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Review: Robert Carter, Encounter with Enlightenment: A Study of Japanese Ethics (SUNY, 2001)

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BOOK REVIEWS

ENCOUNTER WITH ENLIGHTENMENT: A STUDY OF JAPANESE ETHICS. Robert E. Carter, with a foreword by Yuasa Yasuo. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. Pp. xxxviii + 258, with bibliographical references and index. ISBN 0-7914-5017-1

JAMES MARK SHIELDS

In *Encounter with Enlightenment*, Robert Carter takes on a huge task; or rather, two huge tasks. The first is to sketch the history and development of ethics within Japanese traditions—particularly the great informing religious and philosophical traditions of Shinto, Confucianism and Buddhism, as they emerged within and diverged from a broader East Asian context. Second, after distilling from the amalgamation of these various streams a ‘core’ of Japanese ethics, the author proposes a number of specific ideas and ideals which alienated Westerners may fruitfully apply to their contemporary malaise. The first aim succeeds as well as may be possible in such a slim volume, while the second, more grandiose and, one might say, ‘theological’ one provides an important perspective on the contemporary situation of comparative studies, though one that is not without serious flaws.

Robert Carter’s work often strides a fine line between academic scholarship and what might be called, without any negative insinuations intended, ‘popular’ Buddhist writing. To his credit, like few others (Stephen Batchelor and Robert Thurman come to mind), Carter generally succeeds in maintaining a delicate balancing act between thoroughgoing analysis of Japanese culture and thought, and a more experiential, even apologetic type of writing. However, the dangers inherent in such an approach to a topic already as large and complex as ‘Japanese ethics’ do surface from time to time in this otherwise quite solid introduction.

After a very personal introduction, where the author outlines the scope and intent of the book, the first chapter begins with a reflection on twentieth-century East-West studies, criticizing the conclusions of one of the foremost early comparative scholars, Arthur Danto, who suggested that, at least with respect to morals, East and West are irreconcilable—due to insurmountable differences in ways of thinking about the world. Carter rejects such a notion as groundless, asserting that Danto fails to sufficiently recognize the Gadamerian fusion of horizons that can and perhaps must

occur in any cross-cultural encounter. Chapter One moves on to a discussion of the Taoist notion of *wu wei* 無為, or ‘actionless action’, as the starting point for a truly ‘Eastern’ being-in-the-world. Here, we find a sustained critique of Western dualism in favor of (Taoist) spontaneity and naturalness as well as (Taoist-Buddhist) interconnectedness as a basis for both social and environmental ethics.

The second chapter, where Carter speaks of the significance of Shinto for Japanese ethics, is in some ways the most interesting and fruitful of the book. As Carter notes, Shinto is often bypassed by modern writers on Japanese thought and Japanese values, perhaps because they are beguiled by the more obvious role of community-minded Confucianism or by Suzuki’s insistence on Buddhism (more specifically Zen) being the heart of all things Japanese. Here, we find a discussion of key terms like *makoto* (defined as ‘sincerity’, though this reviewer feels that such a translation is somewhat misleading, given the non-conformist and Romantic connotations of that English term), as well as reflection on the essence of Shinto (or, to be more precise, pre-Buddhist Japanese religion) as a basic and simple experience of human kinship with others, the objects of the world and nature. All of this is a necessary and useful counterbalance to the assumption that Shinto does not provide anything towards Japanese ethics. Yet the flaw in this chapter is a tendency by Carter and some of his sources to employ overly Hegelian-Idealist language in speaking of ‘Shinto metaphysics’: “The world is, in this sense, God’s body; nature is *kami* made manifest, the subjective made objective as the form of the formless, the materialization of the immaterial, the invisible become visible” (p. 57). The metaphysical idea that there is something ‘out there’—before, beyond, above, extra—might be considered a distortion of the radical immanence presented by Shinto, at least according to most readings of the generally non-metaphysical ‘*kami*-cults’ which eventually became Shinto. At any rate, in the middle of the chapter, in a section called ‘The Way to the Future’, Carter makes an impassioned plea for the incorporation of a notion of ‘*kami*’ or something similar in ‘our’ (read: Westerners’) moral education.

Chapter Three deals with the impact of Confucian ideas on Japanese ethics. Here the concept of *makoto* is broadened to include the more relativistic (and pragmatic) awareness of “whatever standard of goodness reigns,” and the Confucian emphasis on the bonds between individuals and among members of a community, is given ample treatment. Though Carter wants to keep both Taoism and Confucianism involved within the basic framework of Japanese (and ‘Eastern’) ethics, there is a clear preference in *Encounter* for the ideas of the former over those of the latter. While there has been, of course, considerable overlap and syncretism between these two ancient Chinese traditions over the centuries, there are still some points at which disagreements, some fundamental, linger. Indeed, in some interpretations of Confucian ‘virtue ethics’, one becomes good simply by *acting good*—thus radicalizing the Taoist (and Zen?) dichotomy of spontaneity/artifice or depth/surface. Moreover, one can find something similar to this idea within Japanese thought as well (see, for

example, Kenko's *Tsurezuregusa* 徒然草: "If you run through the streets, saying you imitate a lunatic, you are in fact a lunatic. If you kill a man, saying you imitate a criminal, you are a criminal yourself. By the same token, a horse that imitates a champion thoroughbred, is a champion thoroughbred, and the man who imitates Shun belongs to Shun's company. A man who studies wisdom, even insincerely, should be called wise.") In short, it would seem that the many variant strands of the 'East'—strands that do not always harmonize—are not adequately acknowledged in Carter's analysis.

