The Divinity of the Profane, Representations of the Divine
In the Poetry of Adûnis
by Stefan Weidner

The Christ Figure in Siyîg’s Poetry
by Roger Allen

The volume appears in attractive but sober paperback, printed in the
Netherlands on paper which meets, as certified, the requirements of “ISO
9706: 1994, Information and documentation — paper for documents —
Requirements for permanence, and published from Rodopi B.V.,
Amsterdam — Atlanta GA 2001, while some of the financial means to assist in
editing and printing were provided by the Institute of Arabic and Middle
Eastern Studies, mentioned above.

The book as a whole, makes a pleasurable reading that affords a peep into
the area under study from a rather unfamiliar angle. The matter which might
have hitherto passed unnoticed has been arranged and brought under focus
here in such a manner as may prove quite revealing for those interested in the
classical and modern Arabic poetry or inclined to study the variety of
expressions of the mystic or divine experiences of the human soul.

Khurshid Rizvi


Edward Conze is one of those rare individuals who spend their whole lifetime
mastering some very remote and difficult field of knowledge. He is the author
of six books on Buddhism, including (with I.B. Horner and D. Snelgrove) the
classic Buddhist Texts Through the Ages (1954). In this brief introduction he
attempts to covers the progress of the Buddhist religion in the last 2,500 years
or so. As this religion is spread out so widely in the world — India, Tibet,
China, Korea, Japan, Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand and other parts of East
Asia — it is far from easy even to give the briefest outline of it, but this,
indeed, is what the author has achieved in less than 150 pages.
Gautama, who is now called “The Buddha” (the Enlightened one), was born in the Sakaya tribe somewhere in Bihar in India between 600 to 400 BC. So little is certain about him that the exact date of his birth is unknown as are the details of what he taught. Conze, however, has given his essential doctrine that violence in all its forms should be avoided. Buddha also taught that the “self” is responsible for all pain and suffering and one can get rid of it in the end by the state of self-extinction or “nirvana” as it is called. The Buddha also taught that death, as we understand it, can be overcome. He attributes it to an evil force called Mara which operates into us through cravings and attachments. If we overcome attachments we will become immortal.

Conze divides Buddhism into major phases with many variations and sub-sects which, of course, abound in all religions. According to him the first phase, or Old Buddhism, came to be known as Hinayana. The second is called Mahayana, while the third is characterized by the rise of Tantra and Ch’an. These phases bring us up to 1000 CE after which Buddhism started disappearing from India but persisted in other countries though sometimes in a much changed form. This, indeed, may be called the further phase of this ancient faith.

It is not easy to define Buddhism without falling into either essentialism or historicism. The former method consists of looking for family resemblances as Ludwig Wittgenstein sought in games. The latter consists of recounting the history of the sects without seeking to find exactly what they share in an essential sense with each other. Conze has actually used both methods but, such are the divergences between the sects, that he has had to rely predominantly on the historical method. He does point out, however, that the monastic organization, a set of meditations and the aspiration to the extinction of self, are the elements providing a kind of family resemblance to the different kinds of Buddhism existing in the world.

Conze’s chapter on the first five hundred years is a good introduction to the ideas which provided guidelines for the family resemblances persisting in Buddhism. This, indeed, is the period in which the earliest Buddhist orders were established, monastic rules and practices were laid down and the scriptures came to be written. The Buddha came to be revered and the belief that he had a miraculous body, invisible to all except the ones who were strong in faith, gained ground.

As in all ideologies, whether religious or secular, dissent came to split the original idea. The Buddhists too split up in sects and the sects kept multiplying. It goes to the credit of Buddhism, however, that the monks generally desisted from having their opponents branded as heretics and having them killed. In some cases some sects and individuals were branded as heretics.
but even they were not burnt on the stake as witnessed in some European countries.

Although Buddhism, at least in the beginning, emphasized other-worldliness (mainly by emphasizing the concept of non-attachment to worldly things,) it spread when a powerful emperor Asoka (274-236 BC), started patronising it. He sent missions to the successors of Alexandar in the North West and to Sri Lanka in the South. In Sri Lanka Buddhism has flourished since 240 BC — by no means a bad record! Again, contrary to the spirit of Buddhism, the monks supported the wars of kings in Sri Lanka and gathered wealth in their monasteries in many countries. This link between power and ideology, whether secular or religious, can be witnessed all over the world and in all phases of history. If power is shunned, the creed dies. If it is not shunned, the creed makes major accommodations to its exigencies and demands which change its nature. This, indeed, is what happened to the practice of Islamic mysticism in the Muslim world. State patronage made the Šûfîs rich and worldly; the lack of it made them weak and wither away. ¹

There are different accounts of the split between the Hinayana and Mahayana doctrines of Buddhism. Some scholars say that it occurred in 390 BC. However, according to Conze the split occurred in the second period. It developed first in North West and South India but spread to Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea and Japan. The new doctrine emphasized compassion and taught that a *Bodhisattva*, rather than an *arhat*, is the ideal. The compassionate *Bodhisattva* perfects himself till he becomes a Buddha. Gandhara, the area around the Pakistani town of Taxila, became a centre of Buddhism from where monks spread out to China and Central Asia.

In China Buddhism adopted Taoist and other local ideas whereas in India Tantric ideas — ideas based upon magic and other psycho-physical powers — came to colour Buddhism. The Tantrics believed that such methods gave one a direct and conceivably shorter route to Buddhahood. Versions of this Tantric Buddhism filtered into Burma. Indeed, while Buddhism got influenced by local ideas everywhere, it did give a stamp of its own to these societies. According to Conze, in many societies it gave a characteristic politeness and kindliness which might have been lacking without it. However, as stated elsewhere there are many other variables, including dictatorship and military rule, because of which certain Buddhist countries have been as violent as any other. The exploits of Pol Pot are notorious and the excesses of the rulers of Myanmar towards democrats and Muslim minorities are a case in point.

Buddhism also led to reading, writing, architecture and sculptoring as is evidenced by the number of cultural artifacts in Buddhist countries. In Korea,

for instance, magnificent statues and others monuments were erected between 550 and 664 CE when it became the state religion. In Japan too it inspired art which survives to this day.

Conze’s chapter on the collapse of Buddhism in India is most interesting. He begins by saying that the main cause of its disappearance was, “of course, the Mohammedan invasions” (p. 107). In the course of his writing, however, it emerges that the real cause was within Buddhism itself because, after all, Hinduism and even Jainism did not disappear. In reality there had been so much assimilation between Hinduism and Buddhism that “the separate existence of Buddhism no longer served a useful purpose. Its disappearance thus was no loss to anyone” (p. 109). It should, of course, be remembered that this assimilation was not a grand conspiracy as some Muslim writers make it out to be but an inevitable process given that both Hinduism and Buddhism have tremendous absorbing capacity. In India, however, Hinduism was in such vast majority that it was advantageously placed to absorb Buddhism.

The last one thousand years have been encapsulated in so few pages covering so many lands and developments that the crucial point of the impact of modernity on the faith does not become clear. As for the future, although Buddhist societies have sprung up in the West, it cannot be said whether Buddhism will survive, and if so in what form, in the 21st century. Conze is optimistic and, considering that all systems of beliefs do have a capacity to change and adjust themselves, his optimism may be justified.

In the end I must say that this very brief book, despite its inevitable tendency to gloss over developments covering centuries, is the best introduction to Buddhism one can find in the market.

Tariq Rahman


The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is the biggest inter-governmental body of the Islamic world. It has 57 Muslim states as its members with another three in observer capacity. It was established in 1969 when the Muslim governments met at Rabat to hold the first Islamic summit