

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 16 | Issue 4

Article 1

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10-1-1999

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### Recommended Citation

Cabezón, José (1999) "Incarnation: A Buddhist View," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol16/iss4/1>

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# INCARNATION: A BUDDHIST VIEW<sup>1</sup>

José Ignacio Cabezón

As is the case with many of the more classically theistic religions, Mahāyāna Buddhism has attempted to elaborate doctrines of incarnation. This paper will first examine the philosophical/doctrinal context in which such doctrines are elaborated by offering a brief overview of Buddhism's repudiation of theism. It then discusses both denaturalized/philosophical and naturalized/narrative versions of the doctrine of incarnation as it is found in both the exoteric and the tantric (esoteric) traditions of the Mahāyāna texts. It concludes with a defense of the coherence of the docetism found in such texts.

I take it that one of the principal goal of this issue of *Faith and Philosophy* is to prod the contributors – especially the buddhologists – to use their comparative diving rods to identify (to dowse for) those “currents” (those, even if only crypto-, theistic streams) that lie beneath the dry surface of Buddhism's otherwise stalwart atheism. But why go divining for God on such barren ground as that represented by Buddhism? If the purpose of such an exercise, at least in part, is to broaden the horizons of the philosophy of religion by inviting new partners into the conversation – a laudable goal – then focusing on theism would seem natural, especially since for the philosophy of religion this represents the familiar. But in choosing “theistic currents” as the locus of such a conversation, there also arises a problem. If the purpose of engaging the literature of other religious traditions in comparative philosophical conversation is, among other things, to challenge the presuppositions of the philosophy of religion as that discipline has developed in the West, is theism really the best starting point? Does it not, for example, reinforce the traditional theistic underpinnings of the philosophy of religion, which, to such a great extent, has tended to equate the philosophy of religion with the philosophy of the Abrahamic religions, and especially with the philosophy of Christianity? In choosing theism as the locus of such a conversation, then, we must be weary, lest we fall into thinking of this enterprise as an invitation to think in a mode that J. Z. Smith, paraphrasing Redfield, calls the “they are LIKE-US” form of cultural comparison.<sup>2</sup> In the logic of the more ethno- (or, perhaps more accurately theo-) centric versions of this mode of comparison, Buddhism's very admission into the conversation comes to depend upon its being a “religion,” where being a religion is equated with having theistic currents (it must be LIKE-US).



That being said, as a comparativist I must admit that I do find intriguing the challenge of bringing Buddhism into conversation with the philosophy of religion, even when the stipulated locus of such a conversation carries with it the risk of reinforcing the presuppositions of the latter. In “dowsing for God” over Buddhism’s rather barren landscape, I have chosen to focus on the issue of *incarnation*. Given the importance of this issue as a topic of philosophical and theological speculation in the West, it undoubtedly represents the familiar. Although my investigations will clearly show areas of overlap between Mahāyāna Buddhist and especially Christian theories of incarnation, profound, differences will also emerge. By paying close attention to such differences, it is my hope that this essay will take us beyond the naive “they are LIKE-US” mode of comparison to a more nuanced view.

Buddhism, of course, is not a single thing, and undoubtedly there are schools of Buddhism that *do* appear quite theistic.<sup>3</sup> My own field of expertise is *Indo-Tibetan* Buddhism, however, and here the theistic currents are much more difficult to come by. Given that this essay is devoted to exploring incarnation as the site of a conversation between the Buddhist and Christian traditions, it may be useful to contextualize that discussion by first surveying the terrain, that is, by painting for you a picture – albeit briefly and in broad strokes – of the difficulty of this more general task of dowsing for God on the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist landscape as a whole.

Buddha is not God. A buddha did not create the universe, either *ex nihilo* or out of pre-existent matter, nor is a buddha responsible for the maintenance and destruction of the cosmos. Buddhas do not create living beings. Indeed most Buddhists believe that sentient beings, and the cosmos they inhabit, have always existed – albeit in an infinite cycle of creation and destruction – thereby vitiating the need for a first cause, divine or otherwise.<sup>4</sup> In addition, omnipotence is ruled out for Buddhists as a quality of buddhas, or of any other being for that matter. No being can suspend the workings of karmic causality, nor can they liberate sentient beings from the cycle of suffering and rebirth (*saṃsāra*), simply by wishing to do so. The pervasiveness of suffering in the world is seen by Buddhists as proof of the incoherence of the notion of an omnipotent being, at least when that being is simultaneously held to be compassionately motivated to end the suffering of others, and cognitively capable of understanding how to do so. While insistent on the fact that such properties (creatorship, omnipotence etc.) are *never* instantiated, however, the Buddhist sources seem unwilling to relegate the classical Gods of Hinduism (Brahmā, Indra, Ísvara, etc. – and there is ample evidence to allow us to surmise that the Buddhist view of such deities would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other deities in other cultures as well) to the status of mere figments of the imagination.<sup>5</sup> While willing to grant the mere existence of Gods (*deva*), then, Buddhists consider their depiction by theists to be *unrealistically* maximal.<sup>6</sup>

When their attributes are correctly assessed, such deities, Buddhists believe, will be seen to be limited (in regard to their love, power, knowledge, lifespan, in regard to their transcendence of the cycle of rebirth, and especially in regard to their ability to help others to free themselves from suffering). They will especially be seen to be limited as compared with buddhas, who evince these various qualities in their highest possible mea-

sure. Buddhas are therefore said to possess the wish, impartially, to make all others happy (love), and to liberate all beings equally from every form of suffering (compassion). Being possessed of/by the best of *motivations*, they are said to have the *greatest possible ability* to help others, especially as regards the achievement of buddhahood. Buddhas are the most effective teachers because their *total knowledge* (*sarvajñā*) gives them access to, among other things, the minds of others, thus allowing them to craft the best strategies for spiritual intervention. Their transcendence of the cycle of rebirth gives them unfettered access to the entire universe of living beings, throughout all of space and time.<sup>7</sup> God(s) have none of these qualities, or at least none of them to the extent that Buddha(s) do.<sup>8</sup> To put the matter succinctly, God(s) are less than theists estimate, and buddhas more.

For all of the ways in which a buddha is different from God, there are problems faced by Buddhist philosophers that resemble those faced by their more classically theistic colleagues. One constellation of problems arises as a result of the fact that Buddhism (or at least Mahāyāna Buddhism), like its more theistic counterparts, claims that not only maximally perfect beings (that is, buddhas),<sup>9</sup> but human beings who have made substantial progress on the spiritual path (that is, *ārya* bodhistvas),<sup>10</sup> manifest or incarnate in the world for the benefit of others. It is the tension between buddhas' unchanging perfection and their "incarnate" existence in an imperfect world that gives rise to a series of philosophical/theological conundrums that I will call the dilemma of incarnation.

Incarnation as a topic of investigation across cultures is of course not unknown to the student of comparative religions.<sup>11</sup> In its more, if not most, general form, the problem can be roughly circumscribed through questions of the following sort. Is the action of incarnating restricted to one unique being, or are there many beings who have this power? Can *human* beings gain such a power? Are there degrees of such a power? (Is incarnation a unique occurrence, or can a being incarnate multiply? Is there a limit to the possible number of incarnations a being can manifest?) Where does incarnation take place? (Only on the earth, or elsewhere as well?) Why would a being *choose* to incarnate in the world? Indeed, is it a matter of choice or necessity? Do perfect beings only incarnate in human form? Is the incarnation of a perfect being also perfect (however that may be understood, i.e., as sinless, omniscient, omnicompassionate, etc.)? Is s/he pre-perfected, or does s/he incarnate as an imperfect being who then actualizes perfection while in the world? Is s/he fully human? (Does s/he have a body made of flesh, for example? How is her/his mind different, if at all, from that of an ordinary human being? Does s/he suffer?) How can the unchanging nature of perfection be reconciled with the messiness of history? Are the actions of an incarnation predetermined: necessitated, as it were, by the fact of her/his perfection, or by facts about the world (i.e., the needs of others)? Or are they freely chosen, autonomous responses to historical contingencies? What is the relationship (ontologically, epistemically) of an incarnation to the being that is her/his perfected basis/source<sup>12?</sup>

The answers given to these questions in many ways differentiates one religious tradition from another, but the diversity of views *even within* a single religion often leads to patterns of resemblance between schools of

thought across religions. Hence, at one end of the spectrum, we might place Christianity, with its view of the incarnation as a unique historical occurrence, and at the other, Mahāyāna Buddhism, with its notion that infinite number of buddhas have been “incarnating” in infinite forms (both human and nonhuman) throughout the universe since time beginningless. And yet, both within Christianity and Buddhism, we find a range of views that suggests patterns of resemblance across traditions. Hence, both in Christianity and in Buddhism, we find anthropocentric christ/buddh-ologies, that view the being who incarnates in the world as strictly human, epitomized by the Arian, Ebionite and Hīnayāna positions, respectively; and in both traditions, we find theo/buddho-centric ones, that consider such a being to be strictly divine, as in the Sabellian,<sup>13</sup> Docetic and Mahāyāna schools. In addition to the resemblances in doctrinal content, there are also resemblances in form. Hence, we find both in the Buddhist and Christian textual tradition a form of discourse on incarnation that is abstract, ahistorical, or, to resort to a Griffithsism,<sup>14</sup> denaturalized; and we also find, in each tradition, a more concrete historical, naturalized discourse on incarnation that is tied to the specific person and life- (or lives-) history of Jesus and Śākyamuni Buddha. I now turn to these two forms of discourse, in the order just mentioned.

