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Ruben L. F. Habito

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses three key themes that mark James Fredericks's lasting contribution to Buddhist-Christian dialogue. In his (hitherto unpublished) doctoral dissertation, Fredericks examines the work of Tanabe Hajime, a Buddhist philosopher of the Kyoto School on the one hand, and on the other, that of Karl Rahner, a Catholic theologian who was a major influence in the Second Vatican Council, and finds a resonant theme in their works as he considers the notion of "alterity," a middle way between the pitfalls of monism and dualism with regard to the relationship of Ultimate Reality and worldly phenomena, of God and Creation. A second theme is his ongoing emphasis on the practice of interreligious friendship between Buddhists and Christians, which can lead to the discovery of untold intellectual and spiritual treasures and to mutual enrichment for both sides. Friendship can then become a firm basis for a stance of solidarity, overcoming religious differences, and grounding cooperative work toward justice, peace, and ecological healing.

KEYWORDS: alterity, Karl Rahner, Tanabe Hajime, interreligious friendship, solidarity.

Alterity, friendship, and solidarity are three keywords that emerge in describing the highlights of James Fredericks's lasting contribution to Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Fredericks, by his own account, was launched into a lifelong path of Buddhist-Christian dialogue by his mentor at the University of Chicago, the renowned Japanese religions scholar Joseph Kitagawa, who advised him to look into the work of thinkers of the Kyoto School, a philosophical movement influenced by Zen Buddhism, for possible themes for his dissertation. He was led to examine more closely the work of Kyoto School philosopher Tanabe Hajime, in whose writings Fredericks found resonant as well as contrasting themes in the thought of Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. In his dissertation that he successfully defended at the University of Chicago in 1988, Fredericks sought to explore similarities as well as differences between strands of the Buddhist and Christian traditions as represented in the works of the two noted thinkers, pursuing the question of "how religious experience is brought to speech, and

finally how the conflict of interpretations that results from these differences might be more deeply and irenically understood.”¹

ALTERITY: ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS AND GOD

In the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, the articulation of “the religious,” that is, the experience of Ultimate Reality, revolves around the term *śūnyatā*, often rendered in English translation as “Emptiness.” In the Kyoto School, this Mahāyāna term comes to be rendered as “Absolute Nothingness” (*zettai-mu* 絶対無), that is, contrasted with “(relative) nothingness” that stands at the opposite polar end of the notion of “being.” Absolute Nothingness is used in this context as an expression of Ultimate Reality, and as such does not allow for a polar opposite, since “Absolute,” is precisely a notion that does not fall into, or better, goes beyond any and all (relative) oppositional concepts. Needless to say, in contrast, in Christian tradition “the religious” is conveyed by the term “God,” understood as Absolute Being, the supreme source of all that is holy, true, good, and the beautiful, also identified as the Creator of the universe and all that exists but is Wholly Other to the created order.

In the first chapter of his dissertation, Fredericks lays out critiques of the Christian notion of God as presented by three philosophers of the Kyoto School, Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, Nishitani Keiji, and Abe Masao. While developing their critiques of Christian theism from different angles, these three nevertheless come to a common thrust in their dissatisfaction with the Christian notion of God as inherently dualistic, pointing out the unbridgeable chasm between the Creator as Wholly Other, and the created universe. Fredericks then reviews the response to these three critiques given by Thomas Altizer, one of the noted thinkers of the so-called death of God movement in recent Christian thought, who sought to reshape the articulation of Christian belief in radically new ways, that is, toward overcoming the dualistic implications of classic theism. Altizer brings forth a counter-critique against the Buddhist thought of his dialogue partners, pointing out that behind their critiques of Christianity as dualistic lurked the monistic character of their understanding of Ultimate Reality, referred to as Absolute Nothingness.

The problematic that becomes the launching pad of the dissertation then is in the apparent opposition between the dualistic character of the Christian notion of God on the one hand, and the monistic character of the Mahāyāna Buddhist notion of Absolute Nothingness as expounded by the thinkers of the Kyoto School on the other. Is there a basis for a conversation between these two sides, a common ground of discourse in the understanding of Ultimate Reality in their respective traditions that would avoid the hiatus based on the imputation of dualism on the one hand, and monism on the other?

