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Shin Buddhist Studies

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CONTENTS

Dilemmas of the Sangha TOSHIKAZU ARAI	1
Devotion to Maitreya Bodhisattva: The Lack of Differentiation between Tuṣita and Sukhāvātī as an Influence of Daoist Immortality on Views of Rebirth in the “Pure Land” TAKUYA HINO	13
Why “Buddhist Theology” Is Not a Good Idea: Keynote Address for the Fifteenth Biennial Conference of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies, Kyoto, August 2011 RICHARD K. PAYNE	37
True Disciple of Buddha in Contemporary Society: Through Shinran’s Perspective KIGOSHI YASUSHI	73
The Issue of Transmission of Shin Buddhist Ministry in the West SEIGEN YAMAOKA	83
Mindfulness and the Nembutsu KENNETH MULLEN	95
Current Challenges and Possibilities in the Propagation of the Shin Buddhist Teaching NOBUHIRO FUKAGAWA, TRANS. MUTSUMI F. WONDRA	103
Earnest Dharma-Hearers’ Traits, As Seen in a Survey on Dharma-Hearing KOJU FUJIEDA	117

**Why “Buddhist Theology” Is Not a Good Idea:
Keynote Address for the Fifteenth Biennial
Conference of the International Association
of Shin Buddhist Studies, Kyoto, August 2011**

Richard K. Payne

Institute of Buddhist Studies

In memoriam: Leslie Kawamura

My thanks to the members of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies for giving me this opportunity, and especially to my friend Rev. Dr. Kenneth Tanaka for extending the invitation on the part of the Executive Committee. While I am indeed honored to have been invited, I am at the same time painfully aware that my being here is the direct consequence of the death of my friend, colleague, and mentor, Dr. Leslie Kawamura. We all share in the loss of such a great scholar, committed teacher, and supporter of the IASBS. While his legacy lives on in his students, his presence will be missed. This is a reminder to all of us of the impermanence of human life, and as Rennyō says, while in the morning we may appear to be in the best of health, in the evening we may be nothing more than white ashes.

PREFATORY NOTE

For the sake of clarity, let me start by at least attempting to state clearly what it is that I am *not* attempting in this essay—an effort that I will repeat in more detail in closing as well. I am not denigrating the project of making Buddhist thought relevant in the present day, that is, how to interpret Buddhist thought from its context of origin—whether the context be that of Buddhaghosa or of Yi Xing or of Dōgen or of Shinran or of Tsongkhapa—into our own context. Indeed, much has changed, and much needs to be rethought. What I am concerned with, however, is the consequences of using the neologism “Buddhist theology” as the rubric under which such a project takes place. The balance

of this essay explores why I think that the consequences of doing so are so inimical as to make “Buddhist theology” not a good idea.

INTRODUCTION: “THEOLOGY – THEO = ?”
(WHAT IS THEOLOGY WITHOUT GOD?)

It has been said, by someone in the field of Buddhist studies, that the kind of philological concerns evidenced by rejecting the term “theology” because it translates in a crudely literal fashion as “god-talk” are superficial and sophomoric.¹ Such chastisement has led me to hesitate about doing more than grumbling to my students about the matter—often in merely rude, incoherent grumbles. The terminological issue is not, however, simply my own petty concern, as is evidenced by the discussions during the formation of the American Academy of Religion’s group now known as “Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection.” While considering the term “Buddhist Theology” as the name for the group, it was eventually rejected by that group’s founders.

There are, however, colleagues who have adopted the term and argued for it. Foremost of these are Roger Jackson and John Makransky, in their jointly edited volume entitled, appropriately enough, *Buddhist Theology*. Jackson in his summary of the historical context of Buddhist theology cites David Tracy regarding the possible breadth of the term “theology.” As cited by Jackson, Tracy suggests that “theology” is (merely?) a “useful way to indicate the more strictly intellectual interpretations of any religious tradition, whether that tradition is theistic or not [and] to use *theo logia* in the literal sense of ‘talk or reflection on God or the gods’ suggests that even nontheistic traditions...may be described as having theologies.”² Jackson pursues the even broader ideas

1. That is, it would be an instance of the etymological fallacy. Unfortunately, I do not recall who it was that made this claim.

2. Roger Jackson, “Buddhist Theology: Its Historical Context,” in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger Jackson and John Makransky (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2000), 1. In this sense, Buddhism might at best develop what could be called a “negative theology,” that is, a critique of the ultimacy of the gods that traditional Buddhist thought borrowed from Vedic and Brahmanic traditions, and which populate the Buddhist cosmos. At least as cited, however, Tracy’s position appears to be incoherent—even understanding “theology” as extending to talk of gods in the plural does not seem to provide an adequate justification for extending the term to non-theistic traditions of thought and practice. There would

that Tracy presents regarding the appropriate application of the term “theology,” which he argues do “not even imply belief in gods of any sort: as long as a tradition conceives some notion of ultimate reality, by whatever name, and however provisionally,” to the extent that an “explicitly intellectual reflection occurs [with respect to that ultimate] within a religious tradition, one may speak of the presence of theology in the broad sense.”³ Jackson then offers the following critique.

Because they have taken the term in its narrowest—albeit most common—usage, as referring to discourse about God, educated modern Buddhists understandably have been reluctant to apply the term “theology” to their own or earlier Buddhists’ theorizing about the sacred. If, on the other hand, they were persuaded to define it in the broader—and more basic⁴—sense suggested by Tracy, simply as “intellectual reflection within a religious tradition,” they might then be willing to acknowledge that, right from its inception, Buddhism has been deeply involved in “theological” activity, which might fruitfully be related to theological activity that has occurred in other traditions, whether theistic or not.⁵

While I agree to the rather obvious observation that Buddhism has been deeply involved in intellectual reflection right from its inception, I find

seem to be a certain circularity here: something like literary criticism is also non-theistic, but would not be considered to be doing theology. Why not? Presumably because it is not *already* classified as a religion. If we remove the presumptions that follow from categorizing Buddhism as a religion, what grounds are left for considering it to be doing theology?

3. Jackson, “Buddhist Theology,” 1, citing David Tracy, “Comparative Theology,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 14:447. This rhetorical move appears to be consistent with the shift of theology of religions in its pluralist form from a “Christocentric” to a “theocentric” model. See Hugh Nicholson, “The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (September 2009), 609–646: 617. Nicholson notes that pluralist theology of religion is as much a hegemonic form of discourse as is either the exclusivist or inclusivist forms of theology of religions (618–619).

4. Jackson’s characterization of Tracy’s definition as “more basic” is tendentious and begs the question as to the “proper” understanding of the category, that is, of the set of intellectual projects known as theology. Note here again the role played by the more foundational presumption that Buddhism is a religion.

5. Jackson, “Buddhist Theology,” 1–2.

that I remain one of the “recalcitrant Buddhists” Jackson refers to in his essay. The intellectual category of “theology” is an inappropriate one for Buddhist intellectual reflection because it entails a structure of ideological commitments, priorities, concerns, and categories that are not those of the Buddhist tradition of thought itself.⁶ It is, in other words, the thesis of this essay that to adopt the terminology of “theology” will have the inevitable consequence of rebuilding Buddhism on the model of Christianity. In order to move beyond these merely definitional considerations, the historical origin of theology provides an understanding of the ideological structures that its use as a way of developing Buddhist thought will entail.

I. CHARACTER OF THEOLOGY AS HISTORICALLY GROUNDED

I.A. Historical Grounding of Theology

Theology itself is not a stable discipline. In order to understand the significant consequences of employing “theology” as a model for Buddhist thought, we need to see the historical character of theology clearly. This includes not only its origins, but its more recent developments.

