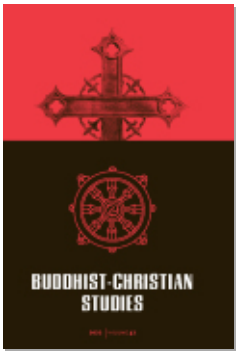
Viewing Jesus: Christology in Light of Muslim and Shin Buddhist Insights



Perry Schmidt-Leukel

Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 42, 2022, pp. 359-373 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2022.0021*

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Perry Schmidt-Leukel
University of Münster, Germany

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I engage in an exercise of interreligious theology focusing on Muslim and Shin Buddhist perceptions of Jesus. I ask if and how a Christian might take Muslim and Shin Buddhist views as genuine insights that may enrich and correct some Christian views. I further hold that lest getting incoherent such an exploration must keep all three perspectives together. It must combine the insight behind Christians' affirmation of incarnation with, on one hand, the insight behind Muslims' concern about the concept of incarnation as such and, on the other hand, the insight behind the concern of Buddhists about the assertion of merely one single incarnation. By interpreting incarnation as an implication of revelation, I suggest that such a Christology is indeed possible.

KEYWORDS: Christology, Muslim critique of incarnation, Shin Buddhist understanding of incarnation, interreligious theology

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15)

Jesus' question obviously reflects that, right from the start, there have been different views of who Jesus is. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is Jesus himself who authorizes the correct interpretation ("the messiah, the son of the living God," Matt 16:11). But what exactly does that mean? And can we take Matthew's narration as a faithful report of Jesus' actual self-understanding? Today, hardly any New Testament scholar will confirm this without crucial qualifications. The different scriptures in the New Testament are expressive of different theological viewpoints. Any information about the historical Jesus contained in the gospels is overlaid by the evangelists' religious beliefs. Although the task of uncovering the historical data underneath the theological superstructure may not be entirely impossible,[1] it is certainly not an easy one. The consensus of the exegetes is often more about what, to all historical probability, has not been the self-understanding of the historical Jesus instead of what it actually was. According to E. P. Sanders, Jesus most probably saw himself as an, or the,

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eschatological prophet.[2] "The notion of Christ as the highest heavenly co-regent of God and God's unique representative" developed, according to Stefan Schreiber, only after the "Easter experiences." And "Christ's equation or identification with the God of Israel, his 'deification', which modifies the Jewish image of God to the extent of exceeding it," had its early beginnings not before the second century and became only possible through Greek, and later on especially Neo-Platonist, philosophical influence (Schreiber 2015: 237f.; my translation).

The images of Jesus found in the New Testament are primarily reflective of what Jesus, his personality, his teachings, his activities, his execution, and the apparitions experienced by some of his followers after his death, have meant to different members of the diverse and heterogeneous strands of emerging early Christianity. They convey what those people who put their faith in Jesus saw in him. The range of these images is considerable. The writings canonized in the New Testament are far from testifying to a single homogenous and consistent Christology. And the New Testament itself is just a selection from a wealth of early Christian writings. The process that led to the inclusion of some texts and the exclusion of others[3] demonstrates likewise how divergent the views on Jesus were among the developing communities. Does anyone own the copyright on the correct Christology? Does anyone have a privileged access to the right understanding of Jesus? And why should the candidates for those who may have got it right be confined to Christians?[4] After all, Jesus was a Jew, and there is also a long list of Jewish perceptions of Jesus, ranging from his outright rejection to his embrace as a "brother" (M. Buber, S. Ben-Chorin).[5] Moreover, the New Testament is not the only canonical text about Jesus. Fifty *sūrah*s of the Qur'ān relate to Jesus (*'Īsā*)[6] together with a large number of hadiths.[7] Hindus and Buddhists have developed their own interpretations of Jesus soon after they came to know about him. They often developed their specific understandings in deliberate confrontation and engagement with Christian, Jewish or Muslim interpretations of Jesus and added to the view of Jesus as "Messiah," "Son of God," as rabbi and as prophet, their interpretation of him as a *guru*, *avatāra*, *bodhisattva*,[8] and—at times—as a demon[9] or simply an "utter failure."[10] And what about the views of Jesus by secular atheists and humanists? They also comprise a spectrum reaching from a moral example to a religious fanatic. Who does Jesus belong to? Who can legitimately claim that their views constitute the authoritative norm so that the accuracy of all others has to be measured by the degree of their conformity with or deviation from this position?