Fredericks lays out the problematic of the thesis, and asks: “Can the Christian experience of God as Absolute Other be interpreted in a way that does not lead necessarily to the problem of dualism? In a similar fashion, can the Buddhist experience of the non-duality of absolute nothingness be interpreted in a way that does not lead necessarily to the problem of monism?”

Fredericks finds a Christian understanding of “the religious” that neither falls under dualism nor monism in the theology of Karl Rahner. And he finds in the thought of Tanabe (in contrast with that of the latter’s mentor Nishida Kitarō) a Buddhist view of Absolute Nothingness that does not fall into a monistic view of Ultimate Reality. This is where the notion of “alterity” comes into Fredericks’s argument, which he puts forth in the following three theses:

1. For both Rahner and Tanabe, “the religious” (God for Rahner, Absolute Nothingness for Tanabe) is experienced in an affirming transformation of human subjectivity.
2. The source of this transformation lies not in subjectivity itself, but in an “otherness” which is not reducible to a power or faculty of subjectivity.
3. The alterity of “the religious,” in its relationship to subjectivity, forms neither a monism nor dualism.²

In Fredericks’s usage, “alterity” (a Latin term that literally means “otherness”) in Rahner’s thought upholds the otherness of God vis-à-vis the human subject (and the whole of Creation) while also affirming the intimate presence (immanence) of God in the transformed human subject (and in the whole of graced Creation).³ In the thought of Tanabe, Absolute Nothingness is non-dual vis-à-vis the human subject, but at the same time is experienced as Other Power (a notion taken from Pure Land Buddhism) that is the ground of the transformation of the human subject.⁴ In short, “alterity” as Fredericks develops it in this work opens a middle way between monism and dualism in these two respective (Christian and Buddhist) approaches to “the religious.”

FRIENDSHIP: MUTUAL LEARNING AMONG RELIGIOUS OTHERS

Fredericks brought this theme that he had begun to reflect on and consider for his dissertation project, into his conversations with Kyoto School philosopher Masao Abe, whom he met as a graduate student at the University of Chicago in 1984 when Abe was a visiting professor. They began to form a deep bond of friendship, a bond that was further cemented when Fredericks stayed in Kyoto during a yearlong sabbatical in 1998–1999, and was a frequent visitor to Abe’s home. He continued to challenge Abe on the latter’s understanding of Absolute Nothingness, and it is these conversations that helped reshape Abe’s own stance on Absolute Nothingness throughout his long career, and while a scholar-in-residence at several prestigious institutions in the United States.⁵ In examining Abe’s writings, it is clear that he continued to reflect and write on this theme from ever new angles, spurred by his encounters with Christian thinkers, including his “friend from University of Chicago days.”⁶

Fredericks writes about his friendship with Abe in an endearing and insightful essay, “Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship,” a piece reprinted several times and now a classic and must-read on the theme of “interreligious friendship.”⁷ Fredericks remarks on the wide gaps in their respective backgrounds and stations in life:

To call us colleagues in the dialogue among Buddhists and Christians hardly does justice to how dear he is to me. To call me his *deshi* (disciple) does not fit

the expectations this word conjures in Japan. He and I disagree professionally on many important matters. Besides, Sensei is a Buddhist and I am not. Is Abe Masao my friend? He is thirty-five years my senior and a distinguished scholar. In Japan at least, calling us friends (*tomodachi*) would be presumptuous. I will stick with friendship, however, and will try to justify the term by qualifying it. My friendship with Abe Masao is a *spiritual* friendship.⁸

Interreligious friendship has become a keynote of James Fredericks's legacy not only in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, but in interfaith work and interfaith studies as a whole, highlighted and described in greater detail by other essays in this volume, and celebrated in a collection on this theme by younger scholars with whom Fredericks co-edited.⁹ Underlying this theme is another key emphasis Fredericks has made over the years on the question of theology, or theologies, of religions.

