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Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue: The Gerald Weisfeld Lectures 2004, and: Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation: Karmic or Divine? (review)

Amos Yong

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ing *God* (see especially p. 113). This book is highly recommended for introductory seminary courses in spirituality and for faith development programs.

Robert P. Kennedy
St. Francis Xavier University

BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN DIALOGUE: THE GERALD WEISFELD LECTURES 2004. Edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel. London: SCM Press, 2005. 262 + x pp.

BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY AND THE QUESTION OF CREATION: KARMIC OR DIVINE? Edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006. 182 + xii pp.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel has been professor of systematic theology and religious studies at Glasgow University since 2000, and member of the secretarial board of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies (ENBCS) since 1997. The volumes under review are collections of essays presented at conferences sponsored respectively by Glasgow University and ENBCS. *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue* derives from the second series of the Gerald Weisfeld Lectures organized by the university's Centre for Inter-Faith Studies, whereas many of the essays in *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation* were produced for the fifth conference of the ENBCS, which was devoted to the theme of creation. In the following, I will summarize these two books and then comment more extensively on Schmidt-Leukel's project in particular, especially as that project is expressed in both texts.

Schmidt-Leukel coordinated the Weisfeld lectures in May 2004 as a prelude to the Dalai Lama's visit to Scotland. The four parts of this volume represent the four weeks' worth of lectures on the respective topics of life and death, the ultimate, mediators, and the quest for peace. For each week, two lectures were given, one each from Christian and Buddhist perspectives, with responses from each one to the other's lecture as well. Hence, there are sixteen chapters in *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue*: the original eight lectures (four by Christians and four by Buddhists), plus the short response of each of the eight lecturers to the lecture of his or her dialogue partner.

Elizabeth Harris (University of Birmingham) and Kiyoshi Tsuchiya (University of Glasgow) discuss life and death, leading to the tentative conclusion that Christians emphasize the need for the redemption of the ego (hence embracing a personal God), whereas Buddhists wish to lose the ego's perpetual desires (hence advocating a more cosmic or naturalistic view of life and death). This is followed

in part 2 with essays by Karl Baier (University of Vienna) and Minoru Nambara (University of Tokyo) on the ultimate, with Baier comparing and contrasting Nagarjuna's logic of emptiness and Nicolas of Cusa's apophatic logic, and Nambara comparing and contrasting the Mahāyāna emphasis on nirvāna as samsara (and vice-versa) with the mysticisms of Eckhart and Boehme. The discussion of mediators provides the opportunity for Schmidt-Leukel to expand on his major project, which explores "the possibility of seeing Buddha and Christ as incarnations of that transcendent reality which is the basis of our salvation" (p. 153). John Makransky (Boston College and Kathmandu University), however, counter-suggests that although the Buddhist can experience the liberating power of Christ in the Christian communion, it is less clear that such an experience for the Buddhist is the same as for a Christian, or that the practices of such an experience lead to the enlightenment pointed to by the Buddha. Finally, Kenneth Fernando (former bishop of Colombo) talks about the quest for peace in the Sri Lankan context, whereas Hozan Alan Senauke comes at the topic from his work in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in California.

One of the outstanding features of *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue* is that all participants have a good deal of scholarly training in both religious traditions and bring that academic expertise to bear in their essays. Hence we have in this volume not only interreligious dialogues *between* Christians and Buddhists, but also *intra*religious dialogues about Christianity and Buddhism by Christians and by Buddhists separately (first in the essays) and then together (in the responses). In short, we are treated to Christian and Buddhist perspectives in three directions: on Christianity, on Buddhism, and on their encounter. The volume includes an index, and will serve well as a supplementary text for courses on Christian-Buddhist dialogue.

Whereas *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue* provides an overview of Buddhist and Christian perspectives on a wide range of theological topics, *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation* is similarly dialogical, but focused only on the doctrine of creation. In his introduction, editor Schmidt-Leukel suggests that the perennial debate of Christian theism versus Buddhist atheism (at least as stereotypically conceived) has inevitably turned on the question of creation. It is time, therefore, to explore the question of whether or not there is any possibility for convergence on this issue. If some Lutherans and Catholics are now beginning to see a *via media* forward on the doctrine of justification, is it not perhaps possible that such might also be available for Christians and Buddhists? This is, of course, a bold hypothesis.

