Thoughts on Why, How and What Buddhists Can Learn from Christian Theologians
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I. Introduction
With my co-panelists, I am asked to respond to the question: “Can and should Buddhists and Christians do theology (or buddhology) together, and if so why and how?” I will respond as a Tibetan Buddhist of Nyingma tradition. My answer is yes, we can and should, where “doing theology together” for me means learning things from Christian theologians that illumine significant aspects of my Buddhist understanding. How is one to learn things for Buddhist understanding from Christian theology—what method should be used? I find the method of comparative theology, as developed recently by scholars such as Francis Clooney and James Fredericks, to be a productive approach for interreligious theological learning, including Christian-Buddhist learning. But first the question of why must be addressed: a Buddhist comparative theology must be motivated and informed by a theology of religions that convincingly articulates for Buddhists why they can learn things from religious others that can make a positive difference for their own understanding and practice of awakening.

If the why and how to learn from religious others is well enough addressed, then one would have the motivation and orientation to explore specific Buddhist learnings from non-Buddhist theologies. In what follows, then, I will make a start at addressing the how, why and what of Buddhist inter-religious learning by briefly summarizing the method of comparative theology, considerations toward developing a Buddhist theology of religions that can support such learning by Buddhists, and some examples of Christian themes that have been resources for my own learning.

II. Comparative Theology
The purpose of comparative theology is to learn from a different religious tradition in enough depth and specificity to shine significant new light on your own. By paying careful attention to elements of another religious tradition in their own context of doctrine and practice, your perspective on corresponding elements of your own faith may be shifted in ways that permit new insights to emerge. This does not merely involve learning at a distance about other religious beliefs and cultures that leaves your own religious self-understanding unaffected. Rather, comparative theological analysis provides a method to learn from religious others in specific ways that newly inform your understanding of your own faith and may also energize and deepen your practice of it.  

1 These reflections are richly informed by discussions the past few years with colleagues Paul Knitter, Mark Heim, Catherine Cornille, John Thatamanil, Frank Clooney, Michael Himes, Wendy Farley, Charles Hallisey, Anantanand Rambachan, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Abraham Velez, Loye Ashton, Leah Weiss Ekstrom, Karen Enriquez, Willa Miller and many others, for which I am grateful.

2 For excellent, foundational introductions to methods and approaches of comparative theology, see Francis X. Clooney, Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Francis X. Clooney, ed., The
For this kind of learning to occur, certain supportive dispositions are necessary, such as those identified in Catherine Cornille’s book *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*. These include: (1) doctrinal humility, the acknowledgement that the doctrinal formulations of your own tradition, including its formulations of other religions, are conditioned viewpoints that have never perfectly captured the whole truth; (2) knowledgeable commitment to your own religious tradition, so that whatever you learn from religious others may inform your religious community and tradition through you; and (3) in the context of potential Buddhist learning from Christians, a belief that there is enough common ground between Buddhism and Christianity that it is possible to hear things from Christians that make a positive difference for Buddhists in their own understanding and practice of awakening.\(^3\)

**III. Theologies of Religions**

For such dispositions to support comparative theological learning, in turn, they must be motivated and informed by an adequate *theology of religions*. A theology of religions is an understanding of other religious systems that explores their potential truth from within the theological framework of your own religious tradition. You can, as an individual, learn many things from other religions. But for your learning to inform not only yourself but also your religious community and tradition, it must make sense to your tradition in its own framework of understanding. And as Mark Heim, John Thatamanil, and Kristen Kiblinger have argued, behind *any* interest (or disinterest) in learning from other religions lies a theology of religions that is either conscious or unconscious.\(^4\) How do I see the potential to learn significant truths from religious others? If my theology of religions is uncritically exclusivist, I may see only errors in religious others unaware that my perspective on them is limited by my own vision. Or if my theology of religions is uncritically pluralist, I may only hear from religious others the presumed commonality of religions that I think I already know. In either of these cases, new learning is not permitted.\(^5\) For example, if I were to see an unconditioned truth as the revelatory source of my own religious tradition while viewing other religions merely as conditioned human artifacts, how paltry other religions’ teachings would appear to me compared to my own. To support learning *for* my religious tradition *from* a religious other that permits something really significant and fresh to be heard, my theology of religions, while rooted

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\(^4\) Heim and Thatamanil have argued this point in oral presentations to Luce AAR seminar gatherings in Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology, 2010. Kiblinger makes this point convincingly in her article, “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology,” in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. by Francis X. Clooney S.J. (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 24-32.

