Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars

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Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars
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CAN THERE BE SUCH A THING as Buddhist Theology? Before reading this book, I would have thought this notion a contradiction in terms. Surely, if one can assert anything about Buddhism, one can confidently state that it is non-theistic? I ordered this book out of sheer perversity. 'Another attempt to Christianise Buddhism, to sneak God in,' I scoffed. I was wrong. On reading the introduction, a collaborative effort by the two editors, it quickly became apparent that this was a deeply serious work. It proposes an important and much needed new approach to the scholarly study of Buddhism that should be of benefit not only to academics but also to practitioners. Indeed, its principal strength is that it seeks to revise this peculiarly modern distinction, a distinction that would have seemed incomprehensible to Buddhists of the past. [32]

Buddhist Theology comprises a series of essays by scholars of Buddhism (Buddhologists) working within American academia. However, what distinguishes this collection from many others is that all the contributors are professed Buddhists, and they make no attempt to disguise or apologise for this fact; quite the reverse. The strength of the book derives from its synthesis of scholarly, critical methods and personally committed spiritual investigation. Rather than try to examine Buddhism as though from the 'outside', the contributors position themselves within specific Buddhist traditions, albeit with a critical perspective. In other words, their scholarship rests upon a foundation of personal spiritual commitment rather than upon a paradigm of sociological-cum-historical analysis. The tradition of personal commitment varies from case to case but there is a strong bias towards Tibetan schools.

Since *Buddhist Theology* covers a wide range of topics and themes it is not possible to review them all here. Instead, I will focus on its central thesis. Essentially, it proposes a new intellectual-cum-spiritual discipline that the contributors choose to call 'Buddhist Theology'. It argues that an appropriate environment for developing this discipline is the 'academy' ('university' in British English). Actually, this activity is not altogether new, but it has, so far, been conducted only in a rather peripheral manner. In naming and identifying the leading characteristics of this activity, the authors aim to demonstrate its legitimacy and so encourage its further development.

In particular, *Buddhist Theology* challenges the institutionalised legitimacy of 'Buddhist studies' by arguing that its claim to dispassionate, 'non-committed', scholarly examination of the Buddhist tradition is somewhat disingenuous. It also challenges the widespread academic prejudice that committed Buddhists cannot approach their own traditions with a critical intelligence and the consequent belief that their scholarship should not be relied upon. According to José Cabezón,[1] the scholarship of 'believers' has been widely dismissed as 'contaminated' by their personal religious convictions and accordingly replaced by a pseudo-scientific 'objectivity' that seeks to treat religious traditions as 'cultural artefacts' rather than repositories of truth and meaning. But, he argues,

religious commitment no more precludes a [33] critical perspective than lack of commitment guarantees it, thus challenging a fundamental assumption of Buddhist studies.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

BUDDHIST THEOLOGY IS DIVIDED into three main parts and this review will focus on the first, more theoretical part. It begins with an editors' introduction by Jackson and Makransky comprising two sections: first, 'Buddhist Theology: its Historical Context' and second, 'Contemporary Academic Buddhist Theology: its Emergence and Rationale.' Part One of the book is subtitled 'Buddhist Theology: What, Why, and How?' Together with the introduction this establishes the theoretical framework for the book. This includes a piece by José Ignacio Cabezón entitled 'Buddhist Theology in the Academy,' which might legitimately claim to be the defining essay.

Part Two comprises thirteen essays that approach various themes and topics as examples of experiments in Buddhist Theology. For example, there is an essay by Makranksy entitled 'Historical Consciousness as an Offering to the Trans-historical Buddha' which explores the impact of contemporary historical consciousness on how modern Buddhists will need to revise their approach to the Buddhist tradition. An essay by Cabezón explores the issue of truth in Buddhist Theology and proposes a pragmatic approach that follows William James. The other essays included in this section are of varying interest, some rather over-burdened with jargon while others radiate the spiritual enthusiasm of their authors. The final part of the book comprises two critical responses to the previous essays (by Luis Gomez and Taitetsu Unno respectively).