I.A.i. Theology as an Intellectual Project Originates in Christian Thought

Theology as a contemporary intellectual tradition—and it is certainly the contemporary intellectual tradition of theology that the proponents of “Buddhist theology” have in mind when they employ the term, despite the appeal to a pre-Christian usage discussed next—developed as part of the Christian tradition. Although earlier terms for systematic reflection on Christian ideas differed, theology has been the term generally in use at least since the high Middle Ages, c. 1000 to 1300. As

6. By making these entailments the focus of critique, I specifically want to avoid what seem to me to be utterly pointless definitional debates over whether Buddhism is theist, atheist, or non-theist. It is certainly the case that many people who one can identify as Buddhists make offerings to spirits of one kind or another. Is this somehow “authentically” Buddhist or is it a superstitious accretion are matters that have polemic as well as definitional significance. An additional problem is created by the circularity of theism and religion—is one an indication of the other? If so, does the absence of one mean the absence of the other? See for example, the discussion by William Herbrechtsmeier, “Buddhism and the Definition of Religion: One More Time,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32, no. 1 (1993): 1–18.

such it does now carry specifically Christian significance. If one speaks of theology, the automatic or default understanding is Christian theology. Any other form requires specification, such as "Jewish theology" or "Hindu theology." That is, Christian theology stands as the cultural norm against which all other versions are semiotically marked as non-normative.

I.A.ii. Jackson's Implicit Argument from Pre-Christian Usage Irrelevant to Modern Connotations

The use of the term theology is first recorded in Greek sources, such as Plato and Aristotle. Jackson calls attention to this fact, emphasizing that the term is not "originally Christian,"⁷ as if its use in pre-Christian theistic traditions somehow freed it from its association with Christianity. However, the Christian identity of the category theology is such that these other uses are ultimately irrelevant, in that it is not these pre-Christian meanings that are either denoted or connoted by the term as it is used in present-day discussions of how to characterize Buddhist thought. It is exactly the modern significances that are relevant to the question of whether or not "theology" is an appropriate way to talk about contemporary reflection on the significance of Buddhist thought. These modern significances originate in the nineteenth century as a result of Christianity's own encounter with the social changes wrought by expansions of science and empires.

Some scholars might attempt to dismiss my concerns with the originary structuring of modern theology, that is, its organizing principles established in the nineteenth century, as an instance of the genetic fallacy. This would entail mistakenly asserting that the significance of theology as it exists today derives from its original meaning rather than its current significance, and in so doing failing to recognize its change and development over the course of two centuries. The ongoing influence of that structuring discussed below in the section "Theology as a Discourse" indicates that these concerns are not based on a fallacious extension of originary characteristics into the present.

7. Jackson, "Buddhist Theology," 1.

I.B. Nineteenth Century Basis of Contemporary Theology

I.B.i. Contemporary Theology (Presumptions, Concepts, Issues) Was Formed in the Nineteenth Century

The expansion of European empires, beginning in the fifteenth century and arguably continuing right into the present, contributed to the development of modern theology. In expanding out beyond the old horizons of Christendom, which structured the religious cosmos into five mutually exclusive categories—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, the pagans of Rome and Greece, and heathens—Christians encountered a much wider variety of “heathen” religions, including some that demonstrated high levels of intellectual and cultural sophistication.⁸ The comparative study of religion, as well as comparative theological reflection, followed from these encounters, the most important in terms of the formation of the theology that “Buddhist theology” is modeled on having taken place in the nineteenth century.⁹

Claude Welch, perhaps the most important historian of nineteenth century Protestant Christian theology, has argued that contemporary theology was given form and structure in the nineteenth century: “[I]t is at least a defensible thesis that the theological situation of the twentieth century is peculiarly dependent on the developments of the nineteenth century. That is, not only do the same problems continue to bedevil and to fascinate, but the shapes which those questions still bear are essentially derivative from the forms they were given in the nineteenth century.”¹⁰

In Welch’s analysis there are “three interweaving themes or questions” that provide the structure of theology in the nineteenth century: “(1) the question of the possibility of theology, (2) the question of

8. See Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), esp. “Chapter 1: Voltaire’s Veda.”

9. James L. Fredericks, considered one of the founders of comparative theology, explains the broader perspective as including not only “the new awareness of religious pluralism associated either with historicism or the increased accessibility of Asian (and especially South Asian) religious texts,” but also the perceived threat of Enlightenment rationalism. Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions,” *Horizons* 22, no. 1 (1995), 67–87: 69.

10. Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century, Vol. 1: 1799–1870*, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), I.1.

the possibility of Christology, and (3) the question of Christianity and culture.”¹¹ That is, the themes include the nature of religious knowledge, the issues surrounding the nature of Jesus as a human and historical figure, and the role of Christianity in society. We can see these same three themes being worked out in the discourse of Buddhist modernism and the attempts toward a Buddhist theology: that is, the possibility of a Buddhist theology, the modernist interpretation of Śākyamuni as a fully awakened human and not as a divinity, and in the creation of engaged Buddhism on the model of the “social gospel.” Out of the range of different theological specializations, it would seem uncontroversially obvious that the majority of those would be structured by Christian preconceptions regarding what constitutes significant topics of discussion. Looking more closely, one might expect that a more adequate model for developing a “Buddhist theology” would be found in those theological specializations that specifically engage non-Christian religious traditions. We can briefly consider three of these to see if such a hope might be fulfilled. These three are the comparative theology of the nineteenth century, theology of religions, and the new comparative theology of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.¹²

I.B.ii. Old Comparative Theology, Theology of Religions, and New Comparative Theology

These three closely related theological projects are specifically constructed as employing a comparative method. As such, they share much with the putatively scientific project of comparative religion (*Religionswissenschaft*), which was intended to be universal, neutral toward all religions, and descriptive.¹³ This representation of comparative religion has itself come under increasing scrutiny and critique over the last half century. The “old” comparative theology was judged

11. Welch, *Protestant Thought*, 1.4–5.

12. Hugh Nicholson, “The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (Sept. 2009), 609–646; idem., “Comparative Theology after Liberalism,” *Modern Theology* 23, no. 2 (April 2007), 229–251; and Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (June 2010), 477–514.

13. Locklin and Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” 482.

problematic because of an inherent Christian triumphalism, that is, it presumed that Christianity was the most “adequate” form of religion and therefore was that toward which all others were moving.

Like all theology, comparative theology is a Christian project.¹⁴ When considering the construction of a “Buddhist theology” that would draw on the comparative themes of comparative theology, however, we need to take into careful account that as a Christian project, it has certain goals, desired benefits, implicit assumptions, and structuring questions. Thus, although comparative in method, comparative theology re-describes “the putatively generic practice of comparison as a distinctively theological endeavor, driven by theological concerns, delimited by diverse, particularly theological traditions and shaped by each theologian’s distinctive interests and expertise.”¹⁵ Its final purpose is to better serve the Christian community by creating a theology that is more adequate in the present, religiously plural world. In other words, those themes that comparative theologians find worthy of exploring are defined by specifically Christian theological concerns as such and are not universal religious themes that apply equally well to Buddhist thought.

Francis X. Clooney, considered by many to have initiated the new comparative theology, asserts that it is a consequence of religious diversity: “If we are trying to make sense of our situation amidst diversity and likewise keep our faith, some version of comparative theological reflection is required.”¹⁶ Religious diversity is not, however, a uniquely modern condition.¹⁷ The history of humanity reveals that there has always been a condition of religious diversity, and it has rarely been an issue vis-à-vis the “loss of faith.” It is this latter that makes the project

14. In the past, I’ve sometimes been misunderstood when stating something like this that seems both obvious and unproblematic. For the record, therefore, let me state that in my opinion the legitimacy of theology as a project within Christian thought is not what is at issue in considering the applicability of the category “theology” to the development of Buddhist thought.

15. Locklin and Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” 491.

16. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Boundaries* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 3

17. Despite the apparently wide popular acceptance of nostalgic, Romantic fantasies of idealized pre-modern communities unified by a common belief. Such fantasies have often been deployed as the contrast to the modern condition itself, providing a basis for criticizing the modern.

of comparative theology a modern one. It is not religious diversity as such that stands as a challenge to faith, but the role that religious diversity has played in theological debates since the middle of the nineteenth century that make it a challenge to faith.