\(^5\) The considerations in this paragraph on the need for a theology of religions to support work in comparative theology are developed more fully in Kiblinger, “Relating Theology,” pp. 24-32.
in my own tradition, would have to see religious others as potential sources of profound truth, without reducing them just to what I thought I knew before engaging them.

Diverse theologies of religions are possible for any religious tradition, and a number of alternative theologies of religions have been operative throughout the history of Buddhism in Asia.\(^6\) Below I will offer considerations toward constructing a contemporary Buddhist theology of religions that would support interreligious learning. Such a theology of religions, if it is to be taken seriously by Buddhists, must be based in fundamental Buddhist understandings of core teachings. Some of the implications of those teachings could turn the attention of Buddhists toward religious others as potential sources of truth. But such teachings have been employed traditionally in ways that orient Buddhists away from the possibility of religiously important learning from non-Buddhists. So to explore how core Buddhist teachings could newly inform interreligious learning for Buddhists today, I must not only summarize them in their traditional forms, but also relate them to experiences of interreligious learning today and to current work in theologies of religions.

### IV. Buddhist Principles Not to be Ignored in Developing a Contemporary Buddhist Theology of Religions

Why did the Buddha teach? A principal reason, Buddhists believe, is that different spiritual paths taught in the world lead to different spiritual results, many of which fall short of complete liberation from the inmost causes of confusion and suffering. This, Buddhists believe, compelled the Buddha to “turn the wheel of the dharma,” to re-introduce the way of the buddhas to the world, the way that leads to inmost liberation, the realization of nirvana. In the *Salleka sutta* ascribed to Shakyamuni Buddha, the Buddha describes dozens of ways that religious practitioners, mostly of non-Buddhist traditions known in his time, believed they had accomplished complete liberation (*moksha*), the highest religious end, while falling far short of it unawares. The Buddha then explains in detail how proper practice of his liberating path provides a way to be released from every layer of clinging to conditioned experience, fully to realize the freedom of the unconditioned state, nirvana. This is formulated in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions like my own as follows: The fullest realization of reality is a stable, non-dual insight into the empty, unconditioned nature of all experience—the emptiness of all conceptualized appearances—accompanied by an impartial, powerful compassion for all beings who have not realized the inmost freedom of such insight. Any religious beliefs or practices that encourage reifying and clinging to any conceptualization of truth, God, scripture, religious identity, ritual, religious experience or ethical prescription as an ultimate would obstruct realization of the emptiness of all such constructed forms, and thus, even in the name of religion, prevent the attainment of the fullest religious end, the unconstructed, unconditioned, nirvana. Careful guidance is required to learn to pay such penetrating, stable attention to experience that even the subtlest clinging to reified concepts collapses.

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\(^6\) For examples of diverse Buddhist theologies of religion operative through the history of Buddhism in Asia, see John Makransky, “Buddhist Perspectives on Truth in Other Religions: Past and Present,” *Theological Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (June 2003), pp. 334-361.
The Buddhist understanding that different modes of practice lead to different soteriological results and the fullest result can only be attained by methods appropriate to it (methods that the Buddha imparted), has established the main purpose for communicating the Buddha’s teaching in the world.\textsuperscript{7}

In sharp contrast to this foundational Buddhist understanding, a popular contemporary option in theology of religions, developed by John Hick and others, called “theological pluralism,” asserts the following: Since all great world religions engage the same ultimate reality which they call by different names, then in spite of their differences in belief and practice, all such religions should lead to the same essential realization of that ultimate reality, the same basic salvific result.\textsuperscript{8} But as the previous paragraph implies, to accept that assertion is to put aside a primary concern of the Buddha and his followers—to investigate the efficacy of specific beliefs and practices promulgated by religions because the results of religious practice, which could be inmost liberation or unconscious bondage to suffering in the name of religion, depend on the specific functions of those beliefs and practices—not on a grand narrative of equality of religions.

