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What Has Chalcedon to Do with Lhasa?

John Keenan's and Lai Pai-chiu's Reflections on Classical Christology and the Possible Shape of a Tibetan Theology of Incarnation

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The starting point of this paper is a critique of John Keenan's so-called "Mahāyāna Christology" in *The Meaning of Christ*, in light of Lai Pai-chiu's "Chinese" response to Keenan's position. My argument is that Lai correctly construes the Chalcedonian definition as a critique of Hellenist ontology, but fails to critique Keenan's crucial contention that this same definition ratifies the subjugation of lived spiritual experience to abstract philosophical speculation. I also claim that Lai does not engage Keenan's flawed use, in his constructive Christology, of the teaching of the Buddha-bodies, which in my opinion could provide an apposite template for the development of a Tibetan contextual Christology. My paper has a twofold purpose: on one hand, I sketch the contours of a possible Tibetan theology of incarnation; on the other hand, I offer a few methodological reflections on the role of classical doctrinal definitions in the development of new contextual theologies.

The burden of this paper is to offer a few suggestions toward the formulation of a culturally contextual theology of incarnation, which uses the resources of Mahāyāna speculation on the embodiment of the Buddha. My starting point is Lai's critique of Keenan's well-known 1989 volume *The Meaning of Christ*, in which Keenan sets out to critique traditional Hellenist Chalcedonian Christology and argues for an alternative articulation of the hypostatic union based on the Mahāyāna teaching of the Buddha-bodies.¹ Lai's article revisits Keenan's critique and argues that the Chalcedonian definition, far from canonizing the uncritical appropriation of a school of thought, evidences the profound limitations of philosophical discourse. Keenan's underlying contention that traditional Christology subjects the Christian message to the strictures of alien categories is thus deconstructed, although Lai goes on to offer yet one more Christological synthesis based on the Chinese understanding of Buddha nature. In my paper I concur with Lai's reading of Chalcedonian categories, which I regard

as more accurate and fruitful than Keenan's, but I also argue that Lai fails to engage the totality of Keenan's argument and therefore does not appreciate the deeper flaws in Keenan's appropriation of the Buddhakāya teaching. My constructive suggestion toward the end of this paper is that such teaching could actually provide a most useful template for the development of a "Tibetan" theology of incarnation, which would remain in continuity with the Chalcedonian tradition, and yet resort to the linguistic and philosophical categories of the local culture.

Theologians wishing to develop contextual articulations of Christian doctrine often meet considerable resistance, since their emphasis on the culturally contingent nature of traditional formulas is seen as a challenge to their continuing normative character. As early as 1969, Joseph Ratzinger's *Introduction to Christianity* expressed serious reservations about the growing tendency to "de-Hellenize" Christian theology and strongly reasserted the enduring "providential" character of traditional Trinitarian and Christological formulas.² At the same time, the development of a postcolonial Christianity in many Asian and African countries could not but call for inculturated expressions of the Christian faith that embedded the Christian message in the categories of the local culture. Theologian Stephen B. Bevans begins his work *Models of Contextual Theology* claiming that in the contemporary world, "the contextualization of [Christian] theology [. . .] is really a theological imperative."³ The understanding of theology as an objective and unchanging science of faith is thus superseded by a new approach that gives pride of place to the religious experience of the individual and the community where he or she lives, operates, and worships.⁴ Bevans's call for a contextual theology views the "experience of the present" as the ultimately normative benchmark against which the "experience of the past" is assessed, in the search for a new synthesis rooted in a particular cultural and social location.⁵

The development of new Christological formulas that use the resources of Asian Buddhist culture is thus possible only after the implications of such "turn to the subject" are fully appreciated. In a Catholic context, Avery Dulles's work *Models of Revelation* testifies to the increased acceptance of alternative methodological paradigms by mainstream speculative theologians. Dulles warns of the danger of subjectivist reductionism lurking in experiential models of revelations, but at the same time concedes that the understanding of revelation as a set of propositions that require assent is a flawed and unhelpful model.⁶ His constructive suggestion is then to envisage theology as undertaking a "symbolic" mediation between religious experience and cultural milieu, where "symbol" denotes anything that furnishes a semantic bridge between God's ineffable reality and humanity's inescapable contingency.⁷