Paul Knitter, a well-respected figure in the field of comparative theology, addresses the colonial structure of the relation between Christian theology and other religions in the project of comparative theology, though he expresses that relation in terms of exploitation. In defense of his appropriation of Buddhist praxis (ideas and practices) he argues that no one is being exploited—nothing is being taken away that is not in fact already being freely offered. While that may well be true, it should not obscure the directionality of the project, which is why it is worth thinking in terms of colonialism (using the term descriptively and not pejoratively), rather than exploitation. The direction of the relation remains fundamentally colonial in character—Buddhism supplies the raw materials needed for the theological economy of Christianity.¹⁸

Thus, comparative theology originates in the nineteenth century with the awareness of religious diversity, accentuated one would suggest by increasing resistance to Christian missionary efforts. This same nineteenth century milieu of increasing awareness of religious diversity also gave rise to comparative religion, which as Nicholson points out¹⁹ defined itself not only positively as a scientific project, but also negatively as *not* comparative theology, which was portrayed by contrast as confessional and dogmatic.²⁰ In its present-day incarnation,

18. Cf. Nicholson, “Reunification,” section IV, 624–628.

19. Nicholson, “Reunification,” 613.

20. Although the field of comparative religion itself originated as a scientific enterprise designed to understand the “universal comparative patterns or categories” of all the world religions, influential voices within the discipline also embraced a theological goal. Even in its mid- to late-twentieth century form, under the name of “history of religions” (a rendering of *religionswissenschaft*) and associated most with the work of Mircea Eliade, it was marked by Platonic preconceptions of a universal category of “religion” of which each religion is a manifestation. Such Perennialist ideas are also shared with the pluralist strain of theology of religions (such as that of John Hick), and today the claim is made by some that the academic study of religion can never be a scientific, value-neutral undertaking because the very idea of religion itself is theologically informed.

the project of comparative theology involves an attempt to understand another religious tradition in depth, so as to strengthen Christian theology.

II. THEOLOGY AS A DISCOURSE

II.A. Structure of Theology as a Discourse

II.A.i. These Nineteenth Century Concerns (Presumptions, Concepts, Issues) Continue to Structure Theology as a Discourse

Theology can be viewed as a form of discourse, that is, a communication that is intended to convince, whether explicitly expressed as such or not. The discourse of theology comprises first the kinds of general concerns identified by Welch, as well as the more specific questions that follow from those. But as a discourse, theology also includes a particular set of concepts and the specialized terminology in which to express and discuss those ideas. More importantly for our purposes here, however, are two characteristics that mark it as a discourse. First is the set of foundational topics that determine such things as, for example, the concepts presumed to be of central concern to any and all religions. These include such things as the centrality of the founder as the unique point of contact between the mundane and the divine, the preservation of the teachings of that founder in a text of revelatory power, the institutionalization of a system by which authority is transmitted, and a social institution, membership and participation in which is vital to the individual's post-mortem status.

Second is the way in which these foundational topics are systematically interlinked with one another. Such linkages are at the hands of some theologians made explicit, producing what is appropriately enough called "systematic theology." But acting implicitly, they form a way of thinking and impose certain consequences because of the very way in which they are linked together—each concept being connected with others in the discourse so as to form a network.²¹ The way in which the network acts as a whole, so that concepts are mutually

21. Such discursive networks are not closed systems, but rather remain open—both on their borders and internally.

supporting and mutually implicating, is what I am referring to here as the ideological entailments of a discourse.²²

II.B. DISCURSIVE STRUCTURING: IDEOLOGICAL ENTAILMENTS

The issue, of course, is not that Buddhism does not also have its own corollaries to these foundational topics—founder, text, transmission, church, or any other set that might be abstracted from theological issues. What is of concern to me here, however, is the structural linkages that convert the items identified from a list of things into a discursive system. It is the structure and the way in which certain elements are given value that constitute the hegemonic character—the imposition of ideological entailments—of theology.

We could in other words create a Buddhist theology rather simply by just replacing the Christian elements in the structure with Buddhist ones, and then explore the ideological entailments that follow from that substitution. In doing so, however, we would have re-created Buddhism on the model of Christianity. I would contend that what gives Buddhism its identity is not the particular items that can be switched out of the theological structure. Instead it is a different structure, with its own organizing principles and valences.

II.B.i. Any Field of Discourse that Derives from theology Will Be Structured by These Same Concerns (Presumptions, Concepts, Issues)

To use a single term, whether “theology” or any other, for a variety of different entities is to create the expectation that there are common characteristics among the entities being classed together. To use the phrase “Buddhist theology” necessarily creates the implicit assumption that the entity so identified will be concerned with and share certain critically important characteristics with “Christian theology.” This is why it is essential to not use the same term, contrary to David F. Ford’s claim that “there is no other non-controversial term”²³ by which

22. This is what in classic Buddhist thought could be identified as *prapañca* (*keron*, 戲論), the proliferation of thought. As such, discourse—like everything else—only exists by its interconnection with other things, which is part of its not being a closed system.

23. David F. Ford, “Theology,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 93.

the topic may be discussed.²⁴ But to set Christian theology alongside Buddhist theology as categories is to already implicitly claim that similarities exist, which is to commit a fallacy of *petitio principii*. In order to avoid the imposition of similarity where it does not necessarily exist, it is essential to find some other term when talking about, for example, Buddhist thought. (Even the phrase “Buddhist philosophy” imposes the same expectation of similarity.) It is more useful if one wishes to pursue the questions of similarities and differences without arguing in a circle to set Christian theology in juxtaposition to Buddhist thought. Indeed, contrary to a presumption of Ford’s claim, there is no need that a single term be used to identify what is being compared.

Theology has a particular organizing structure. An examination of some introductory surveys of theology reveals the common topics that unify theology as a discursive whole, each of these topics being integral to the others.²⁵ In other words, these topics are not simply a list of things that theologians talk about, but rather form an integrated system, one that is very consistent across different authors, though different religious commitments lead to variations in the specifics of what is highlighted by an author. The topics that recurred throughout the works reviewed included:

1. God: nature, existence, our ability to know God
2. revelation and scripture: character, authority
3. human existence: as creatures, relation to God, relation to others, sinful nature, good and evil
4. Christ and the Holy Spirit: relation to God, function in God’s plan, in some cases Triune God
5. redemption or salvation: grace, kinds of redemption, the role of sacraments and ministry

24. I find this a very odd claim. While it may be that there are no terms that are not controversial, the question of whether or not they are controversial (or even to what degree they are controversial) is not the real issue. The real issue is the ideological or rhetorical entailments that follow from employing a term.

25. Chosen relatively at random, the review included Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basics*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), and Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

6. the Church: its nature, existence, founding, centrality to redemption/salvation
7. relations with other religions: the possibility of salvation through other faiths, similarities and differences
8. end of time: history as the unfolding of God’s plan, eschatology.

As indicated, different authors organize their topics in different ways, but for the most part they all discuss a fundamentally consistent set of issues. For example, some use the language of the Triune God to discuss the relation between God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, while others do not, thus reflecting different theological commitments within the larger Christian community. Note, however, that the issue of relations with other religions (no. 7) is not a common topic, but I include it here because this audience is part of that category of “other religions.”

In some cases, if we treat these topics individually, then we can find some points of similarity (e.g., the nature of human existence, the status of scripture, redemption/salvation, and perhaps the end of time). Such a piecemeal approach, however, would simply replicate the problems inherent in any “framework model.” In other words, on a matrix having the eight topics on one axis and Christianity and Buddhism on the other, many of the cells of the matrix under the Buddhism column would be left blank. There is no Buddhist discourse on Christ and the Holy Spirit, for example. And while there are Buddhist models of time that include a dissolution of existence, that is not seen as “God’s plan” (eschatology), nor is it final but rather cyclical. Thus, although there are Buddhist corollaries to these topics, not only do they not match easily, but the structural relations between the elements are different in Buddhist thought from the way in which Christian theology integrates these topics with one another. In other words, a treatment that compares specific Christian topics with their Buddhist corollaries, which is the most common approach taken in comparative studies, obscures the integral and systematic character of theology on the one hand and Buddhist thought on the other.