Chapter Four, "Buddhism and Japanese Ethics," lays out the basic ethical ideals coming from Indian, and especially Mahāyāna Buddhism. The discussion is a thorough and useful summary of the core ideas of Buddhist ethics. However, while admitting that it is a 'broad generalization', the author again relapses into overly simplistic East-West binaries: "The most remarkable difference between ethics East and West . . . is that the former encourages heart-felt feeling as the central core of ethical behavior and the latter precise formulation of a code of behavior, and the identification of some universal criterion of what is good (or right)" (p. 82). There are three problems here: first, as the author himself has noted, the 'East' is simply too large and diverse to be considered as one cultural sphere; second, the 'West', while arguably less culturally diverse due to the shaping force of classical culture and the Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment traditions, is nonetheless quite varied in its ethical 'encouragements'; third, and perhaps most critically, what happens in this section is that Eastern *ideals* (Abhidharma, the Eightfold Path, Taoist philosophical monism, Confucian human-heartedness) are contrasted with Western *realities* (e.g., the idea that the Decalogue too-easily leads people to superficially "follow the letter of the law" [p. 83]). The notion that only Western cultures impose moral teachings simply does not stand up to scrutiny (that is, sociological scrutiny). In fact, when asked in a recent survey why they followed Buddhist practices, a vast majority of Burmese Buddhists replied that a) they were afraid of going to hell, and b) the Buddha made the rules. Sound familiar?

Chapter Five, "Zen Buddhism and Ethics," is unsurprisingly situated as the heart of *Encounter with Enlightenment*. Carter begins by citing Abe Masao, who echoes a familiar Suzukian refrain in stating that Zen is, "in a fundamental sense, the basic source of all forms of Buddhism" (p. 99)—a statement which we might say is true only insofar as Buddhism is reinterpreted along Zen lines, thus providing a perfect case of circular reasoning. This is followed by a short summary of Zen's claims to being 'beyond words and letters'—complete with obligatory reference to the "finger pointing at the moon" and "map is not territory" tropes. Carter's summary here would benefit from the recent work of Bernard Faure and Dale Wright regarding the rhetorical aspects of Zen language. In particular, the notion that language and experience are somehow opposed or can be so easily distinguished, is one that has of late been receiving the critical attention it merits.

While the discussion of Zen and its contributions to ethics is familiar to those who have pondered the work of Suzuki or the Kyoto School, a fairly serious problem arises here. Namely, where are the other denominations of Japanese Buddhism? Notably absent from Carter's discussion are the Pure Land denominations (i.e., *Jōdo Shū* and *Jōdo Shinshū*), which can lay claim to being, by numbers at least, the most popular forms of Buddhism in Japan. The Pure Land approach to ethics is, in many ways, quite distinct from that of Zen, focusing (as with Protestant Christians) almost entirely on the saving grace of Other Power (in this case Amida Buddha, has made an original vow to save all sentient beings), thereby bypassing the Zen focus on emptiness, enlightenment and 'being-in-the-moment'. Indeed, one of the most significant modern works in Japanese religious thought, *Philosophy as Metanoetics* by the mid-century Kyoto School thinker, Tanabe Hajime, is an extended reflection on these issues from a distinctly Pure Land Buddhist perspective. One clear indication of Carter's lack of acknowledgement of Pure Land traditions comes in the conclusion to *Encounter*, where he suggests that while the West takes the "ordinary person" as the standard for ethics, the East favors the "elite, exceptional" figure. However, as Ama Toshimaro has argued, Pure Land ethics is founded precisely on the standpoint of the "ordinary person" (see Ama's article in this issue of *The Eastern Buddhist*). Another important denomination, Nichiren, has, in recent times, given birth to the extraordinarily successful 'new religious movement' called Soka Gakkai, which once again has views on ethics distinct from both Pure Land and Zen. While these traditions do share some features with Zen, the differences stand out—and deserve some attention in a book dealing with Japanese ethics.

At the end of this chapter, Carter makes note of Brian Victoria's 1997 work *Zen at War*, which raised important issues regarding the commonplace understandings of Zen in the West, and which criticized Suzuki in particular for his contributions to the ideology of "Imperial Way Zen." Yet this discussion, as with prior remarks on Confucian-inspired Imperialism in Chapter Three and several paragraphs on Zen militarism near the end of the book, fails to go beyond the conclusion that "those who claim to know the teachings of their great founders simply do not understand after all" (p. 121). Besides *Zen at War*, recent works like *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism* and *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School and the Question of Nationalism* might be noted here to provide some philosophical depth to this vital issue. In particular, given the place Carter gives in this work to 'pure experience' (especially as developed by Suzuki and Nishida), it seems incumbent to reflect upon recent claims made by various contemporary writers in Japan and the West that it is *precisely within this concept* that we may find a clue to Japanese Buddhism's occasional socio-ethical lapses.

