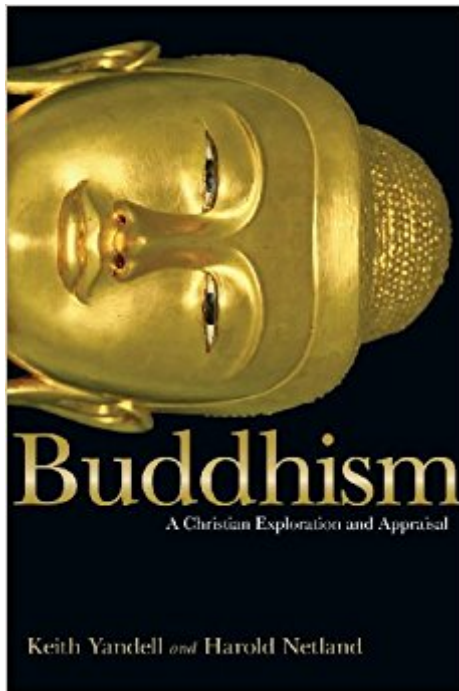




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Buddhism: A Christian Exploration And Appraisal



Synopsis

The disproportionate influence of Buddhist thought and philosophy found in cultural circles such as education, entertainment and the media coupled with the dramatic recent surge of Asian immigrants, many of whom are Buddhist, has brought Buddhism to the forefront of Western culture. And more and more of those who have become disenfranchised from Christian spirituality are embracing Buddhism as a replacement way of organizing their life. In this clear and balanced introduction, Keith Yandell and Harold Netland set out to educate Christians about Buddhism, laying out the central metaphysical claims of this significant world religion, including a concluding chapter which offers an honest comparison with Christianity. The authors acknowledge some overlap of belief while also noting the clear and significant differences between the two religions. As both religions affirm, these distinctions have enormous consequences for the spiritual well-being of adherents. This book guides any reader who wants to understand the central tenets and claims of Buddhism more deeply and how learn how it compares to Christian faith.

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Customer Reviews

This is an exceptional book for at least two reasons. First, it succeeds in summarizing the entire sweep of Buddhism's historical development. Second, the authors manage to give readers an accurate summary of basic Buddhist teachings. An honest book all the way around. Highly recommended. (Terry C. Much, International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2009) A long overdue book for students and teachers of world religions, helpful especially for

Christians who engage in serious inter-religious dialogue with Buddhists. (Dr. Chandler H. Im, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, January 2010)"Yandell and Netland present an extraordinarily lucid and accessible account of Buddhist thought that simultaneously recognizes and preserves its nuanced complexity. The first half recounts the development of Buddhism from its birth in northern India to its modern-day embracement by those in the West seeking an alternative spirituality. In the second part they carefully and critically examine the cogency of central Buddhist doctrines, particularly the view of the persons that underlies the Buddhist doctrines of suffering, karma and rebirth, and liberation to nirvana. Those who adopt the current mantra that all religions are ultimately alike, that Buddhism and Christianity do not differ, that the Buddha and Jesus were historically interchangeable, will be seriously challenged by the way the authors meticulously deconstruct the pluralist view." (Bruce R. Reichenbach, Augsburg College)"While in recent years evangelicals have finally engaged the question of the theology of religions, there are very few evangelicals equipped to do what Professor Netland, himself a leading theologian of religions, and Professor Yandell, a distinguished philosopher, have produced, namely, an informed and incisive engagement of a particular religion from an evangelical perspective. This book not only contains valuable lessons both from Buddhism as a religion and the Buddhist-Christian encounter but also serves as a paradigm for later works: a careful mapping out of key ideas of a living faith and a sympathetic yet unapologetic critique from a Christian perspective. For sure, I will include this book as a text in my courses in world religions." (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, professor of systematic theology, Fuller Theological Seminary, and Docent of Ecumenics, University of Helsinki, Finland)"Yandell and Netland's *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* provides a clear, concise and accurate introduction to Buddhist history and doctrine. Although written for Christians, it is not a work of apologetics so much as one concerned to instruct Christians about what Buddhism is, and to clarify differences between the two religions. It does those things very well indeed, and I hope that it will rapidly become the point of first reference for Christians who want to understand Buddhism." (Paul J. Griffiths, Warren Chair of Catholic Theology, Duke Divinity School)"Yandell and Netland have produced a brilliant, clear, engaging introduction to Buddhism that is both sympathetic and critical, highlighting points of convergence with and divergence from Christianity. Their book would be excellent in university courses in philosophy of religion or religious studies, but it would also reward general readers interested in finding both a reliable philosophical guide to Buddhism as well an exploration of Buddhist teaching in relation to Christian faith." (Charles Taliaferro, St. Olaf College)"Keith Yandell and Harold Netland accomplish several important things in this concise work: (1) they authoritatively summarize Buddhist history; (2) they systematically outline Buddhist

