

Swarthmore College

Works

Religion Faculty Works

Fall 1978

Review Of "The Torch Of Certainty" By J. Kongtrul

Donald K. Swearer

Swarthmore College, dsweare1@swarthmore.edu

[Let us know how access to this work benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Donald K. Swearer. (1978). "Review Of "The Torch Of Certainty" By J. Kongtrul". *Journal Of Ecumenical Studies*. Volume 15, Issue 4. 758-759.
<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/140>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Swarthmore College Libraries. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

denominations, the author examines the hermeneutic function of Christian tradition as norm, criterion, and decisive factor in preserving the identity of Christian truths. Recent linguistic and hermeneutic orientations created problems that demand a reexamination of the role of Tradition in theological interpretation. Respecting the dogmatic heritage of the past, and open to the future, it should reconcile the normative function of Scripture (stressed by Protestants) with that of Tradition (upheld by Catholics and the Orthodox). A theological interpretation, embracing the living tradition of the whole church (its magisterium and community) and the inseparable whole of its norms (Scripture and Tradition), is necessary to rediscover the common foundations of all Christian communities.

The ecumenical impact of this extensive study is evident.

Emilia K. Ehrlich, O. S. U., Kraków, Poland

Jamgon Kongtrul, *The Torch of Certainty*. Trans. Judith Hanson. Boulder & London: Shambhala, 1977. Pp. 139. \$5.95.

During the past ten to twenty years, stemming in part from the dispersion of Tibetan monks from their homeland after the Chinese occupation, the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in North America has rivaled, if not surpassed, that of Zen. Although the current wave of interest was prepared for by the scholarly work of Tucci and Snellgrove among others, and the sympathetic expositions of David-Neel and Evans-Wentz, only in recent years has Tibetan Buddhism begun to be propagated with some success. Tibetan monks can now be found on university faculties; Tibetan Buddhist study centers are located in many American cities; and the translation of Tibetan Buddhist texts is taking place from New Jersey to Colorado to California. Friendly traditional sectarian rivalry among North American Tibetan Buddhist groups is not even unheard of!

The best known Tibetan Buddhist spokespersons in North America today are Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Tarthang Tulku who come from the Kagyud and Nyingma branches of Tibetan Buddhism, respectively. Both have established major educational centers and support significant Buddhist publishing efforts. The Shambhala Press has become a crucial arm in Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's outreach. Books published by Shambhala include contemporary apologetics as well as historically significant interpreters of Tibetan Buddhism. *The Torch of Certainty (Nges-don Sgron-me)* by Jamgon Kongtrul (1813-1899) covers both of these thrusts. It is first of all an annotated translation of a Tibetan Buddhist meditation manual (the *Nges-don Sgron-me*) in the Jagyud tradition, containing both practical instructions and theoretical explanations of basic practices in current use by all Tibetan sects. The *Nges-don Sgron-me* is also a commentary on the *Lhanag skyes-sbyor khrid* written by the ninth Karmapa of the Karma Kagyudpa sect. Wong Chug Dorje (1556-1603), whose lineage includes Tilopa (988-1069), Naropa (1016-1100), Marpa (1012-1096), Milarepa (1052-1135), Gampopa (1079-1153), and Dusum Khyenpa (1110-1193) the sect's founder. In addition to this root text and commentary, *The Torch of Certainty* also includes remarks on the practice of the Four Foundations of Meditation by Kalu Rinpoche, Deshung Rinpoche, and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, popular Tibetan Buddhist teachers in North America. Judith Hanson has supplemented her translation, done as her M.A. thesis at the University of British Columbia, with extensive notes and helpful chapter introductions.

The Torch of Certainty begins by laying out the basis for spiritual endeavor through an analysis of the nature of human existence: its ambivalence, impermanent nature, *karma*, and *samsara* (rebirth). From these "four thoughts which turn the mind to religion," the manual moves to a description of the four foundations of meditation. The first is taking refuge through visualization of a mythical *axis mundi*, a wish-fulfilling tree of one central and five major directional branches symbolizing the *gurus* of the Mahamudra lineage—Tantric *vidams*, the Three Gems (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha), and the *dharmapalas*, *dakas*, and *dakinis* who are beneath the tree. A further ritual, engendering an attitude of enlightenment, focuses on the Bodhisattva vow to liberate all sentient beings. Thus, in the first step, both self-perfection and the perfection of others are established as meditational goals.

