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Jewish-Buddhist Meetings: Review Essay

Richard G. Marks

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Jewish-Buddhist Meetings: Review Essay Jewish-Buddhist Meetings Review Essay Richard G. Marks Washington and Lee University 93 The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India, by Rodger Kamenetz. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. 304 pp. \$12.00. That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist, by Sylvia Boorstein. New York: HarperCollins, 1997. 170 pp. n.p.!. The two books under review here are among several recently published that speak directly or indirectly of a new level of encounter between Jews and Buddhists. Behind these books is a contemporary cultural movement: a small but significant number of American and Israeli Jews are attracted to the sophisticated philosophies and meditation techniques of various forms of Buddhism, mainly in their Western versions. So these books are important as cultural history, but they also deserve to be studied as examples of modern religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue (though it is mainly Jews learning from Buddhists and not vice-versa), and religious philosophy. Rodger Kamenetz's *The Jew in the Lotus* (a play on the Tibetan national mantra "the Jewel in the Lotus") is a wonderful example of interreligious dialogue. It tells of the journey of eight Jewish leaders to India in 1990 to meet with the Dalai Lama and of Kamenetz's

"rediscovery of Jewish identity in Buddhist India" indicated in the book's subtitle. Kamenetz brings alive the adventure, self-questioning, and unexpected discovery that can emerge from meetings with great teachers from another religious tradition. In Kamenetz's admiring portrait, the Dalai Lama, while saying much less than 'Others include Jerusalem Moonlight: An American Zen Teacher Walks the Path of His Ancestors (1995), in which Norman Fischer reminisces over the threads connecting his life as a Zen priest to his Jewish origins; David Cooper's journal Entering the Sacred Mountain (1994), the last half of which takes place in Jerusalem and at a Buddhist retreat in Massachusetts and in which he reflects upon how Buddhism and Judaism meet through mysticism and offer opposed but complementary spiritual disciplines; and Avram Davis's book on Jewish meditation, The Way of the Flame (1996), which contains a brief story of his own meditation experience among Hindus and Buddhists in India before he turned to Jewish meditation. 94 SHOFAR Spring 1999 Vol. 17, No.3 the Jewish participants, comes across as deeply receptive and engaged, benevolent, powerful in his effect on people, and yet humble, witty, and often humorous (p. 232). The Jewish-Buddhist dialogue in the book revolves mainly around the two opposing approaches taken by Zalman Schachter and Irving Greenberg (representing, in rough labels, "Jewish Renewal" and "Modern Orthodoxy"). Schachter is the joyous boundary-crosser who engages in "total immersion dialogue" (pp. 29, 73), joining in the rituals of other religions and mixing them into Jewish worship. Speaking to the Dalai Lama, he formulates kabbalistic doctrine in the Tibetan Buddhist framework of view, path, and goal, and seeks Jewish parallels with central Buddhist concepts. For example, he presents the four worlds of the kabbalistic cosmos in a way that teaches the Buddhist concept of the fundamental interdependence of existence, and he argues that the kabbalistic concept of an emanating rather than creating God approaches the Buddhist concept of Shunyata, emptiness (pp. 72-90). Schachter assumes that Jews and Buddhists can discuss views of ultimate reality with each other and learn something important. Yitz Greenberg, on the other hand, like his teacher, Joseph Soloveitchik (and like David Novak in Jewish-Christian Dialogue), assumes that ultimate reality is beyond discussion, but feels obligated to discuss urgent ethical issues with other religious communities and work actively with them to further common practical goals (pp. 48-49). Out of an identification with the Tibetan experience of genocide and exile, Greenberg offers the Dalai Lama a traditional Jewish model of how to survive and flourish in exile. He recommends that the Tibetans democratize religious education, give current relevancy to old rituals rooted in Tibet, bring rituals into the home, and become more involved politically. In return the Dalai Lama challenges Greenberg on the same level of praxis: Why use the old rituals yearning for Jerusalem? Do Jews justify anger and...

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Washington and Lee University

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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