Nevertheless, for Buddhist philosophers to assert that different kinds of spiritual path lead to different results does not mean that just one narrowly specified way of belief and practice is authentically liberating. Buddhist traditions have also commonly taught that there are many possible modes of learning and practice that lead to liberation, not just one way, as exemplified in Shakyamuni Buddha’s diverse ways of guiding different kinds of people in the practices of his liberating path. This teaching is the doctrine of skillful means (upaya-kausalya), according to which the teachings of the buddhas are ever adapted to the diverse mentalities and needs of beings so as to meet them effectively in their own horizons of understanding.

In a number of Mahayana Buddhist scriptures that emerged in the early centuries CE, such as those of the Avatamsaka collection, the teaching of skillful means was expanded in connection with the cosmic dimension of buddhahood, dharmakaya, the infinite, non-dual awareness of the buddhas that pervades all reality. The infinite mind of the buddhas, these scriptures assert, communicates the dharma in limitlessly diverse ways to meet the varied mentalities of beings in all realms of existence, compassionately entering persons of varied walks of life and religious culture into dharma practices conducive to their mundane and supramundane well-being.\textsuperscript{9} Indeed, the skillful means of buddhahood, in communicating the buddha’s core teaching of the four noble truths, goes beyond all established religious expectations and teaching norms, including familiar

\textsuperscript{7} For fuller discussion of these points, see John Makransky, “Buddhist Inclusivism: Reflections toward a Contemporary Buddhist Theology of Religions,” in \textit{Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions}, ed. by Perry Schmidt-Leukel (St. Otilien, Germany: EOS Editions, 2008), pp. 47-68.


\textsuperscript{9} For fuller discussion of skillful means as ways of relating to religious others in early and later Buddhist traditions, see Makransky, “Buddhist Perspectives on Truth,” pp. 342-354.
Buddhist ways of expressing those very truths. As the Mahayana Avatamsaka scripture puts it:

“In this world there are four quadrillion names to express the four holy truths in accord with the mentalities of beings, to cause them all to be harmonized and pacified. ... [And] just as in this world there are four quadrillion names to express the four holy truths, so in all the worlds to the east—immeasurably many worlds, in each there are an equal number of names to express the four holy truths, to cause all the sentient beings there to be harmonized and pacified in accordance with their mentalities. And just as this is so of the worlds to the east, so it is with all the infinite worlds in the ten directions.”

Such a scriptural passage implies that it is the infinite mind of the buddhas that is the ultimate ground and source of liberating truth for all peoples, cultures and religions, analogous to the Abrahamic belief in the one God as the transcendental source of revelation for all humankind.

But, from a Buddhist perspective, even if there is one underlying source for diverse expressions of truth in the world, it does not necessarily speak with equal clarity, depth, and fullness in all the world’s traditions. Even if the infinite mind of the buddhas is the ultimate source of liberating truth for all, it is Shakyamuni Buddha, many scriptures proclaim, that is the preeminent manifestation of that buddha-knowledge for this eon. He is the one who has spoken the liberating truth of dharma with the greatest specificity, depth and completeness, with a unique focus on core liberating principles that are not as central to other traditions—foundational Buddhist doctrines that proclaim no substantial self in persons and the emptiness of independent existence of all phenomena as keys to the deepest liberation of persons. And it is the Buddha’s dharma heirs, contained in the Sangha community that he established, who uphold this unique teaching for the world.

For a theology of religions to make sense to Buddhists (including those in my Tibetan tradition), the principles summarized in preceding paragraphs cannot be ignored. The teaching that buddhahood employs infinite means of communication that transcend the established expectations of all traditions, including Buddhist ones, could direct the attention of Buddhists to the possibility of profound truth in other religions. So can the Buddhist concern to critically analyze beliefs and practices of religious traditions (both Buddhist and non-Buddhist) for soteriological efficacy. But the tendency narrowly to identify the primary source of revelation with Shakyamuni Buddha and his community makes it difficult for many Buddhists to view non-Buddhist religions as possessing a ground of truth comparable to their own. And the concern to critically analyze all beliefs is usually marshaled for Buddhist critiques of beliefs of religious others (including beliefs

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11 see Makransky, “Buddhist perspectives on truth,” pp. 346-354 on alternative ways the four noble truths have been expressed in Asian cultures, including non-cognitive ways. See Makransky, “Buddhist Inclusivism,” pp.53-60 for more on buddhahood’s infinite means and buddhahood as ultimate source of all religions.
of Buddhist others), not as an analytical tool to avoid missteps while learning from religious others. The traditional Buddhist allergy to the notion of learning important religious things from religious others, including Christians, has been exacerbated in the modern period by the Asian experience of Western colonialism, which many experienced, in part, as an aggressive assault by Christian missionaries on indigenous Asian beliefs in support of the Western domination of their societies.