Even after having stipulatively defined away the unwanted aspects of a term such as “theology” that is otherwise so redolent of meanings and so deeply embedded in the culture of the West, those aspects will still come creeping back in. This is the way in which “ideological entailments” determine the direction of a discourse. That is, any concept that is rooted in an ideological system will—even when polished up and

presented in a new box—drag along behind it all of its predefinitional significances. It should be a matter of wide recognition, though it evidently is not, that stipulative definitions only have value in systems that are primarily deductive in nature, and that as part of rhetorical or discursive systems, including academic discourse, they are entirely ineffectual—or perhaps more significantly, simply decorative. In other words, although an author may stipulate a particular meaning for any term, including theology, the connotations always remain as part of what the audience will understand by that term. It is on the basis of such ineradicable connotations that the ideological entailments develop. Stipulative definitions are part of a more general process found throughout religious studies, that of abstracting categories and concepts out of a Christian and often specifically Protestant context and treating them as religious universals.

II.B.ii. Attempts to Abstract from (Aufheben: Sublation, “to Supersede, Put an End to, but Simultaneously Maintain, Preserve”) Theology Still Entail the Ideological Commitments and Concerns

When “Buddhist theology” is propounded as the name of an area of study, “theology” becomes sublated, lifted up out of its context of origin, and treated as an abstract category of thought.²⁶ Abstraction of this kind is far from neutral, however. As what we might call a metarhetoric (a term modeled on metanarrative), it still retains the marks of its origins. While the specific answers may have been stripped away, the structure of the questions remains. This interrogative structure is more than simply a set of questions, but rather is a closely interconnected whole—not just that the answer to one question contributes to answering the next (a kind of domino relation), but that the questions that comprise the structure all share an underlying set of assumptions. In other words, such abstractions are not benign—they conceal a set of presumptions that direct thought along certain lines.

26. “Sublation” is the English rendering of the German *Aufhebung*, in this case meaning to simultaneously rise above the discourse of origin while still preserving its structures. The term enters philosophic discourse with the work of Hegel, for whom *Aufhebung* refers to “the dialectical transition in which a lower stage is both annulled and preserved in a higher one” (Charles Taylor, *Hegel* [Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1975], 119).

When formulated as questions to be answered, the underlying assumptions are imposed onto the subject being interrogated. This is evidenced in the old example of the double bind, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” Because the question is structured in such a fashion as to presume that wife-beating has taken place, any answer indicts the person answering the question. While the double bind character is obvious in this humorous example, it is equally at work, though less evident, in questions such as “What is the Buddhist idea of salvation?” The question assumes that salvation is normatively a part of any religion—that is, anything that is identified as a religion is expected to have an answer to the “question of salvation.”²⁷ Any truly appropriate response can only be formulated by discussing the assumptions built into the question, such as the question of what the character of salvation is.

I am reminded of a conversation I once had with a retired Methodist minister at a dinner party. Learning that I was a Buddhist, he politely asked me to explain it to him. I began explaining the concept of karma to him, and after about three minutes, he interrupted to inform me that his religion was really very simple, “Jesus saves us from sin.” The conversation then turned to other matters, and I did not have the opportunity (nor the effrontery) to point out to him that each of the three important terms in his statement—Jesus, saves, and sin—were far from simple, but rather had significances ranging back over twenty plus centuries of cultural history. And indeed, in the social setting of a dinner party such a response would hardly have been perceived as a polite one.

27. This becomes particularly evident in the area of engaged Buddhism, where, for example, there is expected to be a “Buddhist view on abortion,” or on genocide, or on any of the topics constituting the current concerns of the global liberal Protestant culture.

III. AN ARGUMENT BY ANALOGY, OR
 “WHAT’S THE MATTER WITH PHILOSOPHY?”

III.A. *Philosophy of Religion*

III.A.i. *Philosophy of Religion, Despite the Claim That It Is Abstracted from Theology as a Faith Stance, Is Still Structured by the Same Sets of Concerns*

While our concern here is with the putative category of “Buddhist theology,” an understanding of how the ideological entailments of Christian theology structure derivative discourses can be seen from examining the philosophy of religion. Although their trajectories differ, the relation between Christian theology and Buddhist theology is fundamentally the same as that between Christian theology and philosophy of religion. Just as the move from Christian theology to Buddhist theology sublates theology as a metadiscourse, so the move from Christian theology to philosophy of religion sublates the categories of theology as philosophic ones.

A promising example of the philosophy of religion, promising because it makes explicit efforts to include non-Christian religious thought, is the collection edited by William Wainwright entitled *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*.²⁸ While identifying the origin of the term, that is the intellectual category “philosophy of religion,”

28. William J. Wainwright, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Such efforts to include non-Christian thought within the philosophy of religion are in fact notably rare. Many works make no substantive mention of other religious traditions or of issues other than those of Christian theology. See, for example, Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Philosophy of Religion: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Beverly Clack and Brian R. Clack, *The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008); and Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray, eds., *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). Like Wainwright, Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, eds., *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), give attention to a selection of “religions of the world” in their opening section, but this seems to function mostly as a way of subsuming these within the otherwise entirely theological structure of the balance of the work. Although it is outside the scope of this essay, a fundamental issue in this regard is the way in which such treatments “level out” different traditions by treating them all as variants within the defining category of “religion.”

as coming into “general use” only in the nineteenth century, he goes on to implicitly claim that the field is universal.²⁹

Historically, philosophic reflection on religious themes had two foci: first, God or Brahman or Nirvana or whatever else the *object* of religious thought, attitudes, feelings, and practice was believed to be, and second, the human religious *subject*, that is, the thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and practices themselves.³⁰

Here at the very beginning we can see not actual historical patterns, but the imposition of the modern European subject–object polarity onto all systems of religious thought.

While mentioning that “Hindu Vedanta and classical Buddhism included sophisticated discussions of the nature of the Brahman and of the Buddha, respectively,”³¹ Wainwright then goes on for several pages to discuss only Western thinkers, until suggesting that religious philosophic reflection can be a devotional activity as well as a propagational one, at which point he mentions Udayana.³² Although numeric supremacy is important in itself, it is not just that the discourse is dominated by the sheer numbers of earlier thinkers referred to, but more importantly by the idea that religious traditions such as Vedānta and Buddhism serve as resources for the colonialist advance of Western philosophy of religion.

The direction of study is clearly colonial, in the sense that Euro-American intellectual culture is presumed to be the dominant, active agent to the submissive, passive patient that is all other religious traditions of thought.³³ This colonial relation is indicated when Wainwright

29. This rhetorical move, sublating a concept that has a specific historical and intellectual context and then simply acting on it as if it is universal, recurs with almost predictable frequency throughout these areas of discourse. Although doubtless not intentionally malicious, this move serves to obscure the realities of the ideological entailments that will of necessity follow once it is made.

30. William J. Wainwright, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, 3.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 8.

33. This is of course the dynamic that arises from the missionary activities of nineteenth century Christianity, which not only informed but justified Euro-American imperialism. More specifically, the training of missionaries was a central motivation for the creation of religious studies in a broad sense,

asserts that “There is no intrinsic reason, however, why the tools of analytic or continental philosophy can’t be profitably applied to non-Western doctrines and arguments....”³⁴ In other words, contemporary European and Anglo-American philosophy is the active party in the comprehension and interpretation of other religious traditions of thought, which is the passive party.