Bevans's models of contextual theology presuppose Dulles's appreciation of the experiential dimension, but go beyond Dulles's analytical approach to offer a few programmatic considerations. For Bevans, theologians must realize the extent to which theology has *always* been contextual, as one sees already in the very text of the Hebrew scriptures, in which different, sometimes contradictory, ideas constantly vie with each other. An author of very different sensitivity and interests such as Jaroslav Pelikan unwittingly heeds Bevans's injunction when he highlights the continu-

ity between the Cappadocian fathers and the Greek philosophical tradition, thereby showing that the great Trinitarian controversies of the fourth century did not take place in a cultural vacuum.⁸ In the contemporary, postcolonial world, the task of contextually minded theologians is thus to pursue in a reflective manner the mediating task that was pursued by Christian theologians in late antiquity, engaging those cultures from Asia, Africa, or Latin America that finally have come to be seen as valuable sources of theological insight.

Almost twenty years after its publication, Keenan's critique of Chalcedonian Christology in *The Meaning of Christ* remains an important benchmark in the enterprise of contextualization. Keenan takes issue with the Chalcedonian understanding of incarnation, and toward the end of his work he sets out to sketch an elaborate alternative Mahāyāna reading. His contention is that the great Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the first centuries relegated mystical experience to the margins of theological discourse, which was then taken over by Hellenist philosophy. Keenan wishes to rescue "spirituality" from the "periphery of serious theology," and claims that a renewed centrality of mysticism necessitates a radical critique of "Greek patterns of thought."⁹ The *Meaning of Christ* maps the history of early Christian spirituality along a trajectory that goes from an initial "mysticism of light" (associated with Origen and Evagrius) to a later "mysticism of darkness" (exemplified by Gregory of Nyssa and the Pseudo-Denys). Both approaches are ultimately rooted in the Platonic teaching of the soul's natural affinity (*suggeneia*) with the divine, which the later Scholastics would term *desiderium naturale*.¹⁰ Keenan does not conceal his preference for the latter over the former, expressing appreciation for the emphasis of the mysticism of darkness on the ultimate epistemological inaccessibility of divine reality. The more cautious mysticism of Gregory of Nyssa, deeply conscious of the boundary between humanity and divinity, is seen by him as a reaction to the tendency—championed, for instance, by the Eunomians—to view the divine essence as fully accessible to human understanding.

In this perspective, the increasing deployment of philosophical terminology by the great doctrinal councils is construed as a detrimental legacy of the earlier mystics, a phenomenon that gradually turned "Christian theory" into a series of propositions demanding intellectual assent.¹¹ Here, Keenan detects a fundamental continuity with Origen's and Evagrius's emphasis on the purification of the *nous* as prerequisite for the attainment of a communion with the divine. As a result, the Nicene and the Chalcedonian statements are instances of a "confrontational pattern of knowing," where God is the *object* of the intellect and it is the intellect that sets the boundaries of mutual acquaintance. The wish to *control* the divine mystery by means of dogmatic definitions is associated with the Origenist striving for a static and unchanging condition, which is then contrasted with the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa in the *Fourth Homily on the Beatitudes*: here, the ascent toward God is an endless striving toward Christ, who, in line with the Letter to the Philippians, is forever present and forever eludes our grasp.¹² The claim in Psalm 115 that "each man is a liar" (*pas anthrōpos esti pseustēs*), which the same Gregory quotes in *De Virginitate*, is ultimately not an

injunction to mistrust human philosophy, but rather to turn to the incomprehensible depths of the divine in full awareness that one may never say anything worthy of God.¹³

