Buddha and Christ as Mediations of Ultimate Reality: A Mahayana Buddhist Perspective

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Can the Buddha and the Christ both be viewed as mediations of transcendent reality from a Buddhist perspective? And if so, how? These are the questions I have been asked to address.

My response should be contextualized. I am a scholar trained in Buddhist Studies by the Western academy and a Buddhist trained in Tibetan traditions that are Mahayana and Tantric. Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes the ultimate undividedness of samsara (conditioned life) and nirvana (the unconditioned dimension of freedom). Tantric Buddhism enacts that basic view in vivid forms of ritual and meditation. I first met and fell in love with Buddhism during my studies in college. After serving in the U.S. Peace Corps in Asia I traveled to Nepal and India in 1978 to meet, study and practice with Tibetan Lamas. I have continued my study and practice of Tibetan (Mahayana, Tantric) Buddhism under the guidance of those and other Lamas ever since, a program which has included daily practice of Buddhist meditation and ritual for the past twenty-six years.

1. Introduction

In some of his recent writings, theologian Perry Schmidt-Leukel begins his analysis of Buddha and Christ as mediators of the transcendent by focusing upon the historical persons of Gautama and Jesus, understanding each as a human being who became so receptive to the liberating power of transcendent reality as to become the “visible face” of the transcendent (the face of God or the face of nirvana). I must agree with Schmidt-Leukel that Buddhists revere Gotama Buddha not just as someone who had especially profound thoughts about reality, but as someone who became perfectly

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1 This article owes much to deeply thoughtful input I received this past year from several colleagues to whom I am immensely indebted: Fr. Michael Himes, Mark Heim, Francis Clooney, S.J., Catherine Cornille, Pheme Perkins, Richard Kearney, Robert Magliola, Luis Roy, O.P., Thomas Cattoi, Lisa Cahill, Fr. Robert Imbelli, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, John Riches. Any errors here are, of course, just my own.

transparent to the unconditioned reality, nirvana, so as to fully embody its qualities of unconditioned freedom, all-inclusive love and penetrating insight and to disclose the means for many others to realize them. My response, then, to the first opening question of this essay is yes, Buddhists have viewed the Buddha as a mediation of the transcendent, unconditioned reality, nirvana.

Yet if Christianity and Buddhism are similar in viewing their central figures as the face of ultimate reality, they have historically differed in their understanding of the soteriological roles of those figures, their roles in saving or liberating persons. Many Christian theologians have understood Christ to be the one who redeems persons from the crushing burden of their sin, a burden possessed by real, sinful selves whose disordered emotions and sufferings express their sinful condition. This seems to contrast sharply with how Buddhists have understood the Buddha’s soteriological role: the one who provides means for persons to discover the lack of intrinsic reality of any such self, thereby undercutting the root of self-grasping that underlies personal suffering. To put it another way, Christ’s passion and death has been understood as an atonement for the sins of persons, which takes the burden of sin from the self. But the Buddha’s activity is understood to trigger a recognition in persons that there is no such self to grasp or defend, hence no real basis of “sin.”

To further explore these questions, I want to focus particularly on practices of Christian and Buddhist communities that bring people into an experience of Christ or Buddha as the living presence and power of ultimate reality, not just as a cherished figure remembered from a distant past, but as a continuing presence and liberating power in the present -- in Christian terms, communing with God in Christ and through that with God’s creatures; in Buddhist terms, communing through perfect forms of Buddhahood (Rupakaya) with the transcendent qualities and powers of Buddhahood (Dharmakaya) and thereby with all beings.

2. A Mahayana Buddhist’s experience of Christian Communion

Since I began teaching Buddhism and Comparative Theology at Boston College, which is a Jesuit Catholic University, I have often attended weekly Eucharist, the liturgical enactment of communion with God in Christ. I have deeply appreciated elements of the Christian rite in their fundamental structure and power, not in spite of my Mahayana Buddhist training but apparently because of that training – seemingly sensitized to Christian liturgy by decades of daily practice of Buddhist liturgies which
invoke the liberating power of Buddhahood. It seems that the patterns of religious receptivity in me formed by such daily Buddhist practice meet, at least to some degree, the patterns of Christian liturgy: prayer, repentance, blessing, listening receptively to revealed truths, opening to receive the purifying and transforming power of divine life, being offered into deep communion with transcendent reality (“God”) through its perfect embodiment (“Christ”) in utmost receptivity and trust, the inwardly liberating power of which (“Spirit”) links one’s heart to many others (like “one body”) in unconditional love (“agape”).