It is a particular feature of the contemporary world that the global diversity of religious and nonreligious views is becoming increasingly part of the awareness of all parties. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith once phrased it: "The process of each is becoming conscious of the process of all" (Smith 1989: 37). The longer the more it will become impossible to suppress such awareness. To quote Smith again:

> What is beginning to happen around the earth today is the incredibly exciting development that will eventually mean that each person, certainly each group, participates in the religious history of humankind—as self-consciously the context for faith. (Smith 1989: 44)

In itself, however, this observation does not tell us how "faith" may react to this context. What shall it mean to have faith in Jesus if this is accompanied by the awareness of a huge variety of different views on Jesus and different versions of seeing Jesus through the eyes of different faiths? Simply measuring all other views against one's own unquestioned standard or that of one's own church, group, sect, school (at a particular time and place) is hardly persuasive. An alternative attitude will be to ask what others may see—or not see—in Jesus and to inquire about how their views may enrich or correct, in any way modify and transform one's own understanding. An appropriate way of pursuing this kind of theological inquiry (in the best sense of the tradition of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, "faith seeking understanding") is to pursue such inquiry jointly, that is, as part of an interreligious dialogical colloquy.[11]

In what follows, I engage in this type of interreligious theology with a focus on Muslim and Shin Buddhist perceptions of Jesus. I ask if and how a Christian might take Muslim and Shin Buddhist views as genuine insights that may enrich and correct some Christian views. I further hold that such an exploration must keep all three perspectives together, so that it shall not become incoherent. It must combine the insight behind Christians' affirmation of incarnation with, on the one hand, the insight behind Muslims' concern about the concept of incarnation as such and, on the other hand, the insight behind the concern of Buddhists about the assertion of merely one single incarnation.[12]

THE INSIGHT BEHIND CHRISTIANS' AFFIRMATION OF INCARNATION

At least among academic theologians, it is now more or less uncontested that Jesus did not see himself as "God incarnate" or as the incarnation of the second person of a Trinitarian God. Jesus shared the strict monotheism of his Jewish people and, as one would expect from a faithful Jewish rabbi, distinguished himself emphatically from the one God. Hans Küng summarizes this important finding of historical-critical exegesis by stating:

> This Jewish Jesus had no more notion than a Muslim in our time would of weakening faith in the one God (breaking the First Commandment). "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Mk 10:18) was his reaction when addressed as "Good Teacher." (Küng et al. 1993: 117)

And in a very similar way Wolfhart Pannenberg concludes:

> At the heart of the message of Jesus stood the Father and his coming kingdom, not any dignity that Jesus claimed for his own person that would thus make himself equal to God (John 5:18). Jesus differentiated himself as a mere man from the Father as the one God. He thus subjected himself to the claim of the coming divine rule, just as he required his hearers to do. He could even reject the respectful title "good Master" (Mark 10:18 par.), with a reference to God alone as good. (Pannenberg 1994: 372)

Jesus did not only proclaim the coming "kingdom" (or better: "rule") of God. He focused on the nature of this rule as that of a merciful, forgiving father. God's kingdom comes to the extent that his will is done. God's rule becomes real if people put God's merciful will into practice. God's kingdom is markedly different from that of the world. It is not about accumulating power over others but about being their servant (Mark 10:42–45). Like a good son, that is, one who *does* what his father wishes him to do (Matt 21:28–31), Jesus saw himself as realizing God's good will in word and deed. He understood his ministry as guided and empowered by the spirit of God (Matt 12:28; Luke 4:18f). In that sense, Jesus could be regarded as the paradigmatic "Son of God," the very same sense in which Paul says that "all who are led by the spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom 8:14). This is also in line with Jesus' statement in Matt 5:44f: "I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." By submitting himself to the good rule of God, by acting out God's benevolent will and embodying God's compassionate and forgiving spirit like a faithful servant and an obedient son, Jesus emulated or imitated what he saw as key attributes of God's relation to us. And he wished his followers to do the same: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).[13]

