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BOOK REVIEWS

***Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal.* By Keith Yandell and Harold Netland. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009. 230 pages. Paperback, \$22.00.**

Given the nature of the work being reviewed here, we wanted to assure balance. For this reason two reviewers, one a Christian theologian and the other a Buddhist scholar, were invited to review the same work. It is hoped that this somewhat unusual procedure provides the reader with a good sense that the limitations and problems identified are not based on a sectarian affiliation.

A Christian Theologian's Reading

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The authors of *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* say in the introduction that this text belongs to a genre of theological writing that they call “interreligious polemics or interreligious apologetics” (xv). As the name suggests, texts within this genre examine the religious views of a tradition different from one’s own, and then elaborate on the truth of one’s own religious tradition, over and against the other. Thus, in this book, Buddhism is examined and explored; and then, in the concluding chapter, the truth claims of Christianity are judged to be superior to those of Buddhism. Indeed, the concluding sentence of the penultimate paragraph in the book says as much: “Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection provide the Christian answer to the question that haunted the Buddha” (212). To be sure, the authors themselves seem to be a little ambivalent about this enterprise. They state in the introduction that “the book is not intended as a refutation of

Buddhism or even as an argument for the truth of Christian theism as opposed to Buddhism” (xvii). Yet, the title reveals that the book is not simply an “exploration” of Buddhism, it is also an “appraisal”—that is, an assessment of Buddhism’s value. And, in that regard, their position is clear: “It is our contention that, whatever other merits Buddhism might have, some of its central beliefs are deeply problematic and should be rejected” (xiv).

Thus, before describing the actual content of the book itself, it is worth taking a moment to reflect on this whole genre of interreligious writing. Christian apologetics, of course, is a field with a long history—as long as there have been competing religious doctrines against which a true exposition of the faith needed to be asserted. There have been Christian apologetics written against other (deemed heretical) Christians, and there have been apologetics directed at non-Christians. However, all apologetics face the same temptation: in “exploring and appraising” one’s opponent, there is a tendency to present the tradition in the worst light, with all warts visible, such that the final conclusion of Christianity’s superiority is most convincing. In a contemporary context, to take this stance with another religious tradition seems to violate the spirit in which most interreligious dialogue occurs—a spirit of openness and humility, and a willingness to see things differently, to view one’s own tradition in a fresh way. Since this is so clearly not the spirit in which the book was written, it is not entirely obvious who the audience for this book might be: certainly not Buddhists, certainly not those looking for a measured, non-judgmental introduction to Buddhism, and certainly not Christians looking to engage more deeply in a positive way with Buddhist doctrine and practice. It seems, then, that “interreligious polemics” serves exclusively those Christians whose sole motivation for dialogue is to more deeply solidify the truth of their own faith; and, of course, this is no dialogue at all.

Now to the book itself. The first few chapters are very straightforward and clear, describing the origins of Buddhism and its geographical spread. None of this material is new, but it is presented in a very accessible way for the presumed target audience: Christians who know little about Buddhism. Chapter 1 introduces Theravāda Buddhism, beginning with the Indian context into which the Buddha was born. The first few pages deal with the cosmology that is shared by Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism: the cycle of rebirth and the need for release.

It then describes the Buddha's own enlightenment, and the four noble truths, including the teachings of impermanence, no-self, and nirvana.

Chapter 2, titled "The Dharma Goes East," is concerned primarily with Mahāyāna Buddhism, touching only briefly on Tibet and Vajrayāna. Helpful in this chapter is the emphasis on cultural differences, and how those differences influenced the character of Buddhism in the different countries into which it expanded. Included here are explanation of bodhisattvas, and a discussion of Nāgārjuna and emptiness. Extensive treatment (by comparison) is given to Pure Land Buddhism; and one wonders if the reason for that isn't revealed in footnote 46, which offers several examples of publications considering parallels between Pure Land and Christianity—including the one mentioned in the text itself, Shinran and Martin Luther. The authors, however, make clear the important distinctions between the two traditions that should mitigate any close comparisons.

The authors then shift to a discussion of Zen Buddhism, which actually is the main topic of chapter 3, but here they seek to introduce its transmission from India through China. Interestingly enough, the authors rely rather heavily on D.T. Suzuki in this chapter, even though they state at the beginning of this section that "The Western conception of Zen [popularized in the 1950s and 1960s] does not always fit the actual Chinese and Japanese historical tradition" (56). Since Suzuki was perhaps the primary figure responsible for this "Western conception," the use of him as a source here seems somewhat incongruous. The chapter closes with brief mention of Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama.

As promised, chapter 3 focuses primarily on Zen, looking specifically at the American context. The two figures treated most fully here are Masao Abe and D.T. Suzuki, and the authors give the impression that the reason for this is that these two are the ones most responsible for promulgating the particular form not only of Zen Buddhism, but of "Eastern Spirituality in general," that has been very influential in the United States (79). It is not insignificant, in my view, that this whole section of the chapter begins with the questionable nature of American Zen. The authors write: "...the extent and nature of the changes in Western Buddhism cause some to question whether this is still Buddhism. There is no need for us to try and determine just what constitutes 'authentic Buddhism.' In any event, this is a question for Buddhists themselves to settle" (79). This suggests that perhaps the

book is directed at those Christians who find themselves enamored of this particular expression of Buddhism without, perhaps, fully understanding the specific teachings and practices it entails. This impression is strengthened when one goes on to read the multiple critiques of Suzuki leveled at him by other Buddhists, including his emphasis on pure experience and the “dehistorization” of the Zen tradition. The authors conclude this section saying, “But the attraction of Buddhism in the West is due in part to the skillful and effective use of such discourse [generalizations and dichotomies] to depict a profound and esoteric ‘Eastern Spirituality’ as the antidote to ‘Western rationalism’ and materialism” (95). Abe is given similar treatment, as the authors emphasize his nonethical stance that argues for an awakened view of good and evil that recognizes their non-duality. They quote Abe as saying, “While in a human, moral dimension the Holocaust should be condemned as an unpardonable, absolute evil, *from the ultimate religious point of view even it should not be taken as an absolute but a relative evil*” (101–102)—they add the emphasis themselves for good measure. Somehow, the accusation that Buddhism seems unable to recognize the profound horror of the Holocaust—a sensitive point for many readers—seems to me to be a bit of a low blow. The authors conclude the chapter with a quote from Tillich, who they argue also “noticed the moral ambivalence of Buddhism” (102).

Chapter 4 is where the specific doctrinal claims of Buddhism are examined and evaluated; and here one notices some of the previous ambiguity around how much of an “apologetics” this book is intended to be. So, the authors open this chapter with a discussion of diagnoses and cures, emphasizing how Buddhism and Christianity offer different diagnoses about what is “wrong” with human existence, and how to fix it. The authors appreciate this metaphor in particular because, in their view, it highlights how serious the differences between the two religions are: “These are serious matters, since mistakes in diagnosis or treatment can be fatal” (106). They follow this introduction with a defense of “religious exclusivism,” arguing that Christianity has been “widely accepted” as exclusivist, in the sense of insisting that “the diagnosis and cure offered in one’s own religion is distinctively accurate and efficacious” (106–107). They then posit that many other religious traditions, including Buddhism, also can be defined as “exclusivist” in this way, given the fact that Buddhism also asserts the superiority of its doctrine (the Dalai Lama is quoted in support here). The point? “The

stakes are high. To put it in a particular idiom: there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun; there is only one way to gain heaven and shun hell, but there are plenty of ways to shun heaven and gain hell” (107). Whether or not this is true is somewhat beside the point: the problem is that this language feeds into Christian fears that interreligious dialogue leads them down a dangerous road, which, apparently, ends them in hell. Even in a book that self-identifies as a Christian apologetic, this stands out as over the top: exceptionally unhelpful, and a dubious theological scare tactic.

So, as one might imagine, the main point in this chapter is to correct the tendency of Western Christians to minimize the differences between Christianity and Buddhism, emphasizing the inherent soteriological focus of the Buddha’s teaching. Clearly, the authors recognize that many Christians simply import various practices and beliefs in a superficial manner, without actually understanding the larger doctrinal system of which they are a part. Thus, the authors seek to explain some key Buddhist doctrines by relating them to a larger soteriological goal—that is, explaining how they are part of the “cure” of the illness the Buddha has diagnosed for humanity. They discuss rebirth and karma, impermanence, no-self, and appearance and reality, among other things. Chapter 5 continues this analysis in the same vein, but this time focusing on particular Buddhist schools, in order to give specific examples of the general observations of chapter 4. In light of who the intended audience for this book seems to be, this chapter is perhaps the least helpful, as it is far more complex and philosophical in its analysis than the previous chapters; and the specific choices of examples is not apparent: Pudgalavādins, three varying interpretations of Madhyamaka—none of which reflect a standard Buddhist interpretation—and what the authors call “Buddhist Reductionism,” which describes the Yogācāra and Theravāda Abhidharma schools. It almost seems as if the schools were chosen specifically to illustrate inherent difficulties in the Buddhist teaching of no-self.