My inner response, prepared it appears at least in part by Buddhist practice, has been two-fold. On the one hand, there is a sense of vivid recognition and appreciation of analogous patterns; and on the other hand, perhaps paradoxically, a wonder at so much difference. First, I found the Christian rite inspiring in ways similar to my inspiration from Buddhist liturgies, which triggered reflections back upon Buddhism regarding analogous forms whose implicit elements of communion and ecclesiology, recognizable in light of the Christian communion ritual, have not received as much theological development in Buddhist commentaries.3

3 “Communion” here, is broadly understood as one’s sharing in the life of the other, e.g. sharing in the life of God and God’s sharing in your very life, or becoming receptive to the qualities, energies and liberating powers of Buddhahood and participating in them. Implicit elements of communion and ecclesiology in Buddhist traditions to which I refer include:

a) Meditation practices from early Buddhism which bring the Buddha vividly to mind to experience the inspiration and power of his qualities and presence (buddhanusmrti). See Trainor, Kevin, Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 184-187. As explained later in this article, such practices are further developed in Mahayana Buddhist liturgies, where Buddhist devotees commune with the qualities, energies and radiant blessings of Buddhahood as a transforming and liberating power. See section 5 below; also: Makransky, John: “Mahayana Buddhist Ritual and Ethical Activity in the World” in Buddhist-Christian Studies Vol. 20 (2000) 54-59, and Makransky, John: “Tathagata” in the new revised Encyclopedia of Religion edited by Robert Buswell (New York: Macmillan, forthcoming).

b) The perfected form of Buddhahood, referred to as “Sambhoga-kaya” in the three buddha-body scheme of Mahayana treatises, is understood not just as the fruition of an individual bodhisattva’s path to enlightenment, but also as a “body of communion in the joy of the Dharma,” a supramundane buddha form communing with advanced bodhisattvas in the Dharma qualities of boundless love, gnosis and joy which spread out to all beings. This is pictured in Buddha realm scenes of Mahayana scriptures and in Asian Buddhist art, contributing to the development of the tantric mandala. See Makransky, John, Buddhahood Embodied. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), chapters
On the other hand, I also experienced much wonder at difference. The Christian rite is embedded in a Christian narrative radically different from the Buddhist -- creation of all by God, renewal of a prior historical covenant of a chosen people, a unique incarnation of God among that people as Messiah (Christ), his passion, death and resurrection redeeming humankind from its burden of sin. And that narrative, in turn, frames much difference in doctrinal understanding: human beings irredicibly distinct from God in their communion with him (versus complete oneness with Buddhahood in non-dual gnosis), Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrection unleashing the power that redeems and frees (versus the Buddha’s pointing persons to the inmost nature of their own experience, the liberating power of aware emptiness), the Spirit of God as active in and through Christian community (versus the inner powers of enlightened resolve, karmic accumulation and Buddha nature as what energizes the community of bodhisattvas). It was as if my formation in Tibetan Buddhism conformed me both to recognize a real liberating power within Christian communion and to be challenged by its radically different understanding of the sources and implications of that power.

This returns us to the other key question I was asked to address. Is Christ a mediation of the transcendent from a Buddhist perspective? My formation in Tibetan Mahayana Buddhist practice seems to have opened

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channels of receptivity to the Christian rite and its Trinitarian power, to recognize some of its liberating functions, and to receive light from it back upon my own tradition in unexpected ways, all of which would seem to confirm, at least anecdotally, that the Christ of Christian communion indeed functions somehow as a mediation of ultimate reality as I, a Buddhist, understand that reality. But if this is so, given the differences in narrative frame and doctrinal understanding, how am I, a Mahayana Buddhist to make sense of that?

3. Christian Understanding of Communion as Liberating power of the Transcendent

In the liturgy of Eucharistic communion, as understood not only in Catholic and Orthodox traditions but also by Luther and Calvin, participants are not merely reminiscing about the historical Jesus long gone, but are entered into communion with the transcendent God through the living presence and power of Christ in the Spirit, which flows out into communion with creatures, drawing them into the Body of Christ. This is what many Christians have understood, in part, as their ongoing encounter with the “resurrected Christ,” not merely with the historical Jesus.  