The denaturalized form of discourse related to incarnation often concerns itself with ontological and epistemological issues. Religious intellectuals from a variety of traditions have often tended to focus on the ontological dimension of this cluster of problems: on the essential nature of incarnations, and their relationship to their basis/source? Such, of course, is the preoccupation of the homo/homoi-ousias and related controversies in Christianity, and arguably the preoccupation of the three/four-body controversy in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism as well.<sup>15</sup> The notion that buddhas have transcendent aspects that are accessible only to other buddhas, and more immanent ones, that are accessible more widely, is quite old. The doctrine is to be found in proto-Mahāyāna texts like the *Mahāvastu*. It was systematized by Indian Buddhist philosophers/theologians, and further refined in the Tibetan scholastic tradition.<sup>16</sup> Since much of what follows requires at least a basic understanding of the Buddhist doctrine of the Buddha’s bodies as systematized in this more abstract discourse,<sup>17</sup> let me now summarize this doctrine briefly, relying principally on the Indo-Tibetan literature.

Buddhas have two principle types of “bodies” (*kāya*): transcendent “dharma-bodies” (*dharmakāya*)<sup>18</sup> and more accessible “form bodies” (*rūpakāya*). In both India and Tibet there was considerable controversy over whether the dharma-body was of one or two kinds. Those who claimed there were two believed that a buddha’s perfection had two aspects: a negative one, that they claimed was the buddha’s essential nature (*svabhāva*), and that they identified with the emptiness of a buddha’s mind, and a positive one, that they identified with all of the buddha’s positive qualities, especially his or her gnosis (*jñāna*).<sup>19</sup> Whether singular or dual, the dharma-body of a buddha was believed to be eternal, and beyond the perceptual<sup>20</sup> ken of even the most advanced bodhisattvas, and therefore directly perceivable only by another buddha. The form bodies,

however, *are* accessible. However, contrary to what the word *form* (*rūpa*, *gzugs*) implies, both in English and in Sanskrit and Tibetan, these bodies are said to be material *only in appearance*, for in reality they are of the same substance or nature as a buddha's gnosis.<sup>21</sup> The form bodies are of two kinds. (1) "The body enjoyed in community" or "enjoyment body" (*saṃbhogakāya*)<sup>22</sup> abides eternally (*rtaḡ du*) in a special heavenly realm (adorned by all of the major and minor bodily marks of an enlightened being), can be perceived ("enjoyed") only by very advanced (*ārya*) bodhisattvas,<sup>23</sup> and will remain until all beings are liberated from suffering. (2) The illusory manifestation body (*nirmāṇakāya*),<sup>24</sup> is multiple (of three general types,<sup>25</sup> but infinite in number). It exists in various realms of existence (on the earth,<sup>26</sup> but also in other realms), and is more fully accessible to less spiritually mature beings.<sup>27</sup>

Now for Buddhists the main issues were not what they were for their Christian counterparts. For example, Buddhists did not argue over whether the *dharmakāya* was of a same, a similar, or a different nature from the *rūpakāyas*. The scholars who dealt with such issues were clearly unanimous in their belief that all three of the buddha's bodies were of one nature. For example, all three are said to arise simultaneously (*duṣ snyams du*) when a bodhisattva attains enlightenment.<sup>28</sup> Nothing in Mahāyāna doctrine calls for an explanation of how one person can have the natures of two distinct types of being. When a buddha incarnates as a human being, that incarnation is human in appearance only. In reality, it is a buddha.<sup>29</sup> For Buddhists there is no question that the categories *human* and *buddha* are mutually exclusive. Even though every buddha was a human being at one point in time, there is no attempt in the Buddhist sources to suggest that a being can *simultaneously* be both human and buddha. Additionally, since each body of the buddha is equally buddha, each is equally omniscient,<sup>30</sup> so there is for Mahayanists no question – as there was and is for their Christian counterparts<sup>31</sup> – as to whether or how an incarnation has access to the thoughts and intentions of his or her basis/source.<sup>32</sup> The question of access is moot for Mahayanists since all of a particular buddha's bodies "share" the same omniscient mind. The point, of course, is that even if it can be agreed that Buddhist and Christian theologians were, broadly speaking, concerned with "incarnational" issues, and even if they engaged these issues in a denaturalized discursive fashion, it is clear that they were asking very different types of questions.

What then *were* some of the questions confronted by Mahāyāna intellectuals regarding incarnation? One of the most important had to do with the question of how buddhas, who enjoy an unchanging perfection in *dharmakāya*, can act in the world. It is clear that the Mahāyāna sources are committed to the view that buddhas do not swerve or waver (*ma gyos pa*) from the transcendent *dharmakāya* state.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, the essential (*svabhāvika*) aspect of the dharma-body, which is identified with emptiness (see above), is considered a permanent phenomenon, by which is meant that it is not momentary (*skad cig ma ma yin pa*). On the other hand, even the dharma-body in its gnostic (*jñānātmaka*) mode of subsistence, though momentary (a corollary of its being gnosis, and therefore mind), is at each moment a state of equal perfection. How can a being that

exists in this way interact with, and be effective in, a changing world? That buddhas are believed to be so is evident from a number of passages in the Mahāyāna texts, passages like this one from the *Uttaratantra*:

The Great Compassionate One knows the world,  
 And witnessing the world in its entirety,  
 Without wavering from the dharma-body...  
 For as long as there is an existence, he manifests himself  
 In the impure fields  
 Using various magical devices.<sup>34</sup>

The question of a buddha's simultaneous transcendence and immanence has sometimes been framed in psychological terms. According to most of the Mahāyāna sources, buddhas lack conceptuality (*rnam par rtog pa*). Their omniscient gnosis perceives the world directly (*mngon sum du*), and not conceptually, that is, not through the intermediary of images or words.<sup>35</sup> And yet action would seem to require motivation (*kun slong*), which by its very nature is conceptual. How then can buddhas act for the welfare of others if they lack the conceptual motivation to act? When buddhas *do* act, they are said to do so effortlessly (*bad thsol med par*), that is, spontaneously (*lhun gi grub par*), without conceptual rumination, and without exertion. They do not first think to incarnate, or to teach, and then do so. Instead this happens spontaneously. But again, how is this possible? One of the more lucid explanations of this aspect of a buddha's conduct is found at the end of the Indian Buddhist classic, the *Madhyamakāvatāra*. Whether concerning motivation or effort, the answer is the same: buddhas act, without wavering from the perfection embodied in their *dharmakāyas*, through their previous training, and *especially* due to the power of their previous vow (made during their training as a bodhisattva) to seek the welfare of others. It is this previous conditioning that allows, and indeed impels, them to act, even without conceptuality, once they achieve buddhahood. Cāndrakīrti (7<sup>th</sup> century), the author of the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, uses the following example:

(6) Here [in the context of everyday experience], a potter's wheel is [initially] spun through the efforts of a strong potter. Once turning, though, it continues to spin even without the benefit of any additional effort from the potter, and in this way it furnishes the cause for the production of jugs and other kinds of pottery.

(7) Similarly, [the buddha] puts forth no effort whatsoever, as he abides in his body of the Dharma, and yet his totally inconceivable deeds are accomplished through the virtue he acquired [previously] as a living being, and in particular through his vow [to lead all living beings to awakening].<sup>36</sup>

Interesting as it would be to explore the Tibetan scholastic tradition on this and related issues, I forego this, and content myself to simply point out that, like the Christian scholars, both ancient and modern, who have dealt

with the issue of incarnation, Buddhists faced their own distinct problems, problems that were in most cases quite different from that of their Christian counterparts.

But despite the very different nature of the questions and answers given by Buddhist and Christian theologians, these two traditions *as discourses* share much in common, as we have already mentioned. There is at the very least a substantial portion of the discourse on incarnation in both traditions that has these traits in common: (1) it is essentially depersonalized (God/dharmakāya and son/rūpakāya talk rather than Jesus/Śākyamuni talk), (2) it is abstract and ahistorical (concerned with essences and knowledge rather than with the depiction of specific episodes in the lives of incarnations), and (3) it is concerned fundamentally with ontological and epistemological issues.

In contrast to this, there is, I believe, a more naturalized, contextual, historical mode of confronting this dilemma, one that attempts to formulate a consistent picture of the doctrine of incarnation by reference to an actual historical figure and his journey in time. For now I leave open the broader comparative question of the extent to which this alternative, naturalized discursive mode is generally exemplified in other religious traditions (and in Christianity in particular). Instead, in what remains of this paper, I will show how at least one group of Buddhist intellectuals, in the later Tibetan tradition, *does* resort to such naturalized discourse focused on the “perfection history” of Śākyamuni as a way of (1) understanding the issues at stake, (2) cataloguing, doxographically, the various views that have been held on the issues, and (3) reconciling, to the extent that it is possible to do so, these various views.