In these two respects—in Jesus as impersonating the rule of God that he proclaims[14] and in Jesus as reflecting or embodying crucial attributes of God's relation to us—we find the roots of incarnational thought. Jesus is indeed a prophet, but one who not merely proclaims but embodies, that is, "incarnates" ("embodiment" or "enfleshment" is the literal meaning of *incarnatio*), the word of God. In him, as the prologue to John's Gospel says, "the word became flesh" (John 1:14). But the Gospel of John also affirms that God (the "Father") is "greater" than Jesus (John 14:28). A similar structural tension between likeness or analogy, on one hand, and dissimilarity or exceeding grandeur, on the other, is also found regarding Jesus as reflecting God's benevolence. In Colossians 1:15 Jesus is called "the image of the invisible God." Given the Jewish context of early Christianity, it was unquestionably clear that one must not make any image of God (the second commandment, Exodus 20:4). Yet, it was equally clear that God had created human beings in God's own image (Genesis 1:27). Colossians combines both traditions and applies them to Jesus. Jesus, the "new Adam," represents the ideal human being, the human as God had always wanted humans to be: reflecting God's own goodness. And still, God remains greater, "invisible" and thus—strictly speaking—indepictable. This tension, I suggest, reflects the general tension between divine immanence and divine transcendence in the act of revelation.

In one of the most significant contemporary works on Christology, Roger Haight has captured the particulars of early Christian thought on Jesus by his suggestion to understand Jesus as "symbol of God."[15] While the symbolized reality remains always different from the symbol, the symbol also participates in what it symbolizes in as much as the symbol "reveals and makes present" the symbolized reality (Haight 1999: 197). In this notion, Haight is influenced by Paul Tillich who similarly held that the symbol, despite being different from the symbolized, nevertheless "participates

in the reality of that for which it stands" (Tillich 1968, vol. I: 265). The religious symbol, says Tillich, "participates in the power of the divine to which it points" (Tillich 1968, vol. I: 265). To Haight and Tillich the religious symbol has therefore, in a sense, two natures: the finite nature of the symbol itself and, via participation as a symbol, the infinite nature of the symbolized divine reality.[16] "Since God is both present to and transcendent of any finite symbol, the symbol both makes God present and points away from itself to a God who is other than itself" (Haight 1992: 263). It is important to understand that the two natures of the symbol and the symbolized come together dialectically in the process of revelation. The symbol "reveals" or "mediates something other than itself" making the other thereby present (Haight 1999: 197). Symbolic mediation is the dialectical structure of all revelation. Incarnational thinking thus emerges from reflecting on the nature and possibility of revelation: If something of a divine infinite quality is revealed through some finite medium, it must be both, different from but also somehow present in and through the medium. Otherwise what is revealed would not be divine, or would not be revealed at all. Thus every medium of revelation has two natures.[17]

In the history of Christian doctrine, the result of such thinking was the deification of the Spirit of God and the Word of God[18] as both being mediated/revealed through Jesus. Yet this development was also in danger of threatening the monotheistic belief in one single and unique divine reality. A solution that retains divine oneness and nevertheless allows for the possibility of divine revelation via finite media (such as human words and persons) may be found in the ontological insight that "God's infinite transcendence is such that God is also immanent to *all things* [. . .]" (Haight 1992: 263, emphasis mine). Indeed, God's transcendence would itself become a kind of finite reality if it were confined by and limited to its being different from finite reality. Genuine transcendence requires and implies the thought of immanence. Genuine difference of God from the world paradoxically demands that God is not different from the world in the same sense in which one finite object is different from another finite object. God is different from finite reality precisely in as much as God *is not confined* to being different from finite reality whereas a finite entity *is* confined to being different from other finite entities. Nonduality is a hallmark of transcendence.

THE INSIGHT BEHIND MUSLIMS' CONCERN ABOUT INCARNATION

Islamic critique of Christian doctrines has taken many forms and comprises various aspects. However, it centers around two major targets: the Trinitarian teachings as an unacceptable deviation from monotheism and the confession of Jesus as the "Son of God" as an illegitimate deification of a human being, the inacceptable elevation of a created being to the level of the creator. No finite being should be placed in the rank of God and be given the honor which is due to God alone. Given that the Trinitarian speculations emerged from Christological considerations the two foci of Islamic criticism are closely intertwined.

The reason behind Islamic criticism is the insight into the inner link between divine transcendence and divine oneness. The Qur'ān affirms that God is "high above

all" (20:114; see also 22:62) so that nothing can be equated to God (42:11; 112:4). God's transcending of everything else must not be misunderstood as if God would occupy the highest place on a single scale. It rather implies "that God cannot be regarded as an existent among other existents" (Rahman 2009: 4). God is "that dimension which makes all other dimensions possible [. . .]. He *alone* is infinite" (Rahman 2009: 4). Hence, if the word "God" refers to that unspeakable reality which transcends everything else, it has to be a unique reality, a singularity. If there were a second and third god (being equal to God), God would no longer be God, because God would no longer be that which is "high above *all*." Genuine polytheism would thus miss the transcendent nature of God. Therefore, as Hasan Askari once lucidly put it, "'One' is not number but a form of awareness of God's transcendence" (Askari 1991: 43).

