



STATEMENT DB-583

**BOOK REVIEW**

**A SUMMARY CRITIQUE:  
Living Buddha, Living Christ Thich Nhat Hahn**

**by Thich Nhat Hahn**

As citizens of nations that allow and encourage the freedom of religion, religious believers in Western democracies welcome the opportunity to practice their faith without opposition and to propagate their faith without hindrance. They realize that their religious freedom is only as secure as the religious freedom of their unbelieving neighbors. In the United States, in particular, freedom of religion ideally means the freedom of all religions to advance their own visions within the framework of the Constitution. If I have the legal right to believe and practice my faith, then you have the legal right to disbelieve my faith and to practice your own faith — or no faith at all. In order to get along peaceably in a democracy, citizens must respect the religious beliefs of people they take to be pagans, infidels, apostates, heretics, blasphemers, or worse.

The pluralism of the Western world not only offers religious freedom, but also places tremendous pressure on the adherents of various religions. While believers are largely unfettered by repressive laws that prohibit or discriminate against their religions (as happens in many nations), they face the challenges of religious competition. The Christian's charge in such a pluralistic situation is to affirm and explain biblical doctrine without compromise and to labor passionately to persuade (but never coerce) unbelievers of all kinds that Jesus Christ is uniquely Lord of all. This is an apologetic and evangelistic task that is neither simple nor optional (1 Pet. 3:15-16; Jude 3), but it is immensely rewarding when it is done under the leading of the Spirit of truth (John 14:17).

As citizens of earth, Christians appreciate the freedom of religion. Saving faith cannot be legislated. As citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20), Christians discern and engage in a ceaseless struggle between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light — a struggle that will rage until the end of history. From this vantage point, the ultimate issue is not religious freedom (as important as it is), but freedom in Christ (John 8:31-32) — a freedom without which one is eternally enslaved to sin.

Of course, in a world with "many 'gods' and many 'lords'" (1 Cor. 8:5), not everyone is concerned about defending Christianity as uniquely true. Among some proponents of competing religions, an alternative strategy to overt evangelism and apologetics is to seek some type of common denominator among the world's religions and devise some way to equalize and harmonize what appear to be unequal and incompatible. Proponents of this strategy often seek the high moral ground by arguing that world peace will come only through some kind of syncretism. In his best-selling book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh pronounces that "when you believe, for example, that yours is the only way for humankind, millions of people might be killed because of that idea" (pp. 92-93). He also

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claims that if we believe that Christianity alone provides the way of salvation "this attitude excludes dialogue and fosters religious intolerance and discrimination." (193).

Hanh, a Buddhist monk from Vietnam now operating out of France, wants to convince us that both Buddha and Jesus can be our spiritual ancestors. His own religious shrine contains images of them both. He says, "I do not think there is that much difference between Christians and Buddhists. Most of the boundaries we have created between our two traditions are artificial. Truth has no boundaries" (154). Although Hanh does not offer a comprehensive theory concerning the unity of all religions, he attempts to show that Jesus' and Buddha's teachings agree and that "when you are a truly happy Christian, you are also a Buddhist. And vice versa" (197). To argue this, Hanh marshals a typical strategy: he redefines Christianity in order to muscle it into his religious framework. When he says that "truth has no boundaries," he really means that Buddhism is truth; therefore, we must reinterpret Christ in Buddhist terms. Despite Hanh's professed open-mindedness, for him Buddhism lays down the boundaries for truth. To evaluate Hanh's approach, we will first show how he distorts the biblical message, and then expose the illogic of his own world view.

In attempting to show the spiritual brotherhood of Jesus and Buddha, Hanh explains that the Christian practice of communion is really an exercise in "mindfulness." By this he means the Buddhist practice of reflecting on the interconnection of all things or what he calls "interbeing." Everything is a part of something else, and nothing stands alone. So Hanh tells us that "the miracle happens...because we eat and drink in mindfulness....If we allow ourselves to touch our bread deeply, we become reborn, because our bread is life itself. Eating it deeply, we touch the sun, the clouds, the earth, and everything in the cosmos. We touch life, we touch the kingdom of God" (30-31).