Nineteenth century comparative theology (see *supra*) provides background for the philosophy of religion, particularly the function of the comparative study of religion in relation to the missionary goal of converting the unbelievers by means of rational argumentation. This seems to peek out from Wainwright’s understanding of philosophy of religion when, regarding the inclusion of non-Christian religions in the discourse of philosophy of religion, he says that “Work of this sort is essential because a defense of one’s favored religion’s perspective should include reasons for preferring it to its important competitors.”³⁵ It is, of course, worth calling attention to the two images employed here, both of which are agonistic: defense and competition.³⁶

This perspective is developed in the few chapters in the collection that do engage non-Christian systems of thought, which in action belies the apparent balance of Wainwright’s dogmatic, normative claim that in considering the logical incompatibility of the Buddhist teaching of impermanence and the Christian conception of God as eternal “both theists and Buddhists need to attend to the views of each other.”³⁷ While perhaps the tone of condescension is unintentional, it may be pointed

and including the philosophy of religion. The name given to the discipline early on, “comparative religions,” referred to enabling aspiring missionaries to convert the heathen by comparing their religion with all its inadequacies with the glories of Christianity. (Sharpe) Thus, missionaries were prepared to engage in debates (intellectualist fallacy) in order to show the superiority of Christianity over other religions, and thereby bring about conversions through the greater power of their reasoning.

34. Wainwright, “Introduction,” 8.

35. *Ibid.*, 9.

36. If we but step back for a moment, this claim evidences a breathtaking instance of cultural hybris. It says basically that the only game is my game, the only rules are my rules, and if you choose not to play, you lose. What universal mandate is there that everyone should care to engage in the kind of debate that Wainwright asserts?

37. Wainwright, “Introduction,” 9.

out that Buddhist engagement with theistic traditions has been going on for two and a half millennia, ever since the establishment of the sangha, and Buddhist thinkers hardly require encouragement in this area. Indeed, the question might be raised as to whether contemporary Christian theologians can come up with anything new, anything that has not already been considered by Buddhist thinkers and rejected on the basis of closely reasoned arguments. In other words, there are many Buddhist thinkers who have played the game, but there is no compelling reason that they should rise to Wainwright’s challenge.

III.A.ii. Griffiths

Paul Griffiths, in his contribution to Wainwright’s collection entitled “Nontheistic Conceptions of the Divine,” addresses the parochial character of the philosophy of religion, though without using that particular word. Griffiths notes that the philosophy of religion (as represented by the collection of essays itself) “is largely a Christian enterprise. Its problems, concepts, and methods are products of peculiarly Christian commitments and specifically Christian history, and its agenda is driven by these commitments and this history.... Christian concepts and methods provide the norm against which alien concepts and methods are measured.”³⁸ Since our attention here is to theology as a model of Buddhist thought, we need not belabor the point that Christian theology provides the conceptual basis for the philosophy of religion. The point that is to be emphasized instead is the way in which the structure of Christian theology informs, that is, gives structure to, the philosophy of religion despite its abstraction out of the sectarian commitments of specific faith communities. So also the abstraction of the category of theology out of its Christian context cannot help but carry with it the same structuring function or ideological power.³⁹

38. Paul Griffiths, “Nontheistic Conceptions of the Divine,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, 60–61.

39. The same pattern of Christian theology determining the agenda of philosophy of religion is also evident in Joseph Runzo, *Global Philosophy of Religion: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2001).

III.C. Buddhist Theology

III.C.i. *By Analogy, the Same Trajectory of Influence Can Be Expected for Buddhist Theology*

As we have seen the philosophy of religion, despite its practitioners' express intent to abstract the project out of the specific theological concerns of any particular Christian faith community, still retains the structures—questions, concerns, issues, presumptions, conceptual categories, terminology, and so on—of Christian theology. In the same way, the attempt to apply this abstracted conception of theology to Buddhist thought will necessarily bring with it the same structures that inform Christian theology, subtly and not so subtly molding the discourse of Buddhist theology to match the concerns, presumptions, questions, and so on of Christian thought.

Further, since theology is by cultural fiat a Christian project, a Buddhist theology will always remain imitative, that is second rate, derivative. Semiotically, this is evidenced by the fact that while Christian thought can be identified simply by the use of the term “theology,” Buddhist thought placed into such a conceptual framework will always be a marked category: “Buddhist theology.”

III.C.ii. *Malignant Presumptions: Three Examples*

III.C.ii.a. Mystical Silence

A first instance of how such presumptions regarding the universal characteristics of religion are far from benign, one perhaps more immediately relevant to this audience, is the notion that Buddhism, like all other religions, seeks the silence of mystical union. This presumption about the nature of religion—as opposed to the nature of any one religion, which is itself already an essentializing move—has even found its way into the authoritative pages of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. In setting up the rationale for Buddhist concerns with language, the author suggests the primacy of silent mystical union as the goal.

Any tradition that seeks mystical silence becomes intensely involved with the question of the role of language in religion. Silence presupposes speech; concern with the former reflects a concern with the latter. Even a brief survey of Buddhism would reveal a number of

important strands within its tradition that depend heavily, or focus primarily, on some concept of sacred language.⁴⁰

Without explicitly making the case, this claim presumes that Buddhism seeks mystical silence. Yet, what does that do for traditions such as Jōdo Shinshū that employ not mystical silence as the key to awakening but rather the recitation of the *nenbutsu* as an expression of gratitude for having already been assured birth in the Pure Land, that is, already assured of awakening? Or alternatively, what does it do to traditions such as Shingon and other tantric traditions that employ ritual practice including both moments of silent visualization and the recitation of mantra and *dhāraṇī*? Similarly, Nichiren Buddhism places its primary emphasis on the practice of reciting the name of the *Lotus Sutra*. Such a presumption makes all of these traditions at best only marginally Buddhist, or even a kind of embarrassing crazy aunt at Thanksgiving dinner. “Don’t ask about Aunt Betsy, she’s kinda out of it, but harmless, we just don’t talk about her much.”

III.C.ii.b. Meditation as Central to Buddhism

Another instance of the effect of theology on the understanding of Buddhism has been the way in which meditation has been promoted as the central, defining practice of Buddhism. In order to understand the full import of this presumption about the nature of Buddhism, we need to step back and look at the logic by which this presumption has taken on the status of common knowledge in the Western representations of Buddhism.

One frequently encounters the assertion that some special experience (mystical, transformative, unitive) is the foundation of Buddhism. Frequently these claims focus on Śākyamuni Buddha’s awakening, framing it as a mystical experience. But the basis for this presumption about Buddhism grows out of Christian theological concerns. The logic appears to be that:

1. Mystical experience is taken as foundational for Christianity.
2. Therefore, mystical experience is foundational for all religions.

40. Luis Oscar Gómez, “Language: Buddhist Views of Language,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, 2nd ed., vol. 8 (New York: Macmillan, 2005), 5308.

3. Being foundational for all religions, mystical experience is foundational for Buddhism as well.

It should be evident that claim number one is problematic, that the step from number one to number two constitutes an unwarranted generalization, and the application of that generalization to Buddhism constitutes a fallacy.

The idea that mystical experience is foundational for Christianity originates in the nineteenth and early twentieth century theological defenses of Christianity against what was seen as the corrosive effects of evolutionary science, psychology, and social theory, or more specifically the theories of Darwin, Freud, and Marx. Against such supposedly destructive (eliminative) reductionism, mystical experience was proposed by the Romantic theologians to be veridical, irrefragable, and irreducible.⁴¹

These ideas regarding the foundational role of mystical experience for Buddhism have supported the reduction of Buddhism to a technology for the production of mystical experiences, that is, to meditation. Again, this contrasts with Shin thought, which does not as such promote meditation. As a consequence, the logical sequence begun above continues:

4. Mystical experience is foundational for Buddhism.
5. Meditation is the Buddhist tool for the production of mystical experience.
6. Shin adherents do not practice meditation.
7. Therefore, Shin is not Buddhism.

Alternatively, nenbutsu may simply come to be treated as a form of meditation, *despite* Shin understandings to the contrary.

