

MAHĀYĀNA THEOLOGY

John P. Keenan

Middlebury College

Mahāyāna theology is a variety of Christian theology. It attempts to understand Christian faith through the philosophical terms of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This paper will sketch the general shape of such a theology and present by way of example a Mahāyāna interpretation of the central Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. This exercise is based on the contention that the enunciation of Christian faith need not depend upon or always employ any one particular philosophical approach. Philosophy is seen here in traditional terms as "the handmaid of theology" (*ancilla theologiae*), not as the overlord of theology (*hegemonia theologiae*). Bernard Lonergan describes theology as combining the general categories of philosophy with the special categories of faith themes.¹

Christian faith very early came to be expressed through the general categories of Greek ontology, which focused on apprehending the essences of things and explaining their relationships. Yet the bond between philosophy and theology was not thereby determined for all time. That relationship remains doctrinally fluid and historically contextual. However, the adoption of any particular philosophical approach to the understanding of faith clothes that faith in those particular philosophical terms and categories, and tends to engender commitment not only to the faith itself, but also to its philosophical raiment. An individual raised within the context of the traditional Christian ontologies tends to defend the philosophical concept of

¹Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 283-4.

efficient causality of grace with as much vigor as the New Testament teachings. Despite Pascal's caveat to avoid confusing the living God with the abstraction of the philosophers, such a person may identify philosophic theism with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and consequently perceive threats against the philosophic affirmation of theism as threats against the faith itself, as attacks on God.

I suggest that such a confusion of faith themes and philosophic categories indicates a failure to appreciate the 'handmaid' role of philosophy. There are of course thinkers who argue for a 'Christian philosophy.' During his illustrious career, Étienne Gilson drew scholastic philosophy and Christian faith so tightly together that the one seemed necessarily to entail the other.² Greek philosophy itself was seen as a providential gift from God. Philosophy thus raised from its handmaid status is elevated from servant to overlord. This so-called Christian ontology has indeed an illustrious pedigree in the history of Christian doctrine. The Nicean proclamations were all couched in this essentialistic framework. One cannot understand the early councils of the Church without some familiarity with Western metaphysics.

But that is not to say that theology need be indissolubly wedded to Western metaphysics. The theological world is not unaware of the distinction between philosophy and theology. Theologies have been constructed upon different philosophical bases. But, for the most part, alternate philosophical languages have been adopted only insofar as they do not contradict the traditional ontological model. Gilson defends that traditional model, the scholastic philosophy of being, arguing against any attempt to express

²Étienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 5-6 and 11-42.

Christian faith in terms of a philosophy of the One beyond being.³ He contends that the philosophy of being constitutes the truest and most appropriate Christian philosophy because it aptly and concisely expresses the basic faith themes. However, this is a contention that may be challenged, for the themes expressed through this ontological model depend more on the model than on the faith. In more recent days, Paul Tillich presented a theology based on the existentialism of Martin Heidegger, and this was widely accepted because it still moved within a philosophy of being and left ample room for new understandings of traditional themes. But the *Honest to God* questioning of John A.T. Robinson jolted the basic philosophical context of Christian thought precisely because it appeared not to honor those traditional understandings. It would seem that the basic pattern of Christian ontology remains rather firmly in place in most theological circles today, exercising its hegemony if not as the actual ruler of the fief, then at least as the gatekeeper who excludes outsiders from the manor house.

Yet there is a price to pay. Many of those who are engaged dialogue with world religions find the Western ontologies unserviceable and seek new approaches to theological understanding in the light of alternate religious traditions, because it soon becomes obvious to those who do not share Western cultural assumptions, that Greek ontology has no privileged right to interpret the Christian Gospel for peoples from non-Greek cultures. Some of the cultures and philosophies of the Orient either have no terms into which one can either translate Greek ontological ideas, or directly refute them. One cannot do theology in a global perspective by insisting on the hegemony of Greek ontology. Mahāyāna theology consciously adopts Buddhist Mahāyāna

³The theme of Étienne Gilson in his *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952).

philosophy as its conceptual model, in order to develop an alternate set of insights into the Gospel meanings. It is an approach that is more open to the varied approaches of global philosophic discourse.