Fredericks is often cited for his point, argued and developed in his *Faith Among Faiths*,¹⁰ as well as in his other shorter writings, that "a completely satisfactory theology of religions is not possible,"¹¹ given the stark inadequacies of the three basic positions that this kind of theological reflection has offered, that is, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.¹² He calls for a "moratorium" on this type of theological reflection as leading to a dead end, and instead argues for an approach of direct engagement with the Religious Other, in friendship, as well as in theological learning, through comparative theology.¹³

He describes this endeavor of comparative theology as an act of hope, "that Christianity's encounter with non-Christian religions can lead to a profound transformation in ourselves as a religious community of believers."¹⁴ This transformation comes about as a Christian committed to the Gospel message encounters a member of another religious tradition and community with an open heart and enters into a relationship of friendship, and is thereby motivated to learn about this other religious tradition on its own terms. In doing so, one comes to see one's own (Christian) faith tradition in the eyes of the Religious Other, and undergoes a "real deepening in (one's) own religious vision, a spiritual transformation generated by the encounter between the truths of Christianity and the truths of non-Christian religions."¹⁵

Fredericks's own contribution in this area of Comparative Theology is noteworthy. In addition to his well-received recommendations and reflections on approach and method, his many short writings also include studies on Aquinas and Nāgārjuna,¹⁶ a reflection on the Christian Trinity compared with Ultimate Reality as Amida Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism,¹⁷ and reflections on Luther's understanding of justification vis-à-vis the thought of Shinran,¹⁸ among others. Since his formal retirement from full-time teaching at Loyola Marymount University, he has begun to embark on other thematic comparative projects, including reflections on Augustine and Shinran on Original Sin and Original Enlightenment, a comparison of Rahner's "supernatural existential" with Shinran's notion of "True Practice," and a rethinking of the Christian notion of Trinity in the light of the doctrine of the Three Bodies of the Buddha.¹⁹

SOLIDARITY: FRIENDS JOIN HANDS FOR EARTHLY TASKS

The bonds of friendship combined with mutual learning among Religious Others usher in another level or mode of relationship, that of *solidarity* in working together toward building community in an increasingly fragmented world. Fredericks addresses this and makes his case in another notable work, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity*.²⁰ Fredericks gives examples of interreligious solidarity in concluding this work:

In Sri Lanka, Christians work with Buddhists in the Sarvodaya movement and its efforts to assist villages in becoming economically self-reliant and improving standards of education. . . . [T]he people of St. Paul's Methodist Church in Fremont, California, have built their church next door to a mosque built by the Islamic Society of the East Bay. Because of zoning complications neither community was able to build its facility without the cooperation of the other. Dialogue between these two communities is what began the process.²¹

Fredericks further expands his reflections on new forms of solidarity arising out of interreligious dialogue and friendship in an essay entitled "Dialogue and Solidarity in a Time of Globalization," noting an enhanced awareness of interdependence among members of different religious communities that cross geographical and other boundaries.²² He cites particular cases of violence perpetrated against religious communities that arise out of ignorance and intolerance, after which members of a religious community of another tradition stood by those who came to be victims of violence due to religious persecution.²³ The examples cited by Fredericks recall courageous actions taken by members of Jewish and Christian communities vis-à-vis beleaguered Muslim communities and individuals in the wake of the violent acts of 9/11. Such acts of solidarity among members of different religious traditions are taken precisely as an act of fidelity to their own tradition's teachings.

Adherents of the world's diverse religious traditions are thereby challenged and called to find within their own respective doctrinal and ethical frameworks the grounding for welcoming and embracing the Religious Other in attitudes and acts of hospitality and solidarity. For Christians, Fredericks emphasizes how the virtue of hospitality toward the stranger, the alien, the marginalized of society, is mandated by the Gospel, and understood as an imperative for Christians to be true to their own identity as such.²⁴

Fredericks's own engagement in the local interfaith movements and activities in his home city of Los Angeles (that is, until his recent retirement from teaching at Loyola Marymount University)—which has enabled him to form deep, enduring friendships with individuals across different Buddhist traditions (Pure Land, Zen, Theravada), not to mention those from other faith communities—lends credibility to his writings, and serves as a living testimony to the cogency and timeliness of his message about interreligious friendship and solidarity.

