part of world leaders would help facilitate global diplomacy,