As in Christianity, Buddhism has seen its share of schisms. Latter day Buddhist theologians, especially in Tibet, sought to bring order to these schismatic developments through a variety of doctrinal means. One of the most important of these was the systematization of the Buddha’s teachings into three vehicles (*theg pa gsum*): (1) the lesser vehicle (*theg sman*, Hīnayāna), (2) the ordinary or exoteric greater vehicle (*theg chen*, Mahāyāna), that is, the vehicle of the perfections (*phar phyin theg pa*, Pāramitāyāna), and (3) the extraordinary or esoteric greater vehicle of the Tantra (*sangs ngags gi theg pa*, Mantrayāna). Tibetan Buddhist scholars went to great lengths to distinguish these three sets of teachings one from another, and to show the relative superiority of the latter to the former in each case. Hence, the three vehicles were distinguished one from another ethically (in terms of the vows taken). In addition, the Mahāyāna – that is, the perfection vehicle and the Tantra – were said to be superior to the lesser vehicle because of their more extensive expositions of emptiness, and because of their unique emphasis on the cultivation of great compassion and altruism. Within the Mahāyāna, the Tantra was considered superior to the ordinary vehicle of the perfections because of its unique technologies of self-transformation, technologies that were said to speed up the process of human perfection. But in addition to distinguishing between the three vehicles in the ways just described, Buddhist scholars in Tibet claimed that the three vehicles could also be differentiated in terms of their views of buddhahood. We turn now to a subset of those discussions having to do



with the status of the historical Buddha.

Put simply, the core question was this: was Śākyamuni, when he came to earth approximately 2500 years ago, a human being, or was he already enlightened? It should be mentioned at the outset that for the theologians who confronted the question this was not mere historical curiosity about the exact point at which Śākyamuni attained enlightenment, but a way of crafting a coherent position regarding incarnation. Tibetans answered the question in the following way: the Hīnayāna believes that at the time of his birth Śākyamuni was a human being, the Pāramitāyāna claims that he was an already enlightened being, and the Tantra contains both views, depending on the division of the Tantra being considered.<sup>37</sup> As mentioned earlier, Buddhists never argued over whether someone could be both human and buddha simultaneously. This was impossible by definition. But they *did* debate the question of *when* Śākyamuni made the transition from human to Buddha, in particular debating the issue of whether Śākyamuni (or, more accurately, the being who would become Śākyamuni) was already enlightened before he incarnated on the earth. Since the discussion that follows presumes an understanding of the Buddha's "twelve great deeds,"<sup>38</sup> let me take this opportunity to list them here. They are: (1) descent from the heaven of Tuṣita, (2) conception, (3) birth, (4) skill in worldly arts, (5) enjoyment of his wives, (6) renunciation, (7) six years of ascetic practices, (8) taking his place under the bodhi tree, (9) defeat of the demon Māra, (10) enlightenment, (11) teaching, (12) death.

Let us now turn to the Tibetan sources to see how this controversy is played out. mKhas grub rje's (1385-1438) *General Exposition of the Tantras (rGyud sde spyi rnam)*<sup>39</sup> is a useful point of departure because it begins precisely with a comparative treatment of "what the different vehicles say about how the Lord, the teacher, achieved complete enlightenment."<sup>40</sup> Following the early Indian scholastic manual, the *Abhidharmakośa*, mKhas grub rje portrays the *śrāvaka*, that is, the Hīnayāna, position as maintaining that from the time of his birth as prince Siddhārtha to just after his subduing of the demon Māra, Śākyamuni was "an ordinary bodhisattva on the path of accumulation" (*byang chub sems dpa' so skye tshogs lam pa*), which is to say that he was a human being.<sup>41</sup> After the defeat of Māra, during the last period of the night, Śākyamuni "immersed himself in equipoise, actualized the paths of preparation, seeing and meditation, and just at the point of dawn, entered the path of no more learning, thus becoming a complete buddha."<sup>42</sup> The doctrine that Śākyamuni came to earth as an ordinary human being, and that even after his enlightenment he continued to have an ordinary, material body, has theological (and even ritual) implications for many Hīnayanists,<sup>43</sup> among them the fact that the buddha's earthly body is enmeshed with suffering, and is therefore not a true object of refuge.

According to the exoteric (Pāramitāyāna, perfection vehicle) form of the Mahāyāna, says mKhas grub rje, the historical buddha was enlightened even before his birth on the earth.<sup>44</sup> Having traversed the various paths during three countless aeons of practice, he was born as a tenth stage bodhisattva in a realm beyond the Akaniṣṭha heaven called Ghanavyūha Akaniṣṭha,<sup>45</sup> where he attained complete enlightenment, and simultaneous-

ly the *dharmā-* and *sambhoga-kāyas*. And then, “while the *sambhogakāya* (the enjoyment body) resided in that (Ghanavyūha) Akaniṣṭha, the *nirmāṇakāya* (illusory manifestation body) play-acted (*tshul ston*) the twelve deeds in the world of human beings.”<sup>46</sup> These twelve deeds, that represent the paradigmatic life of a buddha are play-acted simultaneously in 100 myriads (*bye ba phrag brgya*) of worlds.<sup>47</sup> Thus, according to the Perfection vehicle of the Mahāyāna, the historical Buddha who came to earth 2500 years ago – and according to some accounts, even the major players in the Buddha’s life (his family and his chief disciples) – were all previously enlightened beings. The major events of the Buddha’s life, according to this account, are predetermined in an intentional pattern scripted according to the needs of beings. (Hence, for example, a proto-Mahāyāna text, the *Mahāvastu*, speaks of the Buddha’s body not as a fleshy body, but as a body made of mind, and the Buddha’s actions not as the actions of an ordinary worldly being, but as in “mere conformity” with the world.) At least in its broad outline, then, the Buddha’s life is nomothetic. By eschewing the accidental and random character of his life, the Mahāyāna sources shun representing the Buddha’s biography idiographically, as a series of unique, unrepeatable and contingent events. Put another way, although the Buddha may have *appeared* to have been born, lived and died as do other human beings, these events, being neither karmically conditioned, nor accidental, do not have the same historical quality as the events in the life of ordinary beings. While appearing contingent to some, they are not truly so, being instead the pre-scripted acts of an illusory being. It is little wonder that Parrinder, in his *Wilde Lectures*, portrays this strand in Buddhist thought, present from the *Mahāvastu* to the Lotus Sutra to the Tibetan sources, as docetic.

Now in his discussion of the tantric view, mKhas grub rje states first that the account found in the two lower (*kriyā* and *caryā*, see note 36) Tantras concerning the process of enlightenment coincides with that of the ordinary Mahāyāna just presented. The view of the higher (*yoga* and *anut-tarayoga*) Tantras, however, differs, and even the first of these, the Yoga Tantra view is two fold. According to the Yoga system of Śākyamitra and Buddhaguhya (two medieval Indian Buddhist scholars of the Yoga Tantra tradition), Śākyamuni was born on earth as a tenth stage bodhisattva. After his six years of ascetic practices (the seventh action), he entered a certain state of meditative equipoise, and while remaining in that state in his ordinary material body (*rnam smin gyi lus*), he traveled in a mental body (*yiḍ kyi lus*) in the person of the bodhisattva “Fulfilling-All-Aims” (Don thams cad grub pa) to the Akaniṣṭha heaven, where he was initiated into the Yoga Tantra and became enlightened as the *sambhogakāya* Mahāvairocana. After teaching the Yoga Tantras in this form, he returned to earth and once again entered the body he had left behind (*mi yul du byon nas... rnam smin gyi lus de la slar zhugs te bzhengs*), and then proceeded to act out the remainder of the classical events in his life (proceeding to the bodhi tree, the defeat of Māra, his enlightenment, teaching, and death).<sup>48</sup>

According to the alternative Yoga Tantra system of Ānandagarbha, the tenth stage bodhisattva, in his last life, was born and enlightened in Akaniṣṭha, and only after this did he act out the twelve deeds in the world

of men. Ānandagarbha's account thus resembles the overall pattern of the perfection vehicle. But the first account, that of Śākyamitra and Buddhaguhya (S/B), present us with a new model: Śākyamuni, while born as a human being, leaves the earth for a period of time in a specially fabricated "mental body" in order to achieve enlightenment. He then returns to the earth to finish acting out the rest of the events of his life (the last five actions), now as a Buddha. This model in some ways bridges the Hīnayāna and Pāramitāyāna theories. It recapitulates the Hīnayāna account by acknowledging Śākyamuni's status as a human being at least up to the end of the six years of ascetic practices. It recapitulates the Pāramitāyāna account by insisting on Akaniṣṭha as the true site of the enlightenment, and on the play-acted quality of the last five of the Buddha's great deeds. Hence, the S/B Yoga Tantra view represents a kind of compromise position.<sup>49</sup>

The S/B account is interesting because it seeks to preserve at least a partial notion of history as empirical, in so far as the earlier portion of the Buddha's life is, as it appears to be, the life of a real human being. At the same time, being a tantric view, it is forced to account for Śākyamuni's introduction to tantric practice, and for his subsequent enlightenment as a tantric deity (Mahāvairocana). In keeping with the general commitment to a view of the Tantra as a secret (*guhya*, *gsang ba'i*) vehicle, it explains Śākyamuni's "tantricity" by constructing a secret history – that of the samādhi-interruptus and of the trip to Akaniṣṭha in a mental body – a history that, while not seeming to violate the integrity of Śākyamuni's life as it appears to ordinary mortals, nonetheless explains his achievement of enlightenment as a tantric deity.