Against that background, Muslim critics of Christianity regarded the designation of Jesus as the "Son of God" as highly misleading. Muslim theologians were particularly worried about the possibility of a literal interpretation of this epithet (Ayoub 2007: 117–133). Regarding Jesus in a quasi-biological sense as the descent of God and Mary was a possibility in a mental climate influenced by Greek mythology where the notion of gods begetting children with human consorts was rife. But it is an impossibility to any sound metaphysical thinking. According to Mahmoud Ayoub, a number of classical Muslim commentators of the Qur'ān understood, and accepted, the use of the title "Son of God" in the gospels in a metaphorical sense expressing "a relationship of love and intimacy" between God and Jesus. Some commentators held that Christians misunderstood such legitimate metaphorical use by mistaking it as a literal claim about Jesus' divinity (Ayoub 2007: 124f). To Ayoub (2007: 122), "the disagreement between Christians and Muslims is not over the divine sonship of Christ, figuratively speaking, but over his divinity." The Islamic scholar Neal Robinson, who began his academic career as a Lecturer in New Testament Studies, emphasizes the fundamental congruence between the Qur'ānic view of Jesu as a prophet and the testimony of the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus "thought of himself as a prophet, objected when someone called him good, and stressed the oneness of God (Mark 6:4; 10:17; 12:29)" (Robinson 2005: 139).

Christians too reject, as strongly as Muslims do, any biological interpretation of the title "Son of God." And most Christians see themselves as much as monotheists as Muslims and Jews. They therefore also reject an understanding of the Trinity in the sense of three different deities, although some defenders of the so-called social Trinity get fairly close to such a polytheistic conception.[19] The Qur'ānic notion that part of Muhammad's vocation has been to warn Christians against overdoing in their Trinitarian speculations (4:171; 5:72–77) can and indeed needs to be taken seriously by Christian theology—all the more so as such critique is essentially in line with Jewish concerns regarding Christian teachings such as the Trinity and Christology. "Christians," says Hans Küng, "can learn something from Muslims and Jews about a simpler, more original understanding of the *son* of God" (Küng 2007: 489). According to Küng, Muhammad functions as "a prophetic corrective for Christians in the name of the one and only God [. . .]" (Küng et al. 1993: 129).

Nevertheless, Küng holds, Christians can retain the truth behind the incarnation doctrine if they keep in mind that the heart of the matter is the issue of revelation:

> In everything he said, in his preaching, his conduct, his fate, in his entire person, the man Jesus proclaimed, manifested, and revealed God's word and will. In other words, God's word and will took on human form in him. Only in this fashion will it be unequivocally understood that Jesus [. . .] *is* God's "word," God's "will," God's "Son" in human form. (Küng et al. 1993: 119)

This type of incarnational thinking can fully endorse the Qur'ānic statements that Jesus is the "word (*kalimah*) of God" (3:39; 3:45; 4:171), the "spirit (*rūḥ*) of God" (4:171), and a "servant" of God (19:30; 43:59). I would add that these three Qur'ānic utterances include everything that a Christian understanding of incarnation needs if it wants to be faithful to the portrait of Jesus in the gospels.

More recently, Muslim scholars such as Reza Shah-Kazemi and Muhammad Legenhausen have suggested to take the Qur'ānic designation of Jesus as "word of God" literally. While a strong thread in the Islamic commentarial tradition holds that the title "word of God" would merely refer to the miraculous creation of Jesu in the womb of the virgin Mary by means of the divine word and spirit,[20] Shah-Kazemi and Legenhausen suggest that the prophetic message brought by Jesus is not a message embodied in a particular text but a message embodied by a particular human being. According to Legenhausen, "the form in which the divine revelation was manifest to the prophets in the cases of Moses and Muhammad was textual, while in the case of the Gospel it was made manifest in the life of Jesus, Jesu himself is to be considered the word of God, just as the Torah and the Glorious Qur'ān are considered the word of God" (Legenhausen 2009: 17). Similarly Shah-Kazemi sees in Surah 4:171 a clear distinction between a prophet who bears "witness to the Truth, and one who, in a certain sense, constituted in and of himself the Truth" (Shah-Kazemi 2010: 128). Both Legenhausen and Shah-Kazemi admit that this understanding of the Qur'ānic epithet gets close to the affirmation of Jesus as the "word made flesh" in the prologue of John's Gospel and thereby raises the question of the incarnation.[21] However, this is no less the case with the Muslim affirmation of the Qur'ān as the "Word of God," that is as the embodiment of God's eternal word. I agree with Daniel Madigan (2011: 19) that Muslims and Christians "are both recognizing the presence and expression of the eternal, universal, divine Word in something that, to someone who does not believe, is merely human—in the case of Christians, in a first-century carpenter from Nazareth; in the case of Muslims, in a seventh-century Arabic text."[22]