Finally, the concluding chapter, titled “The Dharma or the Gospel,” is quite revealing; and to my read, actually explains at least in part some of the reason for the book. The authors begin the chapter with the following statement:

In considering the relation between Christianity and Buddhism we face a curious paradox. As Buddhism becomes better known in the West, in certain quarters there is an intense interest in emphasizing

commonalities between the religions, often with the result that Buddhism and Christianity are regarded as complementary religions.... Yet, if each religion is taken seriously on its own terms, as understood by traditional Buddhists and Christians, it is clear that the two religions offer very different perspectives on the religious ultimate, the human predicament, and ways to overcome this predicament (175).

It is clear that the whole book has been in service of the goal of that last sentence—helping Christians take Buddhism seriously on its own terms, and therefore better understand and appreciate the core differences between the religions. Thus, the final chapter brings the apologetic task to its logical conclusion, as the authors reveal their goal of not only clarifying the differences between the two traditions but “at points, to suggest, in a very preliminary manner, why Christian theism is more plausible than Buddhism” (177).

I agree with the authors that all too often Christians attempt a shallow appropriation of Buddhist teachings, seamlessly fitting them into their already-existing Christian practice/belief without a second thought. In this way, this book is helpful because it makes very clear that the religions are different—with different understandings of the world, the human person, and the final goal/end of life. However, the piece that seems both unnecessary and incongruous is the “apologetic” piece—the part where the authors show that Christianity is superior to Buddhism (“more plausible” is less heavy-handed, I know, but the idea behind it is the same). As noted above, it makes me question for whom this book is intended. Certainly, it doesn’t function as a straightforward introduction to Buddhism—the polemic prevents that. Nor is it an example of interreligious dialogue: strengths of Buddhism are not noted, nor are there places where Buddhism is said to be able to helpfully inform or challenge Christianity. It’s a monologue, not a dialogue. So, perhaps it is intended for Christians who want to draw family members or friends back from “dangerous” engagement with Buddhism, by demonstrating exactly what it teaches, and the problems inherent in Buddhist teaching. In the twenty-first century, there must be a better way.

A Buddhist Scholar's Reading

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PREFACE

This review could have been much shorter: "This is a bad book about Buddhism. Don't read it."

The work, however, constitutes one instance of an important aspect of the encounter between Buddhism and Christianity. In the last half century of scholarly discourse on Buddhist-Christian encounter much attention has been given to dialogue between the two (Buddhist-Christian dialogue), and more recently attention has been paid to the complexities of personal engagement with both simultaneously ("dual-belonging" or other related conceptualizations).

Following the Parliament of the World's Religions (Chicago, 1893), the tenor in academia regarding the study of religions has largely been one of understanding leading to appreciation in expectation that this would lead to peaceful coexistence, harmony, and cooperation in relation to issues of mutual concern. This attitude constitutes an almost official dogma for much of undergraduate education in religious studies. I recall a colleague who, for example, once explained during a faculty retreat that his approach to teaching was modeled on the approach of music appreciation—a metaphor I only much later realized he had gotten from one of the most widely used textbooks in the field.

Such a perspective does little, however, to prepare students—even those who later become scholars themselves—for the realities of the religious world of fundamentalists and polemicists. They constitute a part of the Buddhist-Christian encounter today just as much as do all the "dialogue partners."

This review will, hopefully, provide something of a window on these sectors of the Buddhist-Christian encounter, ones not commonly attended to in Buddhist studies. In addition to this goal, however, I found it effectively impossible to not respond to what these authors claimed about Buddhist thought—noting why it was wrong factually, interpretively, or methodologically. As extensive as this review is—possibly enough to tax the patience of the reader—the responses given here are only selectively indicative of the book's failings.

INTRODUCTION: A SMALL EXERCISE
IN THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

On the publisher's website, and repeated on Amazon.com, we find the following noteworthy claim:

The disproportionate influence of Buddhist thought and philosophy found in cultural circles such as education, entertainment and the media coupled with the dramatic recent surge of asian [*sic*] immigrants, many of whom are Buddhist, has brought Buddhism to the forefront of Western culture.¹

There are two parts to this claim that are helpful in understanding the underlying motivation for the production of this work. First, that it constitutes a necessary corrective to the "disproportionate influence of Buddhist thought and philosophy found in cultural circles such as education, entertainment and the media." Second, we find the not so covertly racist reference to "recent surge of asian immigrants," which chillingly resonates with the early twentieth century language of the threats to White, Christian America posed by the "Yellow Menace."² We introduce this work by noting the publisher's claim since it itself focuses our attention on the way in which the publishers wish to motivate potential readers, that is, by fear and resentment—fear of change, fear of the foreign, and resentment about a perceived de-centering of Christianity from cultural discourse.³ Although the authors themselves make a pretense of a balanced "appraisal" of Buddhism, the conclusion is foregone—so far foregone that it is in fact leading the construction of the putative appraisal.

THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Although it is tempting to simply dismiss this work as an anti-Buddhist polemic, it can serve as a means of examining some of the recurring issues in the comparative study of religious philosophies.⁴ Prior to moving to a consideration of some of the issues, however, it is useful to place it in the spectrum of attempts by modern theologians to respond to an increasingly sophisticated awareness of other religious traditions, and to the failure of earlier formulations, such as the division of the world into Christians, heathens (those who had never heard the Gospel and were thus candidates for missionizing), and pagans (those who despite having heard the Gospel, rejected it). Hugh Nicholson has described the different theological positions taken in response to this increasing awareness of religious diversity as a developmental

trajectory.⁵ According to Nicholson this trajectory begins in the nineteenth century with what was then a single field called “comparative theology.” Motivated by the rise of a secularized understanding of a scientific inquiry into religion as a social phenomenon, comparative theology bifurcated, the specifically secularized academic project coming to be known as “comparative religions.” Comparative religions laid the groundwork for the way in which the study of religion entered into the curriculum of state-supported secular universities in the 1960s.⁶ The development of comparative religions as distinct from comparative theology led then to the religiously motivated consideration of the theological implications of the diversity of religious traditions, identified as the “theology of religions.”

Nicholson describes the theology of religions as itself having developed in three stages: exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist.⁷ (The system of three categories and this terminology for them can be traced to John Hick.⁸) Nicholson describes the exclusivist perspective as one in which the theologian attempts to demonstrate the exclusive superiority of Christianity *per se*, that is, as focused on the redemption of human sin by Christ’s sacrifice, over all other religions which lack access (or, block access) to Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. Inclusivism in contrast claims that Christianity “includes and fulfills other faiths.”⁹ Or, as Hick expresses it, “one’s own tradition alone has the whole truth but that this truth is nevertheless partially reflected in other traditions.”¹⁰ Pluralism shifts from a focus on Christ as the defining center to God, that is, from a Christocentric to a theocentric conception of Christianity. In this understanding, the variety of religious traditions are all manifestations of divine grace, providing a route to salvation. Hick claims this view as his own, and defines it as that “the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the different cultural ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is manifestly taking place.”¹¹ In terms of this framework, Yandell and Netland’s “Christian evaluation of Buddhism” can be located as an exclusivist theology of religions. This placement is important for understanding a work that presents itself as “an exploration and appraisal,” and hence seems to attempt two contradictory undertakings—an accurate representation of Buddhist thought, but with the intention of demonstrating the necessary inferiority of Buddhism to Christianity.

Throughout the work, the latter goal seems to influence the choices made both about what to represent as either typical or foundational for Buddhism, as well as the choices made about how to represent Buddhist thought.

STRUCTURE OF THE WORK

Yandell and Netland's study falls into two approximately even parts: history and doctrine. Examining this structure per se is important for what it reveals about the conceptual framework within which the authors construct their argument. Specifically, the importance of doctrine for the authors is evidenced by the at least equal structural importance it has in relation to the section on history. The structure employed by the authors is not a structure that reflects the organizing principles of any emic understanding of Buddhism.¹² In constructing the work in this fashion, they simultaneously construct the reader's understanding according to two concerns that are central to much of Protestant Christian thought, that is, the historical nature of Jesus, and the salvific character of proper belief.

