

The Monk and the Philosopher: A Father and Son Discuss the Meaning of Life

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The Monk and the Philosopher: A Father and Son Discuss the Meaning of Life.

By Jean-François Revel and Matthieu Ricard. Schocke, 310 pp.

Can Western secularism support a meaningful, fulfilled life? Does Buddhism offer a viable and persuasive alternative for disillusioned secularists? Such questions are the focus of this engaging book, a record of conversations between an agnostic father and his Buddhist son. The father, Jean-François Revel, was raised in a French Catholic home but later abandoned all religious belief. He is a noted political philosopher and commentator on current affairs, and a member of the Academie Française. Steeped in the Western intellectual tradition, he prides himself on continuing the Enlightenment project, looking to science and technology to improve people's lives and hoping that secular political philosophy will better society.

His son, Matthieu Ricard, given the best possible Parisian education in molecular biology under Nobel Prize-winning mentors, found his father's secularism unable to provide a key to meaning and happiness in life. He abandoned a promising scientific career to spend years studying meditation with a Tibetan lama, eventually becoming a Buddhist monk himself and an interpreter for the Dalai Lama.

Revel is usually the questioner, trying to understand his son's worldview and seeking Western analogies for various Buddhist perspectives. Because he demands experimental evidence, Revel rejects his son's notion of rebirth, or the continuity of the stream of consciousness from one life to another. He dismisses Buddhism as "metaphysical," that is, unprovable and therefore unworthy of belief. Nonetheless, Revel acknowledges the practical wisdom for living that Buddhism offers, compares it to Stoicism and to Spinoza's philosophy, and notes that in recent centuries the secular West has offered nothing to compete with it.

Revel frankly acknowledges a tragic moral and spiritual void at the heart of Western modernity. Since he sees death as the end of consciousness, he views complete fulfillment in life as impossible. Instead of a coherent vision of a meaningful life, Revel offers fragments of the Western intellectual tradition.

By contrast, Ricard speaks with a serene confidence about the meaning of life. He presents the wisdom of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as if it were "the" Buddhist perspective, and only occasionally notes that there are alternative Buddhist views. Ricard fully accepts the explanations and practices proposed by the Buddha and his later Tibetan interpreters. For him, these resolve the question of how to end suffering and live a fulfilling life.

The conversations are a helpful introduction to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and a revealing commentary on the dilemmas of secular thought. Neither partner's views change much, though Revel learns a great deal about Buddhism and gains a greater appreciation for its practical wisdom. However, his repeated efforts to find Western equivalents to Buddhist thought meet with only limited success and at times distort his reception of his son's message.