To be sure, Muslims have been divided over the question of whether the primordial word of God (the eternal word that is manifest or incarnate in the non-eternal Arabic Qur'ān) is created or uncreated—as much as early Christianity has been divided over the analogous question of whether the primordial *logos* is to be seen as created or uncreated. Perhaps there is an element of truth in both positions: The divine "word" can be regarded as revealing something of God's nature and thus of something "uncreated." But it becomes manifest in relation to us and can thus be

regarded as a divine "creation" in the sense of being a divine act (i.e., the act of revelation). In both respects, revelation conveys something of its ultimate and infinite source, although through a finite medium or sign (*āyah*) or symbol directed and adapted to the finite horizon of human beings. If the notion of revelation, that is the mediation of an infinite reality to and through finite reality, implies that the infinite is somehow present or incarnate or immanent in finite reality, must we then not reconsider the nature of the difference between the finite and the infinite? As I argued before, a simple ontological dualism would be in danger of seeing—and thereby misconceiving—this difference in the same way in which we distinguish two finite entities. The relation between the finite and the infinite is nondual, but in an asymmetric way: While infinite reality inevitably appears as absolutely different from the finite (if seen from the direction of what is finite), finite reality (if seen from the direction of the infinite) can never be absolutely different from the infinite, because the infinite is the one and only absolute reality with no other reality besides it. Hence, it can be stated—also in a Muslim context—that "the Word is manifested in creation not just by Jesus but by all the divinely appointed Messengers, and ultimately, by all that exists" (Shah-Kazemi 2010: 129). This understanding takes us to the issue of the uniqueness or singularity of incarnation.

THE INSIGHT BEHIND BUDDHISTS' CONCERN ABOUT ONE SINGLE INCARNATION

According to José Cabezón, "the claim that Jesus is the incarnation or manifestation of a deity" is not objectionable from a Buddhist point of view. The problem is rather, apart from certain features of the Christian concept of God, "the claim that Jesus is unique in being an incarnation."[23]

The concept of "incarnation" is by no means alien to Buddhism and plays a significant role in most branches of Mahāyāna.[24] From early on, a Buddha was regarded as someone who embodied the Dharma and Nirvana (*nirvāṇa*)—a belief that further developed, especially under the influence of the Yogācāra school, into the teaching of the "three bodies" (*trikāya*) of a Buddha, that is, of three levels of reality in which a Buddha participates: First, the Buddha as a transient human being (*nirmāṇakāya*), second, as a supranatural, immortal being (*saṃbhogakāya*), and third, as the ultimate nature of reality (*dharmakāya*). The latter is designated as "formless" meaning that it is inconceivable and ineffable, while the first two levels are marked by either physical or subtle form. According to several Mahāyāna teachers, such as Tanluan (476–542), the formless "dharma-body" (*dharmakāya*) assumes form, that is, manifests or incarnates itself in the form of the Buddhas of the "fulfillment-body" (*saṃbhogakāya*) who again manifest or incarnate as the Buddhas of the "transformation-body" (*nirmānakāya*). The two kind of form-bodies are thus the dharma-body, but in its manifestation as skillful or compassionate means. Under the impact of this doctrinal scheme, Shinran (1173–1263) understood Śākyamuni (Siddhārtha Gautama) as the incarnation of Amida Buddha (or Amida Tathagata, "Tathagata" being a different epithet for a Buddha) and both as the compassionate manifestation (form) of the formless *dharmakāya*:

> Amida, who attained Buddhahood in the infinite past,
> Full of compassion for foolish beings of the five defilements,
> Took the form of Śākyamuni Buddha
> And appeared in Gayā.
> (*Jōdo wasan* 88; The Collected Works of Shinran, vol. I, 1997: 349)

and

> Dharma-body as suchness has neither color nor form; thus, the mind cannot grasp it nor words describe it. From this oneness was manifested form, called dharma-body as compassionate means.
>
> Taking this form, the Buddha announced the name Bhikṣu Dharmākara and established the forty-eight great Vows that surpass conceptual understanding. [. . .]. This Tathagata has fulfilled the Vows, which are the cause of that Buddhahood, and thus is called "Tathagata of the fulfilled body." This is none other than Amida Tathagata. [. . .]
>
> From the fulfilled body innumerable personified and accommodated bodies are manifested, radiating the unhindered light of wisdom throughout the countless worlds.
>
> (*Yuishinshō mon'i*; The Collected Works of Shinran, vol. I, 1997: 461)

To Shinran, Amida represents or, better, *is* unlimited and unconditioned compassion. His vow(s) to lead all sentient beings to the Pure Land, where they realize liberation and/or become Bodhisattvas who return to the world of rebirth and suffering (*saṃsāra*) partaking in the redemptive work of Amida, excludes no one. Moreover, it is unconditioned in as much as all conditions such as faith/trust in Amida's compassionate vow and the invocation of Amida's name are themselves freely given by Amida.

When in the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Christians first came to learn about Shinran's version of Pure Land Buddhism, they immediately perceived a close similarity between his teachings and Luther's understanding of the gospel. And they rejected both, Pure Land Buddhism and Protestant Christianity, as being the work of the devil. In the twentieth century, Karl Barth, as a Reformed Protestant, interpreted this similarity not as the work of the devil but of divine providence. However, this does not make things any better. According to Barth, God's providence produced Pure Land Buddhism to show that such similarities are completely irrelevant to the question of truth. The truth of the gospel, according to Barth, depends exclusively on the name Jesus Christ in the "formal simplicity of the name" (Barth 1960: 376).[25] That is, to Barth Pure Land Buddhism is as false as it was to the sixteenth-century Jesuits.

While Barth's understanding carries Christian exclusivism to its most irrational extremes, this has not been the only answer given by twentieth-century Christian theologians, whether Catholic[26] or Protestant. In radical contrast to Barth, John Cobb, a Methodist Protestant, has equated Amida with Christ in the sense of the

divine Logos: ". . . Amida is Christ. That is, the feature of the totality of reality to which Pure Land Buddhists refer when they speak of Amida is the same as that to which Christians refer when they speak of Christ" (Cobb 1982: 128). Cobb, however, sees a major difference between Christianity and Shin Buddhism in that the latter allegedly lacks any historical basis for its confidence in the goodness of ultimate reality. The story of the Bodhisattva Dharmākara who "in the infinite past" fulfilled his vows in becoming Amida Buddha, and who is himself to be regarded as a manifestation of Amida, cannot, so Cobb, be taken as history but needs to be regarded as a mythical narrative encouraging faith in Amida. Moreover, according to Cobb, any attempt to ground the tenets of Pure Land Buddhism in the teachings of the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama (who according to Shin Buddhist tradition taught the Pure Land Sūtras) would be "difficult to sustain in the light of historical research" (Cobb 1982: 138). The solution, says Cobb, is to regard Jesus as the joint historical foundation of the truth that both, Christianity and Shin Buddhism, proclaim:

> The history that supports the Christian understanding of the graciousness of God supports equally the Jōdoshinshū understanding of wisdom and compassion that characterize ultimate reality. [. . .] It is in Palestine, rather than in India, that history, when it is read as centering in Jesus, provides the strongest basis for believing that we are saved by grace through faith. (Cobb 1982: 140)

In response to John Cobb's challenge, the Shin Buddhist John Shunji Yokota agreed that the narrative of Dharmākara becoming Amida must not be taken as historical record but constitutes a transhistorical, metaphorical expression of an existential confidence in the compassionate quality of ultimate reality (Yokota 1986, 2000a). Yokota also acknowledged that ultimate reality, in being seen as compassionate, assumes a "personal quality" (Yokota 2000b: 212). But according to Yokota, Cobb underestimates the link between Shin Buddhism and Buddha Gautama. Gautama does provide a historical basis to the Pure Land tradition. Yet this basis is not primarily found in Gautama's teachings but rather in the compassionate nature of Gautama's decision to disseminate his insight and guide others on their way to liberation (Yokota 2000a: 85f, 2005: 96f). The truth expressed in the metaphorical figure of Amida is thus historically actualized in the compassion of Gautama:

> The act of Siddhārtha Gautama to rise from the seat of enlightenment and go forth to talk of his understanding of reality in order to help others to gain enlightenment is the primordial act of compassion in our tradition and can, I believe, be seen as the actualization into history of the compassionate, saving activity of Amida Buddha. (Yokota 2004: 260)

Therefore, according to Yokota, there is no need to incorporate Jesus into the Shin Buddhist tradition to provide it with a historical foundation. But Jesus can, and indeed should, become part of Shin Buddhism as a further person in whom "the reality of Amida Buddha is fully actualized" (Yokota 2005: 100). This integration would change and expand the tradition, as for example by "a recognition of the moral

imperative that the image of Christ includes," which should lead to the development of a social ethics in Shin Buddhism (Yokota 2005: 101).