The history section is a bit more problematic than most textbook treatments of Buddhism. Like most such treatments, it draws on a variety of what may be called tertiary sources, that is, general summaries, rather than primary or secondary ones. Some of these are more recent, while some are quite dated, making for a certain unevenness in the representations of Buddhism. One such oddity is that the first chapter is on "early Buddhism," while we find Mahāyāna being introduced in chapter 2, entitled "The Dharma Goes East." This creates a very distorted picture of the development of Buddhism in India, suggesting as it does that Mahāyāna is an East Asian phenomenon. More striking is the rhetorical question at the end of the first paragraph of chapter 3, "The Dharma Comes West," which identifies Buddhism as a "transnational" religion, that is, one of those "religious traditions with universal pretensions and global ambitions."¹³ The suspicion that the authors hold toward Buddhism is evident in the question that follows: "Can this quaint and exotic religion of meditating monks and serene gardens have global ambitions?"¹⁴

ETHICS AND ONTOLOGY

At the end of the third chapter, "The Dharma Comes West," we find one of the places in which it seems most likely that the authors have

intentionally distorted Buddhist thought and practice, though perhaps only as a means of emphasizing the dangers of an ethical relativism that they see Buddhism entailing. They take the absolutism of Masao Abe with his rhetorical transcendence of all values as representative of Buddhist ethics generally. Highlighting Abe's claim that "from the ultimate religious point of view even [the Holocaust] should not be taken as an absolute, but a relative evil," they assert that "Zen clashes with a widely shared aspect of human experience which recognizes an irreducible distinction between good and evil, right and wrong."¹⁵ Yandell and Netland have chosen to highlight one particularly provocative claim by one Buddhist philosopher, Masao Abe, as representative of the actual consequences of Buddhist ontology. In doing so, they claim justification on the markedly shaky grounds of "a widely shared aspect of human experience," and at the same time explicitly brush aside all Buddhist ethical teachings and the ethical behavior of Buddhist adherents as irrelevant. At the very end of the history section, they assert that

While in practice Buddhists often show exemplary moral character and Buddhist sacred texts call for cultivation of moral character, many have sensed a deep tension between such moral imperatives and an ontology in which moral distinctions are overcome. It remains to be seen whether Buddhism's encounter with the West, with its (diminishing) Christian heritage, will alter the traditional ontology in a way that strengthens the Buddhist basis for moral action.¹⁶

In other words, they promote a particular interpretation of Buddhist thought—one that many people, including many Buddhists, would find offensive—as foundational to all Buddhist thought.

An argument by analogy against their representation might be to take some particularly provocative claim by a single Christian leader as indicating the true nature of Christian ethics and its philosophic underpinnings. For example, consider Pat Robertson's claims that Satan is the active force behind the movements for equal rights for homosexuals, and for protecting a woman's right to choose.¹⁷ To claim that these assertions represent the cosmology fundamental to all Christianity, while at the same time dismissing all Christian ethical teachings and the ethical behavior of many Christians, would be methodologically invalid.

Yandell and Netland's representation of Buddhist ethics fails for two reasons: first, by treating one individual author, Masao Abe, as

representing the entirety of “traditional Buddhist ontology”; second, despite being in the section on Buddhist history, it fails to historically contextualize Abe’s philosophic location. Abe is heir to the Kyoto school, which is in turn heir to the strain of German idealism and Romanticism that promotes an absolutization of the self that transcends social values.¹⁸ What Yandell and Netland are objecting to, therefore, is not “traditional Buddhist ontology” but rather a re-representation of nineteenth century European Romanticism.

SOURCES AND ASSUMPTIONS

One of the distortions that the doctrine section of the work creates is by its selective attention only to the teachings of Indian Buddhism. The authors explain this by saying,

The Buddhist tradition is rich and complex.... The criterion for what within the teachings of these schools gets our attention is simply its relevance to the proposed Buddhist diagnosis of our fundamental religious disease and its cure.¹⁹

While this sounds reasonable enough, and is a positive step in that it makes the authors’ criterion explicit, it does not in fact warrant the almost exclusive attention to Indian Buddhist thought. Of greater concern, however, is that the selection of doctrinal positions they attend to is dependent on their own conception of the Buddhist view (see § Deferral of Authority, below). While the construction of a representation is necessarily based on an author’s conception of the subject being represented, the way in which Yandell and Netland formulate the Buddhist view is highly problematic and even idiosyncratic. One of the aspects of Yandell and Netland’s work that marks it as part of the “modernist” theology of religions, as opposed to the “postmodernist” comparative theology, is their treatment of Buddhism and Christianity as “cohesive wholes.”²⁰ Their formulation of Buddhist thought as a “cohesive whole” implicitly depends on taking the doctrine of momentariness, a technical *abhīdharma* doctrine, as foundational for all Buddhist thought. According to Alexander von Rospatt, the “fundamental proposition” of momentariness

is that all phenomena—more precisely, all conditioned entities (*saṃskṛta*, *saṃskāra*), that is, everything but those special entities which have not been caused (hence their designation as *asaṃskṛta*, “unconditioned”), but which have always existed in the past and which always will exist in the future—pass out of existence as soon as

they have originated and in this sense are momentary. As an entity vanishes, it gives rise to a new entity of the same (or almost the same) nature which originates immediately afterward. Thus there is an uninterrupted flow of causally connected momentary entities of the same nature, the so-called *santāna*. Because these entities succeed upon each other so fast that this process cannot be discerned by means of ordinary perception, and because earlier and later entities within one *santāna* are (almost) exactly alike, we come to conceive of something as a temporally extended entity even though it is in truth nothing but a series of causally connected momentary entities. According to this doctrine, the world (including the sentient beings inhabiting it) is at every moment completely distinct from the world in the previous or next moment. It is, however, linked to the past and future by the law of causality, insofar as a phenomenon usually engenders a phenomenon of its kind when it perishes, so that the world originating in the next moment reflects the world in the preceding moment.²¹

Though Yandell and Netland do not discuss the details of the doctrine of momentariness as such, they do consistently presume that this complex of ideas is foundational for Buddhist thought. However, it is neither universally accepted by Buddhists, nor even philosophically central to Buddhist ontology, including Buddhist conceptions of the person.

What is critical for the project of comparative philosophy at the heart of Yandell and Netland's exclusivist theology of religions is the "cohesive whole" that they hypostatize, and the presumption that it is determinative for Buddhism, not just as a system of thought but also as a lived religion. This has two parts. First, that the portrayal of Buddhism that they construct for presentation to their readers be accurate. Second, that thought be determinative of action, an assumption that, although highly prevalent among intellectuals, is an analytic artifact, not phenomenologically justified. There is a difference between the coherence of an ideological system together with its expression in practice, and a logically and philosophically consistent system of thought. As von Rospatt has put it, "Canonical Buddhism is not a systematic philosophy aiming at maximal coherency."²² The presumption that all religions must be founded on a systematic philosophy that can be justified is one of the distorting presumptions of the projects of comparative philosophy and comparative religion (as distinct from the use of a comparative method). As summarized by Victoria Urubshurow,

Paul Mus argues to much the same effect in his study of Barabudur, the Buddhist monument in Java:

Mus states that one must make a “simple but radical change in point of view” when studying the history of Buddhism. In his opinion, scholars who see a “problem” posed by Buddha Śākyamuni’s answer to metaphysical questions create their own difficulties by trying to solve it philosophically. Their impasse stems from a wish to “construct for themselves an intelligible picture of Buddhist thought before having posed the conditions of its intelligibility.”²³

Mutatis mutandis, the same can be said for theological attempts at solution. This points to a problem pervading the comparative projects of philosophy, religion, and theology generally, as well as Yandell and Netland’s in particular. Frequently, without first “having posed the conditions of [Buddhism’s] intelligibility,” authors treat the categories, positions, and issues of their own primary discipline as unproblematically universal. Whether it is a category such as eschatology, a position such as idealism, or an issue such as the role of reason in belief, these exist within the conceptual framework created over the course of the history of the Western intellectual tradition, and as such entail certain additional commitments. Since the conceptual frameworks within which the various forms of Buddhism operate are in fact radically different, inadequately nuanced use of the categories, positions, and issues of the Western philosophical and Christian theological traditions will necessarily distort an understanding of Buddhist thought and practice.

THE DOCTRINAL TURN

Following the historical survey constituting the first half of the book, the authors turn to a consideration of Buddhist thought. Interestingly they adopt the quasi-medical analytic system found in the four noble truths as a basis for comparing the fundamental structures of Christianity and Buddhism. As it sets the basis for the rest of the analyses that follow, we should consider the paragraph in which they set up the contrast in full.

If we compare Christianity and Buddhism, for example, we see that quite different diagnoses and cures are offered by the two religions. In Christianity, the “illness” is sin; the causal conditions involve our misuse of the gift of freedom in an effort to become free from God; the disease is curable; and the cure requires God’s gracious, redemptive

action in Jesus Christ—his life, death for our sins, and resurrection—and our repentance and trust in God. In Buddhism, by contrast, the “disease” is the unsatisfactory nature of existing transitorily and dependently; the cause is that we mistakenly suppose ourselves to be persons who endure through time; the disease is curable; and the cure requires the occurrence of an esoteric, profound experience in which calm lack of attachment is accompanied by deep acceptance of a Buddhist account of how things really are. Clearly, the diagnoses and cures in the two religions are different.²⁴

The description of Christianity is not one that I am competent to comment on, but I believe it safe to assume that it represents one particular theology within a range of different understandings of the Christian life. The same can, of course, be said of the description of Buddhism, that it is one particular view of the teachings. With that qualification, let us consider the description of Buddhism in detail, phrase by phrase.