teachings; and (3) they clearly compare and contrast Buddhism with Christianity. A unique resource for Christians interested in Buddhism and Buddhist-Christian relationships." (Terry Muck, Asbury Seminary)"At last we have a book that moves beyond the inaccurate, rather imprecise and sentimental level of so many books about Buddhism and the Christian-Buddhist encounter, and focuses on a serious consideration of Buddhist truth claims. The opening chapters give an acceptable first survey of Buddhism, and include material on dimensions of Buddhism, such as the personalist school and the historical context for the introduction of some rather idiosyncratic forms of Japanese Zen into the West, that are often neglected in popular introductions. It gives enough detail on Buddhist doctrines for one new to the subject to understand what the issues are and engage in a critical yet respectful manner with them. At many points this clearly written and readable book corrects, from the point of view of Buddhism as it has existed in history and in its Asian context, common Western misperceptions of Buddhism. But the really exciting section of this book is the philosophical analysis of key Buddhist doctrines such as not-self and momentariness. Netland and Yandell take Buddhist truth claims seriously, as Buddhists ask us to do, and in their analysis of those claims they make a truly original contribution, pitched at an accessible yet refined level of philosophical sophistication and knowledge of Buddhist doctrines and debates. The book throws down a challenge to Buddhists to clarify what they mean when they make their claims, and to enter into debate in defense of their truth. This philosophical analysis is followed by an outline of some absolutely fundamental differences between Christianity and Buddhism, and Christ and the Buddha. Here we see the basis of a critical Christian theological engagement with Buddhism as a religion. The book challenges Christians to move beyond polite small talk or minimalizing of essential differences that demand choice and commitment, and engage with Buddhists in debating their mutually incompatible claims to (as the Buddhists put it) 'see things the way they really are' regarding God, Jesus Christ, personhood, and our meaning, purpose and destiny. This book shows us (to use another Buddhist expression) 'analytical meditation' at its finest. It is an exciting book that I shall certainly use and recommend to my students. For those Christians and Buddhists who take truth seriously, and understand the significance of reasoning in making crucial choices, Netland and Yandell's book will contribute significantly to setting the agenda for serious dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism for some time to come." (Paul Williams, professor of Indian and Tibetan philosophy and codirector of the Centre for Buddhist Studies, University of Bristol, U.K.)"This is a book which we have been waiting a long time to see. It is a well written, constructive and thorough treatment of Buddhism which demonstrates Netland's and Yandell's extensive experience with both the teachings of Buddhism, as well as the popular, lived faith of Buddhists. It provides an excellent

survey of the spread of Buddhism in the ancient East as well as in the contemporary West, always keeping in mind the philosophical nuances of Buddhism as well as the popular, folk practices of Buddhists in their global and ethnic diversity. In a day when the search for common ground has often eclipsed the real and striking differences between the living faith of Buddhists and Christians, this book clearly sets forth the distinctiveness of the Christian faith vis-a-vis Buddhism, but does it in a refreshingly irenic way. The authors highlight common ground where it exists, but they are equally clear about the differences in each faith's understanding of the religious ultimate, the human predicament and the ways to overcome this. This volume regularly inspires and informs the reader. It is a must-read for all people who are seriously interested in the Buddhist-Christian encounter. I highly recommend it!" (Timothy C. Tennent, professor of world missions and Indian studies, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary)"This is interfaith dialogue at its best. Netland and Yandell provide a thoughtful understanding of Buddhism, followed by a careful pressing of internal problems within Buddhism, followed by a constructive summary of real differences between Christianity and Buddhism. They also succeed in establishing the plausibility of Christianity in the light of various possible Buddhist critiques. No reader, Christian or Buddhist, will be left unchallenged by this lucid exposition, critique and proclamation." (Gavin D'Costa, professor of Christian theology, Bristol University, England)

"Keith Yandell and Harold Netland accomplish several important things in this concise work: (1) they authoritatively summarize Buddhist history; (2) they systematically outline Buddhist teachings; and (3) they clearly compare and contrast Buddhism with Christianity. A unique resource for Christians interested in Buddhism and Buddhist-Christian relationships."

