

## The Significance of John Keenan's Mahāyāna Theology

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**S**OMETIMES one is tempted to think of Christianity as a high-rise building that has been hit by an earthquake and is about to collapse. Many have deserted the edifice; others huddle in panic; meanwhile voices of authority deny the rocking of the walls, forbid discussion and dissent, stridently insist on old certitudes. If only there were some assurance of a solution in sight, it might be possible to let go of fear and face the crisis honestly.

"But there is!" shouts a fireman from the street below. He holds out a wide safety net, and calls out: "Jump!" The fireman's name is John P. Keenan and the net is called "emptiness." The figures on the balcony stare down in terror—that net looks like a black void—better to clutch at these solid stones, no matter how they quake, than leap out into the unsupported air, entrusting oneself to some nebulous nirvana. The voices warn against the dangers of Buddhist-Christian syncretism, denouncing Buddhism as "a sort of spiritual auto-eroticism" (Cardinal Ratzinger). But the fireman's persuasion begins to take effect. One by one, the trembling believers drop down into the net of emptiness.

If I cast John Keenan in this grandiose role, it is because his achievement is well-nigh unique, as a fully qualified Buddhologist, with particular expertise in Indian Yogācāra thought, who has drawn on Buddhist insight to construct an original Christian theology. What we see emerging in his work is a new theological landscape, one that is con-

sciously interreligious at every point, or rather "intrareligious," since the Buddhist and Christian frames of reference work together within a single integrated religious vision. He is the first theologian to reveal that Mahāyāna Buddhism has become structurally necessary to Christian faith. Without the background of wisdom and insight explored by the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra thinkers, the Christian kerygma fails to exfoliate its full meaning and remains truncated and opaque. In the past the thought-world of Hellenistic metaphysics provided an intellectual medium for the unfolding of the meaning of Christ. This resource has now been exhausted, and continued reliance on it has a cramping effect, intensifying rather than resolving the crisis of credibility. Hence the sense that the discovery of Mahāyāna thought comes as a providential rescue. Its categories are not in tension with contemplative insight, and they keep in touch with an attentive openness to the phenomena of experience; thus they can heal the split in Western theology between the abstract intellectualism of dogmatic debate and preconceptual awareness of divine presence.

Keenan's procedure is to reinterpret the meaning of central Christian texts and traditions in light of dependent co-arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*), as interpreted by Nāgārjuna, along with the distinction between conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and the truth of ultimate meaning (*paramārtha-satya*). Another important reference is the Yogācāra theory of the turnabout of consciousness from investment in imagined meanings to recognition of the dependently co-arisen world in awareness of its emptiness. He sees nothing obscure or problematic in these notions, and so can apply them consistently to the theological tradition, which has often invested in imagined meanings (*parikalpita*) and confused conventional with ultimate truth. The critical edge of this diagnosis is complemented by a constructive correlation of the presence of God with the realization of emptiness. This is something fully experienced only at the level of ultimate truth, where all the skillful articulations and conceptualizations of religious doctrine and theory fall silent.

The necessity of applying these ideas to Christian tradition, and the healing illumination they bring, are undeniable. Yet it may be that Keenan, in the manner of many great pioneers, has moved too far, too fast. In bringing into conjunction the worlds of Christian theology and Mahāyāna Buddhism he may be riding roughshod over the radical

differences between the two, both in their epistemological and ontological presuppositions and in their cultural and religious contexts. He anticipates and refutes the more obvious objections to his procedure, but its undeniable validity in principle does not guarantee that its enactment in practice will be plain sailing. Every single application of Buddhist categories to Christian discourse implies a "fusion of horizons" raising the most difficult hermeneutical problems. The strong affinities between the two religious traditions, especially in their mystical reaches, make it imperative for theologians to think out their relationship. But affinities must not be taken for identities. The critical impact of Buddhist analysis on the illusion-ridden texture of much Christian discourse has to be pursued fearlessly. But we must be sure that the targets of the critique are properly identified, not underestimating the degree to which Christianity, too, is a sophisticated, self-critical religion. For a fruitful development of the questions Keenan has opened up, we need to stand back and pursue the inquiry in a more scrupulous and elaborate negotiation, keenly conscious of the difficulties that rise up at every step. The resulting encounter may be less direct and global than what Keenan proposes. The Buddhist and Christian ideas and sources may play off against another in mutual critique, without any decisive overriding conquest either way. Their debate may take the form of a series of local interactions rather than a grand synthesis. To the ambitious theologian that may seem a messy prospect, but it is more faithful to the concrete complexity of history and of human encounter.

