
BOOK REVIEW

Crucified Wisdom: Theological Reflection on Christ and the Bodhisattva, by Mark S. Heim. Fordham University Press, 2019. xii + 329 pp., Pb., \$32USD. ISBN: 978-0823281237

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S. Mark Heim has produced two of the most influential books in theology of religions, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (1995) and *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (2001). In the first book, he notes that different religions offer different eschatologies and proposes that those varying eschatologies are real opportunities – Buddhists really can achieve Nirvana, Advaitins really can achieve identity with Brahman, Muslims really do go to Paradise. In the second book, he explains why this diversity of salvation is possible: because the Trinitarian God offers different aspects and emphases, to which the religions respond in different ways, producing a variety of theological interpretations. Indeed, the different aspects of the Trinity – fullness, hiddenness, relationship – are able to “house” the religions’ varying salvations. Religions can learn from one another precisely because they are perceiving unique aspects of God. Each perspective is legitimate, but begs informing by the others.

In his latest book, Heim enacts the agenda laid down in *Salvations* and *The Depth of the Riches*. Having argued that religions are epistemologically interdependent, he practices that interdependence by turning his attention to comparative theology. *Crucified Wisdom: Theological Reflection on Christ and the Bodhisattva* compares, contrasts, and interweaves Mahayana thought on the Bodhisattva with Christian thought on Jesus. Heim turns to comparison for five benefits that it offers: intensification, the heightened understanding produced by juxtaposition; rediscovery, retrieval of neglected aspects of one’s own tradition, brought to light by the other tradition; reinterpretation, approaching a traditional doctrine through a novel perspective; appropriation, the utilization of another tradition’s thought of practice in one’s own; and reaffirmation, the decision for one’s own tradition, or an aspect thereof, after an honest encounter with another tradition (3). By applying the full force of comparison to the Bodhisattva and Christ, Heim asks new questions and provides new answers, thereby driving theological conversation beyond its inherited limits.

Part One of Heim's book presents the Buddhist and Christian traditions discretely, in order to elucidate what he will proceed to compare. His exposition presages certain questions he will address later: How does the presence of the released Buddha within samsara compare and contrast with the presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth? To what extent can Madhyamaka nondual epistemology help resolve the paradox of the incarnation (52–53)?

In Part Two, Heim delves deeply into the specific Mahayana Buddhism that he is engaging, the Madhyamaka Buddhism of Śāntideva, author of *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. This book presents one of the greatest expositions of śūnyatā (emptiness), a fundamental ontology of relation that lies at the root of all Madhyamaka thought. It also elucidates the role that emptiness plays in the release and activity of the Bodhisattva, a role that shows potential to inform Christology. Specifically, the Bodhisattva recognizes, through the truth of emptiness, the illusory nature of the ego, the enemy, and every other dualism (74–75). Rejecting reification and its resulting suffering, the Bodhisattva vows to achieve release for the sake of all sentient beings. If the Bodhisattva suffers on that route, then such purposeful suffering for all produces delight (75). Indeed, such compassionate suffering should be sought out (87).

Heim also studies the important Mahayana concepts of wisdom and compassion. In Madhyamaka, each is closely tied to śūnyatā (emptiness). Heim presents considerable evidence for this indelible association, again largely relying on Śāntideva's thought, even diving into the arcane distinctions between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, which differ on the reality of the mind (103–104). Heim's mastery of this difficult material is clear, and one wonders how he will apply it to his Christian faith.

The constructive payoff occurs in Part Three, which presents systematic comparative theology. Chapter Four discusses Christian anthropology in light of Buddhist no-self, utilizing mimetic psychology to harmonize the two (144–150). Despite his synthetic motives, Heim is careful to note crucial differences between the two traditions. The psychological and emotional suffering of Jesus on the cross, for example, would be unbecoming for a Bodhisattva. A fully realized Bodhisattva cannot suffer. Having recognized the emptiness of all things, the Bodhisattva perceives all events without perturbation (160). If Buddhism can transform Christianity, it will do so through its concrete difference more than any ethereal sameness.

Chapter Five discusses theology proper, as it interweaves concepts of the Triune God as creator with concepts of Buddhahood as the source of all bodhisattvas. Heim applies the Buddhist concept of dependent co-origination to the Christian Trinity, arguing that the persons can be seen as dependently co-originated persons, mutually conditioning personalities, completely empty of *svabhāva* or separate being (171-172). God's greatest gift to humankind is to be made in the image of God; that is, for personhood (180).