THE EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

THIS FOCUSES ON BROADENING and clarifying the meaning of 'Theology' so as to encompass Buddhist activity and the editors are at pains to extricate the term from its more popular connotations. 'Theology' is usually understood to mean 'discourse about (the Christian) God' but the term is of Greek origin and, as Jackson points out,[2] it is found in Plato's *Republic*, where it refers to poetical narratives about the gods. Originally, then, it seems that theology meant discourse about the divine. Tracy, a contemporary [34] commentator on theology, has identified it as 'intellectual reflection within a religious tradition.'[3] Later in the book, John Dunne writes:

> Buddhist Theology is the self-conscious attempt to present reasoned arguments from within the tradition on issues of importance to Buddhists in order to correct, critique, clarify or expand the tradition.[4]

The definitions so far offered emphasise the primacy of intellectual factors in the practice of theology. However, the approach of Buddhist theologians cannot be confined to intellectual reflection if this is to admit abstract and theoretical considerations only. Their reflection will be guided by volitional and emotional factors too, most fundamentally a desire for personal spiritual transformation, and is likely to be framed in an altruistic context. Buddhist Theology will then become a spiritually therapeutic activity, a spiritual exercise.

Jackson then tackles a potential objection to the project of Buddhist Theology. Some Buddhists will say, he admits, that since the aim of Buddhism is an experience that is beyond reason (*atakkāvacāra*) theology is surely beside the point. Notwithstanding, he maintains, there remains a vast legacy of Buddhist intellectual reflection that can be examined. But why examine it? Jackson suggests that 'we may use the term "theology" to describe conceptual activity within and about a particular religious tradition without thereby implying that such activity is an avenue to the ultimate.'[5] Jackson's comment may be overcautious here. The anonymous critic seems to confuse

means with ends; even if the Buddhist goal is ultimately beyond reason it does not follow that reason is dispensable as a means of moving towards it, simply that its limitations will eventually become apparent in the course of spiritual evolution.

Somewhat disappointingly, this discussion of the *raison d'être* of the Buddhist theological enterprise lacks any detailed consideration of its potentially transformative impact upon the individual theologian. This seems a significant and regrettable omission. Nowhere in the book is theology discussed as a spiritual practice; rather it is evaluated in terms of what results it produces, predominantly for others. This would seem to imply that theological activity is an adjunct to 'practice' and aims to yield perspectives, deci-[35]sions and beliefs of value to the practitioner but that the theological activity itself is not practice. However, a bolder approach might propose that the spiritual transformation of the theologian is likely to be the first – even principal – fruit of theological work. Its further fruits will be discoveries, reflections, and insights that may prove spiritually useful to others. Indeed, without the first of these fruits it seems doubtful that the second is possible.

This relationship between the theological exercise and the spiritual life of the theologian is extremely important. A contemporary Buddhist teacher and theologian has suggested that

> The only possible Right Motive with which the study of Buddhism can be undertaken is the hope that through such study Enlightenment may ultimately be attained.[6]

This may seem a rather uncompromisingly grand and somewhat idealised statement. However, in more immediate terms we can propose that: The primary purpose for practising Buddhist Theology is that through such practice one will be spiritually transformed and, secondarily, that by engaging with one's theological work others too may be transformed.

Inevitably, this raises all sorts of questions. What is meant by spiritual transformation? How does one measure whether spiritual transformation has taken place? Does this invalidate the work of historians or archaeologists of religion and other non-committed scholarly investigators? These questions deserve rigorous spiritual investigation, perhaps even theological work.

The definition of Buddhist Theology just proposed does not aim to exclude non-Buddhist scholars from examining Buddhism altogether but it does exclude them from practising Buddhist Theology. In addition, they are, by definition, excluded from approaching Buddhism as the Dharma, that is, from approaching Buddhism as a means to spiritual liberation. The potential limitations and pitfalls of this approach were identified fairly early in the Buddhist tradition by, for example, the redactors of the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*:

> Here, bhikkhus, some misguided men learn the Dhamma… but having learned the Dhamma, they do not examine the meaning of those teachings with wisdom… they do not gain a reflective acceptance of them. [36] Instead, they learn the Dhamma only for the sake of criticising others and for winning in debates, and they do not experience the good for the sake of which they learned the Dhamma. Those teachings, being wrongly grasped by them, conduce to their harm and suffering for a long time.[7]

Following this warning, the Buddha is reported as introducing the simile of the poisonous snake which, if grasped wrongly, may turn back and bite the grasper causing fatal injury. The following passage of the same sutta describes the highly important simile of the raft.