In Buddhism, by contrast, the “disease” is the unsatisfactory nature of existing transitorily and dependently,

This does seem to capture something of the quality of the first of the four noble truths, that our lives are characterized by suffering or more generally, dissatisfaction (*dukkha*, i.e., the perception that things don’t work right, also sometimes rendered “stress”). At the same time, however, it manages to also conflate the cause—existing transitorily and dependently—into that initial expression as well. In doing so Yandell and Netland make the “presenting symptom” as understood in Buddhism less obvious than simply “life is frustrating, dissatisfying, and involves suffering.” The validity of that phenomenological description of human life may be more easily recognized when not conflated with ontological claims regarding impermanence.

the cause is that we mistakenly suppose ourselves to be persons who endure through time;

This next phrase further distorts the authors’ diagnostic–prescriptive summary away from that of the four noble truths. It is not “that we mistakenly suppose ourselves to be persons who endure through time.” The second noble truth is simply that the frustration, dissatisfaction, and suffering that we experience has a cause. In suttas considered early, the Buddha gives two causes for these characteristics of human existence: obsessive desire (*trṣṇā*) and *ātman*. While obsessive desire is easily recognized as a source of suffering, it is also obviously

true on the personal, phenomenological level that we are persons who endure over time. In order to understand Buddhism, therefore, it is necessary to investigate the nature of the *ātman* that Buddhism is denying with careful attention to the original context, rather than simply assuming that we today use the term “self” with the same meaning that Buddhist thinkers have employed the term *ātman*.

the disease is curable

the cure requires the occurrence of an esoteric, profound experience in which calm lack of attachment is accompanied by deep acceptance of a Buddhist account of how things really are

This last description diverges from the four noble truths, which ends with the eightfold path as the prescription. The authors’ summary, however, reveals how they understand awakening. Fitting into the commonly shared presumptions regarding religion that date from Schleiermacher (1768–1834), they present awakening as a kind of experience, one that leads to “calm lack of attachment” and “deep acceptance of a Buddhist account of how things really are.” However, the presumption that awakening is some kind of mystical, or “esoteric” and transformative experience is part of the Romantic understanding that is pervasive in contemporary discourse on Buddhism, both popular and academic. This again follows from the uncritical acceptance of the Romantic conceptions of the nature of religion deriving from Schleiermacher, through Rudolf Otto, to the Kyoto school, and to both D.T. Suzuki and Masao Abe. The latter have created a “pizza effect,” in which the Romantic conception of religion as fundamentally experiential in nature now comes back to the West as if it were Buddhist. Further, the structure of Buddhist thought is not such that belief per se has any has the same kind of salvific import as is found in much of Christian thought. It is not necessary to “accept a Buddhist account,” since the Buddhist account is not something to be believed. It is instead intended as a description of the way things actually are—the recognition of its truth is not dependent upon believing it.²⁵ This description of Buddhism offered by Yandell and Netland depends upon the fallacy of the primacy of thought over action, that is, the mistake that there is a singular causal connection running from thought (belief, or “deep acceptance” in this case) to action.

This review of their introductory summary gives some idea of the difficulties the authors have grappling with Buddhist thought within

the frameworks provided by Christian theology and Western philosophy, even when these intellectual projects are themselves framed in comparative contexts. The work has several problematic aspects, of which we are only able here to mention several briefly, and explore only a few in some depth.

HISTORY, TELOS, AND MEANING

The authors, discussing contrasting images of time and history, claim that for Christianity “since there is a singularity to history—individual lives and events are not repeated endlessly—history has significance.”²⁶ This is contrasted with the supposed Buddhist view that there “is no beginning point, no purpose or direction to history, and no culmination to the historical process.”²⁷ What is of import is the metaphysical linkage being made between there being a beginning and end to history and the sense that history has a meaning—and additionally, the implication that the meaning of human life is dependent upon something external to the individual, that their existence is made meaningful by the meaningful character of history. In other words, axiology is seen as depending on cosmology.

Such a view of history is, both in origin and significance, fundamentally a theological view, and one that can only be accepted as a matter of faith.²⁸ Especially in light of the events of the first half of the twentieth century, such as the two world wars and the Holocaust, as well as the lack of significance in natural disasters, neither the providential nor the progressive view of history is self-evident.²⁹ Such views of history take on a particular religious significance when the idea that history has meaning is linked to the idea that the meaning of each individual’s life is dependent on the meaning of history. It is, further, mistaken to say that any other view is nihilistic—the critique Yandell and Netland level against Buddhism without any actual inquiry into the variety of Buddhist cosmologies and their significance for the individual.

“NATURE” ≠ “ESSENCE”

There are a few spots at which the lack of thorough proofreading of the work is glaring. An example from the section on “Impermanence, No-Self, and Dependent Origination”: “But the Buddhist tradition typically denies that anything denies that any composite has a nature.”³⁰ More important than the simple incoherence of the sentence as it

appears in the work is the apparently intended assertion that Buddhism denies that any composite entity has a “nature.” As it stands, however, this claim is false. It is, for example, the nature of all composite entities to lack any permanent, eternal, absolute, or unchanging essence. More specifically, there is extensive discussion within Buddhist thought regarding the number, kinds, and nature of characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*). It is only possibly true if the authors had intended to use “nature” (the quality or characteristic of something) and “essence” (the defining characteristic that exists in addition to the components that constitute something) synonymously, which—without explicating the synonymy—is philosophically misleading.³¹

CONSTRUCTS

Similarly imprecise is the discussion of the notion of constructs, introduced as one of the “Buddhist strategies for dealing with the idea that there is any such thing as an enduring soul, mind, self, or person.”³² Initially, I assumed that by constructs, the authors meant *skandhas*. However, they define constructs as “concepts that do not fit anything that actually exists; what actually exists is very different from what the constructs represent as existing.”³³ In this psychological or conceptual usage, they would seem to mean *prapañca*,³⁴ which would make some sense—though as they are using it, it only addresses the relation between concepts and their referents and does not go to the more crucial issue that they are supposedly addressing, the emptiness of all existing entities. “One common Buddhist strategy is to treat the concept of the soul, mind, self, or person as only a construct.” Although this statement may just reflect hasty writing, it is less than merely rhetorical to ask, What else could a concept be other than a construct? They further confuse the issue by then linking “constructs” with the simultaneously philosophically and emotionally loaded term, “deconstruct.” “This is a typical Buddhist move, used not only to deconstruct the notion of a soul but also to analyze away physical objects.”³⁵

The authors’ confusing use of nature and essence as synonyms reappears in their discussion of “constructs.” In their discussion of Madhyamaka, for example:

According to this version of Buddhism, then (i) nothing has an essence or nature; (ii) anything that lacks a nature is only a construction; and thus (iii) everything is a construction. As other varieties of Buddhism pointed out, however, this cannot be right. For constructions require

a constructor. The world cannot be constructions “all the way down.” As an account of what there really is, this view is obviously³⁶ mistaken. A necessary condition of there being any constructions is that something that is not a construction construct them. After all, anything that is a construction does not actually exist; it is only thought to exist. But nothing that is only thought to exist can do anything. So nothing that is only thought to exist can construct anything. Without belaboring the point any further, the incoherence of this view was recognized within the Buddhist tradition by other versions of Buddhism which flatly rejected it—it is not even logically possible that the view be true.³⁷

At this point, Yandell and Netland seem to have inadvertently stumbled into a fallacy of equivocation. There are two (quite ordinary and acceptable) usages for the term “construct.” One is the usage Yandell and Netland employ, that is, “mental construct,” or what we might more simply call a concept, and they only consider this meaning in their discussions of Buddhist discourse that employs this term. It is indeed the case, for example, that constructs (meaning “mental constructs,” i.e., concepts) have different characteristics from percepts and from objects perceived. This usage can be described as a psychological one.