41. Consider, for example, Schleiermacher at the beginning of the nineteenth century and Otto at the end. This conception of religion also provides a basis for Perennialism, which adds the idea that there is one single truth revealed by mystical experience and that single truth is therefore the common basis of all religions—in other words, the idea that “ultimately” all religions are the same. Such a conception has been adopted by some of those theologians working in the area of theology of religions who hold an inclusivist view. Despite this, as well as the uncritical adoption of the Perennialist conception of religion in popular religious culture, it is shied away from by some contemporary theologians. See, for example, Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2009).

III.C.ii.c. Historical Founder

One of the impacts of theology on Buddhism as it is known in the West is the emphasis on the historicity of Śākyamuni Buddha and his centrality to the tradition as its founder. We can distinguish between these two dimensions of the theological structuring of Buddhism in the West, though they are of course closely intertwined with one another.

As indicated by Welch, the historical existence of Jesus was one of the dominant themes of nineteenth century theology. This seems to have been usually expressed in terms of the human nature of Jesus. Though Welch himself focuses more on the internal developments of theology, I would suspect that this discussion, and the importance it has had for theology ever since, specifically arises out of the increasing awareness of religious pluralism resulting from the expansion of empire. As discussed by Tomoko Masuzawa⁴² and by Catherine Bell,⁴³ the nineteenth century saw a shift from wide-ranging discussions of “curious customs” of foreign societies to discussions of “religions,” that is, as organized systems of thought and value comparable to Christianity.

With that horizon of religious pluralism, one claim that could continue to preserve the unique status of Christianity, in addition to scripture as revelation, was the actual living historical existence of Jesus. As of the nineteenth century, and unfortunately right into the present for many religiously illiterate, all other religions simply worshipped idols, that is, gods who were human creations. The living historical existence of Jesus as both divine and human continued to serve as a basis for Christian exceptionalism—because of this historical nature of Jesus as the Christ, worship of Jesus was not idolatry, but true religion, the one true God having revealed Himself in the form of Jesus.

The Buddhist response to this seems to have largely been to play the same game. Many contemporary accounts of Buddhism will begin with the life of Buddha, being sure to present him as a living person. Some authors go to such extremes as to give specific dates, calculated

42. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

43. Catherine Bell, “Paradigms behind (and before) the Modern Conception of Religion,” *History and Theory* 45 (Dec. 2006), 27–46.

on the basis of the traditional accounts. But one might ask, why does Buddhist modernism find it so important to place such great emphasis on the historicity of Śākyamuni? And, is the historical existence of the Buddha actually important? What seems to have been important for the medieval Indian epistemologists, such as Dharmakīrti,⁴⁴ was that Śākyamuni Buddha was an awakened teacher. It is the awakening of any buddha that legitimates his teachings. He is a reliable source of knowledge; his teaching (*buddhavacana*, lit. “speech of the buddha”) is authoritative and can be trusted.

This function becomes subtly transformed, however, when Śākyamuni becomes identified not as an awakened teacher, but rather as the founder of the tradition. In the Western theological tradition and the theologized popular religious culture, founders play a crucial role. They are uniquely authoritative, and their teachings become the standard against which everything else in the tradition is to be gauged for its validity or failure to adhere to that originary standard—leading to understandings of Buddhism as a rigid, doctrinaire fundamentalism.

So what if Śākyamuni is given this special status as founder of the tradition? Isn’t that after all what the tradition itself tells us? Actually, no, it isn’t, or at least it is only one way in which the self-understanding of the Buddhist tradition has developed over time.

One way to express this is that there is a difference between being an authority and being the sole authority. As an awakened teacher, though in some ways unique, Śākyamuni is potentially one among many—whether seven or a thousand as different Buddhist traditions claim. As founder, he is the standard of orthodoxy for the entirety of the tradition.

For Pure Land Buddhists of all kinds, this should pose a problem, and I know that in the West, this way of thinking stands in the way of understanding the Pure Land tradition. Many students, first introduced to the historicized Buddha of Buddhist modernism as founder of the Buddhist tradition,⁴⁵ seem to be unable to figure out how Pure

44. See Roger R. Jackson, trans., *Is Enlightenment Possible?: Dharmakīrti and Rgyal Tshab Rje on Knowledge, Rebirth, No-Self and Liberation* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1993).

45. We can consider the sometimes less than implicit assertion involved here as code for the modern Theravāda claims to hold the original and authoritative teachings and tradition and all others to be in one way or another lesser, if not deviations or heresies.

Land is a kind of Buddhism. Since there is nothing about Amitābha or Amitāyus in the Pāli canon, and the Pāli canon is treated as the sole authoritative record of the teachings of the founder Śākyamuni, then according to this theologized logic of founders as sole authorities for tradition, Pure Land is not true Buddhism. This is an example of how the theologization of Buddhism serves to structure not only its representation but also its reception—a dialectically mutually reinforcing relation.

IV. A COST–BENEFITS ANALYSIS OF ARGUMENTS FOR BUDDHIST THEOLOGY

Within the collection of essays *Buddhist Theology* introduced above, there are several arguments in favor of adopting the category of “Buddhist theology.” Rather than discussing all of the different arguments propounded, I would like to focus the discussion by asking a very specific question, one that eliminates much that is extraneous to our concerns here. That question is: What is gained by using the category “Buddhist theology”? In a relatively simple fashion, this brings to bear a costs–benefits model of analysis, referring here to an intellectual economy rather than a financial economy.

IV.A. *What Is to Be Gained?*

In the light of my great respect for Roger Jackson and the other contributors to the volume, as well as in light of being considered “narrow”⁴⁶ and “recalcitrant,”⁴⁷ I am hesitant to voice my disagreement, but find that I am not convinced. One may want to ask not whether the term “theology” can be stretched to fit Buddhism, or whether Buddhist concepts such as *dharmakāya* can be trimmed to fit “the ultimate,” or agree to the rhetorical strategy of claiming that it has always been that way, or make any of the other arguments presented, but instead ask: What is to be gained?

IV.A.i. *Status Argument*

One of the reasons for use of the phrase “Buddhist theology” given by more than one contributor to the volume *Buddhist Theology* is that it

46. Jackson, “Buddhist Theology,” 1.

47. *Ibid.*, 2.

locates the discussion within an intellectual and institutional framework that is already well established, well recognized, and well respected. Doing so would give discussion about those issues the authors wish to discuss an apparent coherence and academic legitimacy. This argument may be called the political stratagem argument, that is, it is politically advantageous to locate this discourse in the framework of theology.

IV.A.ii. The “Identity Argument” or a “Theology of Identity”

Another benefit according to these authors is that the normative character of the work presented and the personal religious commitment of the person presenting the work would be understood. In their view, a person working as a Buddhist theologian is necessarily self-identifying as a Buddhist, while not all scholars of Buddhism are identifiably Buddhists—some may be, some may not, and the issue of identity is left unspecified.

The logic of such presentations would seem to be “I am a Buddhist (or Zen Buddhist, or Tibetan Buddhist,⁴⁸ or whatever), and therefore what I believe is....” It is, in other words, dangerously close to a kind of dogmatism that grows out of an assertion of adhering to a specific religious identity. The claims made from such a positionality contribute to a sense that the project is basically deductive—“These are my axioms, this is what follows.” As such, it can also contribute to a confusion of identity and methodology⁴⁹—is there any specific methodology that has as its prerequisite being a Buddhist? If the claim is made that

48. See for example, John Makransky, “Thoughts on Why, How and What Buddhists Can Learn from Christian Theologians,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2011), 119–133, in which the author repeatedly emphasizes his personal identity, commitment, and practice of rNyingma Buddhist tradition. Similarly, Rita Gross (“Buddhist Theology,” in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger Jackson and John Makransky [London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2000], 55) stakes out as a starting point her religious identity: “As a Buddhist scholar-theologian, my agenda is to bring my experiential knowledge of Buddhist thought and practice into discussions of contemporary issues and problems, to work with the collective wisdom, compassion, and skillfulness of Buddhist traditions to suggest ways of alleviating the individual and collective suffering rampant in the world.”