Keenan has faced the crisis of traditional beliefs and categories and tasted deeply the scepticism and nihilism of the modern masters of suspicion. Yet I do not think he has ever been an addict of anxiety. He has found in Job and Qohelet a biblical correlate for the ordeal of the negative. The scepticism and despair expressed in those texts is overcome by a higher wisdom, which lets go of certitudes and opens up to the presence of a God who cannot be contained by human categories, a God who is empty. This wisdom can take the destructive impact of suspicion in its stride; where doubt abounded, faith abounds the more. The ideas of dependent co-arising and emptiness give a more lucid, systematic cast to this trust in an empty God.

Christ is the richest presentation of wisdom; we find "in the pattern of his life, death, and resurrection an answer to the dilemmas about hu-



man suffering, death, and the silence of God" (*The Meaning of Christ*, 29). His life is characterized by non-clinging; his death is a complete opening up to emptiness; his resurrection is the arising of authentic consciousness of ultimate reality. Such wisdom is appropriated in an experience of the overwhelming, undeniable presence of the love of God, manifested in Christ, an experience Keenan finds to be in deep accord with Buddhist understandings of awakening or enlightenment.

The dogmas that caused such headaches to generations of modernist theologians—the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, the resurrection, the immortality of the soul—are reinterpreted as events of the wisdom of emptiness. Christianity exists only to create an experience of wisdom:

the realization of an Easter enlightenment that can transform our consciousness and, with that, the world we construct based upon that consciousness. It is an experience of the emptiness and dependent co-arising of all our notions and endeavors that frees one for awareness of God beyond discriminative concepts and transparently embodies the rule of compassion in the world of hard politics. (242)

This experience of the world as it is, in its dependent co-arising, is identical with the discovery of God as "Abba," "Father." We must renounce all images of God as one who intervenes miraculously in human affairs; the only miracle is the grace of awakening:

The very arising of all things in interdependency is itself directly and immediately the presence of Abba. . . . Abba does not come to the rescue of bodily or mental anguish. . . . The Old Testament skeptics were right: Yahweh does not save his people. He allowed them to be consumed in the fires of the holocaust. (244)

More substantive and dogmatic ideas of God are idolatrous projections that close us to Abba-awareness: "The point of the Mahāyāna refutation of the creator deity is that any idea clung to as ultimate is an illusion, for any such idea represents a meaning constructed within the conditioned world" (245). The God of Jesus is not posited as an object: "Jesus as the wisdom of God embodies not an idea of Abba, but a preverbal awareness of ineffable meaning thematized as Abba" (247).

There is a basic misfit between the reality of God and the conventional world of ideas and concepts: "Ideas of God indicate their reference in terms of their dependently co-arisen context and cultural milieu. This does not mean simply that ideas are inadequate to present God, but still analogically applicable. It means, rather, that the presence of God is simply not amenable to conceptual expression at all" (247). This is a far cry from John B. Cobb's process-philosophy claim that God is the supreme instantiation of dependent co-arising. Our words and concepts are made for the samsaric world. It is only by realizing their fragility and the fragility of the world they designate that we can open onto the silence of the ultimate. To find God: "Attend not to an absentee gardener, but to the garden itself in all its immediacy and empty transparency"; as death-of-God theologians saw, "an objectively real God somewhere within or transcendent to the world simply did not matter anymore" (247).

The heart of Christian truth lies not (simply?) in dogmatic certitudes but in a conversion of consciousness:

The basic structure of consciousness is already directed toward ultimate meaning and rejects God-conceptions because of their failure to ground themselves in that structure . . . In awareness of the original structuring of consciousness oriented toward ultimate meaning one becomes aware of God as prevenient and encompassing. (248)

Divine activity is conceived of non-anthropomorphically, as follows: "the activity of the pure Dharma Realm in benefiting beings is like empty space encompassing all actions: although space is not purposeful and never sets about implementing any divine plan, yet it is the encompassing source for all beneficent action" (249). This is quite a convincing phenomenology of grace, which can detect grace at the heart of all processes of life, while allowing it to emerge dramatically to the fore in experiences of conversion and enlightenment.

For Keenan it is contemplative experience that is the source of doctrinal insight, not the other way round. He is critical of what he considers the intellectualist, objectifying approach to knowledge of God in the "mysticism of light" deriving from Origen and sees it corrected by the "mysticism of darkness" found in Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius, which opens onto "the mystic realm of meaning as apart



from all mediating images and words, as distinct from the extraverted, confrontational knowing of imagined essences" (116). But Christian theology refused to let itself be founded in such radical mystical awareness. Today, Mādhyamika and Yogācāra thought "can assist Christian theology both in reclaiming the centrality of its own mystic tradition and in maintaining a valid place for theoretical systematics" (123). A radical sceptic would explain the heightened immediacy of contemplative experience and its dissolution of the subject-object dichotomy as a projection of unconscious desire. But Keenan, though well aware to the human capacity for generating illusions, finds that negation is brought to a halt at this point.

