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Review Of "Theravada Buddhism: The View Of The Elders" By A. Tilakaratne

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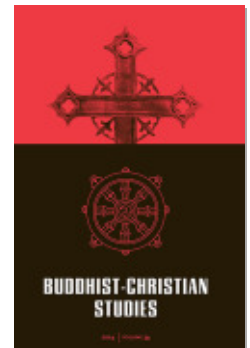
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Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elders by Asanga Tilakaratne (review)

Donald K. Swearer, Sid Brown

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THERAVADA BUDDHISM: THE VIEW OF THE ELDERS. By *Asanga Tilakaratne*. Honolulu. University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. 186 pp.

Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elders is primarily a descriptive, comprehensive study of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The book's eight chapters begin with a brief general account of the life of the Buddha and the beginnings of the tradition in India, four chapters on the basic teachings of Theravāda ("The Triple Gem," "The Basic Teachings of the Buddha," "Karma and Its Results," and "The Social Teachings of the Buddha"), two chapters that contextualize the tradition in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, and a concluding chapter on diaspora Theravāda that highlights two topics—meditation and the Bhikkhuni order. The book's broad scope is both its strength and weakness; however, it successfully negotiates a middle ground between those books that provide only a brief introduction to Theravāda, on the one hand, and more comprehensive, in-depth studies.

The author characterizes Theravāda as a spiritual practice guided by the monastic tradition based on an "interpretation of the words of the Buddha adopted and developed by the tradition." From this normative perspective, the author's description and analysis of Theravāda doctrine includes generous quotations from the Pali Suttas. Tilakaratne "respects modern historical and philological scholarship"; however, he follows the tradition of Theravāda monastic interpretation that accepts the Suttas as the *Buddavacanam* (words of the Buddha) as organized by the early disciples, and characterizes the communal act of chanting as signifying "undivided allegiance to the word of the Buddha as approved by the leaders of the community." From this perspective, the author deems Theravāda to be "remarkably homogeneous" (p. xxvi). Although in general terms Theravāda can be seen as more homogeneous than Mahayāna and Tantrayāna textual and doctrinal traditions, in more localized contexts—not noted by the author—it is also marked by varying degrees of diversity. For example, one thinks of the Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (d. 1993), who was accused of being a "Mahayanist" for highlighting the doctrine of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*), a central Mahayāna concept but of relatively minor importance in Theravāda.

A former monk, Tilakaratne, professor of Pali and Buddhist studies at the University of Colombo, brings an understandable normativity to his description and analysis. Furthermore, the author's background gives the volume a direct firsthand flavor. For example, in discussing the Pali formula extolling the virtues of the sangha that all Theravāda Buddhists learn by heart and repeat within a daily ritual context, the author observes that even though lay practitioners continue to use the formula throughout their lives, they may not comprehend its meaning.

In his discussion of the basic teachings of Buddhism, the author addresses the common misinterpretation of the fundamental Buddhist teachings of not-self (*anattā*) and *nirvāṇa* as negative concepts. The teaching that an individual does not

exist independently affirms the phenomenology of the dynamic, interdependent nature of all things, and, more importantly from the standpoint of spiritual practice, affirms that with this realization (i.e., *nirvāṇa*) “one’s thirst in all forms becomes extinct” (p. 44).

The author structures the basic teachings of the Buddha in terms of the traditional categories of the three trainings: morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and understanding (*paññā*). Apropos of the contextual flavor of the book, the author’s discussion of *sīla* for the laity situates the five precepts (abstaining from taking life, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from telling lies, and from alcohol and intoxicants) within the ritual of taking the precepts as a daily practice at home, the temple, or at public ceremonies. *Paññā* or “seeing things as they are” addresses the fundamental Theravāda teachings of suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence, and not-self: “Suffering alone exists, not a sufferer; action alone exists, not an actor; extinguishment alone exists, not one who is extinguished; path alone exists, not one who treads on it” (Buddhaghosa) (p. 55).