Well written and researched. This is a worthy read for someone who wants to understand what Buddhism really is.

This book was very helpful in providing an overview of Buddhism, spending a balanced amount of time addressing the history, the spread of Buddhism with its different kinds, its metaphysical beliefs and its similarities and, namely, differences with Christianity. This is all done without overwhelming the reader with too much information. When certain kinds of Buddhism are looked at, only a few go really in depth, while others are only sparsely mentioned. This is actually a good thing, as this book is an introduction. I've read introductions before where almost every kind of Buddhism is explained with heavy, unfamiliar vocabulary, leaving the reader slightly befuddled and at a loss about what is

important and what is Buddhism. This book avoided the pitfalls. The history was needed to understand the origins of Buddhism and also how the spread of Buddhism as different schools (from Theravada to Mahayana, and then also Vajrayana) took place. The third chapter, The Dharma Comes West was insightful to see 1.) how Buddhism also acts as a missionary religion and 2.) how Buddhism that has come to the shores of the USA is not necessarily typical Buddhism, or even typical Zen Buddhism for matter. The next two chapters I found to be the most helpful in that many books never really tackle the "beliefs" of Buddhism. But here, some of the foundational beliefs are systematically considered, namely the beliefs of "Impermanence, No-self and Dependent Co-origination", "Conscious States" and "Enlightenment". Also made clear here is that Buddhism, like other religions (such as Hinduism, Atheism, Islam, Christianity, etc.) is exclusivist. There is a disease and a diagnosis and a remedy. And religions differ all as to what these are. If one is wrong about these, then there are grave consequences, as only one of them is correct. For me personally, explanations of the doctrines of "no-self" and "Dependent Co-origination" were very helpful. Buddhism believes that there is no such thing as a person, only a combination of many parts, many experiences that have accumulated over time and that are constantly changing. If I speak of myself, there is "no Stephen", but only arms and legs, cells and the outside influence of climate, culture, and environment. If I should understand that I am nothing, "I" would attain enlightenment, being free from the delusion of "self". Although there appears to be Stephen, there really is not. The helpful illustration used was that of the chariot. There is no chariot. There are wheels and sprockets and a horse and a seat and a cushion—but there is no chariot. The final chapter confirmed some things that I had thought about difference between Christianity and Buddhism. The idea of history is very important in the Christian tradition. Whether an event actually occurred historically is foundation for a belief in Jesus, whereas in Buddhism, it is not that big of an issue. Buddhism seems to be less founded on a person and much more founded on the teachings. Also, Buddhism is essentially an atheistic religion with no room for God, and so notions of sin and evil are quite different than Christianity. Early Buddhism rejected ideas of Brahma and the gods. But, only mentioned in passing, some of the Mahayana traditions, such as Pure Land, seem to elevate Buddha to that of a divine being. He is able to move beyond time and space and encapsulates all that is beautiful and good. Rely on him and you will be saved and enter into the pure land. A good question is how far can Buddhism adapt and include other systems of belief while still remaining "Buddhism". To me, it seems that many times (at least the case here in Japan to a degree), a lot of the names have been imported, but there is only echoes here and there of what Buddhism originally was. I see Shinto views of what happens to the dead and what should be done about them, but I

see the rituals and rites carried out under the name of Buddhism. So, is that still Buddhism or not? Again, whenever I read some comparison between Buddhism and Christianity, the importance of history in the Christian tradition seems to stand out. I think that is something that I had taken for granted, assuming that historically verifiable truth is foundational for belief...but coming across other cultures and religions, that is often not the case (speaking of history and faith, NT Wright as a lot of good stuff about that) In any case, a great book for an overview of Buddhism coming from a very fair Christian viewpoint.