The Buddhist principles summarized in this section, as traditionally employed, have tended to constrain the possibility of new learning from religious others by subsuming others within a Buddhist system of belief that is functionally closed to new input by them. Such principles, then, cannot be drawn on uncritically if they are to inform a Buddhist theology of religions today that would adequately support interreligious learning. Yet they must contribute to any theology of religions that would make sense to Buddhist traditions, including my tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. I believe those principles can be drawn on in fresh ways that avoid closing off new learning from religious others, if they are informed by fresh experience of interreligious learning and by some current work in theologies of religions.

V. Gleanings from my Buddhist experience of interreligious learning

This section will focus on elements of my learning as a Buddhist from Christians. Such learning has reinforced for me the Buddhist understanding that buddhahood, as a source of limitless skillful means, can communicate through non-Buddhist modes of teaching in ways that transcend accustomed frames of reference, including my conditioned Buddhist expectations. In dialogue and study, I have encountered Christians whose spiritual insights and qualities profoundly illuminated my own Buddhist understanding about which they knew nothing, e.g. by embodying absolute trust in the ground of being, by recognizing the holy, sacramental nature of everyday things, or by vividly expressing the intrinsically communal nature of spiritual awakening. What follows are examples of a few areas of Christian theology that are rich sources of reflection for me. This is not the place to provide extensive analysis of each, but to give a fuller sense of my learning process, I will discuss the first of these areas at a little more length below.

1) Christian models of **atonement** include the understanding that human beings are not in a position to redeem themselves from sin, rather God is the effective agent of atonement and redemption for humanity. This expresses what theologians call an **objective** aspect of atonement. Christian concern with salvific power from beyond the human ego deepens my engagement with analogous issues of agency and objectivity implicit, it seems to me, in elements of Buddhist practice, as in the method of exchanging self for others (*tong-len*) central to Tibetan Buddhism.

2) The Judeo-Christian teaching of absolute **surrender in faith to God** as source and ground of all creation has helped anchor Christian reflections on **poverty** and **sacramental vision**. Because all beings, as creations of God, are grounded in God, to know them in their depth is to know them as visible manifestations of grace, as holy
beings of immeasurable worth. Such teachings have further informed and energized my Buddhist understanding of refuge (in Nyingma tradition) as absolute surrender to the expanse of openness and awareness that is the empty ground of all beings. To be surrendered to that ground (zhi) is to be surrendered to the inmost being of persons, a purer vision of them that elicits reverence, love and compassion for them. Articulations of Christian sacramental vision have further inspired me, as a Nyingma Buddhist, to see persons not as ungrounded, isolated entities of no intrinsic worth but as expressions of a primordial ground, embodiments of original wakefulness and profound goodness (tathagata-garbha, buddha nature), however obscured that may be in them by inner tendencies of delusion and grasping. Christian sacramental teaching somehow further informs and energizes this Buddhist way of knowing for me.

3) The themes above inform (and are informed by) the two great commandments of Matthew 22.36-40. A Pharisee asks Jesus: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus replies: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and the first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” The New Interpreter’s Bible comments: “One cannot first love God and then, as a second task, love one’s neighbor. To love God is to love one’s neighbor, and vice versa.”

The striking equation of the second commandment with the first has made me repeatedly reflect (from my Nyingma perspective) on the relation between devotion to buddhahood (dharmakaya, buddha nature) as the empty unconditioned ground (zhi) of beings and unconditional love for all those beings. Because of this connection, to cultivate unconditional love, compassion and joy in persons empowers and is empowered by increasing surrender to buddhahood as the empty cognizant ground of all persons. This becomes the unity of wisdom and love within the bodhisattva path of my tradition. And the ancient Jewish term commandment in the quote from Matthew points me with further depth into the Tibetan concept of dam tsig (samaya), the exigence of deepest commitment to the ground and practice of wisdom/love for the sake of all.