On one hand, Keenan's reading of Hellenist tradition contends that the Nicene teaching of the Trinity and the Chalcedonian understanding of hypostatic union are no longer understood by contemporary Christian congregations, and as such they ought to be replaced. On the other hand, and more crucially, Keenan claims that the use of essentialist terminology borrowed from Hellenist philosophy does not even reflect the insight of the early Christian mystics, and that the notion of a divine hypostasis endowed with two natures is a speculative construct forcefully imposed upon spiritual experience. While Keenan appreciates that the use of theological definitions does not entail the claim that the human intellect is in *full* control of the divine object, as was claimed by the Eunomians, he views this resort to essentialist language in Christology as a deplorable development. The solution sketched in *The Meaning of Christ* is a revitalization of Christological reflection by means of a vigorous influx of Mahāyāna philosophy, which in Keenan's eyes has the virtue of rejecting the notion of essence (*svabhāva*) and of acknowledging that "all ontologies" are "the objectification of illusory conceptualizations."¹⁴

More specifically, Keenan turns to the thought of the Mādhyamikas, a philosophical school within Mahāyāna that emphasizes the distinction between two levels of reality, or truth: on one hand, the transcendental dimension of ultimate meaning (*paramārtha satya*), and on the other hand its manifestation in the conventional world (*samvṛtisatya*), which is identical with codependent origination (*pratītya samutpāda*).¹⁵ It is evident that it is Keenan's scepticism towards *doctrines* that makes this find this school of Mahāyāna particularly appealing. For the Mādhyamikas, as for all adherents of the "great vehicle," the Buddha's demise at the end of his life did not signify his definitive detachment from earthly cares, but his passing into a dimension of active (*apratīṣṭhita*) *nirvāṇa*, where he is forever intervening on behalf of sentient beings.¹⁶ This nirvanic dimension is in fact identical with the samsaric reality we inhabit, but the web of delusions that obfuscates our relationship with reality conceals from our eyes their ultimate identity. The Mahāyāna emphasis on the simultaneous pursuit of wisdom and compassion ensures that the doctrinal articulation of the Buddhist message is itself part of the Buddha's compassionate outreach; resorting to philosophical resources to expound a message that transcends the boundaries of conventional reality is a paradigmatic instance of skillful means (*upāyakauśalya*). Keenan values the tendency of this approach to construe doctrinal statements as *pointers* to a dimension that is eventually accessed by mystical experience. In his opinion, while "Greek" theology focuses on the content of the doctrines (*ta noēta*), Mahāyāna thought sets out to transform one's mode of awareness and retains an appropriate awareness of the limitations of linguistic formulations.

Keenan's doctrinal deconstruction inexorably follows this oppositional reading. The notions of *ousia* and *hypostasis* borrowed from Hellenist philosophy are not just incapable of conveying the mystery of the incarnation to a contemporary audience; they are *intrinsically* inadequate, since they seek to encompass the reality of Christ

within the purview of substantialist conceptuality.¹⁷ While Schleiermacher had suggested dropping any reference to divine nature, Keenan suggests dropping *any* reference to static notions of nature (human and divine). The solution is to turn to the vocabulary of conventional and ultimate reality so to articulate Christ's ontological relatedness with the Father and with each one of us. Keenan's emphasis on the notion of Christ's ultimate "emptiness" should not be read as a negation of Christ's transcendence, but as an invitation to look beyond the culturally conditioned figure of Jesus of Nazareth and rediscover his utter openness to the divine, which Hellenist Christology would label *homoousia*.