Mahāyāna thinkers trace the notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) back to the original enlightenment experience of the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni Gautama. He stressed the transience of all things and focused on insight into the fleeting and unsubstantial nature of this world. Nevertheless, later Buddhists thinkers were driven to pin things down in exact definitions and to envisage a static world of essences (*svabhava*), knowledge of which would provide one with a sure path along which to travel toward cessation (*nirvana*). The various schools of Abhidharma scholastics attempted to develop Buddhist metaphysics by logical definition and analysis. They analyzed each element of being (*dharma*) and identified its essence, constructing supposedly exhaustive lists which represented the absolutely correct view (*samagdr>s>t>i*) of reality. Such an examination could, they believe, guide one's practice toward cessation.

There has for some time been appreciation among Christians for the richness of Buddhist traditions. Writers like William Johnston explain for Christians the power and methods of zazen meditation and discipline.⁴ There have been Christian Zen masters such as Enomiya LaSalle, who for years taught Zen meditation to Westerners in Tokyo. Yet these approaches focus on methods of practice rather than on theological understanding. They take from the East spiritual method, while remaining quietly content with, and perhaps disinterested in, Western metaphysics. There is a split within Western Christian thought between such "mystical, spiritual theology" and serious

⁴See the works of William Johnston, such as *The Inner Eye of Love: Mysticism and Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1974) and *Silent Music: The Science of Meditation* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).

doctrinal theology. These two compartments are not often allowed to overlap. Serious doctrinal theology moves in a theoretical pattern of ontological analysis, while spiritual theology is viewed as more pastoral and less rigorous. Seminars in pastoral practice glory in their distance from arid theology, while theological conferences tend to disdain the sloppiness of pastoral or ascetical approaches. While valued for its mystic punch, the apophatic tradition remains marginal to doctrinal thinking.

The present approach is unlike either spiritual theology or essentialistic theology. While recognizing the usefulness of zazen methods in the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment and also affirming the contextual validity of traditional Greek ontological theology, this paper will attempt to sketch the contours of a new theology one employing as its handmaid the philosophical approach of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Mahāyāna theology avoids the usual distinction between religious practice and theological discourse by insisting on the ineffability of and need for direct experience, while simultaneously and rigorously developing doctrinal thinking.

And yet, no theology which is not rooted in the Christian tradition can hope to express that tradition. One cannot place a Mahāyāna filter over the record of Christian experience without excluding some aspects of that experience. The question then becomes which aspects are filtered out and how central are they to the Gospel message? For example, the Neo-Vedantist philosophy of India interprets Christian faith in such a fashion that its concreteness and unique focus of Christ is discarded. Neo-Vedanta has been quite open to Christian ideas, most recently in the writings of Joseph Campbell.⁵ It sees the Christian tradition as one example among many of the

⁵Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God - Oriental Mythology*, (Penguin: 1982 ed.), 3-34.

varied approaches toward the one *brahman*.. Paramahansa Yogananda in his *Autobiography of a Yogi* repeatedly describes the holy men he encounters in India as Christlike, for all sages are one on the one road toward the summit of the selfsame mountain of *brahman*.. He even recounts a personal experience of contact and encounter with the risen Christ, who confirms the truth not of the Christian Gospel, but of the Yogi's path.⁶ This is a Hindu version of the notion of anonymous Christians, gently and ecumenically incorporating other faith traditions as less conscious versions of one's own tradition. Mahāyāna theology does not adopt this approach. Mahāyāna theology does not adopt this approach. The only elements of the Christian tradition that it excludes are philosophic notions--specifically notions of essence and nature that allow one to define faith in exact concepts--while retaining the faith themes which are central to the tradition. Mahāyāna philosophy is here adopted as a tool for Christian theologizing not because it is a near cousin of traditional Western thinking, but because it clearly differs in its basic ideas and terms. It recommends itself precisely because it is not just "saying the same thing." With Mahāyāna's constant focus on the silent realization of awakening and ultimate meaning, it can perhaps aid in the healing of the Western Christian mind, torn as it is between its dominant ontological mode of analysis and its existential need for spiritual experience. Still, as a Christian theology, Mahāyāna theology grounds itself on the tradition of Christian thought and experience. It does this by reclaiming the ancient Christian tradition of apophatic theology as a valid way for serious doctrinal thinking. This tradition of negative theology has long been present in the Christian experience, but has all too often been shunted to the periphery of doctrinal

⁶Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Los Angeles: Self Realization Fellowship, 1988 edition) 561. Note also the chapter recounting Yogananda's encounter with his risen guru, Sri Yukteswar, 475-497.