4) Ecclesiology: As Dominican theologian J.M.R. Tillard has written: “…. To be ‘in Christ’ is to find oneself under the power of the Spirit of God that … knits into the unity of one body those who receive the gospel of God. … Whoever is ‘in Christ’ and ‘in the Spirit’ is never in a relation of one to one with God.”

Human participation in God, in this view, is intrinsically communal, ecclesiological. The individual is incorporated into the body of Christ that reaches out to all in the building of God’s kingdom. One’s relationship to God can never be isolated from one’s relation to others in God.

Although communal participation has been a central part of Buddhist practice from the beginning, Buddhist communities were understood as collections of individuals, following in the Buddha’s footsteps individually while guided by common disciplines and rules of living (dhamma and vinaya). The rhetoric of path as ontologically individual was retained even as communal dimensions of path gained increasing emphasis and centrality in a number of Buddhist traditions, prominently in Mahayana movements. And the Buddhist doctrinal thread of individualism was given renewed emphasis in the meeting of Buddhism with the modern West, as it seemed to match the intense individualism of Western interest in spirituality.

Nevertheless, “ecclesiological” aspects of Buddhism took highly developed doctrinal expression in Mahayana traditions (including my own), in ways that indicated the path and fruition of awakening must be understood as intrinsically, ontologically communal. Seemingly separate individuals awaken to a communal dimension of reality that they were not previously conscious of, remaking them into a collective extension of the buddhas’ liberating activity on behalf of the world. The ultimate fruition of the bodhisattva path, buddhahood, embodies itself not just as an individual attainment (rang don, dharmakaya) but as a power to coalesce communities of awakening (zhen don, rupakaya) and to incorporate bodhisattvas into bodies of buddhahood—enlightened dimensions known as sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya—as agents of enlightened activity for beings. But unlike Tillard’s Christian understanding, bodhisattva path and fruition

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Implicit bodhisattva “ecclesiologies” in Mahayana scriptures include scenes in which bodhisattvas function not just as isolate individuals on individual paths to enlightenment but as communal expressions of buddha activity—many bodhisattvas performing enlightened activities throughout numerous realms as one community
are intrinsically communal not because bodhisattvas are “knit into one body” by a supernatural Spirit, but because their practices awaken them in wisdom and love to the inter-dependent, ultimately undivided nature of all beings (undivided suchness, *tathata*).

5) I am struck by the Christian concern with a **God of justice**, vividly embodied in Jesus as the one who challenges oppressive attitudes and structures with special attention to the poor and marginalized. It has pushed me to seek increased clarity on the meaning of the unconditional compassion associated with the bodhisattva path of awakening. The Christian theme points me back into Buddhist sources further to observe how bodhisattva compassion, as an unconditional expression of wisdom, *upholds* something in persons by simultaneously *confronting* something in them. To uphold persons in their deepest potential of freedom and goodness is to confront us in all the ways we hide from that potential—the individual and social inhibitions and structures that prevent us from responding fully to others with reverence and care. And to be pointed by Christian ecclesiological thought to “ecclesiological” aspects of Buddhism noted above, shifts my understanding of what it means as a Buddhist to respond to needs of the contemporary world. Instead of focusing on individual attempts to address social problems in the context of each individual’s own practice of dharma, we might freshly explore how communal dimensions of awakening in Buddhist praxis “knit” Buddhist individuals and communities into inter-connected, integrated responses of service and action that respond to concrete needs and problems of societies and the natural world.

Each Christian theme above shifts my lens on a corresponding aspect of Buddhist thought and practice, shining light on further implications of corresponding Buddhist themes in their similarity and difference, infusing them with greater depth and energy in my understanding and practice. It is as if buddhahood is speaking *in and through* the Christian mode of expression to empower a deeper engagement with Buddhist principles, in ways I had not expected, do not control, and do not fully comprehend.

