

Chapter 13
The Moral Quest of Edward Conze
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Chapter Summary

Edward Conze was born of German parents in Britain while his father was German vice-consul there. Throughout his life he was fascinated by the supernatural and occult powers. He grew up in the heyday of the German Empire strongly influenced by family, school, and Wandervoegel (a Boy Scout-type group some consider the cradle of National Socialism) and imbibed a rabid anti-Semitism and an ultrapatriotic Pan-Germanic militarism. However, his deepseated aversion to killing, inherited from his mother's family, gave him a natural predisposition toward Buddhism, which he first encountered when he was thirteen through a book in his father's library.

Conze studied law at Tübingen, philology at Heidelberg, and philosophy at Kiel where he encountered the ideas of the French writer René Guénon who advocated an idea that embraced all religious traditions through the belief that they share common esoteric features. Conze then went to Cologne, which had one of the best philosophy faculties in Germany; there he came under the influence of Max Scheler in earning his doctorate. Moving on to Bonn, he began to learn Sanskrit, then headed for Hamburg where he hoped to earn a second doctorate but was forced to flee to England in early 1933 because of the Nazi threat. Like many elite Germans, the entire Conze family was solidly anti-Nazi. Conze had joined the German Communist Party in 1928 in opposition to Nazism which made his flight to England advisable.

Conze first encountered Marxism during his school years. During that time he also visited a "working class" home of a friend where he was shocked by the barrenness he saw. He became a full-fledged Marxist until fleeing to England and leaving the party in 1933, when he began to view Marxism as "a surrogate for religion." Marxist economics, he realized, simply did not work.

Withdrawing from society in Britain, he practiced meditation for a time and almost killed himself through rigorous asceticism before making a re-entry into society to become a sectional lecturer at various universities. After the end of World War II, he held several temporary university positions in Britain and America.

In England, Conze came to see himself as bogged down in hopeless mire and returned to Buddhism. From about 1938 he devoted his energies to the study of the Mahayana, developed an interest in astrology, and claimed to have developed various psychic faculties as a result of his years of meditation. Although he despised what he called "verbalized religion," he continued to be profoundly attracted to Christianity, noting that many Western Buddhists eventually became Christians because most of the former, he opined, "are at heart disappointed Christians."

The key to Conze's spiritual development appears to lie in his disillusionment with his parents' generation, the society in which he lived, and the actions of supposedly Christian leaders. As a young man he came to see the Protestant clergy as "slavish lackeys of the bourgeoisie and other militarists" and was horrified by pictures he found in his father's diaries of war's brutality. His horror was compounded upon evidence that such brutality was magnified thousands of times during the Second

World War and perpetrated by both sides. He once wrote: "the official history of the politics of the Thirties is bathed in moral indignation."

These experiences confirmed his devout pacifist convictions and, given the numerous indications of hypocrisy he encountered, he advanced that modern religion had lost its true root in spirituality. He protested that if Christians and other spiritual people did not take up issues like the morality of war and such things as mass expulsions, rape, and area bombing, they would eventually be discovered by atheists and used to destroy Christianity and all true religion on the basis that religion turns a blind eye to suffering.

Based on the author's firsthand experience as a student of Conze at Lancaster in the late 1960s, Hexham learned that Conze considered Buddhism a full-blooded religion wherein the supernatural, as discovered via such means as horoscopes and psychic events, plays a significant role. Conze did not like established churches and modern Christians or trendy clergy whom he considered hypocritical. To him, most of the Christianity preached in churches was nonsense, because it stripped the message of Jesus of its supernatural elements. He argued that by adapting their faith to modern science, most Christians were not Christians at all but agnostics in disguise.

He castigated modern expressions of Christianity as advanced by theologians like Rudolph Bultmann, Paul Tillich, and John Robinson, yet respected believing Christians and made time for students who belonged to groups like InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. For Conze, the great men were Aristotle, Marx, then the Buddha, closely followed by Jesus and various Christian writers like Thomas à Kempis, Thomas Aquinas, Leo Tolstoy, and the British journalist F. A. Voigt.

Conze's attack on Christian churches was surpassed by his virulent indictments of modern Buddhists like the controversial British lawyer Christmas Humphries. For Conze, men like Humphries were disguised agnostics who misused Buddhism to promote a ritualistic form of agnosticism with all the trappings of religion but none of its content. Many other Western Buddhist leaders were problematic for Conze because he knew many of them had embraced Fascism or National Socialism in the 1920s and 1930s.

Apart from his ideological enemies, Conze despised what he called "sectarian Buddhism" because it attracted "rich women" who accepted the doctrine of reincarnation because it enabled them to claim that in a past life they were Egyptian princesses. Such a misuse of reincarnation, he argued, was embraced by the rich because it freed them "from any sense of social guilt" by convincing them "that they deserve their money and privileges as a reward for merit gained in the past."

Conze's work laid the foundation for the development of Buddhist studies in the West, although there is evidence that he remained curiously fascinated with aspects of Christianity. In his Memoirs he summarized his disenchantment with proponents of religion, including Buddhism: "how many of the holy lamas of my expectations have turned out to be gun toting whisky-swilling philanderers!"