There are two parts to *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation*. The first consists of seven essays (from the ENBCS conference) that approach the doctrine of creation from Christian and Buddhist perspectives. The first three essays present Buddhist views. Ernst Steinkellner (Vienna University) surveys Hindu concepts of creation and provides a brief history of Buddhist responses, especially focusing on Dharmakīrti's argument from ontology. The major question beneath these Indian debates concerns the nature of reality and of causality, with Hindus

grounding impermanent entities in the permanence of Brahman and Buddhists inclining toward an ontology of momentariness, interdependence, and becoming. Along these same lines, José Ignacio Cabezón (University of California, Santa Barbara) summarizes the views of Gunapala Dharmasiri (famous for his *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God* [1974]) concerning the Mahāyāna notion of “pure fields” or “pure universes,” and of the fourteenth Dalai Lama. Dharmasiri’s polemic is less true to Buddhist intuitions and sensibilities than the Dalai Lama’s (which Cabezón prefers), even though both, like most in the Buddhist tradition, recognize the role of karma in the “production” of the world, emphasize the importance of individuals working out their own salvation in a world of *dukkha*, and have a general aversion to cosmological uniqueness (intuiting instead cosmological multiplicity—multiple universes—that in turn depend much less on the idea of a theistic creator). Eva Neumaier (University of Calgary), then critically analyzes a Tibetan Buddhist text suggesting an openness to the doctrine of creation, and compares and contrasts this with the *tathāgata-garbha* doctrine of the Buddha as the matrix or womb out of which the world comes into existence.

The next four essays present Christian perspectives on the doctrine of creation, albeit in dialogue with Buddhism. Armin Kreiner (University of Munich) discusses creation vis-à-vis the problem of evil (perennially also a Hindu problem featuring prominently in Buddhist critiques). Kreiner suggests as potentially fruitful a version of what has come to be known as the “free will defense,” insofar as that is tied to what John Hick and others have called a soul-making theodicy. John Keenan (Middlebury College) argues that Buddhist critiques of creation cosmologies are ineffective against the Genesis myth and, by extension, Christian views of creation insofar as Jewish-Christian doctrines are less cosmological explanations than they are part of the salvation history of both monotheistic traditions. Aasulv Lande (Lund University and president of the ENBCS) examines process theology and wonders if the process doctrine of creativity translated theologically into the idea of *creatio continua* is compatible with the Buddhist doctrine of karma. Finally, John D’Arcy May (Trinity College, Dublin) compares and contrasts the Christian idea of the world as God’s body with the Buddhist claim that the world is Vairocana’s body, and attempts to adjudicate these claims by the pragmatic criterion of how such theologies enable Christians and Buddhists to engage the ecological crisis.

Part 2 of this volume, titled “The Unbridgeable Gulf? Towards a Buddhist-Christian Theology of Creation,” consists of three essays and a short conclusion by Perry Schmidt-Leukel. In chapter 8, Schmidt-Leukel lays out the presuppositions that inform this task: that both traditions affirm a transcendent reality, that both are soteriologically motivated, and that while ultimate reality is in itself ineffable, at least Buddhists and Christians have concepts derived from different contexts that point to their different forms of experiencing such an ultimate reality. The next chapter analyzes Buddhist criticisms of the doctrine of creation such as the problem of evil, the argument from ontology and causality,

and the pragmatic argument of theistic irrelevance and ethical ambivalence (that the idea of a sovereign God would undermine human responsibility); what emerges seems to be the impasse of karma or God (specified in the book's subtitle).