thinking because it runs counter to the dominant intellectualist thrust of Greek and scholastic thinking. When one is intent on defining just what the basic terms of theological understanding are to be, one is apt to be less than patient with those who despair of finding any definition at all. Clouds of divine darkness may, it seems, be all right for the mystic liturgies of quiet churches, but rigorous theological thinking needs to move in a realm of light. Yet, it is precisely here that a Mahāyāna approach can be of handmaidenly service to Christian theology. While maintaining a central focus on the ineffability and otherness of direct, mystic awareness, Mahāyāna has been able as well to develop rigorous doctrinal thinking. It can perhaps recommend itself to our consideration not only as a valid way of theologizing, but also as a means of reclaiming and restoring the Christian mystic tradition to a central place within the overall Christian theological tradition. Let us look briefly at the contours of a theology which employs the categories of Mahāyāna philosophy.

MAHĀYĀNA PHILOSOPHY

Mahāyāna, the great vehicle of Buddhist teaching, was first articulated in the *Perfection of Wisdom Scriptures*, which appeared around the turn of the common era and which marked the rise of Mahāyāna as distinct from earlier forms of Buddhist teaching. These texts expressed a doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) through pithy axioms and conundrums. Mahāyāna teachings became philosophy in the writings of Nāgārjuna, a monk scholar who lived at the beginning of the second century. He developed a philosophy of the middle path (*mādhyama*) and his philosophy came to be known as Mādhyamika. It is this Mādhyamika philosophy which will serve as the model for our enuncia-

tion of Christian faith.⁷ The fabric of Mahāyāna philosophy is woven from two main themes: the identity between emptiness and dependent co-arising, and the differentiation between the two truths of ultimate meaning and worldly convention. The first theme sketches a Mahāyāna understanding of our "horizontal" being-in-the-world and relates to everything we encounter in our ordinary lives. The second theme is "vertical," and attempts to clarify our experience of transcendence and its enunciation in symbols and languages. A brief excursion into these ideas will perhaps be helpful.

The Identity Between Emptiness and Dependent Co-Arising

Nāgārjuna attacked such metaphysical essentialism as both logically untenable and existentially ineffective. It was existentially ineffective because it substituted analytical viewpoints for concrete experience, even obviating the need for experience by postponing it to an indefinite future. It was logically untenable because, sooner or later, it involved one in contradictions. Nāgārjuna's main work, *Stanzas on the Middle*, undertakes a refutation of Abhidharma essentialism, at times in excruciating detail. He proclaims that things are empty specifically of essence. There is no firmly abiding inner reality that stands under things or holds them in being. There is nothing in our human experience that one can rely upon to be a stable and perduring reality. Consequently, there is no fundament upon which one can establish an absolutely valid viewpoint. It is much better, Nāgārjuna might have said, to experience awakening than to know its defining characteristics.

⁷ Yogācāra philosophy is not discussed in this brief paper, but it too figures prominently in Mahāyāna theology by providing insight into a critical philosophy of consciousness, both defiled and purified. See John P. Keenan, "The Intent and Structure of Yogācāra Philosophy - Its Relevance for Modern Religious Thought," *The Annual Memoirs of Ōtani University Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute*, 4 (1986): 41-60.

Mādhyamika is then a radical devaluation, not only of the Abhidharma versions of essentialism, but also of any philosophy of being which is predicated on the existence of stable and perduring essences in things and which bases its affirmations on the mental appropriation and definition of those essences. One is left in a world without support for human clinging. There are no philosophical refuges from the constant and radical contingency of our lives.

Yet, Mahāyāna philosophy is not nihilism. It is not a negation of being in all senses whatsoever. The Mādhyamika critique is aimed at essentialist views of being and the false security they provide. In their suchness, things present themselves to us not as essential entities, but as transient, inter-related phenomena dependent on a host of other causes and conditions. Empty of essence, things arise in synergy with, and dependent upon, other things. The flip side of emptiness, then, is this doctrine of the dependent co-arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*) of all beings. The two notions are convertible, presenting aspects of the same insight into the essence-free being of beings. The emptiness of beings entails, and is identical with, their dependent co-arising. They arise interdependently in virtue of their emptiness. In a manner not dissimilar to present understandings of our interdependent environment each element of which relies on a host of other elements, dependent co-arising describes the field of our total experience and issues in the call not only for the non-discriminative wisdom of emptiness to perceive the essence-free transience of all things, but also for a discriminative wisdom to understand that which co-arises dependently and to engage oneself again in the world to carry out the tasks of compassion.