Given the prominence of the concept of karma in studies about Buddhism, it is appropriate that the author devotes a full chapter to a discussion of this seminal teaching. Of the two dimensions of the doctrine—action and identity—the author focuses on the latter. Tilakaratne argues that karma constructs identity without resorting to either essentialism or annihilationism. Of even greater ethical import, however, is the fundamental linkage Theravāda karma doctrine makes between action and intention: “Intention (*cetanā*) *bhikkhus*, I call karma. Having intended, one acts physically, verbally, and mentally” (p. 63). Hence, the author proposes that karma should not be seen in static, nominal terms but in adjectival, “karmic” terms.

Chapter 5, about the contemporary Theravāda world, highlights some of the major features in the development of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Because of its brevity, the treatment of Theravāda in these countries will be of interest primarily to readers with limited knowledge of Buddhism within the Southeast Asian context. The longest (forty-six pages) and arguably the most valuable chapter in the book is chapter 7, “Traditional Theravada Practice.” Given the importance of *puñña* (merit making) and *dāna* (giving) in the symbiotic relationship between monks and laity, the chapter begins with an extensive discussion of these two practices. Although the author acknowledges the soteriological dimension of *dāna*, he correctly argues that the belief that it produces good results for the future dominates the practice: “by giving, you reduce your craving; but at the same time you get more and more” (p. 96). The section on *vandana* (worship) will be especially informative for those who conceptualize Buddhism primarily in the limited sense of meditation and the pursuit of *nirvāṇa*. Such readers may be surprised to learn that a Buddhist monk traditionally played an important role as physician and astrologer, and that chanting of *paritta*, one of the most important ritual roles of Theravāda monks, is popularly believed to offer protection and guarantee good luck.

The concluding sections of this chapter deal with both monastic and lay interactions in Theravāda societies, especially Sri Lanka. Given the increasing popularity Buddhist meditation and the importance of female ordination in the West, it is

appropriate that the final chapter focuses on these two topics. In conclusion, Tilakaratna warns his readers that for Theravāda to remain an effective and viable institution in the contemporary world it is imperative to apply the Buddha's teachings to modern contexts and work to develop responses to questions that arise from demanding ethical and social issues. The author's warning to Buddhists regarding the relevance of belief and practice to the contemporary world is, of course, one that applies to all religious traditions.

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ENCOUNTERS IN FAITH: CHRISTIANITY IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE. *By Peter Feldmeier.* Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2013. 326 pp.

This book occupies a unique place in a big crowd. It fits neatly into the rows of textbooks weighing down the shelves marked "Introduction to World Religions," for it admirably achieves the goal of introducing its readers to the basic beliefs and practices of humanity's ancient and more recent religious traditions. But it does more, much more. Peter Feldmeier, professor of Christian theology at the University of St. Thomas, boldly, and I would add fittingly, commits what most scholars of religion consider a mortal sin. He not only describes objectively but engages personally the truths that these religions hold dear. He does so as a Christian primarily for Christian and/or Western readers. The book embodies something I don't think I've found in any other textbook: comparative, or dialogical, theology applied to a world religions course.

Feldmeier lays out this novel approach in an introductory chapter in which he basically defines himself as a comparative theologian—a scholar of Christianity who is convinced that one of the most promising—maybe necessary—ways of understanding Christianity is to bring it into conversation with other religious traditions. So the book has a proximate and an ultimate goal: to understand other religions as accurately as possible but then "to inform, inspire, challenge, and renew one's [own] religious sensibilities" (p. 263). As for the Christian theological resources for doing this, Feldmeier summarizes the standard, but controversial, three "models" of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, but then makes a postmodern decision not to endorse any one of them. Rather, he floats among the models and employs one or another as is "useful and appropriate" (p. 17). Hmm. . .

The overall structure of the book embodies its comparative methodology. Before exploring individual traditions, Feldmeier offers two somewhat surprising thematic chapters, which turn out to be foundational for his project, on mysticism and on