In most English language Buddhist discourse, however, construct is used ontologically, that is as a way of talking about how things exist, rather than the psychological usage, that is, as a way of talking about the contents of conscious thought. An ontological usage is inclusive of a psychological one, and thus what is said about constructs ontologically also applies to mental constructs as well.³⁸ The ontological usage of “construct” in English language Buddhist discourse signifies the claim that everything that exists exists as a consequence of causes and conditions. A lack of attention to the specific original concept being identified (*skandhas?*, *prapañca?*, *pratītyasamutpāda?*), facilitated by the comparative projects and by the veil of secondary sources and apoloia, all apparently contribute to Yandell and Netland having committed a fallacy of equivocation—while their critique is applied to mental constructs, and they define that as the only meaning of the term “construct,” they fallaciously contend that their critique applies equally to the ontological usage as found in present day English language Buddhist discourse.³⁹

Not only does Yandell and Netland’s idiosyncratic rendering of constructs as “merely conceptual” fail to accurately reflect the Buddhist analysis, but it also obscures the significance of the tendency

to misunderstand mental constructs as indicating some kind of permanent essence—for it is that tendency that Buddhism identifies as the human predicament, the ground of the path of practice. The point from the perspective of Buddhist thought as I understand it is not that constructs as such are merely conceptual. Rather, the problem lies with our interaction with ontic constructs in such a way that we think of them as being monolithic wholes that manifest or possess some permanent essence. This way of thinking about constructs is merely conceptual, that is, the concept of existing entities (ontic constructs) as either permanent, eternal, absolute, or unchanging, or as manifesting or possessing an essence that has those characteristics, is itself a mental construct added to actually existing constructs by human attribution. We think of it as “a house” and then construct the category of “house” as something eternal, absolute, permanent, or unchanging—an essence—of which this particular one is an instance or a manifestation. It is this specific conceptualization of ontic constructs as having characteristics that no actually existing entity can have—such as permanence—that is the religious problem according to the Buddhist analysis. Ruth Sonam has expressed this very clearly and cogently.

Statements, made by the Buddha and frequently repeated by the great Buddhist masters, that things are “like dreams and illusions” are often misinterpreted and taken to mean that things do not exist. Mādhyamika philosophy demonstrates through the use of reasoning that though things do not exist independently and concretely as they seem to do, they nevertheless exist: their mode of existence is a dependent one.⁴⁰

Mādhyamikas, therefore, have no quibble over whether things exist. They do, however, reject that any existing thing is absolute, permanent, eternal, or unchanging, or possesses or manifests an essence that has those characteristics.

TWO TRUTHS, OR THEREABOUTS

The authors then address the “doctrine of two truths.”⁴¹ I want to give an extended treatment to their critique for two reasons. First, since this is one of the notions that makes Buddhist thought radically divergent from the system of thought that is not only found in the Western tradition, but which is also shared by the majority of Indian philosophic traditions. Second, the authors do reflect the way in which Buddhist teachings on the subject are widely misrepresented in both

popular and academic discussions. The reason for the latter is also important, as it evidences one of the problematic dynamics of comparative philosophy of religion.

Yandell and Netland's treatment, were it to actually address the two truths, would be devastating. And, unfortunately, what they critique is the interpretation of the two truths that one finds throughout the popular literature on Buddhism. Indicative of this misinterpretation is the heading under which this treatment appears: "Appearances and Reality." This is, of course, an old trope for Western philosophy, going back to the Greek philosophers and reworked repeatedly since. The issue for Buddhist thought, however, is not the relation between appearance and reality, but rather the relation between conditioned co-production (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which can also be referred to as the relation between existence and impermanence.

One problem fundamental to the common representation of the two truths is the almost now normative rendering of *satya* as "truth."⁴² In the range of contemporary philosophic discourse "truth" is easily converted to "truth claim" without specifying that a reinterpretation has been made. A more adequately philosophically nuanced rendering for *satya* would be an expression such as "actually existing." The critique made by Yandell and Netland has to do with "truth claims" rather than with "truth" as "actually existing." It is indeed the case truth claims are either true or false:

Although often called the "doctrine of two truths," this is a misleading way of putting things. The tradition makes a distinction between "conventional truth" and "ultimate truth." A proposition is true if and only if things are the way it says they are. Such a proposition is an ultimate truth. A proposition is conventionally "true" if and only if it says how things seem to someone but is not true about the way things actually are. Thus, in plain English, conventional "truths" are false. The locution "ultimate truth" is redundant and "conventional truth" is an oxymoron.⁴³

Though this is a wonderfully succinct—and breathtakingly condescending—version of an interpretation of the two truths frequently encountered in both popular representations and in some academic critiques, it is simply wrong. By presuming without any critical reflection that the issue being discussed in Madhyamaka thought is satisfactorily expressed in terms of a highly familiar Western philosophic issue, Yandell and Netland are in fact no longer actually discussing Buddhist

thought at all. Unfortunately for the critique—as well as for most presentations of it—it is a strawman. Or rather, we might say that it is Plato in Buddhist robes. Under the “appearance and reality” rubric of Western philosophy which is uncritically ready at hand, the two truths are converted to a hierarchy of truth claims—a claim that is merely true conventionally versus a higher truth, that which is ultimately true. This is of course, an old sophomoric philosophic game, encountered for example in almost every discussion of “modern” physics: the table you experience isn’t really real, it is really just a buzzing mass of energy....

The term *satya* (as in *paramārthasatya* and *samvṛtisatya*, the names of the two truths in Sanskrit) is being poorly, although with long tradition, glossed by Yandell and Netland as “truth.” Its root, √sat, means being, existence.⁴⁴ Thus, the two “truths” identify two different aspects of the way in which an entity exists. The two truths are not two separate truths, much less a hierarchy of truth claims. Rather, they are two ways of expressing the same truth about existing entities. For these reasons, Yandell and Netland’s representation of the two truths, despite what might be called its “high familiarity factor” (that is, it seems right because it is familiar) is, in fact, mistaken and misleading. It is mistaken because the relation between the two terms employed is between terms identifying two different aspects of the existence of entities—not appearance and reality. It is misleading in that discussing the two truths in terms of appearance and reality leads to an interpretation that is based on the discourse of Western philosophy and not that of Buddhist thought itself.

Rather than being either a metaphysical or epistemological hierarchy, the two truths are two ways of expressing the same idea, differing in emphasis. As Jay Garfield has expressed it, emptiness is “merely a characteristic of conventional reality. And this...is what provides the key to understanding the deep unity between the two truths.”⁴⁵ This is neither some “mystical” teaching that attempts to transcend, nor is it a failure to understand the logical principle of the excluded middle—other interpretations by which the two truths have been forced into the categories of Western comparative philosophical discourse in order to implicate respectively either the superiority of the Romantic rejection of Aristotelian logic or the superiority of Western philosophy over Buddhist thought.

NECESSARY TRUTH—REALLY?

Yandell and Netland use the phrase “necessary truth” in their rejections of Buddhist philosophic positions. For example, “Now the Buddhist assumption that anything that exists dependently must be impermanent, existing only for a while and then going out of existence, is not a necessary truth.”⁴⁶ They then go on to explain that

For example, if an omnipotent God wished to create something—say, an angel—that always existed dependently only on God, and on nothing else, God could do this. Noting this is true does not assume that God does exist, or that God does not exist. The point here is simply that it is not logically impossible that God exist, and if God does exist, this is something that God, as omnipotent could do. So there is no logically necessary connection between dependence and impermanence.⁴⁷

Contingent statements are those that are either true or false by reference to the human world of lived experience. Necessary truths are those which are logically valid without reference to any experience; they are true by definition or by following logically from true premises.⁴⁸ We cannot here address the problematic issue of whether the distinction between contingent and necessary is universal or not.⁴⁹ However, we can point out that in the context of Western philosophic discourse there is a sharp distinction between the truth value of a contingent statement and the “truth” of a “not logically inconsistent” claim, that is, claims of necessity may follow validly (be “not inconsistent”), but do not on that basis alone have a truth value, i.e., they are neither true nor false. This distinguishes logically necessary truths, i.e., truth claims, from a claim such as “this table is made of Formica,” which is in fact either true or false depending on what the table is made of. Yandell and Netland’s use of the term “necessary truths”—as in the quote above—refers only to claims that are not logically inconsistent, and *only* to the extent that they are not logically inconsistent. That is, in Yandell and Netland’s analysis, it is not logically inconsistent for something to be both dependent and permanent, and therefore the Buddhist claim that anything dependent is (necessarily) impermanent, is not a necessary truth.

However, as usually understood in the Western philosophic discourse necessary truths are analytic; that is, they derive from the meaning of the concepts employed. Thus, being unmarried follows analytically (i.e., as a necessary truth) from the meaning of the concept

“bachelor.” The meaning of “bachelor” is synonymous with “unmarried male” and thus although it necessarily follows that if Albert is a bachelor then Albert is unmarried, such a conclusion in fact tells us nothing new about Albert. Thus, the relation between existing dependently and existing impermanently depends upon how the two concepts are defined. Clearly, Yandell and Netland choose to define them as two separate characteristics, that is as different from one another, and construct an argument that the one does not necessarily follow logically from the other. However, in Buddhist discourse, the two are generally understood to be synonymous with one another. Unfortunately for Yandell and Netland, the “not inconsistent” status of their understandings of impermanent and dependent (i.e., that something can be both permanent and dependent) does not establish that their understandings are the (only) correct ones, merely that they constitute a set of logically “not inconsistent” claims based upon one specific way of defining the terms. By imposing a different set of meanings on impermanent and dependent from those employed in Buddhist thought, their argument fails. One may suggest that their argument here is another instance of the fallacy of equivocation—they have changed the meanings of the terms under discussion such that they are no longer addressing the real issue.

