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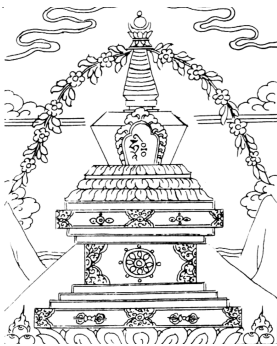
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Book Review

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*Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by
Contemporary Buddhist Scholars.*
Edited by Roger Jackson and John Makransky

Reviewed by
Paul J. Griffiths



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Jackson, Roger and John Makransky eds. *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*. London: Curzon Press, 2000, x + 410 pages, ISBN: 0-7007-1080-9 (cloth), US \$55.00, 0-7007-1203-8 (paper), US \$55.00.

The phrase “Buddhist theology” has an exotic and awkward sound. “Theology,” after all, is a technical term from the lexicon of Christianity, and it means, etymologically and also often practically, “reasoned discourse about God.” In what sense is there a Buddhist version of this enterprise? The main purpose of this collection is to provide an answer to that question; its secondary purpose is to provide examples of the practice of Buddhist theology.

The book is divided into four parts. First, there is a two-part introduction by the editors justifying and explaining the enterprise. Second, there are five essays devoted to definitional questions. Third, there are thirteen essays gathered under the heading “Exercises in Buddhist Theology”; this section comprises almost two-thirds of the volume. And fourth, there are two critical responses to the book’s enterprise and achievement. Almost all of the contributors hold academic positions in the USA and received their doctoral training in American universities. The youngest contributors are in their thirties, and the oldest is approaching seventy, but the majority, I think, are between 40 and 55; it is probably fair to say, then, that the book speaks for the most part with the voice of a good cross-section of the generation of American scholars of Buddhism that came of age in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of the contributors, too, are *soi-disant* Buddhists, and thus speak in some sense (in very different senses, actually) from within and for the tradition(s) about which they write.

The editors of the volume understand “theology” to label a normative, tradition-centered intellectual enterprise. In the case of Buddhist theology, this means, first, that Buddhist theologians take some particular Buddhist tradition to be normative for them, to constrain and order their intellectual

work, and to provide a technical lexicon and a set of intellectual purposes or goals. Second, it means that Buddhist theologians understand their own work to be a contribution to the development of the tradition out of which they speak, think, and write: they want, perhaps, to offer tradition-specific interpretations of or judgments about contemporary phenomena; or they want to develop the tradition's understanding of itself; or they want to apply the tradition's claims and understandings in a critical fashion to lively opposed claims and understandings found outside any Buddhist tradition.

This understanding, stated most clearly in the editorial introduction and in José Cabezón's essay, "Buddhist Theology in the Academy," distinguishes Buddhist theology on the one hand from academic studies of Buddhist materials (texts, practices, buildings, statues, and so forth), and on the other hand from instruction in the *Dharma* (what Christians would call catechesis). Buddhist theology differs from the former because it speaks with a normative and constructive voice, a voice claimed by a tradition and also speaking for a tradition, and it differs from the latter because its primary purpose is intellectual and its practitioners need to have received appropriate intellectual training. But (and again, Cabezón is especially good on this), Buddhist theology is not unrelated to academic studies and catechesis. It may often use the findings of the former: a Buddhist theologian applying (for example) Sakya Pandita's concepts and arguments to the question of what a Sakyapa theologian ought to know before she can properly exercise that function may well profit from using an edition of Sakya Pandita's works made by an academic who is not a Buddhist theologian. And Buddhist theology may often presuppose catechesis and itself be of use for those engaged in that enterprise: the theologian will have had to be formed in the tradition for which she speaks, and this will mean that she must have been catechized; what she writes or says may then be used for catechetical purposes, even if she does not primarily intend such use.

Such an understanding of Buddhist theology is, obviously, modeled in part upon Christian understandings of theology and in part upon

observation of what Buddhist intellectuals have done in the past. On this understanding, Vasubandhu, Tsong-kha-pa, Wonhyo, and Dōgen were all Buddhist theologians (they may have been other things as well); so also, at the moment, are the Dalai Lama and the representatives of the *hihan bukkō* (critical Buddhism) movement in Japan. The existence of the volume under review here testifies to an increasingly strong awareness on the part of many of those who have received technical training in the study of Buddhism in American universities and are now teaching in such a setting that there are no (or no longer) strong reasons of either a conceptual or practical-institutional sort to make the practice of Buddhist theology in a university setting undesirable.