The Differentiation of the Truths of Ultimate Meaning and Worldly Convention

The second theme of Mādhyamika philosophy treats our awareness of transcendence and how it is manifested in language and symbols. Because the essence-free being of all we experience disallows absolute viewpoints, the truth of ultimate meaning (*paramārtha-satya*) remains always ineffable and beyond definition. It is not itself any viewpoint. There is no prospect here of mounting to an understanding of transcendence through knowledge of the things that fall within our more mundane experience, for all things and all experiences are essence-free. Ultimate meaning, synonymous with awakening and Buddhahood, remains silent, as a matter of direct, unmediated experience. This is why, the Mahāyāna scholars taught, the Buddha hesitated to teach any doctrine immediately after his experience of awakening.

But, of course, the Buddha did then teach, for some forty-five years. His doctrines were enunciated over and over again in numerous scriptures, and commented upon in a plethora of commentaries and tractates. The question then arises as to what the relationship of all these verbal pronouncements is to the silence of ultimate awakening. To the Abhidharmists, with their confidence in their own grasp of the essences of things, words represented the very truth of well-analyzed essences. But for Mahāyāna, with its doctrine of emptiness, no words ever grasp any essence, for the very notion of essence is held to be a misunderstanding of experience, engendered through the force of that primal ignorance which would capture the ultimate in verbal nets and domesticate it to canons of guaranteed practice.

But it is not merely that the truth of ultimate meaning is empty. For the Mahāyāna thinkers, all mundane understandings of truth are also empty. Worldly and conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) has two functions. The first

and foremost foremost function is deconstructive; it is called "true reasoning" (*yukti*) and operates to uncover the emptiness of all views and disvalue any claim for absolute viewpoints. This type of reasoning pervades the "hundred negations and thousand denials" of Nāgārjuna's *Stanzas on the Middle*, where he demonstrates logically how all such absolute claims are invalid. And yet, this true reasoning of emptiness functions in synergy with a second form of conventional truth, "correspondential reasoning" (*pramāṇa*) that corresponds to the dependently co-arisen being of things. True reasoning leads always and insistently to insight into emptiness, while correspondential reasoning constructs contextually valid and conventional models of philosophy and doctrine. Philosophies then become verbal models functioning validly and logically only within their dependently co-arisen contexts and only provisionally, i.e. as long as their context obtains. If pushed, all will implode under the questioning of true reason and emptiness. Yet, one need not always so push, for there is a clear need to evolve doctrinal thinking, to teach, to carry out the tasks of compassion. We always live and think in some particular language and context. All verbal doctrine, then, is described as a skillful method (*upāya*) for embodying valid and consistent approaches toward insight. Yet, any conventional presentation remains always completely other from ultimate meaning. Therefore, in contrast to the identity between emptiness and dependent co-arising, conventional truth is differentiated and disjunctive from ultimate meaning, always indicating it as the silence that lies beyond any language, attainable only through direct experience.

But the differentiation between ultimate meaning and worldly convention implies not only that conventional statements cannot reach ultimate meaning. It also means that the truth of ultimate meaning cannot usurp the valid role of conventional thinking and reasoning. This prohibition

disallows an incarnational approach that would 'identify' the divine presence in the world with any conventional embodiment. Such an incursory presence supposes that ordinarily the divine reality is absent from the world, intersecting at some particular point or other. For Mādhyamika, all conventional embodiments of ultimate meaning are 'worldly convention only.' This must not be understood in a minimalist sense, for it is precisely by covering over (*saṃvṛ*) ultimate meaning that worldly and conventional words and symbols reveal it as disjunctive from language and totally other. Within an essentialist perspective, such an understanding leaves little to grasp and seems to denigrate the ultimate. But, in Mādhyamika context, it indicates the highest awareness of the bodhisattva who takes the world as the total focus of compassionate concern within an ultimately meaningful understanding of emptiness. Awareness of the totally conventional nature of our words and symbols reflects a constantly expanding awareness of the otherness of ultimate meaning. When conventional doctrine is most deeply understood, it leads not to affirmations of its essential validity, but to awareness of the silence it indicates. Conventional words speak by introducing us to silence, opening the door not to a vision of God himself, but to an ever-deepening awareness of the mystery of unknowability and otherness.

These, then, are the two basic themes to be employed in a Mahāyāna theology. Let us attempt below to sketch a Mahāyāna christology.