Christian communion, however, has no parallel in Buddhism. In fact, no Buddhist school teaches that we should commemorate Buddha's offering of his life for the atonement of our sins. Meanwhile, Christians partake of the bread and the wine of communion in order to remember and celebrate what Jesus alone accomplished for us through His broken body and shed blood. Jesus Himself instructed us to "do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of *me*" (1 Cor. 11:25; emphasis added). This central Christian observance poses a problem to the syncretist because it centers on the unique and final work of Jesus to atone for our sins and set us right with a holy God. It is not a vague religious ritual that adherents of other religions can interpret and then adopt into their own religious framework.

Hanh's syncretism fails at this point. We do not become "reborn" through communion but through a relationship with Jesus (John 3:1-21). There is nothing in the celebration of communion to suggest that it is a way to touch everything in the cosmos, which he interprets as the kingdom of God. Rather, the focus is on one individual, Jesus Christ, and what He has done for the individuals who accept Him. Furthermore, the kingdom of God is not synonymous with the cosmos, but refers to the reign of God in history. When Jesus announced the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 4:17; 12:28), He spoke of God's direct intervention, not of the universe at large. Hanh suffers from what James Sire in *Scripture Twisting* (1980) aptly calls "world view confusion." This is an interpretive error that reads a text according to a perspective that is alien to the text itself.

World view confusion permeates Hanh's book: "Buddhists and Christians know that nirvana or the kingdom of God is within our hearts. Buddhist sutras [sacred sayings] speak of Buddha nature as the seed of enlightenment that is already in everyone's consciousness. The Gospels speak of the kingdom of God as a mustard seed planted in the soil of consciousness" (167). By this he means that the Holy Spirit, or the "original mind" (according to Buddhism), is within us and is always shining. Only our ignorance or lack of awareness hinders our perception of this reality. However, when Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a mustard seed, He was speaking of its surprising and incorrigible growth despite its humble origins (Matt. 13:31-32). There is no hint that Jesus was speaking of a seed of divinity within each human being. No Buddhist tradition identifies nirvana with what Jesus meant by "the kingdom of God." Roughly stated, nirvana is a supposedly enlightened state of consciousness in which desire is extinguished; it is beyond personality and history. As we've seen, the kingdom of God is something else entirely.

Hanh must purge Christianity of its distinctive and constituting doctrines in order to force it onto his Buddhist Procrustean bed. Several times he appeals to the unbiblical theology of Paul Tillich to find parallels between Christianity and Buddhism. He says, "Protestant theologian Paul Tillich describes God as the ground of being. The Buddha is also sometimes described as the ground of being" (51). Tillich's god was a philosophical construct untethered from the biblical revelation that God is the personal, loving, and holy Creator of the universe and is not a vague metaphysical category. To appeal to Tillich for an understanding of the biblical God is rather like appealing to the KKK for an understanding of the U.S. Constitution and its 26 amendments.

Although Hanh lauds Jesus as his spiritual ancestor, he disparages the importance of Jesus' resurrection (35) and places us all on the same level as Jesus: "We are of the same reality as Jesus. This may sound heretical to many Christians, but I believe that theologians who say we are not have to reconsider this. Jesus is not only our Lord, but he is also our Father, our Teacher, our Brother, and our Self" (44). If Jesus is our self, then he cannot be our Lord, because we would be indistinguishable from Him. For there to be a Lord, there must be a servant — a completely separate individual. Although the Apostle Paul often spoke of Christ living within the believer (Gal. 2:20), he never taught that Christ is the believer! Hanh cites no Scripture and gives no argument to prove that Jesus is our self. It is a bare assertion mandated by his attempt to redefine Christ and Christianity according to his Buddhist world view.

Hanh chafes at the idea that Jesus is unique in any way that would lead to theological exclusivism. He asks, "But who is not unique? Socrates, Muhammed, the Buddha, you, and I are all unique" (193). This is true, but trivial. The uniqueness of Christ concerns His status as God Incarnate, sent to redeem sinful people through His perfect life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection from the grave. I may be unique in that no other entity possesses all of my qualities, but that uniqueness is in an entirely different category from that of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's "one and only Son" (John 3:16), "the way and the truth and the life," (John 14:6), and the only mediator between God and humans (1 Tim. 2:5-6). Jesus has the "name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9), the only name under heaven given to humanity through which we can be saved (Acts 4:12). His uniqueness is our liberation.