Recently Keenan has turned his attention from Gregory and Pseudo-Dionysius to Mark's Gospel. This text, the earliest of the Gospels, comes from a predogmatic and nonmetaphysical level of Christian tradition. Its parables and cryptic narrative exemplify a style of religious communication that undoes at every turn dogmatic rigidity and bondage to convention. Recent commentary on this Gospel has been marked by a deconstructive radicality which goes half way to meet Keenan's Buddhist insights. He attempts to capture the resonances of the Markan text when heard with a Buddhist ear, just as others have listened to the text with Marxist, feminist, or psychoanalytical ears. A Lacanian psychoanalyst does not impose his interpretations upon the analysand, but offers only a punctuation of the analysand's speech, so that its meaning become clear to the analysand. Keenan's commentary is just such a Buddhist punctuation of Mark's speech. The result of the punctuation, however, is to interpret Christianity as far closer to Buddhism than one had imagined. Some might say that the Buddhist insights add nothing to what deconstructive exegetes have already seen. But this underestimates the significance of what is afoot here. Keenan applies to Mark not merely a few scattered Buddhist ideas, but a sensibility formed by the mainstream of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought. The fact that Mark and his exegetes can be translated so consistently into the terms of that tradition reveals a substantial common ground between Christianity and Buddhism.

Such a Buddhist parsing of biblical wisdom in its various forms saves the biblical message from seeming peremptory or archaic and rehabilitates it as a probing and well-grounded revelation of our relationship to ultimate reality. It opens up a new way to making sense of the

notion of God, one that may allay the doubts of the death-of-god philosophers. But it seems to me that the biblical God may resist the consequent application of Buddhist categories, and that Keenan may be underestimating the strength of this resistance. One problem is that the Buddhist conception of ultimate reality, as entirely ineffable and as excluding all distinctions and discriminations—these have validity only on the conventional level—seems to fit poorly with the concrete figure of a living, active, personal God, who speaks through the prophets and involves himself in human history. Can the biblical God be entirely explained as a thematization of a preverbal awareness of ultimate meaning? Ultimate meaning, “the emptiness of things in their inexpressibility and silence,” seems extremely static, silent, monotonous, in comparison with the dynamic, communicative, and many-sided God of biblical tradition. Keenan might say that the simplicity of the ultimate is perfectly compatible with the variety of the everyday world in its dependent co-arising, and indeed sharpens our perception of this variety. God-for-us would belong to this dependently co-arisen level, while God-in-Godself can be attained only in the ultimate quiescence of all fabrications and disappearance of all distinctions. This solution is reminiscent of Eckhart’s postulation of a pure Godhead, beyond all the shifting forms of revelation and the affirmations of dogmatic theology. But it may be that the biblical God undoes precisely such a vision of ultimate purity. The Buddhist demythologization of Scripture may be matched by a biblical dismantling of the Buddhist myth of ultimate meaning as a realm in which all differentiations disappear. Such biblical resistance to a Buddhist reading would immensely complicate the project of a Buddhist-Christian theology.

Keenan often appeals to ultimate reality in order to reduce doctrinal claims to the level of conventional truth: “All perspectives are worldly and conventional, in the face of ultimate meaning which is perspectiveless and silent” (139). All religious utterances are contextual and provisional, and they function well only when they point beyond themselves to the ineffable ultimate.

Mahāyāna theology argues that all theological models (even a Mahāyāna model) are valid only within their contextuality in terms of the particular conditions in virtue of which they arise. In the words of Maximus Confessor, “the doctrines of



the Church are transcended by their own content." (225)

One cannot insist too much on the fragile, hodological character of religious statements (*hodos* = way); they are pointers, set in the context of a practical lifestyle, to an ultimate mystery they can make no pretense of defining or explaining. Yet there seems to be a residual tension between the biblical and the Buddhist evaluation of these pointers. Christian doctrine about God is not exclusively negative or apophatic; rather, it is resolutely affirmative or kataphatic. To associate the negative with the ultimate and the affirmative with the conventional is almost a reversal of traditional Christian priorities, though it is true that under Neo-Platonic influence Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Eckhart came close to such a reversal.