MAHĀYĀNA CHRISTOLOGY

The traditional Western christologies have attempted to interpret the meaning of Christ, both human and divine. Because they moved within the

framework of Greek ontology, they were forced to function within clearly defined notions of what it means to be divine and what it means to be human. Given the historical context of the Fathers of the Church, the categories of Greek ontology were by far the best instrument at their disposal. For cultured Greek men and women, the adoption of Greek patterns of thinking came "naturally." They accepted the notion of God which Greek philosophy had developed in opposition to the anthropomorphic images of the myths. Thus, they took God to be unoriginated, impassible, and unchanging being.⁸ Yet, when one defines God as impassible, the definition of God directly opposes that of man, a creature who is subject to change and suffering. Early christology found itself in the quandary of how to apply both terms, divine and human, impassible and subject to suffering, to the same person of Christ. The first four centuries of Christian theology witness to the various attempts somehow to balance these conceptually contradictory notions in the one person of Christ, confessed in the liturgies to be both unchanging God and suffering man. The thinking that led to the proclamations of Nicea and Chalcedon was both Byzantine in its twists and turns, and inspiring in its final outcome, forging a creedal statement that bent Greek categories to Christian use. And yet it takes a trained philosopher to unravel these proclamations.

The issue is far from dead, for modern understandings of Christ are still formed in terms of this Greek ontological model. The great majority of Christians, while confessing Christ as both human and divine, fall unconsciously into one or another of the heresies excluded by the early Fathers. In

⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine I The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1971), 2-55.

their minds, Christ either becomes God striding through the world, or a man with particularly divine qualities.

A Mahāyāna christology avoids these problems because, in basing itself on the doctrine of emptiness, it refuses to define as an essence either the divine or the human. If things and persons have no essences, they have no specific differences in light of which they might be defined. Mahāyāna theology is thus not compelled to do an intellectual balancing act to reconcile such opposite natures attributed to the same person.

Christ as Empty and Dependently Co-Arisen

The use of the notion of emptiness in christology means that neither God nor Christ have an identifiable essence for the theologian to define. The scriptures themselves certainly do not offer any definition of the person of Jesus. There is no identifiable selfhood (*ātman*) beyond the dependently co-arisen person and his actions which are described in the words of the Gospels, themselves dependently co-arisen from the concrete conditions of their original communities.⁹ The Gospels speak of God and Christ as they relate to human beings, but do not provide any explanation of just what the divine or human entity is. They assume that we have a working awareness of both. In the Old Testament, one learns of the presence of Yahweh through the story of the people of Israel. In the New Testament one discerns the meaning of Christ through his words and through the events of his life, death, and resurrection. In fact, God is described in the scriptures time and again as beyond any definition. He dwells in light inaccessible. No one has ever seen God. Moses encounters him only in the darkness of Mt. Sinai, in the absence of any

⁹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: an Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 304, 307.

mediated knowing.¹⁰ All creation is held to proclaim the presence of the Lord, but this proclamation does not offer any definitive knowledge of what God is. Rather, it renders us, Job-like, aware of the total otherness of Yahweh, of the absence of limiting definition.¹¹

The medieval scholastics taught that God indeed is ineffable, but that he can be analogically known from creation. This notion is indeed a joy to the theologian, who can, after bowing devoutly toward the unknown God, proceed securely with theological knowledge and surety. Mahāyāna theology would negate the validity of such an approach, seeing analogy as but another instance of metaphor, suggestive and intriguing, but not definitive or delimiting. All knowledge of God is metaphorical, bending words and images in striking and disturbing ways. Indeed, the function of doctrine in Mahāyāna theology is not to communicate a body of information about God, but to engender the presence of God in our hearts. All knowledge of God is parable, entailing not acceptance of a given state of affairs in the Godhead, but eliciting conversion of the hearer within his or her concrete context. This is perhaps why Paul says that faith comes from hearing, for it can only be engendered in the concrete situation of concrete lives.

Jesus is empty of essence and presents himself in the New Testament as unconcerned with his own identity. It is impossible to understand him apart from the web of relationships that form his life. As Schillebeeckx asserts, "There is no a priori definition of the substance of Jesus."¹² He is constituted by being related to Abba in silent awareness and to humans in commitment to the rule of God on earth. In the phrase of Ignatius of Antioch,

¹⁰ The main theme of *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses*, transl. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

¹¹ See Nishitani Keiji, "What is Religion," in *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982) 1-45.

