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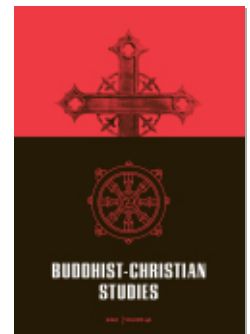
Ecodharma: Buddhist Teaching for the Ecological Crisis by
David R. Loy (review)

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Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 40, 2020, pp. 470-472 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2020.0027>



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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

could be the destruction of human and all other life. This may seem alarmist, but Loy marshals empirical data from a wide range of ecologists and climate scientists as evidence of the damage done by decades of ruthless exploitation of natural resources and the willful refusal of political leaders to acknowledge this.

The book is not a set-piece Buddhist-Christian dialogue, comparing point by point what the two traditions teach. Its standpoint as it probes the roots of the ecological crisis is unambiguously Buddhist, but in undogmatic Buddhist fashion insights from Jewish and Christian, Daoist and Confucian, indigenous and scientific sources are woven seamlessly into the analysis. A feature of the book is the scores of quotations from religious and secular authors, whether ancient or modern, as transitions between the chapters. These alone are worthy of meditation. Loy dispenses with scholarly apparatus; he has covered that ground extensively in the past. This is unapologetically a work of advocacy. Loy's central strategy is to move Buddhist teaching beyond its focus on the liberation of the individual to address institutional and social dukkha, in much the same way as Christian liberation theologians tried to identify the structural sin at the root of political and social injustice. Loy is aware that he is making a bold move, which will not be easily accepted in more conservative Buddhist circles.

At the heart of his diagnosis is the concept of separateness, the prevailing assumption that humans are somehow detached from the natural world, tellingly known as "the environment." Rather, we *are* nature, and the rights and privileges that accrue to us are those of the natural world as a whole. The crisis we are facing is at bottom spiritual, and its causes are summed up as "cosmological dualism and individual salvation" in the teachings of virtually all religious traditions, including some strands of Buddhism. The antidote is nondualism, an understanding on which Loy's entire life of scholarship and practice has been based since his recently reissued Ph.D. thesis. Most accounts of religious transcendence fail to escape the constraints of dualism, resulting in a devaluation of "this" world in favor of another, postulated realm of transcendence. To this extent the ecological problem is not in the world but in our mind, which objectifies and instrumentalizes the world by using language to construct concepts of it (the basic construct of course being the Self) on which all the destructive activities of political ambition and economic enrichment are focused. An obvious example is the concept of property, the earth as "mine," which converts nature into commodities that can be bought and sold. Here Loy draws upon American indigenous traditions to illustrate alternative views of nature as integral to human reality, not separate from it. The prospect of extinction, the collective death of humanity, and the species that enrich and sustain it, he calls the "collective koan" of our time.

With this we arrive at a point where Buddhist and Christian spiritual teachings can engage in fruitful tension. Though we are constrained by language to talk in terms of autonomous selves and objective realities, what Loy calls "consensus reality," Zen Buddhism in particular tells us that beyond the conceptualities of science and common sense there is neither birth nor death; samsara is the same as nirvana and emptiness is form, form emptiness. Such profoundly paradoxical language may seem to undermine the language with which we represent to ourselves the ecological crisis

itself. It is paradoxical as an account of individual destinies; how much more so when applied to political society and the universe as such. Loy does not hesitate to identify this as a challenge to which contemporary Buddhism has not yet risen. To accept Nagarjuna's deconstruction of language and logic and yet keep one's foothold in history and the foundations of ethics is a challenge to Christians as well—although they too can draw on neglected strands of tradition, which postulate nonduality in an apophatic *theologia negativa*, questioning the ways in which creator and creature, mind and body may be related. If Loy is correct in identifying the ecological crisis as fundamentally a spiritual one, analysis at this level will be necessary if both religious and humanistic traditions are to contribute to overcoming it.

As I write this review, large parts of California and the east coast of Australia are engulfed in bushfires of unprecedented extent and ferocity, simultaneously in the American fall and the Australian spring. There are still leaders who deny that these catastrophes have anything to do with climate change. If religions are to contribute to moving us beyond such self-interested obscurantism, analyses such as Loy's are sorely needed. Some may think it impossibly idealistic to claim that Buddhist practice will have any impact on the forces driving us to destruction. For Loy and the many witnesses he calls upon from a multitude of traditions, such idealism is realism pure and simple.

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THOMAS MERTON'S ENCOUNTER WITH BUDDHISM AND BEYOND: HIS INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, INTER-MONASTIC EXCHANGES, AND THEIR LEGACY. By *Jaechan Anselmo Park*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2019. 285 pp.

The Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago in 1893 marked the dawn of a new era for interreligious dialogue. The kind of dialogue that this event initiated can be characterized as having been theological or intellectual, as it sought to uncover between the many religions and denominations represented similarities and differences on the level of ideas and beliefs. Since that time interreligious dialogue has expanded to foster more experiential and hands-on avenues of exchange. Arguably the most important single person in paving the way to these newer kinds of dialogue was Thomas Merton (1915–1968), the Cistercian monk, author, poet, mystic, seeker, and activist, who was based at Gethsemani Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Kentucky.

On the night before his untimely death in Thailand, Merton is recorded to have said, "Zen and Christianity are the future" (xxiii). How it was that Merton came to feel this way and what specifically he may have meant by the statement are the subject of the book by the South Korean Benedictine monk Jaechan Anselmo Park, titled *Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond: His Interreligious Dialogue, Inter-*