The Highest (*anuttara*) Yoga branch of the Tantra offers yet a third (tantric) scenario to explain when and where Śākyamuni attained buddhahood. After three countless aeons on the exoteric Pāramitā path, he was born as a tenth-stage bodhisattva in Akaniṣṭha,<sup>50</sup> receives the two higher tantric initiations, and achieves enlightenment as the tantric deity Vajradhāra, the *saṃbhogakāya*. Then, while remaining in Akaniṣṭha as Vajradhāra, the *nirmāṇakāya* Śākyamuni manifests on the earth and acts-out the 12 deeds. After the seventh of those deeds (the six years of ascetic practices) Śākyamuni is awakened from meditation by the buddhas of the ten directions, proceeds to the bodhi tree and partakes of food<sup>51</sup> (the eighth deed). He is then given the two higher tantric initiations,<sup>52</sup> and acts-out the attainment of enlightenment (the tenth action) according to the method of the Tantras *in the human realm*. The last two deeds (teaching and death) are then acted out accordingly.

The Highest Yoga tantric view hearkens back to the Pāramitāyāna view. Śākyamuni is previously enlightened in Akaniṣṭha, albeit tantrically, and appears on earth as an already perfectly enlightened being. The Highest Yoga tantric view also, however, invokes the samādhi-interruptus scenario of the S/B Yoga tantric interpretation. But where the S/B account uses this as an opportunity to have Śākyamuni travel to Akaniṣṭha, the Highest Yoga Tantra uses it as the occasion of Śākyamuni's breaking his fast and proceeding to the Bodhi tree. That is to say, whereas the S/B view requires Śākyamuni to make the journey to Akaniṣṭha at this point so as to attain enlightenment, a journey that takes place through the secret-historical mode of a mental body, the previously enlightened status of Śākyamuni in the Highest Yoga Tantra view makes such a journey unnecessary. Instead, the Highest Yoga Tantras takes this opportunity to bring

the secret of the Tantras to earth, to make it public, as it were, by having Śākya-muni – albeit in play-acted form (since this had already occurred once and definitively in Akaniṣṭha before his birth) – receive the higher initiations and achieve buddhahood tantrically while sitting under the bodhi tree. Thus, the Highest Yoga Tantra presents us with two enlightenment scenarios: the real one that occurs before Śākya-muni incarnated on the earth, and the play-acted one that occurs on the earth. It differs from the other tantric accounts in its willingness to have Śākya-muni act out the original (real) enlightenment scenario that took place in Akaniṣṭha once again on the earth. As an aside, this is undoubtedly to bring home the unique doctrinal position – so central to the Highest Yoga Tantra – that enlightenment is possible even in the desire realm.

I am not unaware of the complexity of the various accounts of Śākya-muni’s perfection history that I have just outlined. I will forego further review of this material, which can, in any case, be found in a condensed form in Figure 1. Instead, let me conclude now with some brief observations.

*Hīna/Śrāvaka-yāna*

*Lesser vehicle/vehicle of the Hearers*

Śākya-muni is human up to the time of his enlightenment, and a buddha thereafter. First nine actions, those of a human being; last three, those of a buddha.

*Mahāyāna  
Greater Vehicle*

*Pāramitāyāna*

*Exoteric Vehicle of the Perfections*

Śākya-muni enlightened before his birth on earth.

All 12 actions those of a buddha

*Mantra/Tantra-yāna*

*Esoteric Vehicle*

*Yogatantra*

*Anuttara (Highest)  
Yogatantra*

*System of Śākya-mitra and  
Buddhaguhya*

Śākya-muni is born human; after six years of ascetic practices, while in meditation, leaves his physical body and makes the trip to Akaniṣṭha in a spirit body; receives tantric initiation and becomes enlightened as the *saṃbhogakāya* Mahāvairocana in Akaniṣṭha; sends the (now enlightened) spirit body to enter the physical body of meditating Śākya-muni; as a (now secret) Buddha, he proceeds to Bodhi tree, defeats Māra, play-acts enlightenment, teaches and dies. First seven actions those of a human; last five those of a buddha

*System of Anandagarbha*

Similar to the Exoteric Mahāyāna view, except that the future Śākya-muni is enlightened as the *saṃbhogakāya* Mahāvairocana, who then “sends” Śākya-muni to the earth as a *nirmāṇakāya*. All 12 actions those of a buddha.

The future Śākya-muni receives initiation and attains enlightenment in Akaniṣṭha as the *saṃbhogakāya* Vajradhāra; “sends” *nirmāṇakāya* Śākya-muni to earth; play-acts all twelve actions, including initiation and enlightenment, on earth. All twelve actions those of a buddha.

Figure 1. Various views of Śākya-muni’s Enlightenment History

My main point, as you will recall, is that the discourse just described represents a naturalized, historicized, counterpart to the denaturalized discourse discussed above. Although *kāya*-ese is clearly present in this alternative discourse, its main purpose is not to resolve the dilemma of incarnation by elaborating the ontological or epistemological relationships between the various bodies, but to, quite straightforwardly, set forth different views of the enlightenment history of Śākyamuni. Although the genre is quite explicitly doxographical, the overall project is directed at reconciling the various views concerning Śākyamuni's status as an incarnation. That reconciliation is perhaps not as clear in the text just discussed as it is in the later literature, where the "audience" for these various doctrines emerges as a variable in the discussion. The Tibetan literature (at least of the dGe lugs pa school) maintains the Highest Yoga Tantra view to represent the definitive account of Śākyamuni's enlightenment history. But rather than simply dismissing the other accounts as heresy, the hierarchy implicit in the Tibetan scheme allows for a valorization of the "lower" views in terms of their value for specific audiences. Hence, the view that Śākyamuni was born human is a view that cannot simply be repudiated or abandoned, since, being meaningful to the "ordinary disciples" (*gdul bya thun mong ba*) represented by the followers of the Hīnayāna, it serves a useful purpose. The view that Śākyamuni was enlightened prior to his birth, however, is a doctrine of the extraordinary disciples (*gdul bya thun mong ma yin pa*) represented by the followers of the Pāramitāyāna, and is therefore superior to the previous view. Viewed from the perspective of the Tantra, however, the Mahāyāna followers of the vehicle of the perfections become "common," and the tantric adepts "uncommon." Thus, the view that the various doctrines have different audiences – the position that these various views of incarnation serve useful functions for different types of individuals – allows for an appreciation of doctrinal diversity. Such an appreciation, however, does not devolve into relativism, for ultimately these various views are arranged hierarchically, and this implies that the Hīnayāna view is *inferior* to that of the Mahāyāna, and that the exoteric Mahāyāna view is inferior to that of the Tantra (and so forth within the division of the Tantra itself).

But *what makes* the more human view of the Buddha inferior, and what makes those who believe it "ordinary"? A dogmatic – or worse, a circular – argument, one that simply presumes the truth of the doxographical scheme, or of the scriptures on which it is based, will not of course be convincing (even to a *Buddhist* public). So independent reasons must be forthcoming, reasons for accepting one view of buddhahood over another. Such reasons *are* found in the texts, it seems to me, but ultimately they are reasons based on experience: those who attain sufficiently high levels of meditative accomplishment (for example, the "*samādhi* of the dharma stream," *chos rgyun gi ting nge 'dzin*) will be able to experience the truth of the higher view for themselves (for example, by seeing the young Śākyamuni not as a human being but as an already enlightened being). Reasons of this sort, though independent of the truth of the doxographical scheme, are private, and therefore not convincing to those who have not attained these higher states of consciousness. Of course one might imagine more public

reasons: for example, pragmatic arguments concerning how and why the exalted view of the Buddha found in the Mahāyāna is more conducive to spiritual progress than the more human view found in the Hīnayāna, but I am unaware of any such argument in the Buddhist sources themselves. Or again, one might imagine as an example of public reasoning an argument concerning how the Mahāyāna view explains aspects of Śākyamuni's life that remain unexplained in the Hīnayāna view. But once again, I know of no such arguments. In the end, then, we seem to be left with faith, rather than philosophy, as the basis for deciding between alternative views of buddhahood. But lest I be seen as giving up on philosophy too quickly, let me conclude with some comparative, and hopefully philosophically provocative, remarks.