Doctrines of atonement for sin, redemption through Christ’s passion, death and resurrection were formulated in part to account for the experience of such liberating power in communal Christian practice. Trinitarian doctrine was the product of centuries of struggle by Christian thinkers to discern the proper doctrinal form for their communal experience of the ever-present liberating power of Christ as mediation of God. Prof. Schmidt-Leukel, drawing upon Roger Haight, has noted that for early Christians, Christ functioned as symbol through which God, the symbolized, became

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vividly present.\(^5\) This is precisely the sacramental principle which Christian liturgy re-enacts.

Communing with the ultimate, unconditioned reality ("God") by means of its perfect incarnation or form ("Christ") through an inner liberating power (of "Spirit") which re-creates or restores one’s inmost being in the image of the ultimate -- with qualities of unconditional love, joy, patience, self-control, spiritual wisdom, unleashing a liberating power of love and goodness that radiates to many other beings -- from a Mahayana Buddhist perspective the basic structure of such Trinitarian communion and its liberating power is recognizable, although the explanation for what it is and how it functions is different.

4. How Buddhist Analogues to Christian Communion Developed

Numerous scriptural accounts depict Gotama Buddha devotedly as a figure of tremendous liberating power. There is the sense, in such accounts, that the Buddha had such deep knowledge of the inmost psyches’ of persons, and such liberating power in his compassionate relation to them, that even a brief communication, gesture or merely his presence could trigger deep states of reverence or stages of awakening among those who were receptive to him. Each bodily gesture, look, and word, it is believed, expressed the liberating power of his mind, his direct awareness of the unconditioned reality, nirvana. The liberating power of his mind, the nirvanic realization which came to be known as “Dharmakaya” (body of Dharma attainment) replete with qualities of all-inclusive love, compassion, spiritual insight and power, communicated itself through his physical body, “Rupakaya,” by gesture, word, and the inspiring energy of his physical presence.\(^6\)


The ritual and meditation practices of Buddhist communities after Gotama’s physical passing maintained and developed this paradigm of relating to the Buddha as the embodied power (Rupakaya) of transcendent awareness (Dharmakaya). Special symbolic forms that stand in for the Buddha’s physical body (Rupakaya) have provided ways for laity and monastics to continue to offer themselves ritually to the liberating power of the Buddha’s nirvanic attainment (Dharmakaya). At reliquary mounds with relics of the Buddha inside (stupas), devotees have reenacted the offering of themselves to the Buddha and his teaching (Dharma) through the ritual forms reported in early Buddhist scriptures: circumambulating and bowing to the stupa reliquary (as Gotama’s followers had reverenced him), offering beautiful flowers, incense, lamps, foods (as they had offered to Gotama), praying for fulfillment of mundane and supramundane needs, receiving inspiration and energy from the reliquary whose consecrated relics (representing Rupakaya) are believed to be saturated with the power of the Buddha’s transcendent attainment (Dharmakaya). In Buddhist chronicles there are stories of devotees whose practice at such reliquary mounds has led to spontaneous visions of the Buddha or radiant blessings which evoke in them deep tranquility, bliss, faith, or spontaneous realization of stages of the Buddha’s path. Thus the liberating power of Dharmakaya, Buddha’s nirvana, is mediated ritually through his Rupakaya to those caught in the bondage and suffering of samsara, so beings in this world may continue to encounter the transcendent, liberating dimension of reality through its perfect form.7

Buddhanusmrti (“recalling the Buddha”) meditation has been an important Buddhist practice from early Buddhism to the present. It has involved bringing the Buddha to mind, vividly envisioning the beauty of his form together with his qualities of all-pervading love, compassion, penetrating wisdom and spiritual power, bathing in those qualities, and being offered up to them. Meditators accomplished in this practice were said to experience the Buddha’s qualities and powers as vividly present in their world, freeing them from anxiety, taking their minds toward the Buddha plane of awareness, and transforming them into holy beings worthy of reverence.8 Such practices also supported the emergence of images and

8 Harrison, Paul, “Commemoration and Identification in Buddhanusmrti.” In In the Mirror of Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism ed. by Janet Gyatso (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); Williams, Paul, Mahayana
statues of the Buddha which functioned as Rupakaya, a real manifestation of Buddhahood in the world, when they were ritually consecrated with the presence and power of the Buddha’s Dharmakaya, the power of his nirvanic awareness. 

