

The Buddha and the Pantocrator

Buddhist statues and Orthodox icons aren't always symmetrical. Neither are we.

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue



A statue of the Buddha in India (left). [Some rights reserved](#) by [Adityamadhav83](#). Icon of Christ the Pantocrator at Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai (right).

I'm sitting in front of my computer drinking from a knobbly, lopsided Japanese tea bowl, with two new books on either side of my keyboard. At my left hand is William Empson's *The Face of the Buddha*, edited by Buddhist scholar-monk Rupert Arrowsmith from a long-lost manuscript. At my right hand is *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography*, by the Orthodox monk-scholar Fr. Maximos Constas. The books are mirror opposites; I wish the authors could meet.

Many consider William Empson the best critic of his generation. His first book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which he began at the tender age of 22, plumbed the English poetic canon for tantalizing examples of verbal ambiguity—cases in which a word or expression yields alternative meanings, to the puzzlement of the attentive critic and

the delight of the deep reader. Empson was a figure of ambiguity himself, a profound exegete of Christian literature and a passionate anti-Christian. He loved to unearth evidence that his favorite English authors were conflicted about their faith, that the ambiguities in *Paradise Lost* were symptomatic of Milton's struggle to make a tyrannical God seem worthy of worship, that the double meaning of a word as innocuous as *buckle* revealed Gerard Manley Hopkins's mixed feelings about his Jesuit calling, that George Herbert's poem "The Sacrifice" exposed a two-faced God: vindictive judge and loving redeemer.

What had promised to be a spectacular academic career ran aground early on when a servant found contraceptives in Empson's college rooms and the young prodigy was expelled in disgrace. But the exile proved fruitful; after a stint among the Bloomsbury literati, Empson found teaching jobs in Japan and China. Here, amid the gracious statues of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, he discovered a type of ambiguity that was free from neuralgic Christian associations. Studying the Kudara Kannon in Nara's Hōryū-ji Temple, he marveled at the "puzzlement and good humour" on the left side of the face and the "birdlike innocence and wakefulness" on the right. He became fascinated to the point of obsession, crisscrossing the Asian continent in search of statues that shared the same secret: "the faces all seem to be asymmetrical in the same way, as if the artists were working on a theory." To test the theory, Empson would photograph a Buddha's face, split the photograph down the middle, reverse one side, and create two mirrored composites. The asymmetries were unmistakable. One face appeared sardonic on the right side, mystical on the left; another cunning on the right side, placid on the left; yet another "masculine and foxy" on the right side, plaintive on the left. Overall, the asymmetries created an impression of ironic wisdom coupled with compassion, and marked by a certain "coolness" toward the supernatural. "I think Buddhism much better than Christianity," Empson wrote, "because it managed to get away from the Neolithic craving to gloat over human sacrifice."

Fr. Maximos Constas has an eye for ambiguity as well. For Constas, the art of the icon requires a certain strangeness, a disruption of the symmetries that naturally please the eye, in order to transport the viewer from the image to its divine original. Nowhere is this strangeness more apparent than in the majestic sixth-century Christ Pantocrator of Sinai, an icon whose asymmetry has been the subject of endless commentary. Using the same split photograph technique, Constas discovered "a timid, slightly sad-looking young man . . . yearning for contact and love" on one side

and “a ponderous Titan, aloof to all relations” on the other. Some interpreters think that this duality is a lesson in Chalcedonian Christology, but Conostas suggests that the real subject is “the paradoxical co-existence of mercy and judgment.” The effect is intentionally disturbing: “Beholding the face of Christ, the viewer . . . judges his own likeness poor and disfigured.” Yet the ultimate message is a hopeful one, for the tender side of Christ’s face, commanding the viewer’s left visual field (which is favored, Conostas notes, by our asymmetrical brain), is what unites the composition. It seems that the iconographer instinctively understood how to portray the polarity of divine mercy and judgment in such a way that mercy would be undimmed.

Empson never wholly converted to Buddhism; he returned to England at intervals, taught at various universities in the United States and the U.K., and wrapped up a brilliant, unruly, bohemian life with a knighthood and an honorary fellowship from the college that expelled him. Conostas (now the Very Rev. Archimandrite Maximos Conostas) is at once an American academic and an Athonite monk. The two authors, one a promiscuous literary adventurer, the other a scholarly ascetic, have made a wonderful discovery. But where Conostas sees a saving paradox, Empson sees a damnable contradiction. Where Empson sees a vindictive God, Conostas sees a loving God in whom “Mercy and Truth have met together . . . Righteousness and Bliss have kissed.” It’s a mystery—here are two intelligent bipeds, symmetrical on the outside and asymmetrical, as we all are, on the inside, who have so much to teach us about the aesthetics of ambiguity; and yet they fall on opposite sides of the great divide.

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