A Mahāyāna Christology construed in this way would then come closer to the "Antiochean" school, since the emphasis on Christ's "rootedness" within a specific cultural milieu would counter the tendency of Chalcedon and the later tradition to overemphasize Christ's eternal preexistence.¹⁸ The dialectic between *theologia* and *oikonomia* is mapped onto the distinction between ultimate and conventional, and the Nicene affirmation of Jesus's full divinity is contextualized as the consequence of a cultural habit to identify radical "otherness" with a personal divine being. Holding on to this formulation, however, is an untenable strategy, where the assertion of a full disclosure of the Godhead in the person of Christ merely signals a deep-seated inability to let go of an outdated approach to ontology and transcendence. In *The Meaning of Christ*, the emptiness of *śūnyatā* is the ontological support of the conventional and the person of Jesus ensures that the former is made manifest in the latter.

Keenan's argument has already been the object of a number of theological critiques, such as the one offered in 2004 by Lai. Writing from the perspective of a Chinese Christian, Lai critiques Keenan's choice to develop an alternative Christology based on the teaching of the Buddha-bodies, arguing that in a Chinese context the concept of Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) might offer a more fitting template for a Christology appealing to the religious sensitivity of Chinese Christians.¹⁹ What matters for our discussion, however, is that Lai's argument fails to do justice to the nature of the Chalcedonian definition, which in fact underscores the limitations of philosophical language, and which, if properly understood, may still serve its purpose for an educated Western audience.²⁰ At the same time, Lai's critique does not address Keenan's claim that Chalcedonian Christology is unrelated to spiritual practice, and it fails to engage what I see as the flaws in Keenan's constructive theological experiment. While I do not wish to challenge Lai's contention that a different element of Buddhist tradition may provide a firmer bedrock for a Chinese Christology, I wish to argue with Keenan that the theoretical speculation on the bodies of the Buddha offers one of the most intriguing analogues to the teaching of the hypostatic union. In light of Bevans's reflections on the development of contextual theologies, I believe that a *modified* version of Keenan's synthesis would actually offer a most suitable template for an alternative Buddhist Christology.

Lai is quite correct when he observes that "the Chalcedonian notion of the hypostatic union between two natures" being "without division and without separation" is effectively "a challenge to the Hellenist philosophical hypothesis that contrary attributes could not possibly coexist within the same subject at the same time."²¹ He goes

on to note how Madhyamaka Buddhist texts such as the *Mālamadhyamakakārika* make analogous claims on the nature of dharma, which is “not unified nor diversified; not coming nor leaving.” Lai critiques Keenan’s contention that Hellenist Christology is “static,” and observes that “the Creed” actually safeguards a “dynamic” conception “concerning the incarnation.”²² Lai’s reading, however, fails to engage what is in my view a major flaw in Keenan’s argument, namely his assertion of a tension between so-called “later” mystical theology, on one hand, and speculative Christological reflection, on the other. What Keenan calls “mysticism of darkness,” with its radical apophaticism and its mistrust of the power of language, is in fact fully congruent with the philosophical iconoclasm of Chalcedon, whose four logically irreconcilable adverbs challenge all claims to contain the divine mystery within the limits of the human intellect.²³

While Keenan might be right in tracing the roots of the “subject-object approach” to the writings of the Origenist “mysticism of light,” the conciliar declarations on the hypostatic union do not seek to reduce spiritual experiences to *noēta*, but attempt to convey the transformative impact of the incarnation within the history of humanity.²⁴ In the wake of Chalcedon, and even more in the wake of the Second Council of Constantinople one hundred years later, Christ is the embodiment of the divine wisdom that sustains the cosmos; he is one with the eternal Father as well as the paradigm of a transfigured humanity, an example of personal conduct fully ordered to the will of the Father.²⁵ The teaching of the communication of idioms (*koinōnia idiōmatōn*) enables Chalcedonian Christology to posit the continuity of the two *ousiai* and yet assert the perichoretic exchange of properties between the natures that subsist fully intact. The resort to the Neo-Platonic teaching that associates every essence with its own specific energy shows clearly that the goal of Chalcedonian ontology and its renditions by the later ecumenical councils is to present the incarnation as a salvific event that happens *in time*.²⁶ Keenan’s flaws run deeper than Lai ever adverts, because Keenan fails to see how the “mysticism of darkness” was not a tradition marginalized by philosophical theology, but actually *shaped* the theological articulation of Christological dogma.