¹² Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 600.

he is "the voice of the Father from silence."¹³ He has no identity apart from the Father. Almost all the descriptive terms applied to Jesus refer him to the Father. He is the son of God, the word of God, the presence of God, the sacrament of God among us. One cannot define a sacrament apart from its referent. The referent of the person of Jesus is not some Greek notion of immutable essence, but rather the Father who dwells in silence. Still, it is clear from the tradition that the meaning of Christ is not simply an empty sign of an empty God. He is not just a mirror of the nothingness of God, however mystical that might sound. The teachings of Jesus are many and specific he proclaims the coming rule of God and calls all to conversion from a deluded clinging onto idols and toward engagement in bringing about that rule of justice and peace in the world. His meaning, as with all men and women, is constructed from the course of his life, from what he says and does. Just as emptiness entails dependent co-arising, so the empty Jesus takes on significance from his dependently co-arisen life course. He is not distinct in virtue of a different definition, but in virtue of his teaching, his death, and his resurrection and ascension. That teaching, just as the entirety of Jesus' life, is centered around his experience of God as Abba and his passionate commitment to the rule of peace and justice, to the coming kingdom. His Abba experience and his commitment to that rule are not merely aspects of his essential subjectivity. Rather, they are constitutive of his being, the dependently co-arisen being of emptiness. That is who he is.

The teachings of Jesus are not abstract maxims. If so considered, they would have no historical specificity and differ little from similar maxims offered by teachers the world over. Their explosive urgency arises out of their context, from Jesus' insistence on the reality of God and the need to bring

¹³ Ignatius, *Epistola ad Magnesios* 8.2.

about the rule of justice on earth. His denunciation of the religious establishment, content with its grasp of reality, puts him on a collision course with authority, leading inevitably to confrontation and finally to his execution. He insists on an alternate understanding of reality and proceeds to deconstruct the religious underpinnings of the social order of his day. His opponents are not simply the Pharisees and Scribes, for his teachings reflect liberal Pharisee ideas at almost every point.¹⁴ He even insists that not the smallest part of the *torah* (the teaching) will be unfulfilled. But Jesus inveighs against that religious consciousness that clings to its own ideas, as if to God. He is no revolutionary set against the Empire of Rome. He advises soldiers to be content with their pay! His critique is aimed not at a brave new age constructed according to a new social theory, but at insight into both the emptiness of social structures and the dependently co-arisen need to construct those structures with justice and truth. He points to God and to the God's torah as the basis of justice and peace, and excoriates the professional religious for their emasculation of God and trivialization of *torah*. His life oscillates between silent prayer in desert awareness of God, and teaching in social engagement for justice and peace.

Thus, when we use the tool of Mahāyāna philosophy to consider the divinity of Christ, definitions of his dual divine and human natures become unnecessary, and that divinity may be seen in the emptiness of his personal identity, whereby he transparently mirrors the presence of Abba, and lives as

¹⁴ See Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Its History* (1911, Lanhan: University Press of America, 1985 reprint) 137-152 for the depiction of Jesus as a liberal Pharisee. More recent Christian scholars concur that the New Testament teachings of Jesus taken their meaning from their Jewish context, without presenting anything startlingly new. They take their meaning not from subsequent Christian apologetic, but from their own Jewish matrix. See W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (1948, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) and Paul VanBuren, *A Theology of the People Israel* (New York: Crossroads, 1989).

one with Abba. The confession that 'I and the Father are one' is indeed a description of the person of Jesus, totally open to and reflective of Abba. He is then not defined in contrast to God. Neither is he to be defined in contrast to other men and women. He teaches that all may address God as Father, that all may share in that foundational experience of ultimate meaning, experienced silently and directly. He describes himself as the vine united to all the branches. The meaning of Christ cannot then be understood apart from the body of all believers, for that too constitutes his being. That too is who he is. And that 'definition' cannot be limited to his past historical presence in Israel or by scholastic definitions of metaphysical being, but is an ongoing temporal indication of his meaning into the future. Christians have always believed that Jesus is more than an historical figure, that somehow he yet lives in his risen presence. The doctrine of the mystical body of Christ is not merely a pious teaching of later Christendom, but, as in Paul, constitutive of the very being of Christ. The being of Christ, established by his teachings and life course, cannot be determined apart from our being: he is the head of the body that we are. Essentialist definitions are not only academic in tone, but leave us with a distorted image of only the severed head of the body that is Christ. The traditional essential definitions of the person of Christ not only miss the point, but can actually occlude the very experience of Christ, both empty and dependently co-arisen, by substituting Christian theological idols in place of the human depths of our experience of God in Christ.