**VI. An objective aspect of Christian atonement that sheds light on Buddhist praxis**

I will discuss a bit more the first theme mentioned above, atonement. The Christian doctrine of atonement concerns Christ’s redemption of humanity from sin
through his life, death, and resurrection. Two aspects of this doctrine have caught my attention: 1) the agent of atonement for humankind is God in Christ, not sinful humans. Since humanity does not even know the full depth of its own sinful condition, including its distorted tendencies of will and judgment, human beings are powerless to rectify that condition. 2) There is an objective aspect of God’s atonement for our sins through Christ. The redemptive power of God’s action comes not just through the subjective personal responses of human beings to such a loving God, but by Christ’s self-offering on our behalf. God came to us in Christ and Spirit to do the work of reconciliation we cannot do for ourselves. This expresses an objective structure to reality—both with regard to the fallen condition of humankind and to the objective power of God’s grace to reintegrate his creatures back into his loving purpose. John Macquarrie, discussing Christ’s salvific work as it reached completion on the cross, says: “…the classic view [of atonement] includes an objective side. The self-giving of Christ is continuous with the self-giving of God, and the whole work of atonement is God’s…. something needs to be done for man, something that he is powerless to do for himself …. Here that absolute self-giving, which is the essence of God, has appeared in history in the work of Jesus Christ, and this is a work on behalf of man, a work of grace.”

In Tibet, one of the principal practices for progressing on the bodhisattva path of awakening is the contemplative exchange of oneself for others, given vivid expression in the practice of tong-len, literally the practice of “offering and receiving.” After experiencing the power of love and compassion through prior contemplative cultivations, the practitioner takes that power into the tong-len contemplative pattern of offering and receiving. From compassion, one imaginatively takes the sufferings of beings upon oneself into the empty nature of one’s mind. From there, out of love, one imaginatively offers them all of one’s well-being, resources and positive capacities.

There is a tendency in some Buddhist discussions of tong-len to articulate it as a technique to become more compassionate through the effortful use of imagination. In this articulation, the agent of tong-len is the ego-centered human being who is learning to reverse her ego-orientation by re-conditioning subjective patterns of her mind toward greater love and compassion for beings. This is true as far as it goes. But from the perspective of my own tradition, it doesn’t capture the fuller Buddhist ontology behind

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19 Macquarrie, *Principles*, p. 320. Italic emphasis is Macquarrie’s.

tong-len, which Christian reflections on the agency and the objective dimension of atonement help point out.

In the contemplative understanding of my tradition, Tibetan Nyingma, the ultimate agent of tong-len is the awakening mind of enlightenment (bodhicitta) that has been hidden within the human being; the innate buddha awareness that is the infinite cognizant ground and backdrop of all our experiences. Buddha awareness (dharma-kaya, rigpa) is our deepest nature, but has been obscured by the conditioned patterning of our ego-centered thought and reaction. The pattern of tong-len helps re-conform the person to her deeper nature, bringing out her innate capacity of enlightened response, of compassion and love for beings as her greater self. When engaged in depth, tong-len flows progressively more spontaneously from the empty-cognizant ground of one’s being, taking the world’s delusions and sufferings back into that ground, and from that place of oneness with the buddhas, blessing beings. The liberating power that tong-len unleashes gradually incorporates the practitioner into the body of the buddhas by drawing her into the stream of their enlightened activity. From this perspective, it would not be correct to say that the transformative power of the practice comes just from re-conditioning the subjectivity of the practitioner, as if the ego-centered personality were the primary agent of the practice. The ultimate agent of tong-len, gradually discovered from within its practice, is innate buddhahood (dharma-kaya), which works in and through the practitioner from beyond her ego-centered mind, to do what is not possible for that mind.

This is not to say that tong-len, though broadly analogous in its pattern of exchanging self for others, soteriologically equates with the cross of Christ. Each such concept is embedded in its own framework of doctrinal understanding that differs foundationaly from that of the other tradition. But because the similarities are embedded in such radically different worldviews, elements of Christian reflection on subjective and objective aspects of salvation both reveal analogous tensions in Buddhist tradition and shine new light upon them for me—deepening my Buddhist understanding and practice.  

VII. Where does the light of interreligious understanding come from?

It seems to me that the ideas and words that Christians employ in their theological reflections, of themselves, are not what shed so much light for me on Buddhist understanding, since no Christian with whom I am in dialogue (contemporary or ancient) has the expertise to know how so profoundly to inform my Buddhist worldview. Rather, it feels as though the deepest reality that my own tradition engages, buddhahood, dharma-kaya, communicates aspects of truth to me in my own religious location through the religious other, illumining elements of my tradition in surprising ways beyond anyone’s planning. Buddhahood can do this, it is taught in my tradition, because the infinite mind of the buddhas is undivided from the empty, cognizant ground of persons.  