“ENDURING” ≠ “PERMANENT”

Part of the difficulty with the authors’ treatment is that, as with their conflation of nature and essence, they conflate enduring (existing over some period of time) with permanent (existing without change, and without beginning or end) in their claims that Buddhism rejects the idea of an enduring self. This is where their unacknowledged presumption that momentariness is definitive for Buddhist thought comes into play—were momentariness accepted by Buddhist thinkers generally, then indeed there would be nothing that endures. However, constructed entities—whether houses or selves—do endure over time. This is why the authors’ critique of Buddhist thought as not accepting enduring entities is again both mistaken and misleading.

When these two categories—enduring and permanent—are distinguished from one another, and Buddhist teachings are placed in their appropriate social, historical, and intellectual context—rather than presuming the universality of Western philosophic discourse—significant errors in interpretation such as those of Yandell and Netland

can be avoided. For example, discussing the teaching of *anātman*, Asaf Federman notes that “Buddhism rejects a kind of self (*ātman*) which is eternal, blissful, and identical with the creative force of the universe (Brahman). It identifies the attachment to such a self as a source of misery, and thus provides logical considerations (philosophy) and practical exercises (meditation, morality) as antidotes.”⁵⁰ In other words, it is the understanding of the self being promulgated by other religio-yogic traditions over the course of Buddhist history in India that is being rejected. Extending that rejection to contemporary understandings of the self requires careful application of the logic of *anātman* nuanced to other understandings of the use of the term “self.”⁵¹ In this particular case, distinguishing between a permanent or eternal self and an enduring self would avoid much of the tortured logic that Yandell and Netland produce. The following paragraph demonstrates the results of conflating permanent or eternal (which in the context of Buddhist thought I understand to be synonymous) with enduring. It is quoted at length because the logic of the argument involves an *argumentum ad absurdum* that itself requires careful attention in order to apprehend the authors’ argument.

There is, from a Buddhist perspective, great danger in believing that one is a permanent, or at least enduring, being. According to Buddhism, such belief is false and must be abandoned in order for enlightenment to be attained. If we take ourselves to be selves or souls, permanent or enduring, then whatever must exist in order for us to possess that belief must exist. It is thus crucial for the Buddhist tradition that *there being an enduring conscious mind* is not a necessary condition of *there being the belief that there is an enduring conscious mind*. Suppose that what must exist in order for us to possess that belief is that we must be enduring conscious beings. Then any view that admits that we have this belief, but denies that it is true, must be false. In that case, one who wishes to accept the standard “no self” view must hold that the very conditions that standard Buddhism diagnoses describe as creating the disease that Buddhism addresses must exist in order for one to have diagnosed the disease. But the condition is a disease only if the view that there are enduring minds is false. Then a condition of having the diagnosed disease is that it not be a disease after all. So, for most Buddhist traditions, the supposition must be false—it must not be the case that there being beliefs requires enduring believers.⁵²

First, in order to clarify the argument of the paragraph, which being highly convoluted seems opaque and may tend to lead the uncareful reader to simply accept the conclusion and move on, the *argumentum ad absurdum* is approximately:

1. The standard Buddhist view of no self holds that there is no enduring self.
 2. To accept that view is to accept that there is an enduring self: either the enduring self who accepts that view, or the enduring self that is to be denied.
- ∴ The Buddhist view is self-contradictory.
- ∴ There is an enduring self.

Looking at the rewritten version of the argument, there are three problems with the premises. First, the “standard Buddhist view of no self” does not assert that there is no enduring self, but rather that there is no permanent self, and the difference between enduring and permanent is significant. Second, it is quite possible to hold mistaken views, including about oneself. Third, the negation of something does not necessarily imply its existence. (The two alternatives in premise 2 are required due to the ambiguity of the original argument.)

Since it may be argued that the rewritten version is not a perfectly accurate representation of the original, let us then turn to the problematics of the paragraph as cited. There are two items in this paragraph that deserve particular attention: the failure to discriminate between permanent and enduring, and the implication that belief produces awakening. At the opening, the authors assert that in the Buddhist view there is “great danger in believing that one is a permanent, or at least enduring, being.” As suggested above, the conflation of permanent and enduring is only possible by taking momentariness as basic to all Buddhist thought, that is, according to the teaching of momentariness, there is no difference between permanent and enduring, as all existing entities are described as only existing momentarily. Rather than being foundational for all Buddhist thought, however, momentariness is speculative and is not as widely accepted as the authors presume. While the opening of the paragraph apparently distinguishes the two, they immediately drop the qualification and only talk about “enduring.” Taking momentariness as the common basis of Buddhist thought, they treat permanent and enduring as synonyms. Conversely, the presumption that momentariness is the common basis of Buddhist

thought allows them to avoid actually addressing any of the arguments given by those who assert momentariness in support of the appearance of continuity in a causally linked sequence of moments, which for the most part they were pressed to make by other Buddhists.

That Buddhist thought does generally distinguish between a permanent self and an enduring self, rejecting the former and debating the nature of the latter, is evident by the many ways in which Buddhist thinkers have presented conscious awareness as enduring over time. Two examples are the stream of consciousness, *santāna*, and the underlying ground of awareness, *ālayavijñāna*. That believer and belief both exist, and exist in relation to one another, hardly seems problematic for Buddhist thought (specifically, *Yogācāra*). This would be expressed in Sanskrit terminology as the relation between the grasper (*grāhaka*) and the grasped (*grāhya*), or to employ a more scholarly Latin terminology, the apprehender and the apprehended. Such a believer, for example, a person who believes the self is permanent, exists (only) as long, i.e., endures, as they hold that belief. When they stop believing that, then they are no longer that kind of believer. They may have come to believe something else, and thus become a different kind of believer. It would, however, be an instance of a category mistake to take the two different kinds of enduring believer as indicating the metaphysical existence of a permanent believer.

This distinction between a permanent and an enduring self may seem like a purely ontological, and therefore perhaps insignificant, matter. Its relevance to Yandell and Netland's overall project becomes evident in the authors' final chapter, "The Dharma or the Gospel?" In the course of their contrasting Buddhism with Christianity, among several other items they address Buddhist ethics. They first make the false claim that Buddhism is deterministic. "Buddhism accepts the doctrine of dependent co-arising which says that every event is caused by events that precede it as well as depending on events that occur at the same time as it does, and it is difficult to see how this allows for individual freedom and responsibility."⁵³ This reads onto Buddhist thought an interpretation of causality that arose in European thought in light of the work of Laplace (1749–1847), who hypothesized a purely mechanical, and therefore fully determined universe. The issue of the nature of the self enters their comparison in the following claim, that "Buddhism denies that there are any enduring agents to have freedom."⁵⁴ At this

point it should be clear to the reader that the claim is false, conflating as it does permanent with enduring.

NOT YOUR DADDY'S MADHYAMAKA!

Some of the argumentation appears to be philosophically and scientifically naïve. An example is a rebuttal offered to what the authors refer to as the reductionist interpretation of Madhyamaka, specifically the analysis of a person into component *skandhas* (which is both misspelled as “skhandas” and misdefined as momentary states). The rebuttal is performed in two parts. In the first, a collection of material objects (in their example, six pens) is distinguished from a living organism. They claim that the characteristic of living, which distinguishes a living organism from a “mere” collection, is really something new and different from the collection of components per se. Unlike adding a seventh pen, “if a living thing—a thing that has the property of life—comes from putting non-living things together, then that new thing has a property that is not merely additive.”⁵⁵ This sounds as if they are hypostatizing “life” as something more than an emergent property resulting from the items of a collection working together in some fashion.⁵⁶ The second step of the refutation is to claim that living organisms are able to do things that mere collections cannot. As they put it, for a living organism, its “acting potential and its receptive potential are radically different from the acting-potential and the receptive-potential of its components.”⁵⁷

The refutation is only effective if one accepts a simplistic dichotomy between collections of material objects and living organisms, and ignore the many marginal examples lying between the two—there being important borderline cases, such as viruses,⁵⁸ which make the situation look much more like a continuum than the sharp dichotomy Yandell and Netland seem to assume. Similarly, emergent properties do not require the hypostatization of additional characteristics. For example, while neither hydrogen nor oxygen will quench one’s thirst, water can. While neither hydrogen nor oxygen are “thirst quenching,” that does not make “thirst quenching” some mysterious new property added on to the mere combination of the two.

There are many additional issues that could be addressed; however, this review is not the appropriate venue to go into each of these. Four more general issues do deserve comment, however. These are the deferral of authority, the selectivity of the authors’ representation

(including a woefully inadequate consideration of Yogācāra), the presumption of comparability, and the use of generalities.