Conservative schools like the Theravada and Sarvastivada systematically formulated nirvana and samsara as a duality in their Abhidharma literature. To fully attain nirvana, the unconditioned dimension of freedom, was to cut the defiled roots of conditioned life, of samsara, ultimately to leave conditioned existence behind altogether. One who has attained nirvana, it was said, had cut the causes for further rebirth, so that physical death puts a final end to his conditioned mind and body, an end to any further participation in conditioned life. But according to what many Buddhist communities were practicing, ritually, meditatively, a Buddha’s nirvana was being engaged not just as a Buddha’s cessation of defilement and consequent freedom from the world but also as his manifestation of liberating power for and in the world. This seems to have been given earliest doctrinal expression in some of the Mahasanghika school’s doctrines of Buddhahood, and was much further developed in Mahayana scriptures and treatises of early centuries CE.

Like early Christians struggling to give doctrinal formulation to their communal experience of the liberating power of Christ, which eventually developed into Trinitarian form, Mahayana Buddhists struggled to reformulate the relationship of nirvana and samsara in line with their communal experience that the liberating power of a Buddha’s nirvanic attainment manifests within samsara in special symbolic forms and through means of practice passed down by tradition. The doctrinal reformulation of the nirvana of the Buddhas as an unending, all-pervasive, liberating power in the world took diverse expression in Mahayana scriptures and treatises of the first to sixth century CE (as in the Lotus sutra quoted by Prof. Schmidt-

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Leukel), gradually coalescing around the concept of the Buddhas’ unrestricted or active nirvana” (aparisttita-nirvana): a Buddha’s nirvana understood as an attainment of freedom so profound that it triggers the liberation of countless other beings through inconceivable radiant blessings, manifestations and activities.\textsuperscript{12}

5. Mahayana Practices that Inform Buddhist Communion with Buddhahood as a Liberating Power in the World

This developing paradigm of a Buddha’s nirvana as a vast liberating power within samsara was further informed by other Mahayana practices and developing doctrines described below.

Buddhist Practices of Transcendental Wisdom that Reveal the Nirvanic Nature of Samsara in its Emptiness.

The Mahayana Perfection of Wisdom scriptures (Prajna-paramita sutras) declared all phenomena to be empty of substantial, independent existence (svabhava-sunya), hence illusory. When bodhisattvas on the path to Buddhahood attain direct knowledge of that truth, they realize that all things in their intrinsic emptiness have always been in nirvanic peace, that samsara is ultimately undivided from nirvana, that samsara itself can be re-engaged as a field of enlightened freedom and activity. The awareness that knows emptiness deconstructs the apparent boundary between sacred and profane, nirvana and samsara. Everything is intrinsically sacred, “sacramental,” each aspect of experience, each encounter.\textsuperscript{13}

Buddhist Practices of Love and Compassion that Culminate in Unending Buddha Activity:

Awareness of emptiness also deconstructs the thought-made wall of seeming difference in value between self and others to reveal an ultimate sameness, supporting an unconditional love and compassion that empathizes with other beings as one's self. Unconditional compassion, in turn, opens

\textsuperscript{12} Makransky, Buddhahood Embodied, pp. 319-368.
and empowers the mind to let go into the groundlessness of the empty, radiant nature of being.\textsuperscript{14} Instead of the “glue” of self-grasping that binds beings to rebirth in the conditioned world, Buddhahood is bound to the world with the ‘glue’ of compassion for beings, as the spontaneous, energetic expression of the wisdom of emptiness. All this reinforces the reformulation of a Buddha’s nirvana as unrestricted, active, energetic, manifesting in numerous forms the liberating power of nirvana as the transcendent realization of compassion-wisdom.

\textbf{Devotion to the Buddhas in Communion with their Qualities, Energies and Powers}

In several Mahayana scriptures, to begin to recognize the empty, insubstantial nature of things is to deepen one’s faith in the Buddhas and to open one’s perception to the luminous realms of their radiant activity (pure Buddha realms) which had previously been obscured by clinging to things as substantial. Thus, to realize emptiness is not merely to stop one’s existence, but to open up supernal, radiant dimensions of existence that had previously been obscured, to commune with the Buddhas there in deep faith. Some scriptures emphasize the radiant, pure Buddha realms as abodes of rebirth for beings who cultivate faith in celestial Buddhas, such as Amitabha or Akshobhya. Other scriptures develop synergies between devotional forms of practice, visionary experience of celestial Buddhas and wisdom of emptiness. In these texts, devotional practice offering oneself in service to the Buddhas releases self-grasping to allow a deeper knowledge of emptiness, which opens into visionary experience of Buddhas and communion with their radiant qualities, energies and powers, leading to even stronger reverence and devotion, expressed in further service and offering, leading to deeper experience of emptiness, opening into further visionary experience and communion with the Buddhas, and so on.\textsuperscript{15}