### Conclusion

Clearly, there must be some purpose to incarnating.<sup>53</sup> In the Christian sources this has been variously identified. In some instances the Logos' incarnation in the world is seen as having a redemptive function. God's taking on a human form, and suffering as a human being, is seen as a *sine qua non* to the salvation of human beings and the world. In other instances Jesus is seen as incarnating not God's *nature* (so that he becomes a two-natured being, fully human and fully divine, the Chalcedonian christology) but as, metaphorically, "incarnating" God's *spirit*. So that "God indwelt and motivated the spirit of Jesus in such a way that in him, uniquely, the relationship for which man was intended by his creator was fully realized."<sup>54</sup> Hick, one of the chief advocates of this "inspirational christology," sees it not only as avoiding the essential flaws of the "Chalcedonian-type christologies,"<sup>55</sup> but, in his version, as allowing for other incarnational possibilities, even in other religious traditions, which he sees as essential to any theology that takes seriously the challenge of pluralism.

It should, however, be clear from the preceding discussions that Mahāyāna Buddhists will not find Hick's inspirational theology of incarnation particularly appealing, even when graciously extended beyond the person of Jesus. For Hick's incarnation(s) are, alas, human, and it should be evident, even from the cursory treatment above, that for Mahayanists a buddha's incarnations – a buddha's form bodies, the enjoyment and illusory manifestation bodies – *cannot* be human.

Now it might be argued at this point that the Mahāyāna doctrine of the Buddha's form bodies *fails* as a doctrine of incarnation, for, after all, according to the Mahāyāna sources a buddha's form bodies are neither bodies, as conventionally understood, nor form, since they are nonmaterial. Why call these *bodies* at all, then? Why call this an *incarnational* theology? Mahayanists, who do themselves call these *bodies* (*kāya*), are quite clear: the enjoyment and illusory manifestation bodies *appear to be* material bodies. Hence, the illusory manifestation bodies of a buddha appear to be born, to grow old and to die. In the experiential field of ordinary beings (*thun mong ba'i snang ngor*), they are, for all intents and purposes, real bodies.<sup>56</sup> That there are more spiritually mature beings, extraordinary

adepts (*thun mong ma yin pa'i dul bya*), who see beyond the mere appearances, and who recognize these as illusory, of course, does not belie the fact that for the vast majority of beings these illusory bodies appear and function as bodies, especially as regards their role as the purveyors of salvific doctrine, both through word and deed.

But even if we grant the Mahāyāna doctrine of the form bodies of a buddha the status of an incarnational theology, there still remains to discuss the *adequacy* of the Mahāyāna view as an incarnational theology. Here the main challenge, it seems to me, lies in whether or not docetism (the view that an incarnation is only *apparently* human) is defensible as a theory of incarnation. That Christians in the first few centuries of the common era did not find it so had to do, of course, with many of the other positions to which Christian theologians were committed (the doctrine of the redemptive power of the suffering of the righteous, and the later notion that "Jesus, in his death, was our substitute in bearing God's just punishment, or otherwise appeasing the divine wrath or satisfying the divine justice, and so enabling a righteous creator to forgive his sinful creatures"<sup>57</sup>). Such doctrines required a Christ that, while ontologically linked to the father, was capable of suffering, and therefore fully human. But Buddhism, of course, is not committed to doctrines of this sort, making the docetic characterization of the buddha's form bodies consistent with the Mahāyāna doctrinal framework as a whole. In fact, given Mahāyāna doctrinal presuppositions concerning the nature of enlightenment – presuppositions that require buddhas to have transcended suffering altogether – it might even be argued that the docetic option is the *only* viable one.

There is at least one other set of philosophical problems that docetists will have to confront, and this has to do with the nomothetic character of an incarnation's actions in the world. Recall that according to the above accounts, all "supreme illusory manifestation bodies" (*mchog gyi sprul sku*), like Śākyamuni, have their lives scripted, at least in so far as they must all perform the same 12 actions. But how can the law-like, necessary quality of these actions be reconciled with the idiographic, contingent quality of history. How, for example, can a buddha be assured of a positive reception in the world? This is obviously a question that Mahāyāna theologians confronted, although arguably not in these precise terms. Their answer can be pieced together from a variety of sources as follows. On the one hand, it is claimed that Śākyamuni, by virtue of his having accumulated merit<sup>58</sup> for three countless aeons, himself creates a historical situation – crafts an ambience – in which he will be able to perform the twelve actions unimpeded. This notion that buddhas create for themselves – and for those beings who, through their own virtuous conduct, manage to be reborn there – suitable "fields" of action (*buddhakṣetra*, *sangs rgyas kyi shing*) is an old one in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is a way of explaining not only how buddhas can be assured a positive reception on earth, but also how they create more ethereal realms conducive to enlightenment (e.g., the pure lands = *dag shing*, that are so important in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism).<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, the fact that Śākyamuni is not a real human being – the fact that he is omniscient, and that, as an illusory manifestation, he can transcend the laws of the physical universe – means that he can avoid

many of the situations that would otherwise impede his prescribed actions (sickness, an untimely death, defeat in doctrinal disputations or in magical competitions, and so forth). So, on the one hand, Śākyamuni prepares the world for his appearance; on the other, he prepares himself for it.

When all is said and done, however, as long as human beings can exercise free will, a position to which the Mahāyāna is deeply committed, there must still remain in the Buddha's interactions with others, and therefore in the life of the Buddha, a substantial amount of historical uncertainty. But this is surely not incompatible with Śākyamuni's living out his quasi-normative life ("quasi-" because the Mahāyāna does not of course claim that *every* action in the Buddha's life is predetermined). Hence, the Buddha may indeed face situations over which he has little, if any, control (jealous rivals, belligerent students, attempts on his life, and so forth). The Mahāyāna in no way denies this kind of historical contingency. At the same time, it does maintain that such uncertainty could not be so great as to impede the successful completion of the 12 actions. Put another way, although there can be a fair amount of contingency, the Mahāyāna is committed to the claim that Śākyamuni's preparation (of the world and of himself) precludes there being so much uncertainty that his life in its broadest outline (as defined by the twelve actions) could be otherwise than what it was.

Does this provide independent, public reasons for accepting the Mahāyāna account of the Buddha? No. But it provides at least some philosophical defense of the *consistency* of doctetism as subscribed to by Mahayanists. The *plausibility* of that doctrine – and arguably of every doctrine of incarnation – may in the end *be* a matter of faith rather than of philosophy.

*Iiff School of Theology*

#### NOTES

1. This paper was first presented at a panel of the Philosophy of Religion Section at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 1998. The author wishes to express his thanks to Profs. Paul Griffiths and William Wainwright for the invitation to participate on that panel, and their comments, and to Prof. David McMahan for his response. Prof. Kamala Parel's advice concerning the Christian textual sources is also greatly appreciated.

2. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Adde Parvum Parvo Magnum Acervit Erit," in *Map is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

3. John Carman's recent work explores one such exemplum in the Japanese context. See John B. Carman, *Majesty and Meekness: A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994); see especially chapter 7, where he discusses the Jōdo school. See also the following note.

4. Although, once again, given the extreme diversity even of the Tibetan tradition, it is possible to find strains of Buddhist thought that, at least on the surface, would seem to fly in the face of the general Indo-Tibetan Buddhist allergy to a doctrine that the universe has a creator. Hence, in the rDzogs chen Atiyoga tradition of Tibetan Buddhism there is a generally held tenet that the universe arises, or emanates, out of the Sovereign Creator (Kun byed rgyal po),



often portrayed as feminine. See E. K. Neumaier-Dargyay, *The Sovereign All-Creating Mind, The Motherly Buddha: A Translation of the Kun byed rgyal po'i mdo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 29 passim. It is not surprising that such a view was criticized as non-Buddhist by virtue of "having fallen into the extreme of eternalism." This latter current, that sees as heretical the doctrine of primordial awareness as creator, can be found in the writings of Tibetan scholars from at least the eleventh century (see Neumaier-Dargyay, *ibid.*, p.7) to the present day. Especially important to contemporary "heresiologists" of this sort is the work of the early twentieth century dGe lugs pa polymath Pha bong kha bDe chen snying po; see especially *sKyabs rje Pha bong kha pa Chab mdor bzhugs skabs snyan sgron du gsol ser ba'i yig rdzus kyi dpyad don mchan bus bkrol ba dpyod ldan bzhin 'dzum dgod pa'i thal skad rnga chen bskul ba'i dbyu gu*, notes compiled in 1949 by lDan ma bLo bzang rdo rje on lectures Pha bong kha gave in eastern Tibet, and published in *Three Texts Reflecting the Views of Pha-bong-kha-pa bDe-chen-sñin-po on the Question of Heresies and Intersectarian Relations in Tibet* (New Delhi: Ngawang Tobgay, 1977), pp. 1-215.

5. This strategy, a kind of studied ambivalence in regard to the Gods, on the part of Buddhists is of course not unknown in the history of religions. Consider, for example, the analogous view of Epicurus in regard to the Greek Gods.