In her reflections on Chalcedonian Christology, Sarah Coakley notes the contemporary difficulty to view traditional theological definitions as making ontological statements about an objectively existing reality.²⁷ Coakley’s considerations do not address the question of whether alternative Christological formulations are opportune or even possible, but are helpful inasmuch as they uncover the deeper roots of Keenan’s scepticism as to the viability of the Chalcedonian project. Underpinning Keenan’s whole argument is the deep-seated conviction that conciliar declarations are nothing more than, and *should be* nothing more than, epistemologically regulative statements, setting cognitive guidelines for concerned believers. In this perspective, theology *cannot* truly tell us anything about the ultimate nature of reality. Keenan’s attack on the use of philosophical discourse in theology puts into question the very ontological legitimacy of theological claims, since the referents of theological discourse are transferred to a Kantian noumenal world that is utterly inaccessible to the human intellect.

Lai's observation that Keenan misreads the Chalcedonian definition remains correct, but his critique needs substantial supplementation. Throughout *The Meaning of Christ*, Keenan lambasts the supporters of Chalcedon for thinking that the teaching of the Council offered a univocal, exhaustive description of the incarnation, when in fact the conciliar declaration was meant to offer a set of apophatic markers that gestured, albeit analogically, toward an ultimately elusive reality. He incorrectly assumes that the Chalcedonian Fathers used terms such as *ousia* and *hypostasis* intending to provide an exact description of the ontology of the incarnation, and as he correctly notes that no such description is possible, he suggests that this terminology be dropped. In addition, and even more crucially for the sake of our argument, Keenan seems to think that theological discourse, if it wishes to escape the trap of univocity, must accept its fundamentally metaphorical nature.²⁸ Since univocity is necessarily self-defeating, metaphorical discourse becomes the only legitimate means to convey the reality of mystical experience. Madhyamaka thought, not unlike Keenan, construes all statements about ultimate reality as fundamentally metaphorical, since our cognitive structures have no access to what lies beyond the conventional. It is not surprising, therefore, that Keenan should advocate a Māhāyāna, and indeed a Madhyamaka, theology of embodiment.

In short, what Keenan construes as Chalcedonian Christology presupposes claims on the nature of theological statements that would have been utterly alien to the Chalcedonian fathers. Lai's critique of Keenan helps us uncover what we already termed the philosophical iconoclasm of Hellenist Christology, but, as we now see, Lai's critique was only a part of the story. And, in fact, we must yet consider the constructive part of Keenan's project, in which he resorts to the teaching of the Buddha-bodies to develop an alternative formulation of the hypostatic union. While Lai views the notion of *tathāgatagarbha* as better attuned with the Chinese emphasis on cosmic order,²⁹ I would argue that the teaching of ultimate reality manifested in the conventional that we find in the Buddhakāya tradition offers Christianity a better entrée into Buddhist cultures such as Tibet, where the belief in the multiple bodies of the Buddha structures philosophical speculation no less than practice.

Keenan focuses on the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna, which identifies the Buddha's most excellent qualities (*dharmakāya*) with the ultimate structure of the universe, but distinguishes the latter from its conventional manifestations (the two types of form body, or *rūpakāya*). In this perspective, the body of the historical Buddha and even the glorified bodies of the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas residing in celestial realms are not independent realities but mere outflows of the *dharmakāya* that disclose the *dharma* to suffering sentient beings.³⁰ Accordingly, Keenan's Christological strategy presents the life and person of Jesus as manifesting the ultimate reality of transcendence within our ordinary world. As such, the incarnation is first and foremost an exemplary paradigm of righteousness and compassion, whose ultimate nature, however, is the emptiness that embraces the totality of the world. In this perspective, the notion of the incarnation having a cosmic impact is entirely meaningless; Christ's passion and death cannot modify the structure of reality, and nothing may induce us to claim that it was a unique and unrepeatable event.