All such Buddhist practices of wisdom, love, and devotional communion were given unified liturgical forms in Mahayana Buddhist


scriptures from the second century CE, forms of ritual meditation practice that informed developing practices of East Asia and Tibet. An especially influential one is the seven-branch offering and purification liturgy found in the Avatamsaka scripture which inscribes the Buddhist devotee in the visionary world of the scripture, invoking the presence and power of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in liturgical meditation practice, disclosing the devotee’s world as a theatre of divine Buddha activity through ritual forms of reverence, offering, repentance, gratitude, prayerful requests, and reception of radiant, purifying blessing that opens the devotee’s heart and mind to the love, compassion, wisdom, and liberating power of the Buddhas so as to participate in their divine activity through works of service to spiritual preceptors and beings and through dedication of spiritual power (merit, punya) for universal enlightenment. 16

Through such ritual-meditation forms, Buddhists have communed with the transcendent powers and energies of transcendent Buddhahood (Dharmakaya) through perfect forms of it (Rupakaya), so as to relinquish the reifying patterns of mind that hide the radiant emptiness of things and to open their receptivity to qualities of Buddhaness awakening within themselves, qualities which include unconditional love, compassion, joy, penetrating wisdom, and liberating power, envisioned and sensed as radiating out to all other beings.

Such practices informed the buddhalogical doctrine of the Three Buddha bodies (kayas) mentioned by Prof. Schmidt-Leukel in his article, the Bodhisattva devotee communing with Dharmakaya through its perfect, radiant form, Sambhogakaya, located in the center of a circle of communion that radiates out liberating energy and power to beings in clouds of radiant blessing, divine activities and manifestations (Nirmanakaya). 17

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6. How, from a Mahayana Buddhist viewpoint, Might Christ be Understood as a Mediation of Ultimate Reality?

Theologian Mark Heim has developed a theology of religions from a Christian point of view that can be reinterpreted from a Mahayana Buddhist perspective so as to provide one way to address that question. Theology of religions is the attempt from a standpoint within one religious tradition to understand the relation between different claims of salvific truth among diverse religious traditions. In his recent book, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, Professor Heim develops a Christian, Trinitarian theology of religions which he characterizes as a theology of “multiple religious ends.” There he argues that persons of the great religious traditions, through different religious beliefs and practices, do not accomplish just the same religious end, but they do accomplish real ends which are related to each other within the complex ultimate reality which all such religions engage (the Trinitarian God).\(^{18}\)

Heim constructs his Christian theology of religions in opposition to two common options, theological exclusivism and theological pluralism. Theological exclusivism (such as that of Karl Barth) has argued that one tradition is salvifically true, the others false, ignoring the spiritual qualities embodied by persons formed by other traditions. Since other religious traditions are merely human constructs, this logic goes, but one’s own tradition is based in the actual revelation of the ultimate reality (God), the others could not possibly realize the salvific goal which one’s own tradition makes possible. In this way, differences of belief and practice are given central emphasis in an exclusionary way. Theological pluralism (such as that of John Hick) on the other hand, argues for the power of the one ultimate reality behind all great religions to save all persons, downplaying the specifics of difference in belief and practice. Since the great religions engage the same ultimate reality which they refer to by different names, it is argued, then in spite of their differences in belief and practice they should all be able to lead people to the same basic realization of that ultimate reality, the same basic salvific goal.

Both, Heim argues, share a mistaken assumption, that the ultimate reality posited by religions is uncomplex. Given that assumption, if specific differences of religious belief and practice are emphasized, since the uncomplex ultimate reality presumably mirrors just one such set of beliefs

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and practices, only one tradition could be salvifically true while the other traditions would simply be false (the exclusivism of Barth). Or, given the same assumption of an uncomplex ultimate reality with an emphasis on its universal salvific power, then the differing religions may all be understood to lead to the same salvific end through differing means of belief and practice whose specific differences do not finally matter (theological pluralism of Hick).