Chapter Six, "The Fundamentals: Modern Japanese Ethics," looks at the work of Watsuji Tetsuro (whose principal work in ethics, *Rinrigaku* 倫理学, has been translated by Carter). Watsuji's work is indeed unjustly neglected vis-à-vis the Kyoto

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School thinkers, and Carter has done as much as anyone to render his provocative ideas accessible to the English-speaking world. Watsuji's clear acknowledgement of the influence of Confucian ideas on Japanese ethics allows for further discussion of the central place of *makoto* in such ethics, as well as Watsuji's special focus on the status of 'betweenness' (*aidagara*) that he saw as the foundation not only of Japanese social interaction but as the very core of their being-in-the-world.

In Chapter Seven, Carter turns his attention to two modern Japanese thinkers, Nishida Kitarō and Yuasa Yasuo, as well as to Dōgen, generally recognized as the greatest thinker of Japan's 1500-year-old Buddhist tradition. The discussion of the modern philosophers revolves around what the author refers to as the "distinctive genius of the Japanese people, and the key to understanding the type of knowing that is deemed most important in that cultural tradition"—that is, the "ability to experience facts or things themselves" (p. 151). How did the Japanese acquire this astonishing ability? By yearning to "become one in things and in events" (p. 151). Here Carter positively elucidates Nishida's concept of 'pure experience', though this idea has come under the gun of late for being, among other things, a) borrowed from or heavily influenced by certain nineteenth-century Western thinkers like William James, thus not particularly Buddhist or Zen at all, and b) of dubious ethical effect. Indeed, to 'Critical Buddhist' scholars Hakayama Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō, the Nishidan reliance on 'pure experience', however dressed up in Zen garb, seems to displace the clear Mahāyāna ethical imperative of compassion in favor of *satori*. Dōgen is much more careful with respect to the place of enlightenment, and perhaps it is to his wisdom, rather than to his modern heirs, that we should turn to discover some answers to our contemporary problems. Whereas Nishida, along with Suzuki, and sometimes Carter too, seems to assume that the path to enlightenment will automatically result in good actions, Dōgen was astute enough to suggest that it may be out of our actions themselves that enlightenment emerges—or even that there may be 'nothing to' enlightenment beyond our actions themselves.

In conclusion, this book provides a good basic introduction to the sometimes overwhelmingly complex world of Japanese ethics. Carter's focus on certain key terms like *wu wei* and *makoto*, in particular, helps to flesh out some of the more important themes within the Japanese value system as it has developed over the past two thousand years or more. The central problem with the work is that the shadow of Suzuki and the Kyoto School seems to hover rather largely over the proceedings, a shadow which—by allowing for dubious contrasts between 'East' and 'West', as well as a general tendency towards a monolithic, that is to say, Zen/Idealist, vision of Japanese culture—ultimately limits the interpretive and critical power of *Encounter with Enlightenment*.

Certainly, Carter is superior to Danto, Suzuki, or the Kyoto School thinkers when it comes to questioning 'East-Westism', not least in his humility and genuine concern with developing connections between various traditions, but he hedges his bets,

and, in reiterating their tropes about, for instance, the West's "analytic mind" (thereby neglecting not only the mainstream religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but also modern secular streams like Romanticism), ultimately falls back into their stifling embrace. As John Maraldo has put it in his critique of Suzuki: "We look for diversity and historical conditioning in religious expressions, not for a privileged experience that might be the unchanging core of a tradition. The attempt to express a core in 'Western' as well as 'Eastern' terms finds sympathy no longer" (John C. Maraldo, "Questioning Nationalism Now and Then: A Critical Approach to Zen and the Kyoto School," in Heisig and Maraldo, eds., *Rude Awakenings*, p. 340).

For all Carter's well-intentioned caveats, it would seem better, at this stage in the game, for comparativists to drop the whole 'East-West' construction altogether, as being a) an outdated product of colonialism and orientalism, b) methodologically geared towards oversimplification and c) deeply infused with ideological and ethnocentric if not racialist assumptions (witness Yuasa's remark about the "deep structure of the Japan's [sic] ethnic collective unconscious," p. xv). Carter himself admits that there are in fact "many Easts and many Wests" (p. 5). Why then not simply speak of 'Japanese ideals' and, if necessary, compare and contrast these with, for instance, 'modern Euro-American ideals' (or better, 'post-Enlightenment Euro-American rationalist ideals')? Maybe because doing so would water down the rhetorical-polemical force that has been a prop for East-West studies for over a century. Carter's work would stand much taller without the prop.

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SEAN DUKE

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