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Conflict, Culture, Change: Engaged Buddhism in a Globalizing
World (review)

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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,

this kind of analysis will probably not convince anyone who is not already a fellow traveler.

Indeed, some scholars have waited for the leaders of Engaged Buddhism to articulate a more consistent philosophical basis for their praxis. In some ways, this criticism is ironic. After all, the energies of Engaged Buddhism are appropriately directed toward action and not theory, and Sivaraksa and others rightly criticize the single-minded pursuit of meditation unless it is balanced by an active response to social problems. Sivaraksa is careful to balance these dimensions, arguing that either one without the other is unable to bring about real change. He also combines classical Buddhist concepts with modern approaches—liberation theology, for example. What is needed, in this regard, is a more sustained exploration of where precisely traditional Buddhism can be supplemented by modern critical discourse without losing its nature as a dharma-based soteriology. On the other hand, if Sivaraksa's book were more focused on practical steps and concrete agendas, it could have served as a blueprint for organizers. That it does neither philosophy nor pragmatics limits its shelf life.

A third section, "Culture and Change," is the book's most coherent, focusing on Thailand and the rise and fall of its dictatorships and the decline of Thai Buddhism. Sivaraksa's many stories attest to an all-too-common dynamic in South Asian Theravada countries: monks becoming politically powerful and their spiritual discipline waning. Sivaraksa also finds reason for hope: some Buddhists have remained true to the values of simplicity and humility, and new movements have arisen to help the old culture resist the new. At times his descriptions seem, at least to the Western reader, to border on a romantic nostalgia for an agrarian, temple-centered past, when monks were the revered authorities in their villages and families sent their sons to be ordained early. Now, he points out, many monks have VCRs and air conditioning and sleep on "soft, fluffy mattresses." Sivaraksa's book vividly conveys the cultural memory of rural Thailand to the West, and one would want all CEOs of multinational companies to read these stories before they set about modernizing the Thai countryside. Yet modernity cannot be uninvented; there can be no return to the simplicity of yesterday. After an extended chapter describing how the Thai elites' fascination with Western culture has eroded traditional values, Sivaraksa cautions that "meditation alone, which brings about critical reflection, humility, and simplicity, is insufficient to counter the power of foreign capital" (p. 102). This sounds a sober note, but then he goes on to assert that what is really needed is "wisdom resulting from study," which must be "linked to the Four Noble Truths and the Law of Dependent Arising" (p. 102). This simple formula seems tacked on and should have been the book's starting point, not its conclusion.

The basic message of modern Buddhism is that local and global well-being must begin with personal well-being, that large-scale problems are rooted in simple human misconceptions. Sivaraksa notes that all religions agree with this perspective; he consistently identifies peacemakers from other faiths and recounts

the history of activists who more Americans should be aware of, among them Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, a Muslim nonviolent organizer who resisted the colonial British in India. Sivaraksa has personally established many ties with Christians, and one chapter characterizes Buddhism and Christianity as *kalyanamitta*, or virtuous friends. In the Pali sutras *kalyanamitta* are companions who help one practice the dharma by their encouragement and example. Sivaraksa partly bases his vision of this dharma friendship on the Christian theologian Robert Traer's notion of interreligious tolerance, which accepts "total commitment to a particular faith" yet seeks common understanding and, more specifically for Sivaraksa, sees a common commitment to social justice. Sivaraksa's bridge-building efforts are commendable, especially for someone who has witnessed the aggressive anti-Buddhist activities of Christian missionaries in Thailand.

Here as elsewhere, Sivaraksa's rhetoric always extends the olive branch. When he criticizes, he also opens his arms. One of the book's best chapters deals with reconciliation movements in Africa and Asia. Here is an arena in which the benefits of peacemaking are demonstrably paying off and in which the beliefs and practices of all faiths fruitfully coincide. But unlike some religions, Buddhism bases its philosophy of reconciliation on a particular belief in the in-born goodness of people: as Sivaraksa reminds us, "even the most flawed people have Buddha-nature, and reconciliation begins with the acknowledgement of common humanity and shared suffering" (p. 32). Buddhists are essentially optimists about the human condition and, from the core of their philosophical roots, hold out hope that even the most entrenched oppressors can become enlightened to their true nature—a transformation that must ultimately come from within.

There is much to praise about *Conflict, Culture, Change*, but it attempts to do too many things—offer brief analyses, demonstrate practical methods of resistance, and tell alternative histories. What the book laments is indeed lamentable—the near hegemony of Western multinationals and the lack of dialogue between cultures—but while its broad range of topics make it a useful introduction to Engaged Buddhism, it will not greatly contribute to the long-term cause.

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BUDDHIST INCLUSIVISM: ATTITUDES TOWARDS RELIGIOUS OTHERS. By *Kristin Beise Kiblinger*. Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005. 145 pp.

Kristen Beise Kiblinger, who teaches in the religion department at Thiel College, has written a provocative and imaginative book. It is provocative in that