G.K. Chesterton once observed that it was fashionable in his day to suppose that "Christianity and Buddhism are very much alike, especially Buddhism." Though he risked being found out of step with his times, Chesterton went on not only to challenge the equivalence, but also to argue for the greater plausibility of Christian orthodoxy. The authors of *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* are at similar risk. They describe their book as being a "part of a genre known as interreligious polemics or interreligious apologetics," which, they note, "strikes many as inappropriate" (p. xv). A chief end of interreligious dialog by many students of religion is the promotion of mutual understanding and respect among adherents of the different world religions. To many such readers, the very idea of urging reasons for thinking that the religious beliefs of others may be false is anathema. However, Yandell and Netland argue that it is more respectful of a tradition to take its central truth claims seriously--and to engage them as such--than it is to downplay the doctrinal differences that adherents themselves regard as being of great significance. And they observe that there is no necessary connection between thinking a religious belief false and treating those who hold the belief in a manner that is inappropriate. (One might add that thinking some religious doctrines false is a necessary condition of thinking any of them true. To believe a thing is to believe it to be true, and to believe it to be true entails thinking any and all contrary beliefs false. If there is anything inappropriate about thinking any religious beliefs false, the only remedy would thus seem to be to refrain from believing anything at all.) Further, it is commonly asserted that, while exclusivism appears to be a hallmark of Western religious traditions, such is not to be found in the Asian traditions. The authors do much to dispel this notion--which seems itself to be a hallmark of Western religious studies departments--noting that there is a long tradition of interreligious polemic among the Asian traditions themselves. This point is argued explicitly in the introduction and amply illustrated in the ensuing discussion of the various schools of Buddhism as they have encountered other traditions. Yandell and Netland divide their book into six chapters. The first three provide a nice account of the origins of Buddhism against its Vedic backdrop, and its subsequent migration to

China, Japan and the rest of Asia, and, much later, to the West. The reader will find a helpful summary of the various schools of Buddhism--Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, etc.--and will have a sense of how Buddhist thought evolved as it encountered other religious perspectives, such as Taoism. Perhaps of particular interest to Christians is the authors' comparison of Pure Land Buddhism, with its doctrine of grace, to Protestant Christianity. There are also helpful discussions of Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism--arguably the two varieties best known in the West--and the relation that they bear to classical Buddhism. Chapter Three concludes with a discussion of the profound influence of two scholars of Zen Buddhism, D.T. Suzuki and Masao Abe, and the way in which their scholarship has come to shape the Western perception of Zen, as well as Buddhism in general. The discussion of Abe notes some controversy among Zen scholars regarding the moral implications of Abe's metaphysics, as ultimate reality is said to transcend all distinctions, including that between good and evil. Chapter four, "Aspects of Buddhist Doctrine," opens with a defense of the approach that is to follow. The claim is that Buddhism, though often viewed as being practical in its concerns, with a soteriological rather than metaphysical focus, does, in fact, make assertions about the nature of reality. As with all religions, Buddhism begins with a diagnosis of the human predicament and then goes on to prescribe a remedy. As with most Indian religions, Buddhism diagnoses the fundamental problem as ignorance of the true nature of reality, and prescribes a cure in the form of enlightenment--an overcoming of ignorance through a full realization of the true nature of things. Different Indian religious systems offer different accounts of what that true nature amounts to. A standard Buddhist account has it that everything is radically impermanent. The fundamental and pervasive error that holds us in bondage is the false belief that there are enduring substances, and, more specifically, that we are enduring, substantial selves. (This false belief is responsible for selfish grasping and a futile search for lasting happiness in a world that is inherently unsatisfactory.) The truth is that composite existing things, such as people and pagodas, are mere constructs. Only the simple constituents of such things exist, and these are momentary. Each originates in dependence upon its causal antecedent, endures for only an instant, and is replaced by its causal descendant. At any given time, what we call a person is a bundle of these constituents, and a person over a period of time is a causally linked series of such bundles. Much of chapter four is given to the question of whether there is a coherent way of putting the requisite metaphysics that is also capable of accommodating other essential Buddhist tenets. Perhaps the most crucial concern is that something must exist in order to manifest the allegedly erroneous belief, There are enduring conscious minds, and in order for the Buddhist account to be true that something must be other than such a mind. Essentially, it must be possible to account for such beliefs by appeal to a variety of