The doctrine of the Trinity is sometimes cited as setting limits to apophaticism in Christian theology, since it proffers objective statements about the divine being in itself, which it would be heretical to regard as merely symbolic. However, when we look at the matter more closely we see that this doctrine is only a clumsy parsing of the biblical encounter with God as Creator, Word, Spirit. All it claims is that there must be some objective distinction of these aspects within the divine unity. (Of course popular and speculative conceptions of the Trinity have gone far beyond this, but without solid biblical or patristic support.)

A better objection to Keenan's apophatic emphasis is simply the style of the Scriptures, their overwhelming insistence on God's Word and the almost complete absence of reference to God as an ultimate reality best contemplated in silence. Biblical revelation and salvation seems to dwell fully in what Keenan would see as the conventional realm, while the dimension of ultimate meaning, in its otherness from this realm, hardly gets a look in. The critical impact of ultimate meaning, as relativizing all conventional constructs, has to be transcribed into more positive terms in order to be applied effectively to Christian discourse. The Bible is very much a self-deconstructing book, but the deconstruction is not in the name of a purer ultimacy, but of a more convincing incarnation of God. In this context, is Keenan's stress on ultimate meaning not perhaps a subtler version of the "absentee gardener" approach he rejects?

The myth of the ultimate goes hand in hand with an epistemological



myth of pure, unmediated experience, shared by mystical traditions in different cultures. Keenan distances himself from this myth to some extent: "There are, I would acknowledge, no pure, unmediated meanings for the very act of insight mediates experience in some terms or other" ("A Dialogue," 17). Despite the gulf between ineffable experience and language about it, there is a "symbiotic and reciprocal relation" between experience and doctrine (18). Now, if the heightened immediacy of contemplative experience does not exclude such pluralism and contingency, does this not in turn undermine the monolithic view of ultimate meaning?

Keenan grounds the variety of Jesus's teachings, parables, and discourses in a single transcendental experience of God as "Abba" (Father). The application of Buddhist categories seems to smooth away the pluralistic perspectives suggested by the biblical text. Jesus's parables no doubt aim to produce awakening, in a manner reminiscent of Zen *kōans*. But is that all they intend to do? Is it even their primary aim? Jesus speaks more as a prophet than as a master of spirituality, and all the difference between biblical and Indian tradition weighs against any effort to translate his teaching immediately into Buddhist terms. But even if we do correlate Jesus with Zen, could it not be that the *Mādhyamika-Yogācāra* way of talking about ultimate reality is just the sort of thing that Zen snaps us out of and that Jesus too would have snapped us out of if he had ever heard of it?

Nonetheless, there is a substantial enough phenomenological core to Keenan's correlation of *Mahāyāna* and Gospel vision. In both he discerns a powerful call to conversion from the mind of delusion to the mind of wisdom, a conversion that brings us into intimate contact with ultimate reality. Despite its hermeneutical short-circuits, Keenan's theology is consistently phenomenological; it sticks close to the experience of delusion and awakening as exhibited in both religious traditions, and all its categories are derived from this experience. In contrast to the speculative constructions of other Buddhist-Christian thinkers, which distort both the Buddhist and the Christian phenomena, Keenan's constant effort is to allow these phenomena to unfold their meaning in an unforced way. When he feels obliged to reject the archaic categories and images in which they have been transmitted to us, he does so not in view of speculative reconstructions but in an appeal to the phenomena themselves.

## O'LEARY: KEENAN'S MAHĀYĀNA THEOLOGY

In admitting freely that all language belongs to the register of conventional truth and that the truth of ultimate meaning will always elude its grasp, Keenan brings a healing serenity to the epistemological crisis of religious language, and weans his readers away from the vice of "attachment to views." The polishing and refining of our religious language becomes a functional affair, a matter of removing fixational habits of thought and reifying representations, so that the conventional language can continue to serve as a skillful means of awakening us to the ultimate.

His conception of the conventional language is not a monolithic one. Within the conventional, he distinguishes between purely illusory thoughts and thoughts which correspond to the dependently co-arisen condition of the samsaric world; in Yogācāra terminology: between *parikalpita* and *paratantra*. He moves from a conventional religious language which is unaware of its limits and constantly projects illusory reifications of that to which it refers, to a self-conscious language which has taken cognizance of its provisionality.

If "the conjunction of strategies to embody truth always fails and self-destructs before the disjunctive otherness of ultimate meaning" (*The Meaning of Christ*, 138), why worry about the correctness of these strategies? The answer lies in the criterion by which religious traditions are judged, namely, their capacity to permit experience of the deepest reality. Religions can serve as pragmatic, provisional paths to spiritual freedom, or they can hinder and repress such awakening. Dogmatic propositions, when divorced from their reference to spiritual awakening, lose their truth and their meaning. In light of this criterion, most theological discourse seems reified and alienated.