But, Heim argues, the ultimate reality to which the great religions refer, which he understands as the Trinitarian God posited by Christianity, is *complex*, with varied dimensions for human encounter. Hence, its complexity is mirrored in the diversity of means through which it is encountered, which results in different kinds of realization of its qualities, the attainment of different religious ends, by persons of different traditions. Since persons of different traditions are genuinely encountering God, and opening to or realizing qualities of God, they have much to learn from each other about the same God. But because their differing beliefs and practices differently mediate their encounters with God, which effects the depth and fullness of their realization of God’s salvific qualities, the differences of belief and practice really do matter for religious fulfillsments attained, and there is a genuine basis for friendly argument between traditions about the importance of particular beliefs and practices and about their proper integration.19

Since, Heim argues, neither theological exclusivism nor pluralism sufficiently uphold the complexity of ultimate reality, neither adequately accounts for the diversity of authentic religious realizations of it. As a Christian theologian, he argues that God as Trinity represents a complex ultimate reality to which persons formed by practices of different religious traditions diversely relate themselves. From a Christian perspective, then, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims are engaging the Trinitarian God that Christians engage in its complexity; but each intensively focuses uniquely upon particular aspects of that complex reality in ways that tend to delimit or exclude other aspects, resulting in realizations of its liberating qualities that differ from fullest Christian realization, “salvation” as fullest communion with God. For Heim, Christian Trinitarian communion with God and other creatures in Christ represents the fullest integration of all aspects of engagement with the complex ultimate reality of God, while he acknowledges that a Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim might more deeply realize other aspects of relation to that reality, and therefore argue for a different

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integration as fullest. Indeed, that is part of what I, as a Buddhist, will argue below.

Here are some of the virtues of Heim’s model for my purpose here:
1) It motivates strong interest to learn from other traditions as other means of connection to the same liberating truth cherished by one’s own tradition -- a basis for reverencing others’ encounters with liberating truth on a par with one’s own. That is to be preferred over an interest just in learning about other traditions as human constructs divorced from the revealed truth of one’s own tradition, the weakness of exclusivism. 2) Each tradition places great importance on its distinctive understandings and practices as constituting what it means by “salvation” or “liberation” (in Christianity, to be redeemed from sin by God, or, in Buddhism, to be freed from bondage to delusion and karma by one’s own direct realization of emptiness). Heim’s model permits us to acknowledge and learn from differences in each other’s understandings of salvific principles, so that specific understandings and practices most important to each tradition are permitted to retain their importance within a dialogue of mutual learning. This avoids the weakness of theological pluralism: the difficulty it has in acknowledging how specific differences in belief and practice may make a real difference in religious ends attained.

Heim’s model, if newly interpreted to fit a Mahayana Buddhist perspective, provides a powerful way to answer the question I posed at the start of this article -- why should my trainings in Buddhist practices have opened channels of receptivity, appreciation, inspiration from the Christian communion ritual, to recognize some of its liberating functions, and to receive light from it back upon my own tradition in unexpected ways, even amidst so much difference?

This would make eminent sense if the fundamental structure of communion engaged by Christians and Buddhists is part of the structure of reality as such, both traditions practicing means of communion given by the transcendent and immanent ultimate reality which make persons receptive to the liberating power of that reality. From a Mahayana Buddhist viewpoint, that reality is the empty, radiant, all-pervasive, undivided ground of being (referred to as “Dharmadhatus” and “Dharmakaya”), the empty, lucid, intrinsic goodness of all experience (referred to as “Buddha-nature”), possessed of limitless capacity for manifestation of divine qualities, forms, symbols and liberating powers.

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Heim as a Christian theologian isolated three dimensions of the Trinitarian God that he understands diverse religions to engage: the “impersonal,” “iconic” and “communion” dimensions. The “impersonal” is the transcendent mystery of God beyond human conception, the “iconic” involves surrender to God as other, and “communion” involves sharing in the life God. From a Christian perspective, Heim argues, Buddhists and Advaitan Hindus tend to focus intensively (and more exclusively) on the first dimension (the transcendent mystery), Muslims on the second (submission to God as other), while Christians integrate all three dimensions most fully within the third dimension (communion with God in Christ). In that characterization, Heim does not pay much attention to Mahayana Buddhist practices of communion such as those described in the previous section.²¹

Here is how I would reinterpret Heim’s model of truth among religions so as to inscribe it within a Mahayana Buddhist view. Suffering beings, fearing the impermanent, empty, ungraspable, nature of their experience become caught in ego-grasping patterns of thought and reaction that seek to create the impression of a concrete, autonomous, and unassailable self and world over against the tide of change, clinging to what appears to support that sense of self, fearing and hating what appears to undercut it, thus generating deluded emotions of self-grasping, aversion, and fear that drive individual and social suffering.