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21 My reflections on atonement and Buddhism have been informed by conversations with Mark Heim, in the context of his own comparative theological inquiries into atonement in light of Buddhism.

Meanwhile, Christian dialogue partners I have known have said analogous things about their dialogical learning from Buddhism. It is as if, they say, the Spirit of God is teaching them through the inter-religious encounter with Buddhist thought or practice.

In light of all that has been said thus far, a further question arises for me toward developing a Buddhist theology of religions that would support interreligious learning: How to give due weight to these two poles: (1) to my inherited Buddhist understanding that different kinds of path lead to different ends, with the fullest soteriological end involving a stable, non-dual awareness of the empty nature of all things, without which the deepest roots of inner bondage are not cut; and (2) my experience that Christian theologians who are unacquainted with, even uninterested in, such teachings of emptiness can function as revelatory sources for my Buddhist understanding and path. How can both those poles be adequately held? Some elements of theologian Mark Heim’s theology of religions have begun to help me to navigate those poles.

VIII. Learning with and from a Christian Colleague

In developing his own distinctive theology of religions, Christian theologian Mark Heim has argued that people of different religions engage the same ultimate reality, which is endowed with many aspects, qualities and potencies—the trinitarian God for Heim, buddhahood for me. Through differing frameworks of thought and practice, different religious traditions direct the attention of their practitioners more intensively to certain qualities of that one ultimate ground than to others. Since people of different religious frameworks engage different qualities of the same ultimate reality with greater intensity, they would be expected to achieve different fulfillments from their practice—different soteriological results. And because they pay primary attention to differing aspects of ultimate reality, they integrate its qualities differently in their realization of it.

These points by Heim accord with the two Buddhist principles summarized in section IV, and also nuance them. On the one hand, from the perspective of my Buddhist tradition, the deepest ground of liberating truth, which I call buddhahood and Christians call God, in its power to communicate transcends established expectations of all religious traditions including Buddhism. On the other hand, also essential to Buddhists is the principle that different kinds of path lead to different results, and it behooves the Buddha’s followers critically to investigate any proposed framework of belief and practice for liberating efficacy, without assuming all such frameworks support the same soteriological result.


23 In this section I draw selectively on just a few of Mark Heim’s points. I am not adopting his full theology of religions here.

Implied in Heim’s approach, I believe, is the understanding that conceptual frameworks distinctive of each religious tradition are both necessary and inherently limiting. They are necessary to establish systematic religious understandings that inform all practices and to provide a conceptual container that receives the findings of practice experience to make them accessible to future generations. A conceptual map of soteriological ground, path and result is essential to inform each stage of practice in any religious tradition. It is the framework based upon which practitioners are prepared to engage even non-conceptual ways of practice, such as the non-dual meditations of Tibet or apophatic Christian modes of contemplation. But any conceptual framework (whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist) is also limited, because in the very act of pointing our attention to particular areas of understanding and experience it lessens our attention to other areas. In addition, all such conceptual frameworks are limited by historical and cultural conditioning of which none of us are ever fully aware.25

When we relate the Buddhist principles of section IV, and examples of Buddhist-Christian learning in sections V and VI, to Heim’s suggestions above, further light is shed on my experience of inter-religious learning. A Buddhist conceptual framework of belief and practice, by focusing my attention on certain aspects of reality in a certain way, both increases my receptivity to those aspects and implicitly prevents my fuller attention to other aspects, which Christian theologians with a different religious orientation and practice may engage more fully. The same is true for practitioners of other religions. For this reason, people of each tradition have much to learn from religious others, precisely because of their otherness. Religious others may be empowered through their framework of practice to know certain aspects of ultimate reality in greater depth than one may yet know through one’s own tradition. An implication of this is that we are driven by the ultimate reality that grounds our own religious understanding to the religious other for further teaching, further revelation.

A sign of becoming more intimate with buddhahood or God in this view, would be a growing tendency for you to view others who are deeply formed by their traditions as potential religious teachers. Not because you have abandoned your tradition but precisely the opposite. To become more receptive to ultimate reality through your tradition is to be made increasingly attentive to the voice of that reality as it makes itself heard through other religious frameworks. Thus, as a Tibetan Buddhist, elements of Christian teaching can function for me like an encounter with a profound Tibetan lama—they interrupt my established preconceptions to allow reality to speak afresh, to make more of itself known to me in my own religious location.