Religious traditions are dependently co-arisen. This means that they are human historical formations that have to be studied in their cultural particularity. The absolutization of a religion or its credal propositions spells a denial of the law of dependent co-arising. Such absolutism is a lie, which will issue in violence. Here we touch on the basic flaw that explains the tragedies of Christian history. When their historical particularity is seen, religious traditions are reassessed in terms of their functional effectiveness, as paths cut out within a given culture, enabling an opening to reality, or in theistic language, an opening to God. "God" is not a rival to "emptiness" as the name of ultimate reality. Both are valid conventional indicators of the ultimate real-



ity, which both inspires and surpasses all the paths toward it that are traced within religious cultures.

Keenan is not opposed to a theology of conceptual refinement, even system, as long as it remains open at every point to the experience of wisdom, as he considers the conceptuality of Yogācāra to do. The classical debates about the three hypostases of the one divine substance, or the two natures of the one hypostasis of Jesus Christ, have divorced themselves from such mandatory reference to awakening, or in Pauline terms, to Spirit. Their apparent logical coherence masks a profound debility, for they no longer serve as effective conventional testimony to ultimate reality.

Here again I want to sound a note of caution. There are many valid ways of constructing a critique of traditional Christian discourse, including the critiques of feminism and liberation theology. Keenan seems to put all his eggs in one basket, in his focus on the absolutization of the conventional. This critique is made to do work it is not suited to do. It gives rise to sweeping assessments of the language of dogma (notably of the Christological doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon in 451) and of the role played by metaphysics in theology, topics of extreme historical complexity which cannot be dealt with in a single massive stroke.

Can one accept the conventional status of language in Nāgārjuna's sense, seeing religions as skillful means for opening up a path to the ultimate, while at the same time preserving theological realism, that is, the claim that dogmatic statements have objective reference, and are not merely expressive or symbolic or pragmatic utterances? The old awareness of the merely analogical status of talk about transcendent realities has been enriched and intensified by the modern experience of the historicity and culture-bound nature of religious language, so that theology is more than ever ready to embrace Buddhist insights in this realm. Dogmatism, which posits an identifiable truth as ultimate meaning, can be corrected through a subtler presentation of dogma, as a statement of truth which has integrated a sense of its own situatedness and relativity.

Our contingent culture-bound religious languages are skillful means for pointing to the ineffable. They are the finger, not the moon. Yet they retain the capacity, when set in the context of the entire tradition and lifestyle that sustains them, to speak objectively of transcendent

realities. Religious statements are "undecidable" in a sense: we cannot pin down what they are saying in a language other than the very imperfect, ramshackle, myth-laden language which the tradition has given us; we believe the statements are true, but we are rather in the dark as to wherein exactly their truth consists, or how exactly they touch the truth to which they point. Religious statements are shots in the dark, but they can succeed in hitting their mark. They can be analogical statements about what is in fact true, though the analogies are shifting, fragile and context-dependent in a manner not theorized by Aquinas. Keenan objects that for Aquinas "theoretical meaning becomes not a symbolic weaving of models to express the ineffable, but an analogic and valid affirmation of what is in fact is true about God" (117). Ultimate truth lies in the realm of mystic awareness; doctrinal statements belong to the realm of "conventional, language-formed presentations of that awareness" (123). Is there not a danger here of reducing theology to a science of the "as if" or of "supreme fictions"?

Referential success is not guaranteed for all time to any statement, for the statements arise within an ongoing historical struggle to articulate religious conviction, and the integrity of their terms depends on the concrete conditions of their production. "Last year's words belong to last year's language" (T. S. Eliot). A true religious statement is the product of a *kairos*; the decision about its truth-content always contains, therefore, a moment of prophetic discernment. Yet none of this undermines the objective referentiality of such a statement.

God is not an object over against us, to be grasped in confrontational knowing (a *Gegenstand*), but in another sense God is objective, in the sense that the ultimate reality to which the term refers is not merely a supposition. God cannot be conceptually grasped or circumscribed, yet inadequate concepts can be used in a conventional language to advance a judgment which can stand as a valid statement referring to God, for example, "God is supremely good." To say that the conventional status of religious language forbids us to speak here of valid judgments and objective reference would inhibit and undercut that language to a degree incompatible with belief that the biblical word is a communication of truth about God. Keenan devotes much attention to imaginary patterns of thinking about God, but there is a sober and modest discourse about God which does not fall prey to these patterns. Objectivity is not a matter of imaginary objectifications; valid affirma-



tion is not a matter of exhaustive conceptual grasp.

