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Book review: Buddhist and Christian responses to the kowtow problem in China by Eric Reinders

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Eric Reinders, *Buddhist and Christian Responses to the Kowtow Problem in China*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. £65. pp. 187.

In his important work *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), Herbert Fingarette challenged the conventional understanding of the Confucian *Analects* as primarily teaching a thisworldly, practical humanism. Instead, Fingarette argues, at the core of the *Analects* is a 'magical' power exercised through ritual propriety which underlies the essence of morality. Holy ritual shapes virtuous living. A key dimension of the Confucian (and the broader Chinese) conception of ritual propriety is expressed through the act of bowing or kowtowing, the main concern of the book under review. These are acts of reverence, whether it be to one's elders and ancestors, or to a person worthy of honour such as the Son of Heaven – the Chinese emperor.

Eric Reinders' book *Buddhist and Christian Responses to the Kowtow Problem in China* engages this Chinese understanding of ritual in terms of the conflicts that two 'foreign' religions have had on the Chinese soil. After an initial chapter which provides a topographical analysis of ritual in the architecture and the layout of Buddhist temples, Reinders spends the next three chapters expositing the seventh century Chinese Buddhist understandings of obeisance and the conflicts that arose through acts of disobedience with the imperial government. Chapter 2 focuses on the painstaking writings of the monk Daoxuan on how one shows obeisance. For the monk, this includes the physical and the mental orientation of the bowing person, but moreover includes concerns around who is a worthy object to be bowed to and what happens to the subject of bowing. Chapter 3 focuses on a key imperial debate in the year 662, in which the emperor mandated monks to recognise his supremacy and bow to him, but also forbade monks from receiving homage from their parents. In conventional Chinese practices, one's parents and one's emperor are recipients of homage, but Buddhist teachings underscore the opposite since monks and nuns are never to bow to the laity. The next chapter summarises the arguments used to support the view that Buddhist monks did not need to bow to parents or to the emperor, mainly revolving around a view that monks stand in the place of spirits and the Buddha. Having a kind of supernatural influence, monks should be recipients of homage since they bring benefits to the realms of the living and of the dead.

If the first chapters of the book provide a detailed analysis of a specific event and the issues surrounding it, the last chapters of the book provide a broad overview of the implications of obeisance in a number of other situations. Chapter 5, entitled 'Christian Objections' looks at a series of engagements by Westerners with the Chinese context and the debates that arose around the question of whether or not one bows. Firstly, this chapter looks at Catholic and Protestant missionaries who provided different views on whether Chinese converts should bow and venerate/worship ancestors and Confucius. Do such acts constitute a form of blasphemous idolatry? Secondly, the chapter discusses the diplomatic mission of George Macartney who presented gifts from King George III of England to the Emperor of China, Qianlong, but refused to kowtow in full prostration as was the expected convention. Chapter 6 moves on to speak about various social scientific theories about obeisance, and Chapter 7 concludes the book by speaking about contemporary practices of disobedience such as the choice of certain Americans not to salute the flag.

Contrary to what is implied in its title, the book under review is less a comparison of Buddhist and Christian responses to the kowtow problem as it is a focused discussion on the seventh century Chinese Buddhist understandings of obeisance and the conflicts that arose during that time, with reference to other religious understandings of obeisance, such as within Christianity in China and American civil religion. Reinders does an excellent job in engaging historical primary source materials from Chinese Buddhism, and explaining very technical

writings in a lucid and engaging manner. However, as opposed to the four chapters on Buddhist obeisance and disobedience, the single chapter on 'Christian Objections' is not limited to Christianity, but includes a key non-Christian example of diplomatic exchange. The objects of obeisance are different as well: the Christian examples focus on bowing to ancestors and Confucius, whereas the non-Christian example focuses on bowing to the emperor. Moreover, the Buddhist cases are of indigenous Chinese whereas the 'Christian' cases are of Westerners. Finally, this reviewer would have appreciated an earlier chapter orienting readers to the complex historical Confucian and imperial understandings of obeisance to set the scene before the more detailed engagement that comes in the rest of the text.

Despite these concerns, Reinders' volume is meticulous, accessible, and well-researched, and will undoubtedly prove to be an important resource for academics and students of the history of Chinese Buddhism interested in the '662 debate' and, more broadly, the conflicts and the negotiations that have arisen within sangha-state relations in imperial China.

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