"unowned" conscious states. The chapter also considers whether the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination is compatible with the sort of freedom that is presupposed by Buddhist talk of karma and enlightenment. The doctrine requires that, at any time, every momentary state that constitutes a bundle that we think of as a "person" is the inevitable consequence of prior momentary states (which, in fact, are a part of a beginningless sequence of such states). But then it is difficult to see how any account of free will--short of compatibilism--can be accommodated, for it would seem to require unconditioned states within the sequence, which are precluded by the doctrine. The authors explore the sort of account that might be available given the constraints of other Buddhist metaphysical commitments. The chapter concludes with a discussion of several possible Buddhist approaches to accounting for the doctrine of Nirvana. Among them is the suggestion that there is no accounting for it, as it is, in fact, ineffable. But, the authors argue, if the ineffability of Nirvana ends all such discussion, it serves equally well to "preclude any beginning of the discussion of Nirvana." Buddhist traditions typically describe Nirvana in "honorific terms." But "if it is literally ineffable, then it is not better described in one way better than another. It is as accurate to describe it as hell in which torture is carried out by gods and goddesses who are masters of their wicked trade as it is to describe it in terms that might make it desirable to a sane person" (p. 142). People who like to speak of their religious ultimate as "ineffable" tend to cheat, as they violate the ineffability ban on property ascription just long enough to say what their religious beliefs otherwise require. Generally, the discussion is valuable for looking past common metaphors and asking hard questions about what the actual metaphysics must look like if the doctrines are to be taken literally and with any seriousness. Some may object to the somewhat ahistorical nature of the discussion, as the focus is more upon what the Buddhist might possibly say, given certain commitments, as opposed to exegesis of what any particular Buddhists have, in fact said. In my opinion, this is the very charm and strength of the chapter as it is precisely what is required in order to understand the philosophical implications of the doctrines. Chapter five, "Some Buddhist Schools and Issues," considers three varieties of Buddhism: the "heretical" Personalist school, which appeared in the third century, Nagarjuna's Madhyamika school, which is one of the more influential Mahayana traditions, and "Buddhist Reductionism," which includes a number of traditions claiming that the objects of common sense belief are mere constructs, and that reality is exhausted by more basic constituents, such as fleeting mental or physical states. The Personalist school emerged, and, for a time, enjoyed a great deal of popularity, largely because some philosophers within the Buddhist tradition concluded that adequate accounts of personal identity, action, karma and rebirth, or enlightenment cannot be had on the standard Buddhist views of dependent origination,

impermanence and no-self (anatman). It is enlightening to discover that such philosophical worries are not limited to Western analytic--and Christian--philosophers. But here is where closer attention to actual texts might have been desirable instead of textually unsupported references to this or that "Personalist argument." Perhaps a running discussion of such texts could have been included in the footnotes. Discussion of Madhyamika is given largely to three interpretations. On a nihilist interpretation, nothing whatsoever ultimately exists. Not only is this suggestion rife with difficulties (for one thing, were it true there would be no one around either to affirm or deny it), but it is generally not thought to be a correct interpretation of Madhyamika. On an Absolutist interpretation, which strongly resembles Shankara's doctrine of Brahman, all that exists is a qualityless and immutable ultimate. This faces the objection once implied by Ramanuja's challenge to Advaita Vedanta: If nothing but this qualityless reality exists and the experience of plurality is an illusion, then who or what suffers from the illusion? The "ineffabilist" interpretation has it that reality is such that no linguistic concepts whatsoever apply to it. Here, the troubles with the notion of ineffability are revisited and developed further. Finally, in discussing Buddhist Reductionism, the very idea of reductionism, as applied, for instance, to artifacts, is explored as is the notion of emergent properties. (Are there cases in which the right recipe of basic ingredients may result in a property of the whole that is not possessed of its individual parts, such as when a living or conscious being appears to be made of non-living and non-conscious elements?) There is some overlap with a portion of the discussion of chapter four here, but, on the whole, this is a metaphysical feast. The final chapter, "The Dharma or the Gospel?" accomplishes two main purposes. First, it highlights significant differences between Buddhist and Christian doctrines, thus offering strong counterevidence to the still popular claim that they are "very much alike." To take just one of the examples given, whereas Buddhism identifies the root problem of humanity as ignorance, Christianity insists that our trouble is sin--willful rebellion against God. If the Buddhist holds that knowledge--in the form of enlightenment--is sufficient for virtue, the Christian denies this. The demons believe and tremble. Second, the authors consider a number of historical Buddhist challenges to Christian doctrines and offer a defense. Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal fills a void in the available literature. There is an abundance of discussions of Buddhism that are largely descriptive and comparative in nature, or that focus upon various cultural aspects of the religion as opposed to the doctrines themselves. As noted above, there is resistance among many religious scholars to engage in, or even countenance, the rational assessment of religious doctrines and their supporting considerations. This is a work in philosophy of religion that manages to include the philosophy side of that equation. Readers new to philosophy may find portions of the

book--chapters four and five, in particular--to be challenging, but the fruit of such labor is not merely a grasp of what Buddhist doctrines might or do mean, but also a sense of what it is to offer careful and respectful assessment of those doctrines, for this book is a model of such. One wishes that the publisher would see fit to regard this text as but the first in a collection of similar books on world religions.

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