6. Such overestimation on the part of theists is not, according to the Buddhist sources, the result of human theological wishful thinking. In some Buddhist texts, for example, a God (e.g., Brahmā) will be portrayed as mistakenly believing that he created the world, and as imparting this belief in the form of dogma to his followers. Arguably the most sophisticated exposition of the Buddhist view of the Hindu Gods is to be found in the *Tarkajvālā* (Blaze of Reasoning), of the medieval Indian Buddhist scholar Bhāvaviveka; ACIP, release III, TD3856E.RAW, folio 128a et. passim.

7. This access in fact begins in an extensive way already from the time that a being obtains the eighth bodhisattva stage (*acalābhūmi*). For an eloquent expression of such a bodhistva's ability to manifest in various ways throughout the universe see chapter eight of P. L. Vaidya, ed., *Daśābūmikasūtram*, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, no. 7 (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1967); and the translation by Megumu Honda (revised by J. Rahder), in D. Sinor, ed., *Studies in South, East and Central Asia* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1968).

8. For an extensive discussion of the characteristics of a buddha outlined here, with a philosophical defense as found in important Indian and Tibetan sources, see Roger R. Jackson, *Is Enlightenment Possible? Dharmakīrti and rGyal tshab rje on Knowledge, Rebirth, No-self and Liberation* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1993).

9. On Mahāyāna characterizations of buddhas as maximally perfect see Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). This work also provides one of the most complete treatments of the classical Mahāyāna "buddhalogy" in any Western language.

10. See note 7.

11. Incarnation as a *topos* of the History of Religions was, of course, pointed out by, e.g., Mircea Eliade. Eliade would see the specific problem being dealt with in this essay as a specific case of the more general phenomenon of *hierophany*. Regardless of how successful Eliade was in treating this issue (and he has been criticized extensively in this regard in recent years), he must nonetheless be credited with pointing out its importance as a topic of investigation. See his *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1965). See also Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation: The Wilde Lectures in Natural and*

*Comparative Religion in the University of Oxford* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970). The widely held tenet concerning the uniqueness of the incarnation in Christianity, a view that has filtered down, often unconsciously, into the (even secular) mindset of the West, has at times impeded the comparative treatment of the topic. Hence, Parrinder's book is classified not alongside books in comparative religion, but together with volumes dealing with *re-incarnation!*

12. The word *source* of course already pre-judges the ontological question of the relationship, presuming, as it does, a *causal* link between the incarnation and the more transcendent being to which the incarnation is linked. It is difficult, however, to think of an alternative term that is totally neutral in regard to such a relationship. The Mahāyāna Buddhist texts sometimes speak of the *dharmakāya* as the *basis* or *support* (*āśraya*) of the form bodies (see Griffiths, *op. cit.*, p. 81), hence my decision to use this admittedly awkward combination of terms.

13. Whether or not Sabellianism was necessarily docetic is a subject of controversy. The majority of scholars, both ancient and modern, seem to favor this view. Sabellianism is of particular interest as a comparandum *vis a vis* the Mahāyāna, since both hold that the perfect source "though in one substratum, is transformed on every occasion according to the necessary circumstances," the words of Basil characterizing the views of Sabellius. See Wolfson, *op. cit.*, p. 597.

14. See Paul J. Griffiths, "Denaturalizing Discourse: Ābhīdhārmikas, Propositionists and the Comparative Philosophy of Religion," in Frank E. Reynolds and David Tracy, eds., *Myth and Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 57-91.

15. This is the subject of a recent book, John J. Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). Makransky believes that the Indian Buddhist theologians who dealt with this issue basically confronted a fundamental tension at the very heart of Mahāyāna Buddhism, to wit, the tension implicit in the Mahāyāna doctrine of nonabiding (*apraṭiṣṭhita*) nirvāṇa: that buddhas are both free from (that they transcend) the conditioned world, and are active (or immanent) in it. To summarize (and paraphrase) Makransky's conclusions, this basic conundrum had two resolutions: a mystery/mystical one, and a rationalist one. The former leaves the question unanswered (at least in cognitive terms), a solution not unknown to Christian apologists. The latter attempts to resolve this dilemma by positing a separate kind of *dharmakāya* (the *jñānātmakadharmakāya*, or the "*dharmakāya* whose nature is knowledge") that acts as a kind of intermediary between buddhas in their unconditioned transcendence (*svābhāvīkākāya*) and in their status as agents in the phenomenal, conditioned world (*rūpakāya-s*).

16. Most of the Tibetan literature on this subject is to be found in commentaries on the eighth chapter of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, and in commentaries on various portions the *Uttaratantra*, both texts attributed by the Tibetans to Maitreya. See especially Jikido Takasaki, *A Study of the Ratnagoṭravibhāga (Uttaratantra), Being a Treatise on the Tathāgatagarbha Theory of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Serie Orientale Roma, vol. XXXIII (Rome: IsMEO, 1966), especially chapter 2 of the translation.

17. Besides the basic two-body theory described here, which distinguishes between the dharma- and form-bodies, or its corollary, the three-body theory, which further subdivides the form-body into an enjoyment body and illusory manifestation bodies (also described below), there are other enumerations of a buddha's bodies found in the literature. Hence, the Indian Buddhist scholar Bhāvaviveka (6th century) speaks of gnosis-, form-, and speech-bodies. In this

account, the gnosis-body corresponds to the dharma-body, the form-body to the enjoyment and illusory manifestation bodies, and the speech-body to the “the speech that, based on that [form-body], possesses the 60 qualities, and that, having as its characteristic, the letters, roots and words, in that order (of increasing complexity), enraptures the minds of all sentient beings”; Bhāvaviveka, *Tarkajvālā*, ACIP, release III, TD3856E.RAW, folio 129b.

18. One of the most vexing questions concerning a buddha’s dharma-body has to do with whether it is singular or multiple. The claim that the dharma-body of all of the buddhas is identical can be found in a variety of sources. Many scholars – both Indian and Tibetan – believed, however, that such statements could not be taken literally. In this latter view, there are two senses in which every buddha, and their respective dharma-bodies, may be said to be “identical,” or, more accurately, “equivalent”: in so far as they have “the same” maximal attributes, and in so far as they have “the same” ultimate nature (emptiness). The fact that they share these qualities in common, however, does not imply that all of the buddhas, or their respective dharma-bodies, are one. Hence, in this view, neither Buddha X, nor the dharma-body of Buddha X is identical to Buddha Y and the dharma-body of Buddha Y. Put another way, it is not the case, according to this perspective, that all of the beings who attain enlightenment somehow meld into some kind of cosmic buddha-unity, thereby losing their individuality. While equally perfect, and equally empty, each retains an individuality that is the result of his or her particular history. What is more, their different histories makes different buddhas distinctively efficacious as regards their interactions with beings. Such a view can be found in a good deal of the Indian commentarial literature; see, for example, the various commentaries on *Mahāyānasamgraha*, sec. B3d, translated in Paul J. Griffiths, et. al., *The Realm of Awakening: Chapter Ten of Asanga’s Mahāyānasamgraha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 86-9. Griffiths, *On Being Buddha*, op.cit., pp. 185-6, relying on the same *Mahāyānasamgraha* (among other) textual evidence, however, opts for the identity-of-all-buddhas thesis, which again goes to show how ambivalent the Indian sources are on this issue. Tibetan exegetes also reject the claim that all buddhas have the same dharma-body, that is, that the dharma-bodies of different buddhas are identical in every respect. Tsong kha pa, for example, in his commentary on *Madhyamakāvātāra* (11, 39), argues that there are absurd consequences entailed by the identity thesis, see his *dBu ma dgongs pa rab gsal*, ACIP, release III, S5408E.RAW, folios 263a-b.

19. Although Mahāyāna Buddhism and Gnosticism are dissimilar in many ways, the tendency of both to see the transcendent in both negative (Gnostics’ characterization of God as “nothing,” as “nonexistent,” “unborn,” “unbegotten,” “unknowable”) and positive (“good,” “absolutely good,” “excellent”) terms is a similarity that is at the very least worth pointing out; see Henry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, vol. 1. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 522-23.,

20. Both Indian and Tibetan scholastics, however, believed that the dharma-body could be cognized inferentially, and thus conceptually.

21. Bhāvaviveka, *Tarkajvālā*, ACIP, release III, TD3856E.RAW, folio 129b: “At the very instant his mind is enlightened, the Tathāgata’s body, which is of the nature of gnosis, arises in the palace of Akaniṣṭha as a result of having accumulated infinite accumulations of merit and wisdom.” (my emphasis) The same point is made by the Tibetan scholar mKhas grub rje, *Dose*, op. cit., p. 382: “the *sambhogakāya* [is]... inseparable in nature from the gnosis of the *dharma-kāya*”; mKhas grub rje is also quite insistent there, as elsewhere, that the form bodies are *not* material. In fact, the Tibetan sources generally hold that a material body is forever lost considerably prior to the attainment of enlighten-

ment (on the bodhisattva path). For an interesting discussion of the transformation of each of the aggregates (the body, the feelings, etc.) at the time of enlightenment see Jñānagarbha's commentary on the "Maitreya Chapter" of the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, as translated by John Powers, *Two Commentaries on the Samdhinirmocana-Sutra by Asanga and Jnanagarbha*, Studies in Asian Thought and Religion, vol. 13 (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp. 124-5.