> Bhikkhus, I shall show you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.[8]

The Dharma is for the purpose of 'crossing over' to the other shore of spiritual awakening. It does not aim at propositional truth but is better described as a method, a soteriology. The true test of the Dharma's value is in its efficacy, the extent to which it enables spiritual liberation. The purpose of Buddhist Theology, then, will be to inspire transformation not only in oneself but in others too, and the critical methods, tools and approaches of the academy will be utilised under the gaze of this over-arching vision.

Through investigating traditional Buddhist doctrines one is likely to unearth one's own unexamined intellectual convictions and even prejudices, allowing one to evaluate their usefulness and veracity in the light of one's spiritual purpose. One may become aware that there are aspects of traditional Buddhism that one cannot accept as true; perhaps one will become aware of degeneration within a certain tradition and thus be able to point it out to the unwary. These are just a few examples of how the theological enterprise may impinge upon an individual's spiritual unfoldment.

THE CONTEXT FOR BUDDHIST THEOLOGY

JACKSON POINTS OUT that until relatively recently (the nineteenth century, say) Buddhist theological work had been carried out by Buddhist monks in monastic contexts: Nāgasena, Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu to name but a few. The notion that one might want to study Buddhism and yet not be inter-[37]ested in practising it would no doubt have struck such great theologians as incomprehensible, perhaps perverse. At least initially, however, Western interest in Buddhism grew from a colonial desire to understand the beliefs and forms of life of the subjugated populations. Consequently, most of those doing scholarly work on Buddhism in Western academic contexts have not themselves been practising Buddhism until very recently (the 1980s and 1990s).

A new generation of Buddhist scholars – the 'baby-boom Buddhologists' – is now working in the academy: scholars who began their careers with a practical interest in, even a commitment to, a particular Buddhist tradition. They turned to academia as a means of finding out more about their chosen tradition. Since until now no Western equivalent of the Buddhist monastic university has existed, the secular university was the only context where critical investigation of Buddhism was possible. As a result, the baby-boomers found tenure in faculties of Religious Studies which insisted 'that their members be committed, both in research and pedagogy, to description rather than prescription.'[9] This approach prevented them from pursuing Buddhist theological work systematically, at least until their academic standing was sufficiently secure for them to risk it.

Cabezón points out that the Religious Studies approach leaves many – including the most – important issues untouched.[10] After the work of philology is complete there remains the question of the truth of any given doctrine. Moreover, there is the question of relevance and application to contemporary circumstances. All these lines of inquiry fall outside the orbit of Religious Studies. Buddhist Theology, however, embraces such questions as academically legitimate and it does this by challenging the assumptions that underlie the Religious Studies discipline.

Initially, the 'scientific' study of religions arose in contradistinction to Christian Theology as a means of establishing a legitimate context for the academic study of non-Christian religions (at a time when Christianity was considerably more dominant than it is now). This approach employed the method of epoché, the suspension of prescriptive judgements so as to open up space for the in-depth study of non-Christian religions, free from the assumption of their inferiority to Christianity. While providing an opportunity for [38] many people to learn about a range of religious traditions – and even their own where they were not themselves Christian – the rationale of Religious Studies precluded the application of this academic work to the theological concerns of the religions

themselves. But at least some people studying their own religion in a critical, academic context will not be content merely to describe their own tradition at a distance, as it were, but will wish to 'clarify the truth and value of their tradition from a critical perspective located within it.'[11] Ironically, then, the discipline of religious studies has produced a generation of non-Christian scholars who aim to develop a constructive, critical theology that fits neither within the 'value-neutral' confines of Religious Studies nor the prescriptive boundaries of Christian theology.

Makransky points out that the 'value-neutral' stance of Religious Studies has, in fact, never been properly value-neutral. Rather, it implicitly established a value in religions divorced from the normative interests of their own religious communities: 'a value found exclusively in their capacity to fulfil the intellectual, social and economic interests of the Western academy.'[12] In other words, religious traditions became fodder to feed the academic machine – to nourish research programmes, conferences, publications and – of course – to build scholarly reputations.

