Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars edited by John Makransky and Roger Jackson

Introduction II: Contemporary Academic Buddhist Theology: Its Emergence and Rationale by John Makransky

The "scientific study of religions" is a twentieth century phenomenon. It emerged in the Western academy as a child of the Western enlightenment through a methodology designed to distinguish it from Christian theological study. Central to it has been the method of "epoche:" bracketing judgments of normative truth and value so as to open a new space in the academy for the in-depth study of non-Christian religions, free from the presumption of their normative inferiority to Christianity. With its emergence, the study of religion in the academy became segregated into two separate institutional niches. In North America and Europe, religious studies (or "history of religions") departments were created in hundreds of colleges and universities, while university divinity schools and departments of theology remained the loci of Christian theological studies. The meteoric rise of religious studies in colleges and universities made many new things possible. It has given millions of students a much more intimate knowledge and appreciation of world religions than previously possible, and continues to educate the wider public through many new kinds of publication and media. Of special importance to the present discussion, religious studies departments have also created new opportunities for non-Christian graduate students to engage in the critical study of their own religious traditions within the Western academy.

The latter development, though broadly welcomed, has had unintended and largely unacknowledged consequences: it has released new forces of interest in the academy. Religious studies method, by withholding normative judgments, opened space in the academy for new kinds of study of non-Christian religions, but did not provide the space to apply such findings to the theological concerns of those religions. The training of non-Christian scholars in the contemporary study of religions (including their own) has triggered, in some, a natural impulse to apply such knowledge to the theological needs of their traditions. This is an interest not merely to describe their tradition at a distance (from the bracketed, "value neutral" position of religious studies) but precisely to clarify the truth and value of their tradition from a critical perspective located within it. Thus, the training of non-Christian scholars in the religious studies academy has generated a strong new interest in critical, constructive theology that fits neither within the established method of religious studies nor under the
rubric of Christian theology, the previous main locus of such work in Western culture.

This has had further unintended consequences. The religious studies framework that permits non-Christian religions to be taken newly seriously in the West excludes their being taken seriously on their own terms. Under the rubric of religious studies, the functionally secular Western academy mines world religions for its use: to generate research findings, publications, conferences to explore whatever may be of current interest and benefit to the academy. The "value neutral" method of religious studies was of course never value neutral. Rather, it implicitly established a value in religions divorced from the normative interests of their own religious communities: a value found exclusively in their capacity to fulfil the intellectual, social, and economic interests of the Western academy.

This contributes to the current re-evaluation of the assumptions upon which the separation between theological studies and religious studies was originally constructed. As Francis Schussler Fiorenza has pointed out, the "science of religion" was constructed upon late nineteenth century presuppositions about the nature of disciplinary knowledge which late twentieth century criticism largely rejects, while the ahistorical presuppositions that previously conditioned theological study have been replaced by the methods of historical and cultural criticism. The domains of religious studies and theological studies are appearing less mutually exclusive than before.¹ The recent turn toward theology on behalf of their religious traditions by non-Christians in the academy who presently possess no clear niche for such work will further contribute to this re-evaluation. Despite the diverse origins of theological interest within the academic study of religions, it is, among other things, good news for Christian theology, which will be enriched by the wider conversation that continues to unfold around it and in dialogue with it.

This renascent interest in theology manifests vividly in the Buddhist studies wing of the religious studies academy, because the increasing prominence of Buddhist studies in the academy has been driven by the contemporary culture's growing interest in Buddhism, and that cultural interest is driven in significant part by an implicit theological concern to tap Buddhism as a source of truth and value for persons' lives. People who

¹See Francis Schussler Fiorenza's article, "Theology in the University," (CSSR Bulletin, vol. 22, n.2, April 1993) for a seminal analysis of forces in late twentieth century Western thought that push for fundamental re-evaluation of the distinction between religious and theological studies that was erected on the basis of late nineteenth century thought. The recent resurgence of theological interest instigated by non-Christian entry into the academic study of religion complements and makes more vivid the very issues that Fiorenza has raised.
seek truth and transformative power in Buddhism include not only those who identify themselves as contemporary Buddhists, but prominently also Christians, Jews and others for whom Buddhist teaching or practice sheds light upon truths of their own traditions or upon possibilities for integration of those truths into their lives.