22. The sources are ambivalent concerning whether the *sambhogakāya* is singular or multiple, that is, concerning whether a single buddha can have more than one *sambhogakāya*. Those texts that claim a single heavenly realm (Akaniṣṭha) as the unique abode of the *sambhogakāya* tend to the one-*sambhogakāya* model.

23. According to some Indian and Tibetan sources only 10th level bodhisattvas are capable of perceiving a *sambhogakāya*; according to others, a variety of bodhisattvas on any of the ten stages possess such an ability. Hence, the eleventh century Indian scholar Atiśa states in his autocommentary to the *Bodhipathapradīpa*, ACIP, release III, TD3948E.RAW, folio 259a, "The dharmabody pervades all time and all things; the *sambhogakāya* abides in a retinue, is only perceivable by the great lords of the tenth stage, and teaches only the profound and extensive doctrine of the Mahāyāna; the *nirmāṇakāya* is, like the *udumbara* flower (which lasts just a short time), a temporary thing (*res 'ga' ba*), for the scriptures state that after this aeon, there will be sixty aeons in which buddhas do not arise." But the Tibetan scholar mKhas grub bstan pa dar rgyas, *Phar phyin spyi don*, chap. 8, Asian Classics Input Project (ACIP), release III, SOOO9E8.RAW, f. 9b and 21b-22a, holds the view that those who perceive the *sambhogakāya* need not be 10th level bodhisattvas, but only *ārya* bodhisattvas (that is, bodhisattvas on or above the 1st stage or *bhūmi*). Tsong kha pa, in his *dBu ma dgongs pa rab gsal*, ACIP, release III, S5408E. RAW, folio 255a, states that the *sambhogakāya* "directly appears" (*dingos su snang ba*) only to bodhisattvas who are devoid of mental proliferations, that is, "only to those, who, by virtue of their dual accumulations (of method and wisdom), have obtained the state of stainless mirror wisdom, and not to ordinary beings (*so skye*) who still possess mental proliferations." He then cites a verse that states that the *sambhogakāya* is perceived (but not exclusively?) by 10th level bodhisattvas. So Tsong kha pa's position is itself unclear in this regard.

24. Griffiths, *On Being Buddha*, op. cit., chapter four, although equivocating at times (e.g., p. 197), generally holds to the position that the only properties of the illusory manifestation bodies of a buddha are relational ones, that is, temporally indexed properties that exist only in so far as they appear to non-buddhas (of the form "seems to S to be P at t"). However, this flies in the face of doctrinal claims, elaborated most fully in the Tibetan sources, namely, that nonrelational properties (the uni-substantial nature of a *nirmāṇakāya* and a buddha's gnosis, the omniscience of a *nirmāṇakāya*, on which see below, note 29) can be predicated of a buddha's illusory manifestation body. This, together with the critique of *dharmakāya* identity (see above, note 17), brings into question many of Griffiths's conclusions concerning the consistency of the Mahāyāna theory of the Buddha's bodies (ibid., chapter seven).

25. The three general types of *nirmāṇakāyas*, are (1) the supreme illusory manifestation body (*mchog gi sprul sku*), like Śākyamuni, who acts out the twelve deeds of a buddha, (2) the body that, though originally born as, or manifested by, a bodhisattva, comes to attain the status of a buddha's illusory manifestation body after that bodhisattva attains enlightenment (*skye ba'i sprul sku*), and (3) the craftman-like illusory manifestation body (*bzo bo sprul sku*), which buddhas manifest for specific, quite circumscribed, purposes, as when Śākya-

muni manifested as a magnificent lute player to defeat a rival lute player, and thus to subdue his pride. mKhas grub bstan pa day rgyas, ACIP release III, S0009E8.RAW, f. 18a, cites a verse, purportedly from the *Uttaratantra*, as the source of this doctrine, but no such verse is to be found in that latter text.

26. For the purposes of this paper I am translating the term Jambudvīpa – the name given by the Buddhist texts to the “continent” on which Śākyamuni manifested – as *earth*. Given that there may be no one-to-one correspondence between Buddhist and Western-scientific cosmology, I realize that *earth* may not be the most accurate translation, but this is for the most part irrelevant for what is to follow.

27. There is controversy in the Tibetan sources concerning whether accessibility to the *nirmāṇakāya* requires a certain level of karmic purity (*las dag pa*). mKhas grub bstan pa dar rgyas believes that it does not. Hence, he defines a *nirmāṇakāya* as “a form body that undertakes the very extensive (work) on behalf of others by way of actually appearing to ordinary beings, both to those who are karmically pure and to those who are not”; ACIP, release III, *ibid*, S0009E8.RAW, f. 18a.

28. This would seem to contradict the claim, in some sources, that the *saṃbhogakāya* acts as the determinative causal condition (*bdag rkyen*) for the *nirmāṇakāya*. The Tibetan sources get around this problem by claiming that although the *saṃbhogakāya* does indeed function in this way in the case of some specific *nirmāṇakāyas* (e.g., in the case of Śākyamuni, who arose as a *nirmāṇakāya* on earth considerably after he attained enlightenment), it cannot in general be maintained that these two bodies are related in this way (that is, with the *saṃbhogakāya* as a cause of the *nirmāṇakāya*), since in general *nirmāṇakāyas* begin to be emanated immediately upon the attainment of enlightenment, at the same time that the *saṃbhogakāya* itself comes into being. Such a position is perhaps clearer for the Tibetan scholars than it is for their Indian counterparts. Consider, for example, Tsong kha pa’s pains to gloss Candrakīrti’s Autocommentary on *Madhyamakāvatāra* (11, 10), ACIP release III, S5408E.RAW, folio 255 b, where he states, “Whether they arise from the power of the *dharmakāya* or of the previously explained *rūpakāya* (i.e., the *saṃbhogakāya*), *nirmāṇakāyas* are, by nature, resultant bodies (*’bras bu’i sku*) that, being different from the *saṃbhogakāya*, are causally concordant with the *dharmakāya*- and *saṃbhogakāyas*. These (*nirmāṇakāyas*), that arise as the result of (the need to) tame sentient beings, are said to have inconceivable qualities of power (*mtshu’i khyad par*). Hence the Lord of Sages, in a single form body (i.e., in one *nirmāṇakāya*) that is causally concordant with the *dharmakāya*- and *saṃbhogakāyas*, exhibits the entire range of his previous births, from the beginningless cycle (of existence) to the present, where they have now ceased. This is how in a single instant he spontaneously exhibits, clearly and without confusion, that is, without mixing it up, his entire history, the complete nexus of his past, like a reflection in an extremely clean mirror.”

29. This does not imply that an illusory manifestation body is less real than the Buddha’s other bodies. The fact that all three bodies are of the same nature implies that there cannot be an ontologically hierarchical relationship between the three. Each is equally existent, and equally real. Put another way, the fact that an illusory manifestation body does not necessarily *appear* as a buddha does not mean that it does not *exist* as such.

30. Not only is each body buddha, and each of the Buddha’s mental events omniscience itself, indeed, every part of a buddha’s body is also said to be omniscient. This follows, of course, from the fact that each of the buddha’s bodies is of the same substance as his/her gnosis. Hence, the Co ne bla ma Grags pa bshad sgrub, in his commentary on the *Diamond Sūtra*, ACIP, release

III, S0024F.RAW, folio 29b-30a, states, "Even the Buddha's sense consciousnesses, that is, the eye consciousness etc., perceive all phenomena. That is why they are explained as being no different from his actual omniscience. One *sūtra* [implies this when it says], 'Even the protuberance on the Buddha's head witnessed it'; and in the section of the *Recitation of the Names [of Mañjuśrī]* that speaks of his hair emitting *vajras*, it explains that every part of a buddha's body knows all phenomena. The Buddha's body and his sense consciousnesses are of the same nature as his mental consciousness (*yiḍ shes*). The same point is made in the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Cakrasaṃvara Root Tantra*."

31. In the Christian sources this was the issue at the heart of the monotheistic controversy. More recently, Hick has criticized the christology of Thomas V. Morris for its inability to go beyond monothelism; see below, note 49.

32. At the risk of oversimplification and overgeneralization, it might be useful simply to point out at this juncture – without further elaboration – that on the various issues discussed in this paragraph, Buddhists might be characterized as at least partially sympathetic to many of the views of the figures and schools that came to be characterized by the orthodox Church Fathers as heretical: namely, Gnostics like Cerinthus and Simon, also Apollinaris, the Monenergists and Monotheletes, to name just a few.

33. This may be an appropriate place to note that kenosis is neither required nor possible for buddhas. On the one hand, emptiness, as the intrinsic quality of all things (including buddhas), cannot be made to come and go. Buddhas cannot, for example, "swerve" from their empty nature (their *svābhāvīkākāya*). On the other hand, such swerving is *not required* for the process of incarnation to take place.

34. *Uttaratantra* (II, 53); Takasaki, op. cit., p. 329.