According to Makranksy, however, the domains of Religious Studies and Theology now appear to be much less mutually exclusive than they once did. Previous assumptions about the nature of disciplinary knowledge have been challenged and the a priori hegemony of Christian belief has disintegrated, allowing the academy to approach Buddhism 'as a source of truth and value for persons' lives.'[13] He points out that the growing interest in Buddhism among Western people is driven by practical concerns – the ecological crisis, the death of God, the breakdown of traditional forms of authority and hierarchy. If academic discourse about Buddhism does not address pressing issues such as these it will become increasingly irrelevant to the wider culture that funds it.

Makransky points out that Buddhist traditions are in need of critical self-reflection. In order to communicate what they have to offer to the contemporary Western world, they will need a critical perspective on how the traditional patterns of Buddhist thought and practice have been shaped by socio-[39]cultural and historical forces that may not be applicable to contemporary settings. If they fail to do this they may, unwittingly, cause harm to the spiritual lives of sincere Western converts – a particularly sad irony given that the principal aim of the Dharma is to release humanity from suffering.

Thus far, the contemporary critical tools developed within the academy have not been very thoroughly applied in a Buddhist theological context. This has meant that a gap has opened up between those who transmit the living spirit of the Dharma – who are, by and large, not trained in critical methods – and those who critically analyse it in order to understand how it arose. The bringing together of personal commitment and critical scholarship may lead to a renewal of Buddhism, even a new turning of the wheel of the Dharma, that will enable practising Buddhists to diagnose the influence and effects of cultural conditions on the development of their tradition and so cut away the rot in order to reveal the vital heartwood underneath. Until very recently, Buddhists have tended to take their own traditions somewhat uncritically and literally, perhaps alienating those trained in critical thinking and scholarly methods.

Makransky defines Buddhist Theology in the following way:

> It includes critical reflection upon Buddhist experience in the light of contemporary understanding and critical reflection upon contemporary understanding in light of Buddhist experience. Like that of Christian theologians, it is the work of scholars who stand normatively within their tradition, who look to traditional sources of authority (in sacred text[s] and previous forms of social practice and experience), who re-evaluate prior Buddhist understandings in light of contemporary findings and who seek thereby to contribute to the continuing development of their tradition in its relevance to new times and places.[14]

It is worth pausing to examine this definition. Makransky identifies five principal features of a Buddhist Theology:

(1) It is done by scholars
(2) These scholars stand normatively within their tradition
(3) They look to traditional sources of authority
(4) They seek to re-evaluate Buddhist teachings in the light of [40] contemporary concerns
(5) They seek to contribute to the development of their tradition.

(1) BUDDHIST THEOLOGY IS DONE BY SCHOLARS

NOWHERE DOES MAKRANSKY DEFINE what he means by the term 'scholar'. However, later in the book,[15] Cabezón supplies us with a few characteristics of scholarship. First, it is based on a commitment to breadth of analysis – to the examination of all relevant sources – which would include grappling with the most anachronistic and problematic aspects of a tradition.

Second, scholarship is critical. It should seek to make familiar the unfamiliar but also defamiliarise the commonplace. It should force us to examine our own presuppositions about our religion, to scrutinise our beliefs and thus reconsider their appropriateness. The critical approach is thus anti-dogmatic and will evaluate Buddhist ideas and practices in relation to whether they help the individual to move towards Enlightenment.

Third, scholarship requires a commitment to the use of formal apparatus. This includes things like the systematic exposition of one's subject, admissions of limitations or omissions in one's arguments and sources, as well as more formally stylistic matters such as appropriate annotation and citation, bibliographical information, and so on.

Cabezón argues that such an approach is valuable for two reasons. First, such methods have proved worthwhile so far, and second, 'There is arguably no greater form of social legitimation than acceptance in the academy, and this requires the emergence of a mode of theological discourse that subscribes to its norms.'[16] This is a rather large claim and its examination goes beyond the scope of this article.