Indeed, in a Madhyamaka perspective even Christ's passion and death would be mere ripples in the eternal flux of *samsāra*. As the teaching of the Buddha-bodies grounds Buddhological speculation within the Madhyamaka dichotomy of ultimate and conventional, its Christological application ensures that Christ's "body of form" is no different from the innumerable forms that invite us to look into the emptiness beyond our world. As a result, Keenan's "Mahāyāna" Christology is effectively a form of "Christological Mahāyāna"; instead of articulating the Christian position using Madhyamaka terminology, Keenan ends up offering an interpretation of the hypostatic union from a Mahāyāna perspective. It would not be an overstatement if we claimed that any follower of Madhyamaka could wholeheartedly embrace Keenan's understanding of Christ and yet remain fully committed to her Buddhist position. Keenan's experiment with contextualization does not deliver what it promises; his adoption of Buddhist categories effectively evacuates the distinctive character of Christ's incarnation, and dissolves it within the undifferentiated ocean of conventional reality.

If we compare Keenan's approach with the critical appropriation of classical philosophy on the part of the Cappadocian fathers that Jaroslav Pelikan so accurately charts in his work on late antiquity, we sense a radical methodological difference. The Christian authors of the first centuries deployed the terminology and categories of late classical antiquity but resisted the aspects of that culture that were incompatible with the way in which the communities of believers of the time had come to formulate the Christian faith. Even if we limit ourselves to the Greek cultural area, the examples are numerous and telling. In his work *De Incarnatione*, Athanasios of Alexandria grounded his Christology in the Stoic teaching of the *logoi spermatikoi*, but rejected the Hellenist teaching of the eternity of the cosmos which was incompatible with the Scriptural account of creation.³¹ In a similar fashion, Maximos the Confessor resorted to the Origenist dialectic of unity and plurality as hermeneutically useful, but instead of viewing the plurality of creation as an ontological flaw in line with the Neo-Platonic tradition, he linked it with the incarnation of the Logos and invested it with a salvific import.³² Keenan's strategy is more akin to the acceptance of nonscriptural eschatological teachings by so-called "vulgar Origenists": he allows a philosophical system to set the terms of theological speculation, even when the claims of the former sit uneasily with the way in which the Christian community has traditionally understood the significance of the incarnation.³³

The outcome of Keenan's Christological experiment bears more than a passing resemblance to the construal of divine embodiment that we find in the Tibetan tradition of *dGe lugs* scholasticism, where the Buddha's conventional manifestations disclose an all-encompassing nirvanic reality that eludes ordinary modes of knowledge. In the writings of the great Tibetan reformer Tsong kha pa (1359–1423), the teaching of the Buddha-bodies becomes the regulative centre of a system that ranges from anthropology and soteriology to broader issues of cosmology and epistemology. His *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* construes the intrinsic dialectic of ultimate and conventional embodiment as the overarching template of spiritual practice, while asserting the crucial role of conventional reality in leading sentient

beings to enlightenment.³⁴ It is in the historical Buddha that the Buddha nature pervading the universe becomes accessible, but it is the all-encompassing Buddha nature that is the ontological foundation of the historical Buddha. In the world created by the Christian God, the cosmic Christ assumes our nature and brings God's wisdom to humanity; on the Tibetan plateaus, the *dharmakāya* enters the conventional world and dwells in it so as to attract sentient beings to *nirvāṇa*.³⁵