35. The claim that a buddha's mind (a buddha's omniscience) is a form of direct perception (*pratyakṣa, mngon sum*), and therefore non-conceptual, leads Griffiths, *On Being Buddha*, op. cit., p. 193, to claim that buddhas possess "no conscious mental states," "no perceptual experience... (no) affective experience." In the discussion that follows he implies that "what it's like to be a buddha" is like "what it's like to be a rock"! "We know all that there is to know about what it's like to be Buddha precisely because there is nothing to know, and we can know that formal fact." (p. 192) But surely it does not follow that because buddhas do not cognize the world conceptually, they do not therefore cognize the world *at all*. It was in part to deal with this very issue that both the Indian and Tibetan scholastics resorted to the distinction between the two dharma-bodies: the Buddha's essential (*svābhāvīka*) body, i.e., the Buddha qua emptiness, and the Buddha's gnosis (*jñānātmaka*) body, i.e., the Buddha qua omniscient mind. It is true that the former cognizes nothing, but that does not imply that the latter does not. The Tibetan sources uphold the view that buddhas possess "emotions" like love, compassion and the desire to benefit others (even if, both in quality and quantity, these emotions are quite different from our own). Hence, consider this passage from mKhas grub bstan pa dar rgyas, *Phar phyin spyi don*, chap. 1., ACIP, release III, S0009E1.RAW, folio 80a, where it glosses a verse from the *Uttaratantra* that describes the qualities of the Buddha as a jewel of refuge (the Buddha, says the *Uttaratantra*, is non-compounded, spontaneous, does not conceptualize things in dependence on other causes, which constitute the qualities of his having realized his own goal; and the Buddha possesses the qualities of knowledge, mercy and power, which constitute the qualities that enable him to fulfill the goal of others). "Even though (in general) the Buddha jewel possesses all eight qualities (mentioned in the *Uttaratantra*), this does not mean that every (body) of the Buddha possesses all eight, since, for example, the *svābhāvīkākāya* does not possess the qualities of

knowledge and mercy, and the buddha's omniscience does not possess the quality of being compounded." It is by resorting to strategies like these that both the Indian and Tibetan sources uphold the view that Buddhas are cognitive beings.

36. *Madhayamākāvātāra* (11, 6-7). Translated by C. W. Huntington, Jr., with Geshe Namgyal Wangchen, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamaka* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1989), pp. 190-191. See also the comments of the Tibetan scholar Tsong kha pa on this question; ACIP, release III, S5408E.RAW, folios 253a-254a.

37. The four major divisions of the Tantra, as systematized in Tibet, were: Action (*kriyā*), Performance (*caryā*), Yoga (*yoga*) and Highest Yoga (*anuttarayoga*), where the latter is considered superior to the former in each case.

38. This list varies from one source to another. Sometimes only nine deeds are mentioned, sometimes as many as fourteen, but the Tibetan sources, following the *Uttaratantra*, usually accept the following twelve-fold list as the standard one.

39. The text (Toh. 5489) has been edited and translated by F. D. Lessing and A. Wayman in *Introduction to the Buddhist Tantric Systems* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978); reprint of the 1968 ed. In what follows, all references are to this edition of the text (abbrev. *IBTS*); all translations, however, are my own.

40. *IBTS*, p. 16: *theg pa... tha dad pa... las/ ston pa bcom ldan 'das mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas tshul gyi rnam par gzhangs pa/*

41. *IBTS*, p. 18.

42. *IBTS*, p. 18: *gung la mnyam par bzhang pa'i tshes/ sbyor lam mthong lam sgom lam rnam mngon du byas/ tho rangs skya rengs dang po 'char ba tsam na/ mi slob lam mngon du byas te mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas so/*

43. This position is that of the Vaibhāṣika school. The Sautrāntika, another Hīnayāna school, repudiates the Vaibhāṣika claim by pointing out that if a Buddha's earthly body were not extraordinary, there would be no reason to consider it a heinous (*anantarīya*) offense to attack a Buddha's body and to make it bleed. See *IBTS*, p. 20, and J. I. Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 40.

44. This point is reiterated in mKhas grub rje's *sTong thun chen mo*; see my translation, *A Dose of Emptiness: An Annotated Translation of the sTong thun chen mo of mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 382.

45. The Akāṣiṣṭha being described here is said to be in the *form realm*, that is, in the next higher realm beyond the desire realm where the earth is located. Tsong kha pa, in his *dBu ma dgongs pa rab gsal*, ACIP, release III, S5408E.RAW, folio 249b-250a states, "[The text] teaches that all those who are not already buddhas must be inhabitants of Akāṣiṣṭha when they first attain buddhahood, while those who have already achieved buddhahood, play-act the attainment of buddhahood in the desire realm. This is the view of the Pāramitāyāna."

46. *IBTS*, p. 22: *longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku de 'og min du bzugs nas/ sprul pa'i skus mi'i yul du dzad pa bcu gnyis kyi tshul ston te/*

47. For a discussion of this issue, and some attendant problems, see Griffiths et. al., *Realm*, op. cit., pp. 251-58.

48. Though there are obvious differences, I am struck here by the similarity of this (S/B Yoga Tantra) account to the account found in the gnosticism of Cerinthus, wherein Christ (= Holy Spirit) descends from his abode, the *pleroma*, into Jesus in the form of a dove after his baptism; see Wolfson, op. cit., p. 506.

49. It should be noted that the S/B account differs from the Hīnayāna account not only in regard to the site (the *where*) of Śākyamuni's enlightenment, but also in regard to the time (the *when*) and the method (the *how*) of his

enlightenment. Whereas the Hīnayāna claims that Śākyamuni's enlightenment occurs, as it seems to occur, after the defeat of Māra, the S/B account maintains that Śākyamuni's disembodied trip to Akaniṣṭha, and therefore his enlightenment, occurs *before* the defeat of Māra. In addition, it occurs not through the traditional forms of meditation found in the exoteric sources, but through the process of tantric initiation and meditation.

50. IBTS, p. 36: *bskal pa grangs med gsum du tshogs bsag pa'i mthar/sa bcu pa la gnas pa'i byang chub sems dpa' srid pa tha ma par gyur pa'i tshe 'og min du mkha' khyab kyi ting nge 'dzin la snyoms par zhugs so/*. Lessing and Wayman fail to translate the passage that states that this last life takes place in Akaniṣṭha.

51. It is significant that Śākyamuni must take food before proceeding further. Since the tantric path is one that spurns bodily mortification, Śākyamuni's rejection of fasting as a path to nirvāṇa is his first step in the pursuit of the path of pleasure as a means to enlightenment, one that will culminate several days later, according to this particular tantric account, in his taking recourse to sexual yoga.

52. mKhas grub rje does not state whether the defeat of Māra (the ninth deed) occurs before, during or after the initiations.

53. The alternative would be to claim that God(s) and Buddha(s) act whimsically, without reason. This claim is not of course unknown in the history of religions, as when, for example, in some schools of Hinduism, the creation of the universe is said to be the mere play or sport (*līlā*) of God.

54. Geoffrey Lampe, as cited in John Hick, "An Inspirational Christology," in *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 53. Hick, it will be seen, rejects the claim of uniqueness.

55. For Hick's critique of a contemporary version of such a christology, as offered by Thomas V. Morris in his *The Logic of God Incarnate*, see "The Logic of God Incarnate," in John Hick, *Disputed Questions* (see previous note).

56. This is so to the point where one is morally responsible for the actions that one engages in with respect to such bodies. Hence, someone who inflicts harm on a buddha's body and draws blood is said to accrue one of the worst forms of non-virtuous (*anantariya*) karma, the equivalent of patricide or matricide.

57. John Hick, summarizing a view which he then goes on to criticize, in "An Inspirational Christology," *op. cit.*, p. 41.

58. Specifically, it is said to be the training in the first five perfections – giving, moral discipline, effort, patience, and meditation – that brings about this result. Hence, Atiśa, *op. cit.*, folio 277b, states: "The Lord attained [the state of] non-abiding nirvāṇa; and it was by means of giving, etc., that he acquired the perfect result, his great environment, that is, his form body, his field, his entourage, and so forth."

59. The Tibetan sources distinguish between the pure lands of *nirmāṇakāyas* and those of *saṃbhogakāyas*. An example of the former is "Sukhāvātī (the paradise of Amitābha), in which (the Buddha) play acts his enlightenment as a *nirmāṇakāya* in an assembly composed strictly of beings who possess the five extra-sensory perceptions," while an example of the latter is "any field in which a buddha play-acts his enlightenment as a *saṃbhogakāya*, in an assembly composed exclusively of *ārya bodhisattvas*"; mKhas grub bstan pa dar rgyas, *Phar phyin spyi don*, chap. 1, ACIP, release III, S00091E.RAW, folio 35a. On the controversy in China concerning whether Amitābha was a *nirmāṇakāya* or *saṃbhogakāya*, see Julian Pas, *Visions of Sukhāvātī: Shan Tao's Commentary on the Kuan Wu-Liang-Shou-Fo Ching* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), chap. 5.