In an essay responding to Fredericks's on the Catholic Dialogue with Buddhists, Huaiyu Chen suggests widening the range of solidarity between Buddhists and

Christians and other interreligious partners, from local issues through which Fredericks has widened his circle of friendships, further toward matters that affect the human community throughout the world, such as violence, gender, health, climate change (global warming), and other issues of global import that also have impact locally.²⁵ This can be taken as a welcome expansion of Fredericks's own proposals for engaging in concrete tasks entailed by a solidarity that transcends religious boundaries by people of goodwill, toward alleviating the suffering of our fellow sentient beings and healing the wounds of our Earth. This is but a natural and inevitable outcome of engagement with the Religious Other in dialogue and in forming bonds of friendship.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: OFF THE MAP?

In a provocative essay reflecting on his own years of engagement in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, James Fredericks notes how he began with the "fulfillment theory" laid out in post-Vatican II documents as his theological map for engaging in dialogue in his early years, but now emphasizes that he finds this theory no longer helpful.²⁶ He cautions especially his fellow Catholics and Christians in general against what he calls "the domestication of difference" in their way of regarding other religious traditions.²⁷ The fulfillment theology of religions laid out in Vatican II and Pope John Paul II's writings, while avoiding an exclusivistic or proselytizing attitude, consigns other religious traditions to the role of "preparations for the Gospel," thereby tending "to marginalize and control difference and privilege similarity" found in the Religious Other.²⁸ Such a theological framework accords the (Catholic) Christian a superior position in relating to Religious Others, and fosters an attitude that becomes a hindrance to mutual understanding, genuine mutual learning, and effective solidarity. Here "the religious Other is rendered a relatively obscure reflection of the same truths witnessed to more explicitly in Christianity," thus diluting or erasing "the destabilizing and potentially transformative power of the other religions."²⁹

While welcoming this fulfillment theory as a great achievement for the Catholic Church in enabling its members to be open to what is true and holy in other religions, Fredericks exposes the inadequacy of this theological framework especially for engaging in dialogue with Buddhists.³⁰ He describes what he sees as irreconcilable differences between Buddhists and Christians in their respective approaches to certain issues, including the understanding and articulation of Ultimate Reality, how to deal with anger, the question of human rights, and the nature and intent of spiritual practice.³¹ These are differences that tend to be obscured and diluted by some who tend to emphasize perceived "similarities" between the two religious traditions. In short, Fredericks is arguing for the acceptance of the Otherness of the Buddhist traditions, and against the watering down or domestication of differences.³²

Fredericks's emphasis on respecting and accepting the Otherness of his Buddhist friends brings us back to his theme of Alterity. As noted in the first part of this essay, the doctoral dissertation that launched his life of Buddhist-Christian dialogue focused on this theme, referring primarily to the understanding and articulation of Ultimate

Reality in the two traditions, and highlighted a middle way between the extremes of monism and dualism. His ongoing and lifelong dialogue with his Buddhist friends has made him starkly aware of an Otherness that took him “off the map,” challenged him, and continued to spur him to engage in mutually enriching friendships with Religious Others. He discovers an Otherness that does not thereby equal incommensurability, but rather one that invites both sides to enter into a relationship of friendship and solidarity, and in so doing, find a welcome and enriching complementarity.³³ These relationships of friendship and solidarity that James Fredericks has allowed himself to enter into, or better put perhaps, has been blessed with throughout his life, have served to deepen and broaden his understanding and appreciation not only of the rich treasures found within the Buddhist family of traditions, but also within his own Catholic Christian faith.

NOTES

1. James Fredericks, *Alterity in the Thought of Tanabe Hajime and Karl Rahner* (Unpublished PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1988), 1.

2. *Ibid.*, 24.