Tsong kha pa follows the earlier commentarial tradition of India in emphasizing the normativity of Madhyamaka philosophy for spiritual practice, and deploys it to unravel the Mahāyāna paradox of active *nirvāṇa*. On the basis of a rigorous exegesis of earlier Abhidharmic texts as well as excerpts of *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, Tsong kha pa claims that philosophical reflection discloses the existence of two aspects within the Buddha's own realization: an unconditioned, formless thusness that fully transcends the world (*svābhāvīkākāya*), and a form of "conditioned consciousness" that encompasses the totality of "dharma gnoses" (*jñāna-dharmakāya*). While the former is the ultimate emptiness of all aspects of Buddhahood, the latter is the conventional skillful means through which the Buddha engages the world and which give rise to the various bodies of form.³⁶ In their infinite number, Tsong kha pa's emanation bodies intimate the emptiness that undergirds the cosmos. At the same time, they guide sentient beings toward enlightenment; one might even risk calling them a sacrament of the soteriological value of emptiness. Through these conventional bodies, all Buddhas and bodhisattvas manifest the all-encompassing power of Buddhahood and make it accessible in specific spatio-temporal circumstances adapting it to the correspondent cultural context. A Tibetan practitioner could accept the avatars of Viṣṇu and the person of Christ as conventional manifestations of Buddhahood, because her religious background would offer her the necessary categories to relate to these figures even as they belong to different traditions. What she would have to reject, however, is the claim that any of these novel "bodies of form" is unique, since this would be incompatible with the way in which Buddhism views reality as the incessant flux of *samsāra*.

The problem with Keenan's constructive Christology is that his construal of divine embodiment does not use the resources of a different tradition to express a Christian theological insight; rather, it expresses a *Weltanschauung* where the incarnation is indistinguishable from the Buddha's many conventional manifestations. In *The Meaning of Christ*, Keenan claims that Chalcedonian Christology is overly monophysitic, and that the traditional emphasis on the divine hypostasis downplays the ontological fullness of Christ's humanity.³⁷ A closer look at the Madhyamaka dialectic of conventional and ultimate, however, shows that his alternative rendition of the incarnation does not strengthen Christ's humanity, but rather compounds the problem. In a Mahāyāna Christology, the ultimate reality of Christ's transcendence is the foundation of his conventional manifestation, which never exists as an independent reality; at the end of Christ's earthly life, this conventional manifestation (or *rūpakāya*) is reabsorbed into emptiness. As such, the person of Christ is one of the millions of forms that fleetingly emerge from *dharmakāya*, a codependently originated veil drawn over the abyss of *śūnyatā*.

One might object that the notion of active *nirvāṇa* does not evacuate conventional reality of all salvific impact and that all Buddhas and bodhisattvas make use of conventional skillful means to help sentient beings reach enlightenment. This is correct, but the perichoretic exchange of properties in the hypostatic union effectively operates an ontological change in the relationship between human and divine. On the other hand, the Madhyamaka dichotomy between conventional and ultimate can *never* be overcome. Keenan's theology of the incarnation replaces an alleged monophysitism with a virtual docetism, and substitutes an ontological with an epistemological soteriology: Christ's *rūpakāya* bears a sort of weakened sacramentality, which illumines the true nature of reality but is incapable of accomplishing an authentic transformation.

While the Tibetan *dharmakāya* delineates a universe in which the kaleidoscope of appearances masks an underlying emptiness, the incarnate Christ is the interpretive lens, but also *the ontological source* of the universe. Following Clooney's call for a development of systematic theology in a direction that is simultaneously confessional and interreligious, one could appropriate the Tibetan terminology of embodiment and argue that the event of Christ's incarnation upends the existing categories and gives us an instance of *rūpakāya* that explodes the division between conventional and ultimate. This conventional body would then be unique in its power to bestow ontological plenitude to the *dharmāḥ* of the ordinary world; it would never return to the embrace of *śūnyatā*, but foreshadow an eschatological transfiguration of the cosmos in which everyone shall take part. Thus, such an approach would not subsume the hypostatic union within Madhyamaka dualism, but rather deploy Madhyamaka terminology in a Chalcedonian key, emphasizing the person of Christ as an *unicum* that reveals but also transforms the structure of the universe.