Yet again, Heim offers a differentiated synthesis: his Christology is informed by *śūnyatā*, but he notes that contingency is a gift in Christianity – creation is an act of grace, within which we search for conditioned relationship, not unconditioned transcendence. In Buddhism, contingency is a fault, producing an aspiration for the unconditioned, for *nirvāṇa* (185). This distinction is radical; that is, it goes to the root of both traditions. Sallie King, a Buddhist-Christian scholar, was faced with a choice after the birth of her daughter: a selfless yet attached love, or a selfless and detached love. She chose the former, electing to love and suffer with, rather than to feel compassion from a place beyond. According to Heim, this constitutes a selfless attachment to *samsara* itself, loving vulnerability to the world and the persons who inhabit it (207-208).

Chapter Six addresses soteriology, constructively comparing the assistance provided by bodhisattvas to Christ's grace toward disciples. For focus, Heim chooses Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, as a foil to Christ. Bodhisattvas like Avalokiteśvara help people in three ways: they provide humans with merit from their inexhaustible store, they do good works, the effects of which continue to ripple through time, and they personally appear to disciples, in any form necessary, in order to provide interpersonal help (212-217). Aspirants can activate such interpersonal help through (Tibetan) Buddhist practices like deity and benefactor meditation, which personify spiritual affects, then regard the personifications with the compassion of *bodhicitta* (219-222). These Bodhisattva qualities can inform Christology: Christ provides a salvific resonance that impels us to salvation, Christ inspires us to open ourselves for the healing of others, as Christ and Avalokiteśvara have done, and we can perform positive actions that will ripple through time, to the benefit of others (224-230).

Nevertheless, Heim notes the differences that Buddhist and Christian salvations offer: Forgiveness is more central to Christian ethics than Buddhist. Buddhist salvation transcends difference, but Christian

salvation preserves it. Buddhism deems many vehicles of salvation to be legitimate, for varying stages of spiritual development, while Christianity focuses on the interpersonal salvation offered by Jesus as normative. Christ suffers, but Bodhisattvas don't. And the target of healing is different in the two religions: Buddhists focus on variegated suffering, while Christians have traditionally focused on sinfulness, which is less of a concern in Heim's Buddhist-influenced soteriology.

Chapter Seven offers a review and conclusion. Heim notes that, while any Buddhist can become a Buddha, but no Christian can become Christ, Bodhisattvas can benefit all, including Christians.

In *Crucified Wisdom* Heim has offered a remarkably erudite work. As a Christian theologian, his knowledge of Mahayana Buddhism, particularly the Madhyamaka tradition, is vast. And he has repeatedly shown how relevant Buddhist thought can be to Christian thought, in all the ways he outlines: by contrast, rejection, synthesis, and adoption. He, along with other comparative theologians, is leading the way to a transformed Christian theology, one that thinks alongside other religions, in order to become ever more faithful to our own.

Heim's rigorous exposition of Mahayana thought raises one important question for me regarding comparative theological method: What is the relationship between critical comparative theology and constructive comparative theology? We can define critical comparative theology as producing insight through comparing and contrasting another religion with our own. Constructive comparative theology is the new theology that we produce as a result of that critical insight.

Could someone write constructive comparative theology without reference to the critical comparative theology that produced it? That is, with specific reference to Heim's work, could he have offered a Christology transformed by Buddhism, without detailing the process by which that transformation occurred? He would still make arguments for the new Christology, borrowing Buddhist arguments, adapting them to the Christian tradition, while noting their potential for pastoral effectiveness. This streamlined comparative theology would emphasize the constructive over the critical, then argue for the legitimacy of the constructive based on its relevance to twenty-first century Christian church life.

In other words, explicit comparative theology would become simple constructive theology, in conversation with other religions. We see this in other theological fields. For instance, Charles Hartshorne utilizes Whitehead's process philosophy extensively in *Omnipotence*

and Other Theological Mistakes. But he does not lay out Whitehead's positions in order to produce his own revisionist theology. He simply presents his revisionist theology, while footnoting Whitehead and other interlocutors.

I believe that comparative theology will move to this method, and simply become constructive theology that utilizes a comparative method, and any other method that helps the church. Christian intellectual openness to the other will become standard, and through that openness we will become enriched.

That being said, Heim has here produced an outstanding example of comparative theology, both critical and constructive. Especially though his constructive excursions, Heim displays the power of comparison to unite religions and inspire the church.