3. Fredericks focuses on Rahner’s notion of the “supernatural existential,” that is, graced Creation, which is a departure from the theologically dualistic implications of neo-Scholastic thought that Rahner inherited. In this, Rahner follows the lead of Henri de Lubac, SJ, in the latter’s groundbreaking and controversial *Le Surnaturel* (*The Mystery of the Supernatural*, Milestones in Catholic Theology Series, New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1998). Here Fredericks refers to Rahner’s two key tomes providing the groundwork for the latter’s foundational theological stance, *Hörer des Wortes* (*Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundations for a Philosophy of Religion*) (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1994) and *Geist im Welt* (*Spirit in the World*) (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1994).

4. Tanabe Hajime’s work is enshrined in his *Zangedō to shite no Tetsugaku* (*Philosophy as Metanoetics*: Nanzan Studies in Religion and Culture, trans. Takeuchi Yoshinori, with Valdo Viglielmo and James Heisig, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). See also Taitetsu Unno and James Heisig, eds., *The Religious Philosophy of Tanabe Hajime: The Metanoetic Imperative* (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Fremont, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1990), a volume celebrating and expounding on the significance and implications of Tanabe’s thought for philosophy and theology, with many prominent Christian and Buddhist authors contributing, including Fredericks himself. These English translations and reflective commentaries were published after Fredericks had submitted his dissertation, based on his readings of the original Japanese texts.

5. See Donald Mitchell, ed., *Masao Abe and a Zen Life of Dialogue* (Boston: Charles Tuttle, Inc., 1998).

6. See Fredericks’s tribute to Masao Abe, “Masao Abe and Karl Rahner: On Traces of Dualism and Monism,” in *ibid.*, 242–247.

7. First published as James Fredericks, “Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship,” *Spiritus* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 219–230.

8. See reprinted version in David Brockman and Ruben L. F. Habito, eds., *The Gospel Among Religions: Christian Ministry, Theology and Spirituality in a Multifaith World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 218–219.

9. See James Fredericks and Tracy Tiemeier, eds., *Interreligious Friendships after Nostra Aetate* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

10. James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

11. Ibid., 166.
12. *Faith Among Faiths* argues in detail for the unsupportability and unviability of these three options in the theology of religions for living in a multifaith world such as ours.
13. Ibid, 165–179.
14. Ibid, 178.
15. Ibid., 179.
16. James Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 51–95.
17. “Primordial Vow: Reflections on the Trinity in Light of Buddhism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 325–343.
18. “The Finnish Luther: Reflections from a Buddhist Perspective,” in *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 231–241. Journal website: <http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0012-2033>.
19. Fredericks has listed these projects as “in preparation” in his current curriculum vitae.
20. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.
21. Ibid., 114.
22. James Fredericks, “Dialogue and Solidarity in a Time of Globalization,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 27 (2007): 51–66.
23. Ibid., 64–65.
24. Luke 10:25–37. See Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians*, 113.
25. Huaiyu Chen, “A Response to James Fredericks: Sharing the Karma,” in *Catholicism and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. James L. Heft, SM (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153–159.
26. James L. Fredericks, “Off the Map: The Catholic Church and Its Dialogue with Buddhists,” in *Catholicism and Interreligious Dialogue*, 127–144.
27. Ibid., 136.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. It is important also to emphasize here that while he regards the “fulfillment theory,” also known as “inclusivistic theology,” as inadequate, Fredericks has also given ample space in his writing to warning against the pitfalls of a naive kind of theological pluralism that would tend to a relativistic view of religious truth and would also play down the absolute claims made by the different traditions, including Christianity. See “How Helpful Is Pluralism?” in his *Faith Among Faiths*, 103–118.
31. Buddhism is by no means a monolithic tradition, but is described better as a cluster, or family of traditions, with stark differences among them on key issues relating to articulating Ultimate Reality, human behavior, spiritual practice, etc. Thus, there are other ways of presenting Buddhist views and perspectives than the ones Fredericks focuses on in this essay. I beg to differ with Fredericks on the points he makes in this particular section of the essay, but will wait for another occasion to address this.
32. Ibid., 136–141.
33. This resonates very much with the account of the fruits of Buddhist-Christian dialogue given by Sri Lankan Jesuit Aloysius Pieris, SJ, most notably in his work, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).