DEFERRAL OF AUTHORITY

Beyond the factual and interpretive errors, and the distortions imposed by the framework of an exclusivist theology of religions, however, there are some serious problems with the representation of Buddhism provided. At the most basic level, they engage in a deferral of authorship. They never, that I recall, admit that it is their image of Buddhist thought that is being presented, referring rather to such things as “typical Buddhism.” Additionally, throughout their treatment appears to be almost entirely dependent on secondary (or even what might be considered tertiary) sources. Working at this level involves the interpretive construction of a representation that is in turn based on interpretive representations. Since there is no foundation that is not itself an interpretive representation, the representation constructed needs to be claimed as an author’s own, rather than cloaked in the pseudo-authority of phrases such as “traditional Buddhism.”

SELECTIVITY OF REPRESENTATION

Perhaps equally distorting is the fact that their doctrinal section only addresses Indian Buddhist thought and rather limited portions of that as well. No doubt they had good reason to not attempt to undertake a comprehensive treatment, as that would have led to such complex issues as the self-empty/other-empty debate in Tibet, the sudden/gradual debate in East Asia, the development of tantric Buddhism, the linkage of *tathāgatagarbha* and *ālayavijñāna* in *The Awakening of Faith* and its influence on the development of East Asian Buddhist conceptions of buddha-nature, and so on.

However, even within the range of Buddhist thought to which they limit themselves, the lack of adequate attention paid to Yogācāra (Pudgalavāda gets more adequate treatment) obviates any claim that the Buddhism they have addressed is “typical Buddhism.” Even the criterion of selection that they put forward to justify their treatment of doctrinal points (“relevance to the proposed Buddhist diagnosis of our fundamental religious disease and its proposed cure”⁵⁹) does not justify reducing Yogācāra to one of two versions of “Buddhist reductionism” and describing it solely as holding the view “that there are only conscious states (unowned mental states).”⁶⁰ This caricature excludes any

of the Yogācāra discussions of many of the same issues that Yandell and Netland themselves find problematic, such as continuity of identity over time.⁶¹

THE PRESUMPTION OF COMPARABILITY

Like almost all comparative studies this work suffers because of the presumption that the two terms of the comparison are instances of the same general category, and are therefore comparable. This is now a very long-standing problem in the comparative study of religions, dating to the nineteenth century when the modern category of “religion” was created. It is in fact problematic whether the category of religion applies to Buddhism in such a fashion as to allow for direct comparison. In contrast to this presumption of comparability, the relation between Buddhism and Christianity is better understood as one of “complementary incommensurability,” in the phrase of my friend and colleague, Peter Yuichi Clark.

GENERALITIES

It is probably the case that the audience that Yandell and Netland intend to address is one for whom the generalities—Christianity and Buddhism—are operative. It may, therefore, seem inappropriate to point out the vast variety of actual forms grouped together under these general categories. (Indeed, it might be dismissed as merely knee-jerk postmodernism.)

There are, however, two consequences that follow from Yandell and Netland’s use of generalities. The first is that it creates a situation in which the two terms of the comparison are incommensurate—as Daijaku Kinst, another friend and colleague, recently said, not just apples and oranges, but rather apples and boats. Second, the incommensurability is, however, cloaked beneath the wide and uncritical use of the generalities. This is a problem that unfortunately continues in the various comparative projects, that is, comparative religions, comparative philosophy, and comparative psychology.

CONCLUSION

Almost two decades ago now, while discussing the project of comparative philosophy, D. Seyfort Ruegg noted that

comparison of the type “Buddhism and X” or “Nagarjuna and Y” can only take us just so far. More often than not, it has proved to be of rather restricted heuristic value, and methodologically it often turns out to be more problematical and constraining than illuminating. In the frame of synchronic description this kind of comparison tends to veil or obliterate important structures in thought, whilst from the viewpoint of historical diachrony it takes little account of genesis and context. For however much a philosophical insight or truth transcends, *in se*, any particular epoch or place, in its expression a philosophy is perforce conditioned historically and culturally.⁶²

In the case of Yandell and Netland’s *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal*, however, we find the intellectual problems created by employing a dehistoricized and decontextualized construction of Buddhism compounded by the polemic intent of proving Buddhism inferior to Christianity.

NOTES

1. <https://www.ivpress.com/cgi-ivpress/book.pl/code=3855>, accessed April 3, 2014.

2. Much the same threads are found in the introduction to the issue of the *Areopagus Journal: The Journal of the Apologetics Resource Center*, which includes an essay on Buddhism by Keith Yandell that discusses some of the same themes found in the book under consideration here. The introduction, “Veritas: Eastern Religions” by the journal’s senior editor Craig Branch, explains the thinking behind devoting an issue of the journal to this topic. The first subheading, titled “Why We Should Care about the Eastern Turn,” opens with the following: “There are several reasons why the Body of Christ needs to become acquainted with these religions. One reason is our missional calling and responsibility both at home and abroad. Another reason is that there are many contemporary off-shoots of these parent religions that are impacting Western culture and gaining followers. A third reason is the concern not only for the spiritual death of its followers, but also the growing physical harm, persecution, and murder being conducted by certain militant subgroups of Hinduism in the Far East.” (Craig Branch, “Veritas: Eastern Religions,” *Areopagus Journal: The Journal of the Apologetics Resource Center* [May–June 2009]: 3). It is noteworthy that where one might have expected the usual demonization of Islam, one finds in this case Hinduism being highlighted as the dangerous religion.

3. Resentment is used here in its Nietzschean sense of *ressentiment*, that is, the anger directed by one who, perceiving a status differential, is angry toward those they perceive to be higher than they are, even though the latter may

have no actual responsibility for the status differential.

4. This is particularly relevant as one of the two authors has published on the philosophy of religion. See Keith E. Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and idem., *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). We can trace the mistaken conception of Buddhist theories of the self found in the book under review here to the first of these two, in which the author treats *nirvana* as an experience (26–27). The second gives rather more attention to Buddhism, but commits the error common to comparative philosophy of assuming the universality of Western philosophic positions, into which Buddhism is made to fit. This is the Procrustean fallacy discussed in the conclusion.

5. Hugh Nicholson, “The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (Sept. 2009): 609–646.

6. Russell T. McCutcheon, “‘Just Follow the Money’: The Cold War, The Humanistic Study of Religion, and the Fallacy of Insufficient Cynicism,” *Culture and Religions* 5, no. 1 (2004): 41–69.

7. Nicholson, “Reunification,” 616ff.

8. John Hick, “On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims,” *Religious Studies* 19, no. 4 (Dec. 1983): 485–491. That this system is limited to Christian theology, and not itself universalizable, is evident from Hick’s discussion of the three categories as different ways of thinking about how people claim “awareness of the divine” (487).

9. Nicholson, “Reunification,” 617.

10. Hick, “On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims,” 487.

11. Hick, “On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims,” 487. Note that Nicholson goes on to propose a “new comparative theology” to supersede all three positions in the theology of religions (note 5 above).

12. One commonly found instance of the latter is the tripartite system used for example by Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhimagga*, that is, morality (*śīla*), contemplation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). This is a developmental sequence—the foundation is learning to control one’s behavior in light of understanding karma. *Śīla* is the necessary basis for engaging in and sustaining practice—of which a very wide variety are to be found across Buddhist history. That is, if one is not living a morally informed lifestyle, it is impossible to engage in such practices as meditation, contemplation, visualization, or *sādhana* on a sustained basis. It is not the case, at least in the majority of emic interpretations that I’ve myself encountered, that morality is of inherent value, that is, that moral action in isolation gives rise to awakening, but

rather that it is a requisite for a life that enables one to engage in practice. This contrasts with at least one strain of Christian soteriology in which moral behavior, in the sense of overcoming—or perhaps living in dynamic struggle with—one’s naturally sinful nature, is inherently salvific. This helps us to understand perhaps the emphasis the authors give to the ethical quandaries produced by certain “absolutist” interpretations of Zen, discussed *infra*. Similarly, contemplative skill is not itself the goal of practice. Rather, contemplative practices are (again, for the most part) intended to allow the practitioner insight into the way things actually exist (*bhūtatathatā*). All existing things exist as the result of causes and conditions (*pratīyasamutpāda*) and are therefore empty (*sūnya*) of any essence (*ātman*). This insight is wisdom (*prajñā*). Note that despite the frequent use of the modernist rhetoric of experience found in many of the popular representations of Buddhism, such insight is not a mystical, or transformative, or even dramatic experience. Rather, it is cumulative, a gradual increasing of clarity regarding the fundamentally transitory and dissatisfying character of all existing things. Even those traditions that fall on the “sudden” side of the sudden-gradual divide in Buddhist thought usually entail a great deal of preparatory practice before the sudden moment in which awakening takes place.

13. Quoting from Mark Juergensmeyer, “Thinking Globally about Religion,” in *Global Religions: An Introduction*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7; appears in Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 69.

14. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 69.

15. *Ibid.*, 102.