At the same time, from this perspective, there is no reason to assume that different frameworks of belief and practice lead to the same soteriological result. For example, Mark Heim, operating within a Christian framework, understands the fullest spiritual fulfillment to be deepest communion with God in Christ, a dualistic communion. I, operating within a Buddhist framework, understand it to be fullest realization of the non-dual wisdom and compassion of buddhahood. These different understandings are based in different systems of doctrine and practice, and the religious experiences they inform and express need not be equated. Nor can I step out of my own conditioned, finite

religious perspective to fully understand and rank the possible fulfillments of other world religions (or even of other Buddhist traditions). There may be individuals in other traditions whose beliefs and practices function in ways that deeply free them from inner causes of suffering beyond what I know, beyond how my own historically conditioned tradition has conceptualized what’s possible.

As a follower of the Buddha I am required to maintain an exploratory perspective on practice and result that asks critical questions both of non-Buddhists and Buddhists—how might these beliefs and practices inhibit or support liberation? At the same time, based on all that has been said above, as a follower of the Buddha, it behooves me to learn from religious others—because their lens on reality may permit them greater intimacy with aspects of it and because elements of their understanding may interrupt reified elements of my own in importantly informing ways.

Even when Mark Heim and I disagree about fullest spiritual results, we are motivated to listen deeply to each other for further learning in and through our differences, since the ultimate ground of our traditions can teach each of us more by means of the other’s perspective. Indeed, it is because we inhabit such different worldviews that such fresh revelation may come through the other. This implies that religious others in their difference exist not just to be overcome through the apologetics of one’s own tradition, but are needed if one is to learn more fully from the ultimate reality that grounds one’s tradition. To lose the religious other (by dismissing him or reducing him to a straw man of one’s apologetics) would be to lose a potential religious teacher, whose different lens on reality uniquely interrupts ways I have subconsciously mistaken my lens on reality for reality.26

Again, from a Buddhist perspective all such explorations in theology of religions and comparative theology can not be divorced from the need to explore critically whether beliefs and practices of religions (Buddhist and non-Buddhist) help cut inner causes of bondage, evoke our best capacities, release us into our deepest ground of freedom. But for such critical inquiry to be well informed, it needs a lot of help—from resources of Buddhist tradition, from current disciplines of investigation and analysis, and also from alternative perspectives that only religious others can provide.27

IX. Conclusions

Without compromising my inherited Buddhist focus on specific forms of practice leading to specific results whose fullest realization I understand in Buddhist terms, I view religious others as deeply engaged with the same ultimate reality (the same ultimate ground of experience) that Buddhists engage, potentially realizing some aspects of that

26 The theme of “interruption”—religious others functioning as sources of revelation by interrupting accustomed frameworks of one’s own tradition—is informed by the work of Lieven Boeve, Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern “Context” (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2003), 163-179. It is also informed by numerous Asian Buddhist stories of masters who interrupt accustomed conceptual frameworks of individuals and institutions by unexpected modes of teaching or action, so the dharma can be re-revealed in that moment in a fresher and fuller way.

27 Parts of this section are much informed by enriching conversations I have been fortunate to have with Wendy Farley, Abraham Velez, and Karen Enriquez.
reality more deeply through their modes of understanding and practice than I have yet as a Buddhist because they are not Buddhist. This would explain the depth dimension of my experience of inter-religious learning—as if Buddhahood were tutoring me through the Christian theologian, showing me more possibilities of Buddhist understanding than I had previously seen, more than my Buddhist formation alone had permitted. What has been said here about Buddhist learning from Christians is equally applicable to Buddhist learning from all other religious others.

This kind of theology of religions has been called “open inclusivism.” The Buddhist open inclusivism articulated here can support Buddhist ways of engaging in comparative theology, in interreligious learning. In such work, we explore what can be learned from elements of another religion, doing so from within the perspective of our own religious worldview. This is done not just to categorize religious others within pre-established, unchanging categories of our own tradition, but to permit new learning from religious others to inform and enlarge the understandings of our tradition. This is done not by turning away from our own tradition but by learning better to keep faith with the deepest ground of that tradition, and through that, to receive more of what it can only teach us through religious others.

28 On open inclusivism, see Catherine Cornille, Im-possibility, pp. 197-204.