This Mahāyāna critique does not necessarily hold that the Nicean and Chaceldonian teachings are illusory, for in their doctrinal context they redefined and reconfigured theological language in the service of Christian understanding. In fact, in their evolution these teachings provide a model for the adoption and adaptation of various philosophies to enunciate the meaning

of Christ. It does, however, see their validity and usefulness as limited to their own Greek and Western context and would refuse to affirm the truth of their underlying philosophical essentialism. A warning should perhaps be affixed to Western theology when it is exported to the rest of the Christian world *Timete Danaos et dona ferentes!* Fear the theological gifts of the Greeks, not because they are unworthy, or lacking in depth or beauty, but because they are idiosyncratic and culture-bound. As with all philosophies, these gifts stand in need both of the pure reasoning (*yukti*) of deconstructive emptiness, and the correspondential reasoning (*prāmaṇa*) of cultural appreciation they must be seen to be empty of any absolute validity and therefore valid in their particular context.

If, however, we limit our Mahāyāna understanding of Christ to the themes of emptiness and dependent co-arising, we still have a rather 'Antiochene' description of Jesus, which focuses on his and our horizontal being in the world. There is more to christology than that, for Christ is the voice of the Father from silence. He is the word of God spoken to the world. Therefore, we must also thematize his enunciation of the transcendent reality of Abba in the world, and for this we turn to an 'Alexandrian' consideration of Christ through the Mahāyāna doctrine of the two truths.

Christ as the Conventional Expression of Ultimate Meaning

The Gospels teach that Christ is the word of God, and the Church confesses that he is God incarnate that one of the persons of the Trinity has become human in Jesus Christ. The Mahāyāna theme of the two truths presents a philosophic understanding of how ultimate meaning is embodied in concrete, human living. But, while the Western philosophical notions behind the traditional confessions function in terms of contrasting divine and

human essences, the Mahāyāna doctrine of two truths does not function as two levels of truth which are essentially distinct, one transcendent and one conventional. It holds that both ultimate meaning and worldly convention are empty and essence-free. The worldly embodiment of ultimate meaning then cannot be an incursion of ultimate meaning into worldly convention. The two truths remain always disjunctive and other. The being of Jesus is not then the outflow of some divine essence into the human nature of Christ. There are Mahāyāna texts which speak of "the outflow from the reality realm" (*dharmadhātu-niṣyanda*), i.e., the conventional outpouring of ultimate meaning into conventional symbols of doctrine. Yet, even this outflow is not a continuous progression from the ultimate to the conventional. Conventional embodiment is an outflow from ultimate meaning in the sense that it arises because of awakening and draws its deepest impulse from that awakening--thus being skilfully in harmony with that ultimate. Reengagement in the conventional world is triggered by awareness of ultimate meaning. Here, outflow implies no continuity, for the conventional being of that outflow remains fully and completely conventional. In christology, this means that Jesus embodies the divine by being truly and fully human, not by participating in a divine essence. This is, I think, why Paul depicts Christ as a second Adam, for he is confessed as embodying the true being of the original human. In virtue of his abandonment of essence and self-definition, he reflects the direct experience of Abba and calls others to engagement in the tasks of the compassionate kingdom. It is in virtue of his identity as dependently co-arisen that he experiences Abba and embodies the rule of justice. It is as "worldly convention only" that Christ shares in the otherness of God. That is to say, it is not by clinging to an exalted, divine being, but by emptying himself of being that Christ mirrors the divine and is one with the silent Father.

The Incarnation is not a synthesis of two natures, for as Chalcedon teaches, each remains distinct and there is no commingling between them.¹⁵ Christ is God not as if God made a visit to earth. That is religious science fiction. Rather, he is the son of God as the sacramental sign of the otherness of Abba, identified with the reality of what is signified and lying at the deepest levels of our human consciousnesses. As the sacrament of our encounter with God, Jesus is not a second subject alongside God.¹⁶ The words and mediation of Christ do not lead directly toward the summit of the Godhead, but embody, as do all words and symbols, a deeply conventional understanding of the limits of the conventional, i.e., of the unknowability of the silent Father.