16. *ibid.*, 103. The parenthetical insertion of “diminishing” evidences, like the publisher’s blurb, the authors’ attitude of defending a culture under attack by more powerful forces. This theme is one that goes deep in the Christian mythos, to the very earliest days of the church when it was a threatened minority. Since the time of Constantine, however, Christianity has been the dominant worldview in the Western world, so much so that prior to the rise of nation-states, the West was referred to as Christendom.

17. <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/pat-robertson-recalls-days-when-gays-were-stoned-death-blames-satan-gay-rights>, accessed May 8, 2014.

18. It is sadly ironic that in their section on the history of Buddhism they fail to historically contextualize a Buddhist author to whom they refer.

19. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 145.

20. Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (2010): 494.

21. Alexander von Rospatt, *The Buddhist Doctrine of Momentariness: A Survey of the Origins and Early Phase of this Doctrine up to Vasubandhu* (1995; repr.,

Berkeley: Institute of Buddhist Studies and Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai America, forthcoming), 1.

22. *Ibid.*, 80.

23. Victoria Urubshurow, "Transformation of Religious Symbol in Indian Buddhism: Reflections on Method from a Reading of Mus's *Barabudur*," *Numen* 35 (1988): 261. Internal citations are to Paul Mus, *Barabudur: esquisse d'une histoire du bouddhisme fondee sur la critique archeologique des textes*, 2 vols. (1935; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1978).

24. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 106.

25. This is not to be confused with the philosophic debates over whether accepting the truth of some claim entails also believing it. Rather the issue is the distinction between the salvific role of belief in much of Christianity, and the assertions of impermanence, and so on in Buddhism. In the Buddhist view the latter are true whether one believes them or not, and failure to recognize their truth means simply that one will remain frustrated and dissatisfied. In much of Christian thought, however, proper belief (orthodoxy) is either causally productive of or a necessary condition of salvation.

26. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 196.

27. *Ibid.*

28. See Samuel Moyn, "Jewish and Christian Philosophy of History," in Aviezer Tucker, ed., *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

29. According to Peter Sloterdijk, "What was previously called philosophy of history amounted without exception to delusional systems of prematurity. They always led to hasty montages of their material onto violently drawn straight lines, as if the thinkers had been seized by an overactivity syndrome that chased them towards the wrong goals." He goes on to describe grand narratives, including the Christian, as having "been seen through as unsuitable attempts to seize power over the world's complexity." Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 4–5. This applies to the Buddhist/Hindu philosophies of history as well, so setting that up as the alternative to the Christian philosophy of history is also not sustainable. At the same time, Sloterdijk is clear that this does not mean that we should, even if we could, simply ignore history.

30. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 121.

31. Using "nature" and "essence" as synonyms leads the authors into a confused claim that "common sense belief" is a more accurate version of existence than Buddhist thought: "Another basic error of common sense belief is said to be the idea that things have natures or essences, what the

tradition often calls ‘own being.’ There are feature that a cow, for example, must have in order to be a cow. The features that are necessary and sufficient for Bessie, the cow out in the field, to be a cow constitute Bessie’s nature. So common sense holds” (Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 121). Since, as discussed here, Buddhist thought does not reject the idea of characteristics or natures (*lakṣaṇa*), the argument completely fails. To that extent, Buddhist thought and “common sense” are in agreement. Again, what Buddhist thought generally rejects is the idea of a permanent, eternal, absolute, or unchanging essence of some kind, not characteristics or natures. Here, common sense and Buddhist thought are also in agreement, since common sense cannot establish the truth of a metaphysical claim, such as the existence of “cow-essences.”

32. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 122.

33. *Ibid.*

34. See Jayarava Attwood, “Papañca 1: Translating Papañca” (posted 23 March 2012) and “Papañca 2: Understanding Papañca” (posted 30 March 2012), *Jayarava’s Raves* (blog), <http://jayarava.blogspot.com>.

35. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 122.

36. A critical reading will stumble over the rhetorical use of “obviously” in this section. Once one steps back from the Western philosophic horror of infinite regressions, it is not obvious at all. Nor is it obvious that the dichotomy of either an infinite regression or an Aristotelian unmoved mover of some kind is not a false one. In regard to the rhetorical use of “obviously,” consider the discussion of “surely,” in Daniel Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 53ff.

37. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 158–159.

38. Unfortunately some present-day writers on Buddhism continue to be influenced by an older philosophically idealist interpretation of Buddhism, thus confusing this distinction. Such interpretations are eisegetic readings onto Buddhism of pre-existing presumptions about what it means to be “spiritual,” and are particularly frequent in the self-help versions of Buddhism.

39. It would appear to reflect the uncritical appropriation of the postmodern language of constructs by some (or many) present-day Buddhist apologists, who themselves may not clearly distinguish the psychological and ontological meanings.

40. Ruth Sonam, “Introduction,” in Rgyal-tshab dar-ma-rin-chen, *Yogic Deeds of Bodhisattvas: Gyel-tsap on Āryadeva’s Four Hundred*, trans. and ed. Ruth Sonam (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1994), 7.

41. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 128ff.

42. Like all technical philosophic terms, rendering them into a foreign

language as well as the even more complicated foreign philosophic discourse, is complicated. For example, Michael Broido has noted that “The Sanskrit word *satya* has been used as an ontological category (‘reality’), as a property of statements or propositions (‘true,’ ‘truth’), and perhaps as an axiological category (‘genuine’),” and goes on to add “veridical sensory cognition.” Michael Broido, “Padma dKar-po on the Two *Satyas*,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 8, no. 2 (1985): 20–21.

43. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 128, internal citation to Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 69–72, elided.

44. *Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (2008 revision), s.v. “sat,” <http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/monier/>, accessed April 29, 2014.

45. Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 91.

46. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 127. Similarly, “The assumption that anything that exists dependently necessarily lacks a nature or essence is also not a necessary truth” (128).

47. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 127. I am tempted to offer as a general principle the assertion that any author hypostatizing an omnipotent god who is capable of doing whatever is needed in order to win the argument is cheating. Such an argument is constrained in the same way that all possible worlds arguments are, that is, they can only show what is not possible because it is contradictory.

48. I am well aware that this is a complex philosophic issue. It has been debated since Leibnitz formulated the categories. Not everyone agrees to the view presented here. For example, Kant, whose first Critique is intended to resolve the problem of synthetic a priori truths, articulated an important and highly nuanced view. Similarly Quine argued against the view presented here as well. See Mario Gómez-Torrente, “Logical Truth,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/logical-truth>. Yandell and Netland, however, employ the terminology without reference to any nuancing, and it seems, therefore, reasonable to take them as using the categories in the way that they are commonly employed in contemporary Western philosophic discourse.

49. The view on this that I have come to is that such claims are “universally applicable” while at the same time historically contingent, having been produced at some particular time and place in response to some particular problem.

50. Asaf Federman, “What Buddhism Taught Cognitive Science about Self, Mind, and Brain,” *Enrahonar: Quaderns de Filosofia* 47 (2011): 47.

51. I would argue that in fact the term “self” for *ātman* has been vastly misleading, in that it almost invariably leads English speaking readers to think only in terms of the personal, psychological self. As seen in Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamikākārikā*, the analysis extends to all essences, that is, the idea that there is something permanent, eternal, absolute, or unchanging that can be attributed to either persons or entities.

52. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 131. Emphasis in original.

53. *Ibid.*, 185.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*, 168–169.

56. Though they do not go into the matter here, one suspects that members of their presumably intended audience would understand that they are thinking of something along the lines of a soul that God adds to the collection of components comprising a human being that makes for a person.

57. *Ibid.*, 169. We note that the authors give no explanation of how they are using “acting potential” or “receptive potential.” The terms do not appear to be at all standard philosophic terms, as a search of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* revealed no entries using these terms. Conversely, *Google Books* only gave this work itself in response to a search for these terms. The terms “action potential” and “receptor potential” are used in biology to describe how the electrochemistry of sensation and action is affected at the level of transfer across membranes, such as the synapses between neurons. Unfortunately, what this might have to do with their argument escapes this reader, except perhaps as giving a patina of scientificity to their apparently vitalist ideas.

58. See, for example, Luis P. Villarreal, “Are Viruses Alive?,” *Scientific American* (Dec. 2004), available online at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/are-viruses-alive-2004>.

59. Yandell and Netland, *Buddhism*, 145.

60. *Ibid.*, 167.

61. Their focus on Madhyamaka perhaps follows from the Tibetan doxographic placement of it as the highest teaching, or from accepting the characterization of Yogācāra as psychology, and therefore of less interest to their own philosophic inquiry. In the latter case we see another of the problems endemic to the comparativist projects, that is, presuming that the disciplinary categories found in Western intellectual discourse are themselves universally appropriate—when they are not.

62. David Seyfort Ruegg, “Some Reflections on the Place of Philosophy in the Study of Buddhism,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 154–155.