The critique of the role played by Hellenistic metaphysics in Christian theology has a long history, but the subject remains a difficult and delicate one. It is a mistake to underestimate the cogency and intellectual force of the metaphysical tradition. Keenan himself draws on the best of Christian metaphysics—the apophatic reaches of medieval ontology and the refined philosophy of consciousness developed in the transcendental Thomism of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan. Reference to Heidegger could serve both to complicate and to clarify Keenan's stance toward metaphysics. Heidegger does not contest the truth of metaphysics, or the truth of science, on its own terms; rather, he points to a dimension of thought which metaphysics has been too busy to attend to, a contemplative attunement to being which is attained by stepping back from the conceptual realm. The critique of metaphysics from this perspective need not involve any discrediting of the conceptual labors of the philosophical tradition since Plato. Keenan's critique of metaphysics, unlike Heidegger's, is largely an intra-metaphysical critique: he advocates a flexible, critical metaphysics of consciousness over against a fixated reifying metaphysics of substance. In addition he performs a step back from metaphysics which has some remote analogies with Heidegger's, insofar as he consigns all metaphysical discourse to the level of conventional truth, not to the truth of ultimate meaning. One recalls that Heidegger drew inspiration for his "step back" from German translations of Lao-tse and D. T. Suzuki's essays on Zen. Heidegger's step back, like Harnack's critical labors on the history of dogma, is not merely a shift of register, but installs a thorough interrogation of the entire history of the tradition, somewhat as in *Mādhyamika* the conventional is critically revisited from the vantage of the ultimate. Does Keenan's handling of the two truths facilitate such critical work on the tradition or does it simply bypass ancient tensions through consigning them globally to the conventional register?

In his critique of Chalcedon, Keenan moves too quickly from a Buddhist stress on the "selflessness" of Christ to a rejection of all talk of "nature" and "hypostasis" in connection with Christ. He presumes that the conceptual labors of the Council were tied into the pattern of imaginary reification, neglecting the possibility of a more benign reading in light of his own view that the language of "self" may be reas-

sumed on the conventional level. To be sure, if we accept the Buddhist ontology of the emergence of phenomena in radical interdependence, there can be no fixed substance of the humanity, divinity, person, or nature of Jesus Christ. But this does not rule out a reformulation of Chalcedon without any reference to fixed substance. "There is no selfhood to Jesus at all, for all human beings are empty of any self (*ātman*). Christian doctrine on the person of Christ cannot then be expressed by attempts to define his dual nature or divine personhood" (*The Meaning of Christ*, 225). But the doctrine of Chalcedon does not "define" the natures and person of Christ. Its concerns could well be expressed in Buddhist language. Its stress on the distinction of the divine and human aspects of Christ consigns his humanity cleanly to the conditioned realm and his divinity to the unconditioned. The inseparability of the two aspects recalls the inseparability of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* in Mādhyamika.

Though Keenan's reading has a constant critical agility, the sifting of gospel events between conventional and ultimate becomes rather monochrome, like the practice of some of the Fathers who ascribed some actions of Christ to his humanity, some to his divinity. Resistance to Jesus always derives from attitudes that can be cured by insight into the two truths. People are fixated on the conventional taken as ultimate; they cling to the defined boundaries of the conventional instead of letting go in faith; they are trapped in discriminations which impede wholehearted faith; they bifurcate the sacred from the profane, the supernatural and their ordinary lives, mistaking the otherness of ultimate meaning for an identifiable other, a separate realm, rather than the "silent awareness of the emptiness of everyday living" (*The Gospel of Mark*, 151). In contrast, the way of faith abandons the props of the conventional, in "a wilderness conversion, modeled on that of Jesus' direct awareness of God" (153). Faith is not insistence but expropriation, not clinging but letting-go. It rejects the institutional temptation "to reduce the ultimate meaning of tradition into the conventional framework of obvious necessities" (288).