These, the Buddha taught, are the inmost causes of suffering which chain the minds of beings to their own self-grasping projections, shutting out the qualities and liberating powers to be found in the empty, radiant ground of being (Dharmadhatu, Dharmakaya). Mahayana Buddhist practices, through patterns revealed by the Buddhas, provide means to release the mind from those shackles, to open persons to the empty, radiant ground of being through three basic kinds of practice: practices of wisdom, love, and devotional communion. Practices of wisdom are means to look into and sense directly the lack of independent reality of subjects and objects of thought, to recognize vividly their thought-madness, emptiness, so the deepest patterns of self-grasping bondage may be released. Practices of boundless love and compassion open the mind to the unconditional, all-inclusive transcendent power of goodness beyond self-centered patterns of thought and grasping. Practices of devotion to and communion with the qualities of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas elicit a surrender of ego patterns to the unconditioned essence of experience, the ground of liberating Buddha

²¹ Heim, Depth of the Riches, 174-197
qualities, revealing it as one’s own inmost nature and capacity of enlightened goodness and freedom (Buddha nature).

From this Buddhist perspective, Christian practice can enter Christians into communion with the unconditioned reality and its liberating powers in faith through what they cherish as its perfect embodiment (“Christ”), so as to deeply relax their patterns of self-grasping and be opened to qualities of Buddhahood in the empty, radiant ground of being: qualities of unconditional love, compassion, and liberating power which radiate out to many others. From this perspective, such Christian practice would represent a skillful means to be harmonized to the empty ground of being and its liberating qualities in cultures where the Buddha’s teaching of emptiness is little known or too challenging yet for many to accept, but practices of unconditional love and devotional communion may be deeply engaged. Indeed, Christian practice engages Dharmakaya so intensively in communion through Christ as Rupakaya that much light can shine back upon Buddhist thought and practice from Christian reflection upon Christology, communion, and ecclesiology. 22

Continuing to employ Heim’s model of diverse religious realizations from a Buddhist perspective -- Christian traditions, then, tend to focus intensively on the love and communion aspects of participation in the ultimate reality. Mahayana traditions that I have received, while profoundly integrating those two aspects, focus more intensively than Christian traditions upon the wisdom-emptiness aspect as the center of soteriology, the very source of liberation. “Emptiness” (sunyata) here is not understood merely as an emptying of self-concern, nor as an intellectual belief in the inconceivability of God, nor as an apophatic union with God attained by rare persons whose special vocation is mysticism. Rather, emptiness is here understood in Buddhist terms as the insubstantial nature of all aspects of ordinary experience, to be realized in non-dual awareness at some point by all who have entered into the Bodhisattva path of enlightenment. This non-dual encounter with the empty nature of reality has been introduced to many followers of the Buddha through special means of guidance and practice from age to age, distinctively informing Buddhist understanding of love and communion earlier described.

From this Buddhist point of view, then, the ultimate reality that Christians engage in practice as “God” is what Buddhists engage in practice as “Dharmakaya,” differently understood. But, because Buddhists and

22 See footnote 3 above for examples of light upon Buddhism from Christian praxis of communion and ecclesiology.
Christians are taught to focus most intensively upon different aspects of that reality, they would tend to realize different qualities of it more fully, or realize similar qualities of it differently.

For example, Buddhism teaches that bondage is created by patterns of thought that construct, reify and cling to an autonomous sense of “self” and “other.” Therefore, it is taught, to cut the deepest layers of such bondage and fully purify the mind, one must realize the emptiness of all such patterns within a stable non-dual, non-conceptual awareness. Furthermore, Indo-Tibetan and Zen traditions explain, although the Buddhas can inspire and guide the awakening of beings, Buddhas can not give persons a stable non-dual awareness of emptiness just through grace. For that reason, these traditions have exerted much effort to provide clear direction to enter practitioners into the wisdom of emptiness and non-duality in their own experience.  

Buddhist teachings of unconditional compassion and love, in turn, are profoundly informed by that specific kind of wisdom. Deep Buddhist compassion, it is taught, is compassion elicited by the wisdom of emptiness that understands how beings suffer through bondage to a duality that is created by their own minds. Deepest compassion is non-dual awareness suffused with a tone of compassion that has transcended even the distinction of “self” and “other.”

