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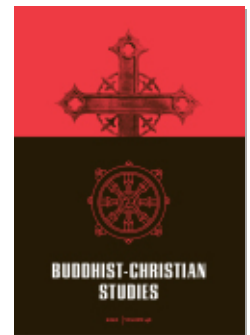
*Rainbow Body and Resurrection: Spiritual Attainment, The
Dissolution Of the Material Body, and the Case of Khenpo a
Chö* by Francis V. Tiso (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

RAINBOW BODY AND RESURRECTION: SPIRITUAL ATTAINMENT, THE DISSOLUTION OF THE MATERIAL BODY, AND THE CASE OF KHENPO A CHÖ. By *Francis V. Tiso*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016. 393 pp.

In recent years, the growing popularity of comparative theology as an academic discipline has led to the proliferation of academic studies exploring the points of contact between different religious traditions, bringing into conversation authors and texts that address analogous themes or question, without however postulating any historical or conceptual link between the strands of the tradition in question. For instance, Francis Clooney's *Hindu God Christian God* (2001), *Divine Mother Blessed Mother* (2003), or *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (2008) set out an ambitious road map for an intellectual exchange between two vastly different religious traditions. These monographs, however, focus on speculative and conceptual echoes between Hindu and Christian authors from different eras and never claim any instance of reciprocal influence. In a similar way, a work like John Keenan's *I Am/No Self: a Christian Commentary on the Heart Sutra* (2011) may highlight unexpected echoes between the well-known Mahāyāna text and the Gospel of John, but it certainly does not venture any hypothesis about historical exchanges of ideas. At this stage in the history of interreligious dialogue, to embrace an alternative approach would seem a throwback to the Campbellian world of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), where a sort of perennialism for the masses presents all religions as culturally determined expressions of the same tradition.

Francis Tiso's *Rainbow Body and Resurrection* is not a neo-perennialist work in the vogue of Campbell or Guenon: Tiso is certainly not interested in erasing the peculiarities of different religious traditions or in turning Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity into masks of the divine. At the same time, Tiso makes a number of daring claims, namely he affirms that there are peak mystical experiences in Buddhism and Christianity that share intriguing similarities, even if no one can actually affirm their identical character. In addition, he affirms that the interpretation of such experiences in the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism was actually influenced by certain theological strands of Syriac Christianity that were largely erased from the historical consciousness of Western, and to a great extent Byzantine Christianity, but were able to spread to the East via the Silk Road, until they encountered the

Buddhist world on the Tibetan plateau and in Western China. Tiso is well aware of the fact that most scholars will question his reconstruction of the history of Tibetan thought and that many readers will be startled at his acceptance of the truth of seemingly “paranormal” phenomena. Even this reviewer, while sympathetic to Tiso’s enterprise, is ultimately reluctant to accept the full import of his claims. At the same time, whether or not one chooses to follow the author in his search for the ever-elusive historical contact between Buddhism and Christianity, this monograph has the distinctive merit of trying to challenge established academic conventions and reset the terms of the comparative conversation. Perhaps, Tiso appears to suggest, there is more to comparative theology than the mere juxtaposition of texts; it may be high time to go back to fieldwork, let go of our enlightened prejudices, and seek out the extraordinary phenomena that religious traditions—at least in the past!—routinely acknowledged as possible.

In the introduction, Tiso observes that the resurrection of the dead in Christianity is associated with the notion of a transcendent God returning his creation to fullness of being, while such an eschatological perspective is not universally present in Buddhism. At the same time—he claims—this teleological thrust can be found in later strands of the Tibetan tradition of Dzogchen, where the emphasis on the inter-relatedness of all phenomena coexists with the conviction that human experience can have a direction or purpose. What would this be? According to many Dzogchen authors, then, the purpose of human experience is to break through to the original nature of the mind and dwell unceasingly in a state of primordial awareness. This is possible because “the entire structure of mind, consciousness, and the manifestation of phenomena are ‘designed’ to bring about the emergence of this primordial awareness” (7–8). In this perspective, the attainment of the rainbow body signifies that the Dzogchen contemplative has become one with all phenomena “to the point of claiming the attainment of the dissolution of the material body into its energetic components” (8). Tiso claims that such phenomena can be traced across different religious traditions and gives the example of the Tamil sage Swami Ramalinga, whose body allegedly dissolved into light in March 1874. Ramalinga’s tradition—a branch of Saivite Hinduism that was often practiced by non-Brahman Yogis in rural Tamil Nadu—preserves a body of esoteric knowledge that envisages human embodiment as an energetic receptacle, enabling advanced practitioners to transcend spatiotemporal limitations and blend into the ground of being (14–15). The Tibetan rainbow body and the Christian resurrection of the flesh are thus instances of a more universal phenomenon, albeit one that very few advanced practitioners in any tradition are destined to attain.