In its central thrust this reading does capture much of the impact of the Markan Jesus. But there are elements in the Gospel and even in Jesus' own religious world-view that can be revised in the light of Buddhist insight. (This will sound blasphemous to fundamentalists, but Paul and John encourage a critical overcoming of the Letter that kills



in light of the Spirit that gives life.) If Keenan had made a greater effort to define carefully the differences between the New Testament and Mahāyāna contexts, he could have staged such an open confrontation between Buddhism and the Gospel. Bland appeal to the two truths can whitewash ancient errors, such as Paul's approval of slavery: "Paul acquiesces in the givenness of his world" (*The Meaning of Christ*, 256). Here a serious blind spot in early Christianity is whisked away and the door is opened to an over-facile method of coping with the Christian past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). Again, Keenan wishfully assures us that Mark "is not recommending a replacement theology, whereby the new religion of Jesus takes over from the outmoded religion of the Jews" (*The Gospel of Mark*, 283); yet "he will give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:9) can have no other meaning, and to say it refers to "the recognition of the otherness of ultimate meaning, of the falsity of clinging to any tradition, whether Jewish or Christian" is pure escamotage. From the Buddhist standpoint we should be freer to recognize the gravely questionable things in Scripture, such as this replacement theology which lays the foundation of Christian antisemitism. Precisely because the Gospel-writers did not have access to Buddhist refinements about the status of religious language and about spiritual awareness, they fell into various dangerous short-circuits, of which Buddhism can help to heal us today. Keenan's supposition that Mark is an anonymous Buddhist may cause him to miss the full healing potential of Buddhism for Christian tradition.

I wish he had applied the two-truth hermeneutic more cautiously, with constant attention to its problematic aspect, instead of using it as a catch-all net. His commentary is a perpetual hybridization of two heterogeneous worlds, sometimes effected by allegorical eisegesis that biblical scholars will find regressive. Even the most adventurous exegetes Keenan draws on follow the basic law of literary criticism, that interpretations must be grounded in a plausible construal of the text. Commenting on Mark 11:23 (the believer can cast a mountain into the sea), Keenan writes: "The depths of the sea symbolize the complete absence of human constructs, the emptiness of all supports for conventional language" (276). Here the effort to coax Buddhist insight from the text is counterproductive. It leads not merely to over-interpretation, a common vice of recent Markan exegesis, but to completely tangential associations. A shorter, trimmer book, that would sacrifice such descants

and siphon out the more persuasive correlations between Mark's strategies and two-truth theory, would serve more effectively to establish Buddhist-Christian theology as a viable discipline, capable of steady development.

The resurrection is perhaps the Christian doctrine that is most unconvincingly preached at the present time, and it is also the one that generates most anxiety, for if Christ was not raised from the dead the entire system of Christian doctrine collapses and there is no guarantee of eternal life for believers. Discussion of this theme is polarized between "realistic" accounts that insist heavily on the alleged empirical signs of the miraculous event, such as the empty tomb and the appearances, and more "spiritualizing" accounts that tend to reduce the resurrection to a mere interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' life and death. For Keenan: "The resurrection stands as the breakdown of all conventional linear events and the breakthrough to awareness of the complete otherness of ultimate meaning" (366). Useless, then, to try to circumscribe this ultimate spiritual reality by insisting on empirical data or by giving a dogmatic definition of the resurrection-event. Resurrection means awakening to the ultimate reality signified conventionally by the entire ministry and passion of Jesus. The resurrection narratives, if taken literally, take us into an unreal world in which the laws of nature are broken at every moment. But if these miracles are taken as symbolic representations of the breakthrough of ultimate meaning everything falls back into place. In all probability the laws of nature are never suspended and apparent miracles are ultimately explicable in natural terms. The resurrection is not to be sought in the realm of magical interruptions of nature's course, but in the realm of ultimate meaning, or what Paul and John call "Spirit."

"Mark is not trying to demonstrate the truth of the resurrection within the context of imagined thinking, for no such demonstration is possible. Rather, the point is that Jesus is not there within conventional frames of reference, and thus not within the realm of words and judgments that might be called upon to demonstrate his renewed existence" (393). "There are no resurrection appearances because Jesus is beyond empirical validation. He will not 'reappear' even in Galilee. The resurrected Jesus can be seen only upon the awakening of conversion that he came to preach about, not in some supernaturally perceptible coming back to show his new glorified body" (394). "Through his life and



death, Jesus has resurrected the ordinary dependently co-arisen course of life, infusing it with his presence" (395). "His resurrection is an awakening to the eschatological wisdom of God-awareness, empty of any identifying image or idea, and to the subsequently attained wisdom of reengaged world awareness, with all the images and ideas needed to live and witness to the gospel" (397). "There is no great day when the Lord comes in all his glory and gives Jesus' enemies what for. The eschaton comes in the everyday suffering and the everyday resurrection from that suffering" (358).