Hanh pits open dialogue against religious exclusivism and warns that "sharing does not mean wanting others to abandon their own spiritual roots and embrace your faith. That would be cruel" (196). This is ironic because, as we've seen, Hanh's strategy demands the redefinition of Christian teachings in Buddhist terms. In the name of openness and dialogue he asks Christians to abandon their spiritual roots and to embrace his version of Buddhism!

Given Hanh's views of Christ, it is no surprise that Elaine Pagels has written the introduction to his book. Pagels is known for her defense of Gnosticism, an early Christian heresy that emphasized the discovery of the divine within through esoteric knowledge (*gnosis*). Pagels finds similarities between Hanh's Buddhism and the Gnostics since both see "Jesus as one through whom the divine was manifested, and through whose example and teaching they could hope for similar enlightenment" (xxii-xxiii). She cites the extrabiblical Gospel of Thomas, which teaches that we realize our true identity not by submitting to Christ, but by knowing ourselves. Pagels's endorsement is a sure sign that Hanh's interpretation of Christ is unorthodox. The Gnostic error of seeking salvation within the self is widespread today, thus contributing to the appeal of Hanh's book.

Hanh's identification of Christianity with Buddhism is not all that is confused about this book; his own world view is deeply contradictory. He is true to the Buddhist tradition by claiming that ultimate reality is beyond concepts: "When we extinguish our ideas of more and less, is and is not, we attain the extinction of ideas and notions, which in Buddhism is called nirvana. The ultimate dimension of reality has nothing to do with concepts" (140). He also asserts that "for a Buddhist to be attached to any doctrine, even a Buddhist one, is to betray the Buddha" (55) because no doctrines capture reality. Furthermore, "we must let go not just of our notions and concepts about the ultimate but also of our notions and concepts about things in the phenomenal realm" (159).

These mystical-sounding statements eliminate any conceptual knowledge of ultimate reality. In the end, we can utter nothing at all about this reality because the use of language requires the use of concepts. To say that ultimate reality

has nothing to do with concepts is to use one of those forbidden concepts to describe ultimate reality. This is clearly contradictory and therefore false.

Moreover, Hanh flagrantly breaks his own rules by making positive attributions about ultimate reality, as when he cites a Buddhist Scripture on the nature of nirvana: "Verily, there is an unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unformed. If there were not this unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unformed, then an escape from the world of the born, the originated, the created, and the formed would be impossible" (138-39). This passage is brim full of concepts concerning ultimate reality. Yet Hanh says that concepts are utterly inept to describe this realm or even the realm of everyday experience. One need not be a trained philosopher to smell a philosophical rat here.

Hanh matter-of-factly asserts that "nothing can be talked about, perceived, or described by representation" (141). However, the very sentence he has written *represents* the concept he is trying to communicate. If nothing can be represented, then language is doomed from the start. But Hanh has written this book (and many others) to convince people of the importance of Buddhism. In essence, he is writing that "sentences cannot communicate truth." What about the sentence he has just written to communicate this "truth"?

If Hanh clings to his idea that ultimate reality is unknowable through concepts — and only knowable through mystical experience — he can say nothing about the alleged unity of the Buddhist's nirvana and the Christian's kingdom of God. To say that concept A and concept B are identical requires that we know what both concepts mean and that we know that they mean the same thing. If I know the meaning of "bachelor" and "unmarried man," I know that these concepts are identical. If I cannot ascertain what each word means, it would be absurd to assert their common meaning. But this is exactly what Hanh must do if he wants to assert that Jesus and Buddha are both "living" realities who taught the same essential message.

*Living Buddha, Living Christ* is one of myriad attempts to defend the indefensible. Those not rooted in the reality of the Redeemer often attempt to unify religious doctrines in the name of tolerance and peace. But the historic Buddha and the historic Christ cannot be so reconciled. Buddha taught a philosophy whose primary purpose was to deliver adherents from eternal suffering by attaining extinction; it had nothing to do with a personal God. Christ taught that He was God in human form, "the desire of the ages" who came in the fullness of time to set His people free. He is "the living Christ" because He is the resurrected Lord of life. The Buddha lacked these credentials.

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