The current groundswell of normative Western interest in Buddhism is by no means a passing fad, any more than previous such groundswells in China, Japan or Tibet. Like other cultures in their early stages of Buddhist encounter, the West has just begun to discern its own face in the Buddha's teaching. Some post-modern analysts have argued that this is merely an imaginative projection, and of course it is partly that (as it was in China, Japan, Tibet). But it is not merely that. The remarkable cultural absorption of Buddhist thought and practice we are now witnessing is rooted in an intuitive recognition of its potential power to beneficially transform many aspects of the culture it now touches. As for previous cultures, this is the start of a profound cultural recognition that energizes masses of people across diverse social strata to explore more and more dimensions of Buddhist image, thought and practice over the long term.

Can Buddhist teaching and practice reveal the nature of reality beyond the webs of dichotomous thought? Can it shed light upon holism in embodied experience, beyond dichotomies of mind and body? Can it open new ways to heal body and mind? Can it profoundly effect ways we currently think, write, make music, paint, form relationships, recreate, educate our children? Can it reveal previously unnoticed limitations of post-modern responses to modernism, of feminist responses to patriarchy, of intellectual responses to the environmental crisis? Can it shed new light upon the West's resurgent interest in previously marginalized sources of its own spirituality? Can it shed light on so much because it ultimately derives from a transcendent knowledge (Sanskrit: lokottara-jñana) whose creative potential is limitlessly adaptable? These are questions that concern truth, value and transformative power. Religious studies, as previously practiced, brackets such questions. But to bracket them is to render the academy irrelevant to the groundswell of interest in Western culture that generates the increasing presence of Buddhist studies in its midst.

If the contemporary situation generates pressing cultural questions that the religious studies academy has been ill-equipped to address, it generates equally pressing questions for Buddhist tradition that traditional Buddhist teachers have been ill-equipped to address. Is there a systematic coherence to be found within or among the competing Buddhist cultural traditions now planting their roots in Western culture (cultural traditions that have often ignored or disparaged each other)? What contemporary meaning and relevance is to be found in these ancient cultural expressions? What are the possibilities of authentic adaptation?
Such pressing cultural concerns now contribute to an especially strong theological push in Buddhist studies, because a number of its current representatives were set on their course by the same kinds of concerns, which took expression in them both through years of traditional study and practice under Asian Buddhist teachers and through training in the critical methods of the contemporary Western academy. A number of such scholars now find themselves equipped with both sets of tools, and an emerging scholarly purpose defined both by the cultural forces operative in and around them and by the contemporary theological needs of the Buddhist traditions in which they have trained.

The contemporary need of Buddhist tradition for critical reflection is as great as that of Western culture. The two needs are, of course, connected. Buddhist traditions want to communicate themselves in ways accessible to new worlds of interest. But to do this requires not only a knowledge of new languages in which to translate the old ways, but a critical perspective upon the old ways that understands how much of them has been the product of socio-cultural and historical forces that are inapplicable to new socio-cultural settings. Lacking such critical understanding, religious traditions such as Buddhism do unintended harm to persons and to their own reputations in new settings, then repeatedly misdiagnose the sources of harm.\(^2\)

Historical critical consciousness developed in the Western academy which has been the locus of Christian theological study. Christian theologians now routinely inquire into the effects of historical, cultural, political, economic, and social conditions upon previous theological understandings, seeking to contextualize and critique previous perspectives so as to recover or newly emphasize other resources of tradition in light of contemporary knowledge and experience, and thereby to constructively re-engage the truth and value of Christian tradition for fresh re-appropriation.

\(^2\) A stunning recent example of this: some Tibetan monks who now introduce Westerners to practices centered on a native Tibetan deity, without informing them that one of its primary functions has been to assert hegemony over rival sects! The current Dalai Lama, seeking to combat the ancient, virulent sectarianisms operative in such quarters, has strongly discouraged the worship of the "protector" deity known as Dorje Shugden, because one of its functions has been to force conformity to the Gelugpa sect (with which the Dalai Lama himself is most closely associated) and to assert power over competing sects. Western followers of a few Gelugpa monks who worship that deity, lacking any critical awareness of its sectarian functions in Tibet, have recently followed the Dalai Lama to his speaking engagements to protest his strong stance (for non-sectarianism) in the name of their "religious freedom" to promulgate, now in the West, an embodiment of Tibetan sectarianism. If it were not so harmful to persons and traditions, this would surely be one of the funniest examples of the cross-cultural confusion that lack of critical reflection continues to create.
Such theologians view at least some of the critical methods of the contemporary academy as powerful (even providential) tools on behalf of their tradition, to help Christians authentically re-engage and clarify the truth of Christianity for a new time.