So much for the setup, which is promising. Although I am not a Buddhist and as a result cannot contribute to Buddhist theology as understood in this volume, the definitions and arguments offered by Makransky, Jackson, and Cabezón are quite persuasive; they identify an intellectual enterprise of considerable intrinsic interest, one that is obviously of deep concern to Buddhists and Buddhism, and one from which non-Buddhists with an interest in Buddhism can only learn.

But what about the practice? The essays in the central part of the book are exercises in Buddhist theology, and here, it must be said, the results are more mixed. Some of the contributions are of high quality: Makransky's analysis of what Buddhist theologians might have to say about the question of historical consciousness, a question that has proved so difficult for some other religious traditions, is first rate. It shows the difficulty of reconciling some judgments produced by the use of historical-critical method (for example, about the authorship of particular texts) with what Buddhists have traditionally claimed about those matters; but it does this not to pit one against the other, but rather to see what a Buddhist who recognizes the force and value of the former may find in it to offer to his tradition for its own proper development.

Interesting, too, though considerably more distanced from the devotion evident in Makransky's essay (and I mean that comment positively), is Jackson's piece entitled "In Search of a Postmodern Middle." Jackson

presents learning to be a Buddhist as the acquisition of a kind of aesthetic skill, a complex capacity to order one's life in accord with a set of dominant tropes, most especially the trope of the middle. Jackson is aware that his essay might be read in such a way as to suggest that he is "yet another deracinated modern intellectual" (238) whose interest in his tradition is about as serious as that of the secular Jew who neither keeps kosher nor observes the Sabbath, but likes to think about Jewish identity; he sees, too, that the real difficulty lies in his own attitudes toward authority—the authority of a tradition and the authority of a teacher. His appeal to the metaphor of the middle is, in part, an attempt to escape the importance of decisions about this. But if Buddhist theology is really to be a tradition-centered intellectual practice, its practitioners will have to reconcile themselves to the fact that this means, among other things, submitting their own intellectual independence and its deliverances (those last and most attractive *āvaraṇāni*) to something (a text, a teacher, a practice) outside and beyond themselves. Tropes of submission, too, are not hard to come by in Buddhist traditions, and Jackson's studious and elegant attempt to marginalize them is well represented by his reliance upon the methods of the Christian theologian David Tracy, who is in large part motivated by just the same need with respect to Christianity. It would be sad if Buddhist theology had to replicate the methodological mistakes of its Christian partner, and in so doing to become simply one more example of the ruminations of intellectuals in love with their own intellects.

This problem, in fact, is the central difficulty with almost all the essays in this volume. The question of authority is either ignored or airily dismissed, as is the possibility of genuine intellectual difference that submission might bring. To become seriously Buddhist, I would like to think (because I am not myself, I can only speak from without), involves permitting, joyfully, a tradition of intellectual practice to reshape and reorder one's own intellectual practice, to immolate confidence in one's intellectual independence in the fires of compassion, and by so doing to offer one's mind to the tradition and the tradition's mode of reasoning to the world. Anything less is just not serious: it is a game without stakes, a

theology without risk. Buddhism, like Christianity, does not lack for martyrs, but the approach to Buddhist theology expounded here will not give the world any new ones. And until it can, it will not really be theology; it will be one more commodified intellectual act whose products are displayed for purchase in the virtual fantasy-store of the university to be consumed later (usually in private) by those who find them attractive. As with the other commodified intellectual acts in this store, it is the would-be autonomous agent, the purveyor of consumer goods, who determines what gets said and how; and so, with the partial exceptions mentioned, the overall impression given by this collection is of an opportunity half-recognized, but not fully taken.

That the opportunity to begin engaging in genuinely theological Buddhist thought has not yet been grasped is evident from the fact that, for the most part, “Buddhism” serves in these essays to label an instrument, a set of conceptual devices, to be used in the service of something other than itself—as an acolyte to the desires and needs of feminists, psychoanalysts, and so on. We will see Buddhist theology being done only when we see Buddhists writing and thinking with sufficient intellectual confidence to construe all other intellectual activities as acolytes in the service of Buddhism, jottings in the margin of the Buddhist master-text.

Reviewed by

Paul J. Griffiths
 Professor of the Philosophy of Religions
The Divinity School, University of Chicago
 pgriffit@midway.uchicago.edu