49. See, for example, Gross, “Buddhist Theology,” 53.

yes, there is, then isn't that simply an unsupportable claim of epistemological privilege?

Beyond the issue of this kind of uninterestingly derivative “theology,” it is also relevant to ask whether such self-identification is of use to the reader in evaluating constructive efforts, or, by acknowledging the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” does it constitute a postmodern flourish intended to ward off such suspicions? Another aspect of such self-identification is a claim to authority, and in some cases becomes a covert appropriation of the authority of the tradition, or of the Buddha, onto one's own views.⁵⁰ However,

The term “Buddhism” turns out to be a site of unremitting contestation, as a cacophony of voices—each averring privileged access to the essence of the tradition—lays claim to its authority. Our own attempts to identify or stipulate the fundamental tenets, core practices, or even “family resemblances” that characterize Buddhism do little more than to add to this unremitting din, while at the same time distracting us from the obvious: the power of the term is sustained in part by its very indeterminacy, its function as a placeholder. The authority of the word “Buddhism” lies not in its normative signification(s) so much as in its rhetorical deployments.⁵¹

Certainly, the category “Buddhist theology” participates in one such normative deployment of “Buddhism.”

Such an approach to self-identification as a basis for constructive work also partakes in the fallacious metaphor of “religion as container,” when instead we need to acknowledge the variety of modes of engagement. I have sat Zen meditation; does that make me a Zen theologian? If you say obviously not, then why not? How much sitting does it take?

50. Sometimes it feels like everybody but me knows what the Buddha said, thought, and felt. Person A says, “This is what the Buddha taught.” Then I read Person B, who claims just the opposite of what Person A says, claiming that “This is what the Buddha taught.” I get so confused so that sometimes it all seems like everyone is making up their own Buddha. If people would only say “According to text XYZ, which I choose to accept as authoritative, the Buddha taught PQR,” then we could avoid so many acts of Sartrean bad faith.

51. Robert Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 16.

IV.A.iii. *The “Because Buddhism Is Important” Argument*

In addition to the political argument regarding legitimacy of the project and the value of self-identification argument, a third argument made in *Buddhist Theology* is that Buddhist theology is an important area of study because Buddhism has been a major player on the stage of history. Thus, Rita Gross argues,

Given the profundity of the Buddhist tradition historically and its impact on world history as a whole and on major cultures, it is strange to imagine that exploring what that tradition might have to offer today is deemed to be “off limits” by some who make claims about what should and should not be discussed by contemporary Buddhist scholars.⁵²

This is her argument for the value of considering the relevance of Buddhist thought to contemporary issues. She goes on to claim that it is appropriate to call such a project “Buddhist theology” for two reasons, which are versions of the legitimacy and self-identification arguments.

Buddhist thinkers may have something useful to say in relation to contemporary issues, but that is not in itself reason to place them in the (confining) framework of theology, where the range of presumptions, concerns, and issues originating outside of the Buddhist tradition itself structure discourse and entail answers within the limits of that confining framework.

IV.B. *What Is Lost?*

IV.B.i. *Not So Subtle Reinforcement of Popular Misconceptions of the Equivalency of Christianity and Buddhism (Matrix Model)*

In the approach to “world religions,”⁵³ which I call the “matrix model,” a selection of religions is arranged along one axis of a matrix, and a set of characteristics is arranged along the other. This is a consequence of the “levelling” of religions into relative uniformity,⁵⁴ primarily as

52. Gross, “Buddhist Theology?,” 55.

53. See, among many others, Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*; and Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

54. Bell, “Paradigms,” 33.

systems of beliefs, those beliefs being justified in terms of religious experiences.⁵⁵ The creation of world religions as instances of religion was motivated by the rise of the scientific study of religion in the nineteenth century. The various religions were treated as objects to be observed and generalized about—thus, scholars in one still influential approach “began to search for universals within the family of human religions, plural but clearly expressing an ultimately singular entity of a profound sort—the sacred.”⁵⁶

The relevant consequences for our inquiry into the ideological entailments of the phrase “Buddhist theology” are twofold. First, Buddhism and Christianity are set as equivalent to one another, which in the contemporary consumerist society means that they are freely chosen commodities to be acquired. The consumer of religion can select one or any other, because they are reduced to an equivalency as items in the array of world religions—only differentiated by how the cells of the matrix are filled in. The equivalence leads to implicit assumptions that the factors important to Buddhism are individually equivalent to their analogues in Christianity—thus, Amida comes to be implicitly considered as equivalent to Jesus, and Sukhāvātī comes to be implicitly considered as equivalent to Heaven. This is not a “New Age” phenomenon; it is the consequence of the objectification and systematization that in fact creates the religions categorized as world religions. In the process of systematization, doctrinal concerns, that is, belief, is (still) taken as the primary markers of different religions.

IV.B.ii. Reinforcement of the Intellectualist Fallacy that Doctrine Is Primary

The intellectualist fallacy, by which I mean here the belief that action always derives from thought,⁵⁷ is fundamental to the primacy given to doctrine in the study of religion generally. The notion that thought,

55. Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (London: Routledge, 2003), 54.

56. Bell, “Paradigms,” 33. That some readers will find the world religions approach with its levelling and promotion of a transcendent unifying experience of the sacred unproblematic is simply evidence of how influential this way of constituting religion as a category has become—not that it is correct.

57. See Catherine Bell on the “thought–action dichotomy,” *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 25.

i.e., belief, is the basis (or should be the basis) for action explains the role of theology in contemporary Christian discourse. This primacy of belief can itself be traced to the Protestant Reformation, at which time theologians such as Luther rejected the primacy of the sacraments as salvific, replacing them with the primacy of faith—that is, proper belief, orthodoxy. The Buddhist tradition, however, does not support such a salvific role for belief, and to create a “Buddhist theology” implicitly supports a reinterpretation of Buddhism along such lines.

One sees this, together with the “theology of identity,” rather clearly in engaged Buddhism, where the logic runs as follows. “I am a Buddhist. Buddhists believe XYZ. Actions PQR follow from beliefs XYZ. Therefore, I will engage in actions PQR.” Despite the way in which key Buddhist ideas, for example, the “four noble truths,” are almost universally presented in the contemporary popular Western/ized literature on Buddhism as beliefs, such representation distorts their role within the system of Buddhist thought itself. One does not believe in suffering, for instance, and such belief is in no way conducive to awakening. Suffering is a description of the human condition, and one either realizes the truth of that description or not.

IV.B.iii. Reinforces the Illusion That “Buddhism” Is Something Other Than a Construct

As a concept, “Buddhism” is a nineteenth century invention.⁵⁸ It arises out of the imperialist expansion of Euro-American societies, which encountered a variety of differing local traditions and thereby created the intellectual horizon upon which these could be constellated as part of the “same” religious tradition. As such nineteenth century theology informed the representation of Buddhism as a single, unified tradition. It was “theologized” from the very beginning.

The idea of Buddhism being a Euro-American nineteenth century invention is supported by the history of the 2,500th anniversary celebrations in Burma (the “Sixth Buddhist Council,” 1954–1956). Even as late as that, Burmese organizers did not wish to invite Japanese Buddhist representatives on the grounds that as married clergy, they were not

58. See Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”* (London: Routledge, 1999), 143–160; also Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “Introduction,” *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

real Buddhists. To this extent, then, there was not among the organizers an understanding of “Buddhism” as a singular, global entity.

While a fair amount of critical research has been done on figures such as the Rhys-Davids, Blavatsky and Olcott, Alexandra David-Néel, and Evans-Wentz, it is here important to point out that their work, their study of Buddhism, their appropriation or apologetics would all have been impossible without British imperialism. They had the international scope to range across Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, China, Japan, and Tibet because of the existence of the British Empire. To the extent then that “Buddhism” as a single unified religion could be created (and not “seen whole” as is sometimes implied) is a consequence of imperialism. Buddhism in this sense is as much a product of imperialism as are Mid-Western Americans wearing Madras shirts in the summer.