All this sounds as if the resurrection-faith hangs on a very thin thread. Yet the thread is no thinner than that on which Buddhism hangs. It consists in contemplative insight, rather than empirical proofs. Matthew Arnold claimed that the facts on which Christian faith depended had failed it, leaving only the poetry. But for Keenan the true facts are of a spiritual order, the breakthrough of ultimate reality in the figure of Jesus, which like the Buddha's enlightenment is received not by blind faith but by growth in insight. As to the resurrection of the individual believer, this too becomes nebulous, about as intangible as Buddhist *nirvāṇa*. The voice of the Johannine Christ, assuring us of the presence of eternal life, has the same calm authority as the voice of the Buddha proclaiming *nirvāṇa*. But we can appropriate the message only by letting go of worldly or egotistic expectations.

Does Keenan do justice to the Christian claim that God is made known in a uniquely concrete way in the election of Israel and in the incarnate manifestation of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Perhaps this claim, too, needs to be refocused and tempered, or given a specific limited bearing, so that it no longer lessens the autonomous dignity of other religious traditions. The categories in which Keenan refocuses it may not be adequate to capture what is most concrete and decisive about God's action in Jesus, which is not only a breakthrough of ultimate meaning but a concrete, historically mediated work of salvation.

On this point it would be illuminating to compare Keenan with the century's most influential New Testament scholar, Rudolf Bultmann. For Bultmann, the resurrection is the transformation of the memory of Jesus into a powerful kerygma, a word of salvation, wherein Jesus becomes the Eschatological Event of God's breaking into human history. Eschatology is demythologized and existentialized, but for Bult-

mann the kerygma remains primarily a prophetic address to faith and conscience, rather than an instrument of converting us to the mind of wisdom. His Eschatological Event engages with real history in a more positive sense than Keenan's. No doubt Bultmann's Lutheran hermeneutics of the New Testament could have been enriched by Buddhist and Hindu attunement to the dimension of Spirit (*pneuma*) in Paul and John (and here the later Heidegger would have been more helpful to him than the Heidegger of *Being and Time*). Keenan, to the contrary, practises an entirely spiritual hermeneutic, emphasizing the universal presence of the Kingdom as the "power of awakening" (211), a present reality which no longer strains toward a future consummation. The Kingdom is redefined as "the judgment of ultimate meaning that empties all conventional traditions and activity" (282); it is "present and available at every moment, has no linear time reference" (267). But once the Kingdom message ceases to be a concrete intervention within human history and becomes instead a universal, ahistorical wisdom-teaching, it loses its *raison d'être*. Of course we should avoid giving Jesus' eschatological language an absolute status; it is only a provisional expedient; the eschatological in itself remains ineffable. Still, to make it refer only to enlightenment, in its ultimate and worldly aspects, goes against the grain of biblical thinking; the reader can resist Keenan's emphasis by consulting the exegetes he generously quotes in his notes (e.g., 268). If Jesus was merely teaching timeless spiritual truths, he chose an extremely clumsy and cumbersome vehicle for them, and the best thing would be to jettison these eschatological myths altogether.

If there is a blind spot in Keenan's theology, it is located here. But the fact that he is forced to a spiritualizing interpretation reveals how opaque the eschatological message has become in our world and how difficult it is to retrieve the concrete historical meaning of the Gospel call. Buddhism puts great pressure on Christians to dissolve this aspect of their tradition as an archaic positivism. Meanwhile, Christians find themselves incapable of addressing to Buddhists a concrete kerygma of the Kingdom of God. But in time both Buddhists and Christians may rediscover the distinctive strength of Christianity, its prophetic engagement with concrete history.

Meanwhile, Keenan has opened up a Buddhist way of reading the Gospel that may today be more practicable in the West than standard



Christian readings, for it bypasses many thorny theological conundrums. The appropriation of Christ as wisdom-event is one of the most fundamental demands of the Gospel. All the dogmatic claims that have divided Christians and Jews, and split the Christian community itself, can be handled more lucidly and irenically if this foundation is first put in place. There is another, even more fundamental demand of the Gospel that Buddhism sheds less light on, namely the concrete message of a historical event of salvation to be received by faith. Here we still stumble on profound differences and unresolved problems of interpretation and articulation.

My thought has been profoundly influenced by John Keenan's writings over the last ten years, to the point that in arguing with him I have the impression that I am arguing with himself. He is better armed than I to move boldly to the frontiers of Christian-Buddhist theology. I am more inclined to worry about the hermeneutics and methodology of the enterprise. I have no doubt that the enterprise itself is a great one, and that it is laying the ground for a future religious vision, one that can elicit an adult and vibrant faith, far beyond the sectarian panic and dogmatism of the churches today. We may anticipate that Christianity will emerge from its embrace of Buddhism altered even more profoundly than Keenan's writing suggests, though not thereby diminished.

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