Yokota's affirmation of Jesus as an incarnation or even "pivotal incarnation" (Yokota 2005: 101) of the salvific power of ultimate reality implies—in line with Shinran's views—that the incarnation of ultimate reality cannot be confined to one single instance. The Korean Protestant theologian Hee-Sung Keel has pointed out, approvingly, that the assumption of multiple incarnations is the inevitable conclusion from Cobb's identification of Amida and Christ:

> If Amida is Christ, then the two traditions should also recognize the common transcendent origin or the two mediators of salvation. Then Jesus can be regarded as a manifestation of Amida Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, and Śākyamuni Buddha as an incarnation of Christ and the eternal Logos. (Keel 1995: 181)

If incarnation is understood as an implication of revelation, there is indeed no good reason why this should be confined to one single instance. On the contrary, such an understanding not merely allows for the possibility of multiple incarnations, but makes one "expect that there will be other historical mediations [. . .]" (Haight 1992: 281). As in Christianity and in Islam, in Shin Buddhism too the possibility of finite mediation of the infinite is supported by a nondual ontology. At the level of the dharma-body, says Shinran, the Tathagata (i.e., the Buddha) "pervades the countless worlds; it fill the hearts and minds of the ocean of all beings. Thus, plants, trees, and land all attain Buddhahood" (*Yuishinshō mon'i*; The Collected Works of Shinran, vol. I, 1997: 461).[27]

AN OPEN CONCLUSION

It may sound paradoxical, but it is indeed possible to understand incarnation in a way that does justice to the fundamental Muslim concerns about incarnation as such and simultaneously to the Buddhist concerns regarding the singularity of incarnation. Is such a reconstruction a postmodern or revisionist form of Christian theology? I do not think so. I rather see it as a return to the beginnings of Christian thought in the light of what can be learned from Islam and Buddhism. All truth, if it is truth, is compatible. If one believes that there is truth in the religions, one should not be surprised to discover compatibility. The postmodern delight in incommensurabilities may well be just the surface of an underlying frustration with any trust in religious truth, a weak substitute for existential confidence and an escape to the irrational. I think it is possible and reasonable to view Jesus, the Qur'ān, and Śākyamuni as symbolic mediators of an ultimate reality, a reality that is, despite its unfathomable nature, in relation to us loving, merciful, all-embracing, and boundless; a reality that reveals itself to us through the specific messages as they have taken form in its manifold mediations.

Yet, we have no proof that such a reality exists. Reasonable trust is not infallible knowledge. The question of religious truth remains closely tied to the existential risk

of faith, to courage and confidence in the face of the insoluble mystery that surrounds and permeates our world and our existence. We do not know for sure if this mystery will welcome and salvage us or whether it is merely the frigid face of absurd nothingness. Shinran was very clear about this (see *Tannishō* 2, The Collected Works of Shinran, vol. I, 1997: 662). What we find in the messages embodied by Jesus, the Qur'ān and Śākyamuni is no more, but also no less, than the call to entrust ourselves to this mystery. Addressing it as a merciful father, as *ar-Raḥman* and *ar-Raḥīm*, or as our compassionate parent (*oya-sama*), are clear expressions of such hope and confidence. Whosoever follows the call emerging from one of those three symbolic mediations has no reason to blame the followers of the other two. Instead, the faithful will say:

> *"We make no distinction between any of His messengers." And they say, "We hear and obey. We seek Your forgiveness, our Lord! And to you alone is the final return"* (Qur'ān 2:285)