(2) NORMATIVE COMMITMENT TO TRADITION

BUDDHIST THEOLOGIANS ARE PERSONALLY COMMITTED to the tradition that they investigate, appreciating that tradition as a source of personal spiritual nourishment. They are interested in its transformational value, in how it may enhance their lives, not simply in examining it as a sociological or historical phenomenon. In other words, it matters to them. Clearly, such personal conviction will entail a different sort of critical examination than the [41] one conducted by the historian or sociologist. It will be driven by a personal spiritual search (*sammannesanā*),[17] a desire for meaning, coherence, and direction.

(3) RELIANCE UPON TRADITIONAL SOURCES OF AUTHORITY

BUDDHIST THEOLOGIANS WILL CONDUCT THEIR INQUIRY in the light of what their chosen tradition upholds. They will have a basic trust that the tradition has useful things to say and will aim to clarify what these are, as well as to strip away what is no longer useful or even limiting. However, this touches on a fundamental problem in discerning the spiritual value of Buddhist teachings. Any approach will be limited by one's degree of spiritual development. This may mean that one will be tempted to dismiss certain teachings through prejudice or simply ignorance when, in fact, that teaching is of fundamental importance. In consequence, a healthy spiritual inquiry is most likely to take place in a context of dialogue with a personal spiritual teacher who may embody the spirit of

the Dharma more adequately than the theologian. This also implies that the value of the theologian's work will be influenced by the degree of his or her own spiritual realisation.

(4) RE-EVALUATION OF BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

BUDDHIST THEOLOGIANS WILL NOT ACCEPT their traditions on the basis of blind faith (*amūlikā saddhā*), nor assume that everything in the tradition must be true, but will have an awareness of how teachings are forms of practice that have been shaped by a multiplicity of forces, not all of them rooted in spiritual inspiration. The traditional teachings will be re-evaluated in the light of their liberative value, not in terms of likes and dislikes, fashionable views or personal prejudices. But theologians must surely be cautious here. How are they to know whether some teaching is spiritually beneficial or not? The fact that something may, at first glance, appear to be spiritual chaff may, upon developing deeper insight, reveal itself to be indispensable. The problem of evaluation underscores the need for caution and scrupulous care in the examination of one's tradition in order that one may step firmly upon the raft of Dharma instead of dismantling it prematurely. [42]

(5) CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRADITION

THIS DRAWS OUT the practical, other-regarding aim of theological investigation – the bodhisattva element. It illustrates that such work may express a compassionate responsiveness to the spiritual needs of others and hence be conducted in a spirit of humility and service. Buddhist theologians will be servants of their spiritual communities and of the Buddhist tradition as a whole. They will not place themselves above others – or above the tradition even – in some privileged position but will recognise that their skills and knowledge represent only part of the rounded spiritual individual. They will recognise that the Buddhist tradition, like everything else, is characterised by impermanence (*anitya*) and lack of fixed identity (*anātman*) and needs, therefore, to be continually revitalised and re-appraised. They will understand the urgent need for reassessment and re-presentation of Buddhist principles given the novel circumstances of contemporary Western life.

A further point to notice about Makransky's definition is that it not only requires theologians to examine the Buddhist tradition in the light of contemporary scholarly findings but also demands that they examine the issues of the contemporary world in the light of Buddhist principles and insights. To this end, they may develop Buddhist critiques of prevailing socio-cultural practices. This kind of work is still in its infancy but includes, for example, the ecological work of Joanna Macy and the work on sexuality of José Cabezón. This Buddhist critique is essential if the pervasive view that 'West is best' is to be critically examined.

Does Makranksy's definition leave anything out? Well, as has already been suggested, the book as a whole seems to omit any reference to the personal transformative impact of theological work on the theologian. In addition, there seems to be very little emphasis on the communal context of Buddhist Theology. The picture created so far is of an individual pursuing his or her research in an isolated way. Presumably, each of the contributors to the volume does participate in a spiritual community of some description. Unfortunately, this aspect of their enterprise is not explicitly articulated. Given the emphasis in Buddhism on the importance of Sangha (spiritual community), it would seem appropriate to stress the interpersonal dimension of theological work. [43]

Ideally, the theologian will be working within a theological community that will provide a framework of support, encouragement and critical dialogue. In fact, it is likely that valuable insights will be gained in the course of theological dialogue as much as in the context of personal research and inquiry. This underlines the importance of spiritual friendship (*kalyāna mitratā*) as the social

context of Buddhist theological activity, an important safeguard against dangers such as personal aggrandisement (*māna*) and spiritual bewilderment (*moha*), as well as a cluster of other defilements (*kleṣā*). Of course, this ideal can be realised only if there are a number of Buddhists participating together in a theological community who are all motivated by a desire to help each other develop spiritually, as well as benefit the wider Buddhist community. They would need to be motivated and bound together by a shared spiritual impulse.