Unlike the Christian situation, the new historical and cultural awareness of Buddhism that religious studies has made available in the Western academy has not yet been profoundly integrated with Buddhist religious culture in most of Asia or the West. Historico-cultural critical consciousness, by and large, has remained the province of the Western academy at a great distance from the Asian Buddhist cultures that it studies. Asian Buddhist teachers are not trained in Western critical methods, and frequently have little interest in exploring the implications of critical findings for their own traditions. Such methods are irrelevant to what has previously mattered in Buddhist cultures, where Buddhist teachers and meditation masters have become accomplished through traditional, not contemporary critical, methods. Now Buddhist thought and practice is increasingly introduced into the West by such Asian teachers, and by a number of their outstanding Western students recognized as teachers of Buddhism in their own right. But for the most part, the training of such Western Buddhist teachers in the study of Buddhism has been traditional. Very few have been trained in the critical methods of the academy.

Thus, in contrast to the integration of Christian theology with contemporary critical thought, the rise of Buddhist studies in the religious studies academy has opened a gap between those who transmit the living experience and traditional understanding of Buddhism and those who critically analyze Buddhism to understand the historical and cultural conditions of its development. As Christian theologians know well, the latter findings are crucial for a religious tradition to appropriate if it is to find the voice to speak its truth anew.

This situation contributes to a great irony, which has not gone unnoticed in the West: Buddhist traditions that take pride in their knowledge of all kinds of human conditioning that cause suffering (Second Noble Truth) still lack the critical tools to diagnose the effects of cultural conditioning upon their own previous understanding and current communication, and how that conditioning now contributes to confusion and suffering. Because of this, Asian Buddhist traditions continue to require contemporary persons to conform inappropriately to aspects of ancient cultures that do more harm than good for the very life of their own traditions. One common example of this is the Asian Buddhist transmission

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3 Japan is certainly a partial exception to this, but there, too, there remains a tendency to segregate within academic institutions what is viewed as the confessional study of Buddha-dharma from the contemporary critical study of Buddhism.
of ethnic prejudice to Westerners unawares. Upon introducing Westerners to the Dharma, Asian traditions often continue to claim for themselves the only "pure" transmission of the Buddha's teachings, subtly conforming naive Westerners to the implicit understanding that all other Asian Buddhist cultures or traditions are corrupt. Other such examples appear in some of the essays of this volume.

In recognition of these issues, scholars who were formed both by Buddhist tradition and by the contemporary academy increasingly seek ways to respond both to their own culture's normative interest in Buddhism and to the inner necessity of Buddhist tradition to reflect critically upon itself and find new ways to express itself. Their hope is that, as in the past, such new reflection rooted in long community experience may contribute to authentic new understanding: by critiquing past elements of tradition inappropriate to a new time, recovering or re-emphasizing other elements, critiquing Western models inadequate for a fuller understanding of Buddhism, and exploring the potential of Buddhist experience to shine new light upon a host of contemporary cultural and religious concerns. This is the broad project of contemporary "Buddhist theology."

The term "theology," then, in "Buddhist theology," is used in a broad sense. It includes critical reflection upon Buddhist experience in light of contemporary understanding and critical reflection upon contemporary understanding in light of Buddhist experience. Like that of Christian theologians, it is the work of scholars who stand normatively within their tradition, who look to traditional sources of authority (in sacred text and previous forms of social practice and experience), who re-evaluate prior Buddhist understandings in light of contemporary findings and who seek thereby to contribute to the continuing development of their tradition in its relevance to new times and places.

Although, for reasons noted, the institutional loci for Buddhist theology are still largely undeveloped, we would argue that the forces behind its emergence and continuing evolution are ineluctable. At present Buddhist theology finds expression mostly in the margins of academia: in religious studies conferences where "theology" is still too often viewed with suspicion, in theology conferences where the central focus is Christianity, in settings for inter-religious dialogue, in recent writings on Buddhist ethics and contemporary thought, and now in this volume.

One purpose of this volume, then, is to inspire further exploration of ways that the pressing needs of Western culture and Buddhist tradition for Buddhist critical reflection may be met through new forms of inter-change, new cooperative projects, and new institutional settings East and West.