In Christian understanding, because the ultimate reality (which I call “Dharmakaya” and Christians call “God”) is differently understood, and also the human problem, so is the posited solution and praxis. The problem is sin, a broken relationship with God, which is to be redeemed mainly through the power of God’s grace in communion. Restored relationship as a salvific goal implies distinctions which define Trinitarian relationships within God and between God, oneself and other creatures. A sign of restored relationship is deep participation in God’s unconditional love (agape) that

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pervades all creation. But such love is a love within relatedness, mirroring the relations of the Trinity, involving distinctions between poles of relatedness that are irreducible, not non-dual.25

Such love, as an unconditional, all-inclusive willing of the good of all creation seems similar to the all-inclusive and unconditional love and compassion of Mahayana Buddhism. But it would also be different -- Christians such as Heim would not extrapolate the deepest realization of unconditional love or compassion to complete non-duality. Indeed they might have compassion for Buddhists who do so, for losing relationship with God and other creatures in their deconstruction of relations as ultimately empty. Mahayana Buddhists, on the other hand, might have compassion for Christians for grasping to duality without realizing how their own minds have reified it, holding themselves back from a fuller realization of the empty nature of reality (i.e. holding back from fuller realization of Dharmakaya).

Similarly, Mahayana and Tantric devotional communion with the Buddhas ultimately leads to dissolution even of the seemingly separate poles of “self” and “Buddha” within a non-dual realization of Dharmakaya beyond such distinctions. Indeed, that non-dual realization is understood as the deepest form of devotion in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.26 Christian theologians such as Heim, on the other hand, identify communion with God within relationship as the essence of salvation, maintaining the separate poles of that relationship as fundamental for salvation and irreducible.27

In Mahayana traditions of India and Tibet and in Zen traditions of East Asia, the power of inmost liberation is not something understood to come supernaturally from beyond the natural order of persons and their experience as many Christian theologians have argued. Rather, inmost freedom and unconditional goodness are found in the very essence of ordinary experience. In addition, Christian understanding of God as omnipotent creator makes God’s grace (through Christ) the salvific power that redeems and saves humans from sin. But although the Buddhas guide, bless, inspire, and quicken receptive persons in innumerable ways, they are not understood by Buddhists to be omnipotent, which means that persons must realize emptiness in the fullest way through some specific procedure of

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27 Heim, *Depth of the Riches*, 202-204.
investigation or pointing out passed down in living tradition by a qualified
guru, lama, or Zen master that is not finally fulfilled simply by Buddha’s (or
God’s) grace. It is for this reason that I shy away from any theological
pluralism that assumes Christians and Buddhists attain the very same
religious fulfillments and ends in spite of specific differences in practice,
especially with reference to Buddhist transmissions of remarkably effective
ways to bring receptive persons to stable recognition of the empty nature of
all experience, the very essence of freedom in Buddhist terms.

Christians, on the other hand, by upholding a theocentric vision that
includes creation of human beings in the image of God, a God of justice and
final judgment, might critique Buddhist traditions for their historic difficulty
in distinguishing the dignity of human beings from other sentient beings
sufficiently to justify truly effective social concern for human justice,
poverty, and the marginalized in human societies. And Christian
ecclesiological understanding of spiritual community as God’s very body,
communally active in the world as God’s own loving response to human
need, contrasts sharply with much Buddhist rhetoric, retained from early
Buddhism, of spiritual path as individual endeavor. That kind of Buddhist
rhetoric translates much less directly than the Christian into spiritual praxis
as effective communal social service (rather than spiritual practice just as
individual virtue). Light from Christian communion and ecclesiology can
send Buddhists back to resources in their own traditions with fresh eyes (as
mentioned in note 3), perhaps helping them respond to such issues. The
capacity not only to appreciate and learn from the other tradition but also to
argue for a different vision and praxis is precious -- part of what each
tradition can offer to and receive from the other, each for its own fuller self-
understanding in our time.

In sum, Heim’s model of diverse religious realizations, when re-
interpreted in a Mahayana way, provides a framework to understand why a
Mahayana Buddhist would be inspired by patterns of Christian communion
and learn from Christianity with regard to the very reality that he
understands himself to engage in Buddhist practice. He may thereby indeed
recognize Christ as a remarkable Rupakaya manifestation of Buddhahood
itself, a powerful means through which followers of Christ have indeed
communed with and learned to embody liberating qualities of Dharmakaya
(though differences between the two traditions do make a real difference in
which such qualities are most strongly attended to, and how they are realized
and integrated with other such qualities). In addition, from within this

28 As in the texts mentioned in note 23.
framework, a Buddhist would be motivated to improve his understanding of liberation, ultimate reality and praxis in part through discussion and argument with Christian theologians and saintly practitioners, discussions that take note both of analogues and differences between Buddhist and Christian understandings of the natures and roles of love, wisdom, devotion, communion and emptiness.