

REALITY ITSELF

ENTRE LE VISIBLE ET L'INVISIBLE

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Reality Itself

Philosophical Challenges of Indian Mahāyāna

JOSEPH S. O'LEARY



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To John and Linda Keenan

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Foreword

The most important thing to know about the book you now hold in your hands is that it is not primarily a scholarly text. That it is, and at times so much so that it is easy to lose sight of what Joseph O’Leary is about. The interface of Christian and Buddhist intellectual history is too important for him not to honor his sources with high scholarly conscience. But O’Leary is not one to hoard the treasures of a lifetime of study or leave them buried in the dry dust of academic gardens. He carries them through the storms of contemporary debate to lay them at the feet of a multireligious world struggling to find harmony in the preservation of diversity. Without appreciation for its motives, anything quoted from the book is quoted out of context.

I have known Joseph O’Leary since 1985 when we invited him to join us at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture to assist in the editing of a two-volume work on *Buddhist Spirituality*. While he was with us his first book, *Questioning Back*, was published. That work, together with *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (1996) and *Conventional and Ultimate Truth* (2015) forms a trilogy of a revolutionary fusion of Buddhist thought with Christian theology. Three additional volumes written in French round out his thinking on the subject. In recognition of his contribution, we invited him to the Roche Chair for Interreligious Research at the Nanzan Institute from 2015 to 2016. These six books, however, are only a portion of his prodigious and uninterrupted output on a range of topics from literary criticism to patristic research to the exegesis of Buddhist texts.

Of the essays gathered together in these pages, ten are a reworking of essays published from as early as twenty years ago and the remaining five are original to this collection. The core of O’Leary’s vision is

laid out in the opening two chapters of this book and nicely complemented by Chapter 5 on the enigmatic Heart Sutra and Chapter 9 on the Buddhist theory of the two truths. The two complementary ideas around which everything seems to rotate like planets around the sun are emptiness and negation, or rather, his creative revisioning of these ideas for Christian theological reflection.

Far from seeing emptiness as a simple vacating of meaning or reality from the things of life, O’Leary embraces a positive Buddhist attitude to “nirvanic emptiness” both as a counterfort to ideas of God as the “fullness of Being” and to ontological accounts of reality. Seeing all things as self-negating, self-deconstructive confessions of their own emptiness is not meant to shred the veils of illusion to expose a dark abyss of meaninglessness but as a way to “see through” the diaphanous veils of human thought and experience to the ultimate nothingness of reality that is not graspable as such but only as manifest at the point where the veils hang between the conventionally and the ultimately true.

Negation, which has a long and venerable place in theological “apophatic” thought, is brought into dialogue with the work of the greatest logician of the Buddhist tradition, Nāgārjuna, and his exposition of the tetralemma. As O’Leary lays out in Chapter 9, this dialectic of affirmation through the negation of substantial being is more radical than Christian attempts to distance God from our conceptions of God in that it applies to all of reality—even to the tetralemma itself. Among other resources, he turns to Heidegger’s “thinking the phenomena” and Hegel’s “mastery of the Concept” to bridge the gap this opens up in more traditional ways of thinking about God.

The upshot is that O’Leary, in sympathy with the groundbreaking work of the Mahāyāna theologian John Keenan, has demonstrated what many of us have long suspected: that the Buddhist view of “reality itself” in which conventional truth and ultimate truth are co-dependent is a promising way of loosening Christian dogmatics from its bondage to Greek metaphysics and opening up a commons on which

the two traditions can rethink the way they proclaim their very different ways of honoring the aspiration to truth and goodness.

Readers who make their way through the entirety of the book will soon realize that there is no “correct” way to read O’Leary. The Christian and Buddhist lenses through which he himself does his reading are ground differently, making for a dizzying shift of focus from detail in one landscape to the background of the other. Careful attention to the writings of Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida, and Augustine are made to wrestle not only with one another but with a select corpus of Buddhist scriptures. The analysis of technical terms and Sanskrit vocabulary that mark much of the volume should not deflect attention from the radical assumption that lies behind it: the biblical scriptures that contour the Christian faith can no longer be seen as a storehouse to be roofed over and walled in to fortify it against the assault of other faiths but rather as a movable horizon that can be expanded to include many of the sacred texts of Buddhist faith. The inclusion is more than a gesture of hospitality or a stage of pre-evangelization; it is nothing less than a useful means, a provisional and conventional *upāya* for reading into and reading out of scriptures more than either tradition has been able to do on its own.

Perhaps it is due to a fascination with the styles of Joyce, Derrida, and Heidegger, but O’Leary regularly liberates his pen from ordinary English usage to pepper his text with an out-of-the-way vocabulary suggestive of the wide range of sources on which he draws. As always, the engaging lilt of O’Leary’s prose carries the reader across a wide expanse of unfamiliar and dense terrain, never roughshod and always composed with care. His impatience with dogmatism in any form is balanced by an affection for prophetic voices that reach out to the multireligious reality of our modern world with hope for the revival of tradition in new and unexpected forms.

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Nagoya, Japan
1 March 2019