The first chapter of the volume opens up with a translation of the hagiographical account of the life of the Dzogchen master Khenpo A Chö (1918–1998). A Chö grew up in the Kham region at a time when Tibetan monastic culture was still intact and trained with a variety of masters from different schools, reaching extraordinary proficiency both in the Gelug philosophical tradition and in the teachings of the Nyingma school. His familiarity with different strands of the broader Tibetan tradition meant that in the aftermath of the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the cultural revolution,

when a degree of religious freedom was permitted again, A Chö was instrumental in the preservation and transmission of numerous teachings and practices that might otherwise have been lost. In 1992, he went into seclusion to engage in intense practice, until his passing in 1998 was accompanied by a variety of supernatural phenomena (35–37). During the week after his death,

Each day his body was observed under the cloth, becoming smaller and smaller until finally, on the day after one week had passed, there was manifested the stainless rainbow body, the vajra body. [. . .] ‘The rainbow body of great transference’ is considered to be the liberation into the body of light without leaving even hair and nails. (37)

Throughout the rest of the first chapter, Tiso recounts his travels in the Kham region in 2001, as well as his encounters with friends and disciples of A Chö. This all makes for fascinating reading, though this reviewer wonders whether the study’s overall argument might not have been better served by a historical survey of analogous phenomena in the Tibetan cultural area. Even in the case of A Chö, evidence for the truth of his supernatural achievements appears inconclusive and anecdotal, often coming from disciples eager to promote the veneration of their master (43).

The second chapter of the monograph seeks to locate the rainbow body phenomenon in the context of the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) tradition, which posits “an uncreated, primordial basis” from which all aspects of the universe arise. This basis is essentially immaterial, but is capable of creating spiritual, mental, and material phenomena (93). In his *Precious Treasury of the Mode of Being*, the Tibetan master Longchenpa (1308–1363) systematizes the Dzogchen teaching on awareness and the mind of enlightenment in relation to mind in general and the dialectic of *samsara* and *nirvana*. The two key practices taught by Dzogchen masters are then “cutting through” (*khregs chod*) and “leap-over” (*thod rgal*), whereby practitioners focus on the essence of primordial purity or on the visionary phenomena that spontaneously arise from the primordial mind (104). In the third chapter, Tiso sets out to explore the mystical tradition of Evagrius Pontikos (345–399), whose *Kephalaia Gnostika* he quotes at length, only to move to a discussion of the mysticism of light of the Church of the East that is found in the writings of John of Dalyatha (690–786) (176). John’s mysticism is “that of an experience of encounter with God, i.e. direct experience of God’s presence in the heart and experience of the supernatural effects of this presence.” There is no emphasis here on Christ’s atoning death and resurrection: rather, the highest state of contemplation is the retrieval of a reality that is already present within the soul, which “gradually emerges in the course of the practice of asceticism and love” (176). Tiso presents *The Book on the Realization of Profound Peace and Joy* (*Zhixuan anle jing*), possibly composed by the Chinese Christian monk Jingjing (eighth century CE), as evidence of the encounter and cross-fertilization between the Buddhist and the Syriac Christian tradition (180). This text, which Tiso views as a form of theological inculturation, outlines the nature and purpose of

Christian spirituality in terms that clearly echo the language and rhetorical strategies of Mahāyāna sutras.

After a lengthy discussion of early Dzogchen, Tiso concludes his volume with a discussion of “unanswerable questions.” Is there a connection between the Great Perfection and the teaching of the Church of the East? Are there connections between the peak mystical experiences described in this book? And actually, do these experiences *actually happen*? Tiso offers some suggestions about future possible directions for research, but all of these questions remain open.

Where does this leave the reader? This reviewer has a few reservations about the structure of the monograph and its division into chapters. Tiso chooses to start his discussion of the Buddhist material with an exploration of the later developments of Dzogchen and returns to the origins of the Great Perfection after a long detour into Syriac Christianity. Perhaps his argument would have been helped by a more linear arrangement of the material, allowing the mystical speculation of Evagrius and the Syro-Oriental authors to pave the way to the elaborate philosophical constructions of Longchenpa and later Dzogchen. In a similar way, readers might have gained more from the report of Tiso’s travel in the Kham region if the latter had been placed after his overview of Dzogchen—in this way, his audience would have been more familiar with the beliefs of the individual practitioners that Tiso encounters on his travels. These considerations, however, are merely tangential to the main question, namely whether what Khenpo A Chö and “the man of the shroud” actually experienced was the same peak experience and whether Dzogchen was truly influenced by Syriac Christianity. Tiso is skeptical of all reference to Jungian archetypes (247), but this reviewer wonders whether it might not be possible to just argue that different religious traditions reach analogous conclusions about peak mystical experiences without direct historical contact, merely because they all spring from our common human condition. Perhaps, despite Tiso’s impressive attempt to prove otherwise, the question of the origin of different religious practices will always remain an “unanswerable question.”

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ECODHARMA: BUDDHIST TEACHING FOR THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS. By David R. Loy. Somerville: Wisdom Books, 2018. xi+217 pp.

Those who are familiar with David Loy’s work will not be surprised to learn that this book once again demonstrates his ability to transpose even the most complex Buddhist teachings into astute diagnoses of social ills and proposals for remedying them. In this he ranks alongside Thich Nhat Hanh and Joanna Macy, who are frequently quoted in this work. Here he focuses a Buddhist lens on what he discerns to be not just a climate crisis, but a full-blown ecological emergency whose outcome