Symbolic purification follows in stage two with a one-hundred-mantra rosary recitation of Vajrasattva as universal ruler. Having purified oneself of unwholesome actions, in stage three the meditator perfects the accumulation of merit (generosity, moral conduct, patience, strenuousness, concentration), and transcendental insight or knowledge. The

fourth and last stage of the manual preparatory to the Mahamudra (not translated in this volume) is the visualization of Vajradhara as the meditator's root-guru, and symbolic identification with the Kagyudpa lineage. Each stage is elaborated by details of ritual visualization, a distinctive element of Vajrayana meditation, and enriched by commentarial discussion of Vajrayana doctrine.

The Torch of Certainty is a welcome addition to the translations of other primary Kagyudpa works, among which Professor Herbert Guenther's contributions deserve special mention. Furthermore, since the volume is a traditional Vajrayana meditational manual and commentary, it invites comparisons with Theravada and Zen meditation treatises already available in translation. Finally, while some historians of religion are growing alarmed by the appearance of a Buddhist apologetic in academia, books such as *The Torch of Certainty* offer a rich resource for a critical analysis and interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism.

Donald K. Swearer, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA

Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages*. New York: KTAV Publishing House, Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1977. Pp. 286. \$17.50.

The ambitious task Lasker has set for himself is a "systematic overview" of the philosophical aspects of medieval Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature. Actually it is a "catalogue" of forty-one polemical treatises, giving names and dates of authors (where possible) and a few remarks about each work. In organizing this list Lasker employs the six categories of polemic (*vikuah* or *sefer nizzahon*) given by Joseph ben Shem Tov (c. 1400-c. 1460). But, in addition to these specifically polemical treatises, the present work deals also with legal treatises, Bible commentaries, chronicles, and philosophy. Lasker appreciates the problems inherent in literary classification but does not seem to be aware of the damage done to his own achievement by employing a fifteenth-century schema. He acknowledged its inadequacy but did little to improve upon it.

Emphasis on the rationality of belief marks polemic as specifically philosophical, according to Lasker, who sets the stage for his analysis by discussing the appeal to reason in religious polemic. Mutual acceptance of Aristotelian physics, metaphysics, and logic provided both Jewish and Christian debaters with a kind of religiously-neutral common ground—a terminology, a set of principles, and a cosmology. These principles, in turn, determined questions of possibility or impossibility, contradiction, consistency, and admissibility.

Chief among the Christian doctrines attacked by the Jewish polemicists were the Trinity, the incarnation, transubstantiation, and the virgin birth. Despite its overwhelming importance as an object of polemical attack, "the Trinity, in itself, was not an unacceptable doctrine" (p. 105). Jewish Aristotelians, for example, had long acknowledged that God is thinker, thinking, and thought (*sekhel, maskil, muskal / 'aql, 'uqil, ma'qul*). But it was the Christian belief in the incarnation which led the Jewish polemicists to underline the differences between their conceptions of divine attributes and the Christian notion of a trinity of persons. And Christian thinkers, on the other hand, asserted the compatibility of the same Aristotelian principles with divine Trinity. Hence, Lasker maintains, it was not a case of two separate philosophical movements, but rather "a common philosophy was employed for contradictory polemical purposes" (p. 104).

Among the more interesting conclusions of this study are the following. Jewish polemicists apparently learned about Christian beliefs not from Christian theologians but from Christian polemicists and missionaries, for they rarely took account of the philosophical defense of Christianity developed by Christian theologians. Explanations of the Trinity as thinker, thinking, and thought—or as power, wisdom, and will—were not so much Christian theological interpretations as they were polemical approaches designed to make the doctrine of the Trinity acceptable to Jews. Because they were interested in a defense of Jewish survival rather than in Christian theology itself, the Jewish polemicists concentrated on countering the arguments of Christians who wanted to convert them and "paid little attention to the more developed forms of the Christian doctrines" (p. 163).

Lasker's analysis also concludes that medieval Jewish arguments against Christianity were rarely original but often had their sources in Christian heretical writings, in Muslim