It is, I think, such an idea that lies behind the Patristic distinction between theology and economy, for what we know of God is what has been conventionally revealed within our cultures through the cultural models

¹⁵ The Council of Chalcedon proclaimed: "Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all with one voice teach that it should be confessed that Our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the Same perfect in Godhead, the Same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the Same consisting of a rational soul and a body, *homoousios* with the Father as to his Godhead, and the Same *homoousios* with us as to his manhood, in all things like unto us, sin only excepted, begotten of the Father before all ages as to his Godhead, and in the last days, the Same, for us and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin *Theotokos* as to his manhood, One and the Same Christ, Son, Lord, Only begotten, made known in two natures which exist without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union, but rather the properties of each being preserved, and both concurring into one Person (*prosopon*) and one *hypostasis* - not parted or divided into two persons (*prosopa*), but one and the same Son and Only-begotten, the divine Logos, the Lord Jesus Christ, even as the prophets from of old have spoken concerning him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and as the Symbol of the Fathers has delivered to us.' Quoted from the translation of Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon 451*. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1965) 544.

¹⁶ The theme of Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

available to us.¹⁷ That knowledge is truly and even infallibly authentic because it harmonizes with the foundational experiences of the Lord Christ and of numerous Christians who follow in this path. It is, however, never unchanging and absolute, for that is the mark of inauthenticity and deluded imagination.¹⁸ About theology, we know nothing, for we have no words that correspond to God. Correspondential knowing relates to the economic disposition of human life, to our experience of Abba and our commitment to carry forth the rule of justice and peace, but it cannot stand under the scrutiny of the true reasoning of emptiness that deconstructs all models of God and leaves us, like Moses, in the darkness of direct contact.

It is then in hiding God from view by our conventional descriptions (*saṃvṛti* from the root *vr*, to cover over) that Christ manifests (*saṃvṛti* from the root *vṛt*, to manifest) the otherness of God.¹⁹ And it is in disappearing in the face of Abba and the rule of God that Jesus embodies the reality of God in himself and for us. Christology need not then function within its accustomed essentialist framework. There is no necessity to try to reconcile both human and divine characteristics in the one person of Christ. The doctrine of the sharing of properties (*communicatio idiomatum*) tried to explain how the

¹⁷ See George L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (Toronto: W. Heinemann, 1936) 98-102 on the divine "economy". and John P. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) 221-259.

¹⁸ There are Mahāyāna parallels for the Roman Catholic doctrine of infallibility. *The Analysis of the Middle Path and Extremes* presents an explanation of ultimate meaning that includes the path as "unerring full perfection" (*aviparyāsa-pariniṣpatti*) inasmuch as it follows and harmonizes with suchness. See Nagao Gadjin, *The Foundational Standpoint of Maḍhyamika Philosophy* (New York: SUNY, 1989), 62. The idea here is that when a worldly and conventional statement functions in accord with logical criteria and in full awareness of emptiness, then it cannot err because it neither attempts to express an absolute statement nor refuses to construct contextual statements.

¹⁹ See Nagao, *The Foundational Standpoint* 39-42. This volume is the source for most of the Mahāyāna ideas presented above.

properties of each nature of Christ can be attributed to the same person, but that attempt was never satisfactory. One was left with a notion of Christ as being able to shift natures as one might shift gears. A Mahāyāna christology, refusing to move in that essentialistic framework, has no need to appeal to such explanations, for it is in his fully and completely human identity that Christ is God. As embodying dependent co-arising, Jesus is empty of essence. As fully conventional, Jesus manifests the ultimacy of God.

CONCLUSION

These terms may sound minimalist to a person accustomed to thinking in essences. They seem to negate the divine essence of Christ. Indeed, they do, but they also negate his human nature. A Mahāyāna theology is content to say much less, while suggesting ever-new aspects of the person of Christ as called for within different contexts and cultures. But, within this particular philosophical approach, these two terms of emptiness and dependent co-arising, along with the doctrine of the two truths of ultimate meaning and worldly convention, signify the deepest levels of meaning. Emptiness is not merely a negation of essence. It is synonymous with the highest reality of awakening, experienced immediately and directly. Dependent co-arising is not a second best status, but the concrete entailment of emptiness. Ultimate meaning is not the possession of anyone and cannot be attributed to any essence, however august. It is the empty content of awakening, moving spontaneously toward conventional reengagement in the dependently co-arising world to carry out the tasks of compassion.

The use of Mahāyāna philosophy as a handmaid for Christian theology does indeed issue in a different theology, a different understanding of the

Gospel confession of Christ as embodying the presence of God. It can be recommended, I think, because it is grounded upon the mind of faith and moves to the center the apophatic thinking of the Christian mystic tradition. It avoids the conundrums of essentialist theology, always in danger of falling to one side or the other and always teetering on the point of presenting a schizophrenic picture of the Lord. Further, it issues in the possibility of a rigorously performed theology of the Incarnation.