There is, though, a difficulty here. The Buddhist tradition is vast and disparate. Theologians may be committed to Buddhist traditions that are so different from one another that dialogue seems impossible. This limitation is unwittingly reinforced by Cabezón's suggestion that the Buddhist theologian is most likely to be committed to a particular Buddhist tradition, for example, Tibetan. He speculates that the theologian who relies on more than one Asian Buddhist tradition will be rare. Western Buddhist academic theology will, he says, be necessarily sectarian.[18] This seems a rather disappointing and pessimistic view. The astonishing – and unprecedented – characteristic of the post-modern Western world is that we have access to the entire Buddhist tradition. We are able to trace how certain doctrines and practices developed as Buddhism was transmitted from culture to culture. We are in a position to 'prune the Bodhi tree' and so enable it to blossom anew. Is it not possible that we can take our stand on the Buddhist tradition as a whole without having to commit ourselves to a sectarian standpoint? Could not a valid approach to Buddhist Theology be to discern the underlying unity that binds all traditions that we call Buddhist? In using such an approach, the function of the Buddhist theologian would be to extract the 'essence' of the Buddhist message so that it may be sprinkled over – and thus perfume – the forms of Western life. This seems to be the most exciting – and daunting – challenge facing the Western Buddhist theologian. [44]

THE SOURCES FOR BUDDHIST THEOLOGY

WHAT IS THE RAW MATERIAL for Buddhist theological inquiry? According to Cabezón, the theologian 'must take tradition – and especially the *textual* sources of the tradition – seriously'[19] (my italics). This would seem to imply – perhaps unwittingly – that the tradition is, primarily, transmitted through texts. However, many integral features of Buddhist life are not well documented, including meditation, ritual and devotional practices. Presumably they should not be excluded from consideration. A textually biased 'protestant' approach to the examination of the Buddhist tradition has been consistently and persuasively criticised by Gregory Schopen, who argues that a fuller picture of the nature of Buddhism as it has actually been practised emerges from the examination of archaeological remains and it is worth recalling some of his reflections here. Schopen argues that the study of Buddhism has been inappropriately focused on textual evidence and, moreover, that this focus owes more to Western intellectual and theological conditioning than it does to the nature of the Dharma.

It is possible that the curious history of the study of Indian Buddhism is neither curious nor unique. It begins to appear as only one instance in which a particular assumption concerning the location of religion [i.e. in texts] has dictated and determined the value assigned to various sources. It is possible that what originated as a sixteenth-century Protestant polemic of where "true" religion is located has been so thoroughly absorbed into the Western intellectual tradition that its polemical and theological origins have been forgotten and now it is taken too often entirely as a given.[20]

Buddhist theologians will be alive to this prevailing approach and examine it critically. They will also be receptive to additional ways of characterising and examining Buddhist traditions. This would include the kinds of evidence that Schopen has highlighted.

> It is hardly revolutionary to suggest that, had the academic study of religions started quite literally on the ground, it would have been confronted with very different problems. It would have had to ask very different questions, and it would have produced very different solutions. [45] It would, in short, have become not the History of Religions – which was and is essentially text-bound – but the Archaeology of Religions. It would have used texts, of course, but only those that could be shown to have been actually known or read at a given place at a given time, or to have governed or shaped the kind of religious behaviour that had left traces on the ground… This Archaeology of Religions would have been primarily occupied with three broad subjects of study then: religious constructions and architectures, inscriptions, and art historical remains. In a more general sense, though, it would have been preoccupied not with what small, literate, and exclusively male and certainly atypical professionalized subgroups wrote, but rather, with what religious people of all segments of a given community actually did and how they lived.[21]

The Buddhist theologian will not only be interested in texts and archaeology but will examine Buddhist experience too. This will mean that non-textual topics like meditation, ritual, devotion and ethical behaviour will be included in his or her inquiry. Importantly, he or she will be concerned to identify and understand the spiritual significance and transformative value of such activities rather than merely to describe their outward forms from a 'disinterested' perspective.