V. CONCLUSION

V.A. What I’m Not Claiming

Although I had thought that this would simply be a matter of attempting to clarify my own reservations about an intellectual project, that of “Buddhist theology,” the intentionally provocative character of the title creates far too many opportunities for misunderstandings—either in opposition or in support—to simply conclude without a note of explanation of what I do not mean. As I indicated to our Association’s President, Dr. Tanaka, when asked for a title, the quotation marks around the phrase “Buddhist theology” are essential since it is the concept that I wish to address, although of course concept and practice are not so easily separated one from the other.

Therefore, in closing this critique of the category of “Buddhist theology,” I would like to at least attempt to ward off some possible misunderstandings. First, there may be a mistaken understanding that I am denying the validity of the project of examining the relevance of Buddhism to our contemporary world, which we can call the “normative project.” This initial clarification is necessary because one of the usages of the term “theology” is as a signifier for developing Christian responses to contemporary issues. However, rather than denying the validity of contemporary applications of Buddhist thought, I would argue that Buddhism has always had a strongly practical dimension, and that continuing the project of practical application of Buddhist thought into the present is a good and valid undertaking. I also think that there is room for disagreement in how contemporary application

ought to be undertaken. Most importantly, from my own perspective, developing Buddhism as a practice in the present requires a sophisticated and critical reading of the tradition itself, so as to be able to avoid making uncritical assumptions about the nature of Buddhist thought or uncritical projections of our own values onto the tradition.

Second, I am not claiming that Buddhists, that is those who self-identify what they do as part of an ongoing stream of praxis originating from or at least transmitted through Śākyamuni Buddha, have never or should not engage in critical-reflective or systematic thought. Rather, this essay focuses attention on the question of employing the category of theology for discussion of those aspects of Buddhist thought. Specifically, it seems to me that theology—like the category religion itself—imposes assumptions and presumptions onto any subject area placed within that intellectual framework. Such impositions lead to ideological entailments that rupture the integrity of the structures of Buddhist thought.

Third, I would like to affirm that although initiated by etymological concerns, that is, the literal understanding of theology as talk about god/s, my concern has developed into one about ideological entailments and the structuring of thought.

Fourth, this is not an argument for “purity.” All claims to purity are simply strategic moves in a rhetorical game of authority and power. In fact, there is no such thing as purity, only syncretisms, hybridities, and mongrelizations. I personally like the notion of being a mongrel Buddhist, and feel that it has as much integrity as any official lineage document—and I assure you that I have one—that I could stick up on my wall and point to as a means of giving authority to my own critical reflections. (For those not adequately paying attention, the foregoing statement is intentionally ironic, doubling back on itself in such a fashion as to both claim and simultaneously disclaim the very same authority in an attempt to stand somewhere from which authority as such may itself be critiqued.)

What I am instead addressing is the adoption of a concept, that of theology, and the formulation of what is in fact a new category, a new rubric, which is not simply another and unproblematically neutral name for critical-reflective or systematic thought. Obviously, Buddhist textual history is replete with scholastic works of doctrinal systematization. However, the category of thought identified by the term “theology” does not simply mean “applying religious ideas in the present.”

Even if an author were to attempt to stipulate that as the meaning of the term as they intend to employ it, such stipulative definitions are powerless gestures in the face of popular religious culture and the ideological formations that it wields in its progress across the intellectual landscape. Small defensive positions constructed of carefully crafted stipulative definitions are tossed aside effortlessly by popular religious culture.

V.B.ii. Positive Suggestion: Buddhist Praxis

Although the absence of a positive suggestion in no way invalidates a critique, it seems appropriate here to make a positive gesture by pointing to an alternative to the category “Buddhist theology.” In this instance I would suggest that the category “Buddhist praxis” might be both adequate and encompassing enough to serve. By “Buddhist praxis” I mean thinking about things in terms of some or any of the key ideas that give structure to Buddhist practices—either in the sense of deriving from or in the sense of leading toward, the latter perhaps distinguishing Buddhist thought from theology that proceeds from “first principles.”⁵⁹ It is critical to note that what is being proposed by the category praxis is a dialectic relation between doctrinal claims

59. This is one of the problems that I find with works such as Knitter’s comparative *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. He repeatedly speaks in essentializing terms, such as declaring what Buddhists think or claim (*passim*). And he quotes Buddhists who say things like, “As a Buddhist...” (e.g., 187). Such formulations seem to bring together two presumptions. First is the intellectualist fallacy that human action is based on conscious decisions reached rationally through a logical deduction from a set of “first principles,” such as the theological bases of a religion. Such a presumption is effectively not only naïve but outdated, considering both Freud and Marx. Second, it is based on a notion of “identity religion” (a neologism coined to match “identity politics”). So in this approach, one claims a religious identity, and then asserts that their actions not only follow from but have their legitimacy because of that identity. This is why I have problems with “dialogues” since they set particular individuals as representing the entirety of a religious tradition. (Further, despite being a popular work and his repeated disclaimers about the accuracy of his representation of Buddhism—which he says he is not concerned about, since it is only in the service of his own theological project—Knitter continually claims to be able to assert what Buddhists as an entire class of people think about various issues. Even when he supports his claims

and the practices (and the experiences those practices lead to) of the Buddhist tradition. It is not a case of privileging doctrine as determinative of practice, nor of privileging practice as determinative of doctrine. None of the three terms—doctrine, practice, experience—ought to be considered foundational for the others. Indeed to do so would be rather “un-Buddhist” in that it is counter to the notion of conditioned co-production/mutual arising (*pratītyasamutpada*).

V.C. Closing

Clearly one of the most important directions for Buddhist studies in the West is the development of constructive/critical Buddhist thought. It is important, therefore, that Buddhist thought be treated not merely as an antiquarian project, something for people who are interested in that sort of thing but that is not relevant beyond that scope. Why, for example, spend time understanding the workings of eighth century Indian Buddhist epistemology if it has nothing to contribute to contemporary discussions about knowledge, perception, and the nature of mind? (I am convinced, for example, that many of the current dead ends and backwaters in discussions of consciousness can be elucidated by just such study.) Or, for another example, why examine Tang dynasty Chan writings if they do not contribute to a better understanding of the history of Buddhist meditation and its contemporary practice? Equally important, in terms of my own work, why study the thought of nineteenth century European philosophers unless it contributes to a self-reflectively critical analysis of the cultural assumptions read into Buddhism in its process of enculturation into Western societies? The importance of this project, that is the making relevant of Buddhist thought in the present world, is so great that it is important to be careful at the very foundations of that project, that is, paying attention to the implications of the category into which such constructive, critical, normative efforts are placed. This includes not only the category of theology, but also that of Buddhism. There is no singular entity corresponding to Buddhism or the Buddhist tradition. These are constantly reinvented conceptual constructs serving a variety of differing and often competing socio-political ends.

As discussed above, “Buddhism,” as the concept is familiar to us today, is itself a nineteenth century construction. It arises out of the

with quotes, he does not seem to recognize that the authorities he is citing only offer one, sometimes very idiosyncratic view of Buddhist thought.)

age of empire, when it became possible to juxtapose the religious practices of Sri Lanka, Tibet, China, Japan, Burma, Nepal, and so on, and abstract from those a single, unitary religious phenomenon. This is, obviously, a work of essentializing, but the more specific point I would like to raise is that in that process of creating a representation of Buddhism as a single unitary religious phenomena, the construction and its audience were both heirs of the Western religious tradition, and therefore employing it as if pre-reflectively given the structures of nineteenth century theology. In other words, Buddhism as represented in the West, which means the working category that everyone who has been educated to think in those terms established by nineteenth century comparativists employs, is itself theologized from the very beginning.