NOTES

1. Some skeptics did and still do suggest such an impossibility. For a recent example, see Sugirtharajah (2018: 263): "The quest for the historical Jesus seems in a way to be a futile enterprise, so it is well worth asking whether there is any purchase in undertaking it."
2. "He regarded himself as having full authority to speak and act on behalf of God" (Sanders 1995: 238). "He thought that God was about to bring in his kingdom, and that he, Jesus, was God's last emissary" (Sanders 1995: 248).
3. Some noncanonical writings are of roughly the same age as the younger ones in the canon (second century CE), and others, such as the Didache, are even older. See Gregory and Tuckett (2015).
4. An excellent reader of classic texts from Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism that refer to Jesus is offered by Barker and Gregg (2010). A collection of contemporary perceptions of Jesus within different religions is found in Barker (2005). For a somewhat essayistic overview, see Outcalt (2014).
5. See Heschel (2005) for a brief summary of Jewish views of Jesus.
6. See Bauschke (2001: 9).
7. On the image of Jesus in the Hadith literature, see Khalidi (2001). For a survey of the understanding of Jesus in the traditional Muslim commentaries on the Qur'ān, see Robinson (1991). A survey of Muslim images of Jesus in Qur'ān, Hadith, Sufism, Sunni, and Shi'a is found in Leirvik (2010).
8. For Hindu and Buddhist views, see Gross and Muck (2000), Schmidt-Leukel (2001), Barker (2005: 79–146), Barker and Gregg (2010: 153–271), and Sugirtharajah (2018).
9. See Barker and Gregg (2010: 233–238) and Schneider (2019).
10. So Anagarika Dharmapala, in Guruge (1965: 475).
11. See Schmidt-Leukel (2017a: 109–146).
12. Note that I am not talking about *the* Christian affirmation or *the* Muslim or Buddhist concern. All three traditions are internally diverse, and there is no such thing as *the* Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist position, although there are many different views within each tradition claiming to represent *the* essential and genuine view.

13. Geza Vermes (1924–2013), in particular, has pointed out the motif of the imitation of God in Jesus teachings and deeds. See Vermes (1993: 157–159, 200–206).

14. Origen (second–third century) famously called Jesus the *autobasileía*, "the kingdom himself," or "the kingdom in person" (*In Evangelium secundum Matthaeum* 17:7).

15. See Haight (1999).

16. See Haight (1999: 196–207) and Tillich (1968, vol. I: 266f).

17. As an analogy, take the example of a book. Every book has two natures: the physical nature of paper and ink and the very different nature of the mental content. And the exact relation between the two proves, on closer examination, to be fairly mysterious (see Nagel 1987: 38–46).

18. Note that, strictly speaking, it is not Jesus who was deified, but the Logos, that is the eternal Word of God that was embodied by or incarnate in Jesus.

19. "For the social theorists, to put the matter crudely, God is more appropriately modelled on three human beings than on one" (Kilby 2000: 441).

20. Against such efforts of the tradition see the following remark of Mera Ali on 4:171 and 3:45: "The text does not say 'Christ is only the apostle of God, born of His Kalima' but clearly: 'the apostle of God and His Kalima'. In the second verse, it is not stated: 'God gives thee glad tidings of a Child produced by his Kalima', but rather 'the good tidings of a Kalima from Him'." Mera Ali, "Le Christ selon le Coran," *Revue de l'Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 5 (1968): 79–94, 85, quoted from the translation in Azumah (2018: 74).

21. See Shah-Kazemi (2010: 128f) and Legenhausen (2009: 10–13).

22. For further Muslim voices pointing to the same direction, see Leirvik (2010: 257–259).

23. Cabezón (2005: 21). To Cabezón, the God of the Hebrew Bible appears to be, in ethical terms, "far from perfected," at times even appearing as "capable of seemingly malevolent actions." And "the God of later Christian theology" is, according to Cabezón, philosophically questionable. "Given Buddhist's metaphysical commitments [. . .], there can be no God who is the creator of the universe, who is originally pure and primordially perfected, who is omnipotent and who can will the salvation of beings" (Cabezón 2005: 22f). A fair treatment of this critique would go beyond the scope of this essay. It would require a discussion of the hermeneutics of the anthropomorphic imagery in the Biblical representation of God and a detailed examination of the traditional Buddhist criticism of an eternal creator God. A discussion of the latter is found in Schmidt-Leukel (2016).

24. For an overview, see Parrinder (1997: 166–180).

25. For a critique of Barth, see Schmidt-Leukel (2017b: 111–115).

26. See Küng's positive assessment of John Cobb's interpretation in Küng et al. (1993: 434f).

27. On the interpretation of nonduality in terms of an asymmetric relation between conventional and absolute reality in a Buddhist context, see Schmidt-Leukel (2019: 418–420, 476–478).

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