In addition, the Western Buddhist theologian will need to be sensitive to a further possible assumption: that of doctrinal fundamentalism. This approach discriminates what is to be regarded as 'authentically Buddhist' from what is to be dismissed as heretical in the light of certain doctrines that are believed fundamental. While there is much value in this approach, it may lead to the dismissal of valuable soteriological methods that appear – at least superficially – to be doctrinally at odds with established Buddhist dogmas (of course, the question of which are the fundamental doctrines is itself problematic). This issue has been highlighted by the debate over 'critical Buddhism', stimulated by the work of its principal protagonists Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiro.[22] Among other things, Matsumoto argues that the doctrine of *Tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha-nature) is not Buddhist because it contradicts the fundamental Buddhist insight of *anātman* (no fixed self).[23] Sallie King [46] counters this metaphysical critique with a soteriological defence. She argues that the doctrine is in fact impeccably Buddhist because it helps Buddhists to gain Enlightenment. She proposes that it should be seen 'as a soteriological device, not as an ontological entity or principle.'[24]

THE INSTITUTIONAL FOCUS FOR BUDDHIST THEOLOGY

JACKSON CONCLUDES HIS ARTICLE by commenting that 'Buddhist Theology emerged almost exclusively from the monasteries; today, it still has a home there, but just as commonly arises from lay-oriented meditation centers and academic departments.'[25] It is now transmitted through many media, including books, magazines and the Internet. The contributors to this book, being themselves academics, are understandably keen to show that there is room in the academy for the activity they call Buddhist Theology. They make a strong and reasonable case for this. Perhaps, though, there may be other institutional contexts where Buddhist Theology will flourish. It is possible, for example, that Buddhist equivalents of Christian theological seminaries may develop in the West, institutions committed to encouraging systematic and critical inquiry within a context of religious commitment and personal spiritual development. Such an institution may have advantages, particularly that of shared aims and beliefs that would better facilitate theological dialogue in a

context of *mettā* (loving-kindness). It is even possible that such an institution may develop a fruitful relationship with the orthodox academy leading to the mutual enhancement of both.

CONCLUSION

THE BUDDHIST THEOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE as outlined in *Buddhist Theology* and explored in this article is a demanding one. Cabezón comments,

> If we take all of these demands literally, it puts a tremendous burden on academic Buddhist theologians, for over and above religious commitment, an intellectual mastery of the tradition, and a mastery of the norms of traditional and contemporary scholarly discourse that are re-[47]quired to explicate it, it requires of them its (at least partial) internalisation.[26]

The Buddhist spiritual life is – in any case – a demanding one and its goal sublime. Given that their aim will be to function as interpreters and communicators of the Buddha-Dharma, it is not surprising that the theologians' task is a difficult one. Notwithstanding, the potential value of this kind of inquiry is inestimable. Potentially, Buddhist Theology could lead to a thorough sifting of all aspects of Western life and all aspects of the Buddhist tradition with a view to identifying which forms of belief and practice are most likely to foster personal and even social liberation within the context of our historically unique cultural situation. Indeed, ambitious though it is, this kind of inquiry would seem essential if the Buddhist tradition is to survive with spiritual integrity in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

[1] Jackson and Makransky pp.26–8.
[2] ibid., p.1.
[3] ibid., p.2.
[4] ibid., p.276.
[5] ibid., p.3.
[6] Sangharakshita, p.33.
[7] *Majjhimanikāya* 22, translated in Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, p.227.
[8] ibid., p.228.
[9] Jackson and Makransky, p.11.
[10] ibid., p.28.
[11] ibid., p.14.

[12] ibid., p.15.
[13] ibid., p.15.
[14] ibid., p.19.
[15] ibid., pp.35–8.
[16] ibid., pp.37–8.
[17] ibid., p.37.
[18] ibid., pp.32–4.
[19] ibid., p.40.
[20] Schopen, p.14.
[21] ibid., p.114.
[22] Hubbard
[23] ibid., pp.165–73.
[24] ibid., p.190.
[25] Jackson and Makransky, p.13.
[26] ibid., p.41.