Schmidt-Leukel's constructive Buddhist-Christian theology in response to this impasse is presented in a lengthy tenth chapter, building on the insights of the previous nine. There are four elements woven together in his argument. First, Kreiner's conclusions regarding the free-will defense and the person-making theodicy are important from the perspective of the classical Buddhist emphasis on human responsibility as essential to the salvation process. Second, even in the Buddhist tradition, karma operates not deterministically but both includes the merits available through the Buddha's dharma and assumes that even nirvāna is a causal condition for liberation insofar as it is an object of meditative consciousness. Buddhist debates about these matters parallel Christian debates both about sovereignty and grace and about how transcendence (God, in this case) interacts with the world. More precisely, the intricacies surrounding the Buddhist doctrine of *tathāgatagarbha* may also complement the complexities revolving around Christian doctrine of creation, including the question of "how an unconditioned, permanent, immutable, simple god could create a world which is conditioned, temporally structured, changing and internally diversified" (p. 160). Third, the Buddha's admonition against speculating about the ontology of creation is suggested to be compatible with Aquinas's doctrine of creation that was flexible enough to accommodate either the world being everlasting or its having had a beginning. From this, finally, Buddhists and Christians both agree that the idea of first cause is problematic even as that of final cause is central to the soteriological (and, for Christians, eschatological) visions of both traditions. In this framework, "the world in the final sense *is* the creation of the ultimate. . . . Thus the ultimate is the *first* or—given the teleological structure, better—*final* cause of the world in a logical and ontological, not in a chronological sense" (p. 171; italics in original).

Schmidt-Leukel's constructive proposal can be seen as part of his wider project in Buddhist-Christian theology so far. Since the mid 1980s, he has labored earnestly on this front, producing dozens of scholarly essays (in English and German) on theology of religions, philosophy of religions, Buddhist studies, and the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, as well as authoring or editing (by himself or with colleagues) at least fifteen books on these topics. One would be hard pressed to identify a more formidable Christian theologian at work at the intersection of these arenas. Still, perhaps two questions can be raised, one theological and one comparative, about Schmidt-Leukel's proposal.

The first has to do with Schmidt-Leukel's pluralist theology and philosophy of religions, defended succinctly in his essay in *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue*, and then tested against the constructive theology of creation in the other book. Pointedly put, is the theory that Christianity and Buddhism are diverse responses to an ineffable ultimate reality sustainable? Makransky's counter-

proposal highlights perhaps irresolvable questions underneath any pluralistic theology or philosophy. To be fair, Schmidt-Leukel has written a long book—*Gott ohne Grenzen: Eine christliche und pluralistische Theologie der Religionen* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005)—defending and even extending this hypothesis in dialogue with John Hick (while distinguishing it from other proposals like Mark Heim’s), so any final criticisms of this theory will have to take that argument into account. In the meantime, we may have to remain satisfied with Schmidt-Leukel’s claims that there is no contradiction between denying that *dharmakaya* and god are identical, and yet that their difference “inheres in their different . . . forms of experiencing the same ultimate reality” (*Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation*, p. 121).

On the comparative front, while there is much to applaud in the way that Schmidt-Leukel theorizes (theologizes) out of the soteriologies of both religious traditions, there may be a subtle confusion at work in his attempt to think through the doctrine of creation from this soteriological point of view. To explore this issue, consider first Thomas Aquinas’s distinction between primary and secondary causes, which Schmidt-Leukel draws upon in his constructive proposal. The former is divine and ontological, whereas the latter is creational and cosmological. Alternatively, if creation is understood in final (teleological) causal terms, then divine causality can be understood in soteriological and eschatological terms as well. Now switching to the Buddhist perspective, the question can be put thus: is the *tathāgatagarbha* to be understood as equivalent to ontological causality (of the world as a whole) and karma to cosmological causality (of the world as conventionally understood)? This is what Schmidt-Leukel appears to suggest, especially inasmuch as he links the causality of the *tathāgatagarbha* to Buddhist soteriology (the *telos* of salvation as enlightenment and liberation). Schmidt-Leukel then asks if Christians might “accept the Buddhist notion of karmic causality as a functional equivalent, expressed in a nonpersonalistic idiom, of their own idea of a creator-god” (p. 175). But this appears to confuse karma understood as cosmological and conventional (secondary) causality with God understood as ontological and teleological (primary) causality.

Still, these may be no more than minor points that will be clarified in the ongoing dialogue. They should certainly not detract from the major contributions represented by these two books. They are exemplary examples of the difficult but important constructive work going on within the framework of the interfaith dialogue in general and in Christian-Buddhist dialogue in particular. In the process, Perry Schmidt-Leukel has emerged as one of the more profound voices in this conversation. We are indebted in these volumes to his editorial work and to his pushing the discussion forward precisely by engaging the most difficult of theological and buddhalogical issues at the juncture of the contemporary Christian-Buddhist encounter.

Amos Yong
Regent University School of Divinity