In his book *Constructing Local Theologies*, Robert Schreiter notes that a developing, local expression of the faith ought to be open to the "criticism of other churches," and that it should also be ready to "challenge other theologies."³⁸ Schreiter's concern is primarily the ecumenical dialogue between different Christian churches, but his claim retains its validity if applied to the dialogue between traditional Christian theology and contemporary expressions of the faith. The viability of a new, contextual theology ought then to be assessed at the grassroots level, testing its effectiveness in communicating the Christian message within a culture whose imaginative horizon may have been shaped by different religious traditions. It is not enough then to clothe Christian theology in borrowed garments; one should also make sure that they fit and not overlook or conceal the boundaries between one tradition and the other. In our case, Schreiter's invitation to open our theologies to mutual criticism would entail that a Mahāyāna Christology could challenge its Chalcedonian counterpart, but also that former may also be tested against the criticism of the latter. Chalcedon and Lhasa, in the end, exist in the same world.

Clooney's suggestion in *Theology after Vedānta* that contemporary systematic theology ought to be comparative but also dialogical may be read as enjoining an analogous process of mutual correction.³⁹ The search for a new conceptual framework to express the Christ event cannot operate then as if the "otherness" of the non-Christian

tradition were of itself a sign of deeper authenticity. Much as Origen and Athanasios retrieved the teaching of the *logoi spermatikoi* from earlier Stoic literature but adapted it to the Christian framework, a Mahāyāna Christology could embrace the Tibetan teaching of the Buddha-bodies but would have to modify it, so as to accommodate the transformative potential of the event of the incarnation. At the time, Athanasios's theology of the eternal Logos may have looked like a sort of "de-Stoicized" Stoicism, but it was only this qualified form of contextualization that enabled Athanasios to express the distinctive Christian character of the incarnation. It might be the case then that a future Tibetan Christology will take the form of a "de-Mahāyānizing" Mahāyāna, where the appreciating awareness of the insights of the religious other does not preclude a critique of their ontological or epistemological claims.

If Bevans is right in claiming that theology is not a finished product honed by professionals and then offered to the consumption of the masses, perhaps this critique will take the form of a dialogue between technically trained theologians and the authentic "voice" of the people.⁴⁰ At the same time, Lai's reflections on Keenan's Christological experiment show how Christian theologians from areas that are not *culturally* Christian are now coming to appreciate the value of traditional doctrinal definitions as helpful markers in the search for new theological syntheses. Beyond the specific question of what shape a Tibetan Christology might possibly take, contemporary contextual theology could then overcome the unhelpful opposition between traditional and inculturated formulations of the faith that undergirds Keenan's work and that is oblivious of the extent to which the former were themselves shaped by a particular culture while simultaneously transcending it.

NOTES

1. John P. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989; Lai Pai-chiu, "A Mahāyāna Reading of Chalcedon Christology: A Chinese Response to John Keenan," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24 (2004): 209–228.

2. Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster and M. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), Part II, The Ecclesiastical Form of Faith, 82–100.

3. Stephen B. Bevans, SVD, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and exp. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 3. When Bernard Lonergan observes that theology mediates between faith and culture, he similarly presupposes that theological statements describe an objective supernatural reality, but are also the expression of a particular cultural horizon. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 76–80.

4. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 76–80.

5. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 4–8.

6. Avery R. Dulles, SJ, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 48–52.

7. *Ibid.*, 131–154.

8. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), chaps. 15 ("The One and the Three"), 17 ("The Economy of Salvation").

9. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ*, 221.

10. *Ibid.*, 67–68.

11. *Ibid.*, 86.

12. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Beatitudinibus* 4 (PG 44: 1245–1248), also Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique. Essai sur la théologie spirituelle de Grégoire de Nyssa*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Seuil, 1953), 257.

13. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virginitate* (PG 46: 361); the scriptural quote is the Septuagint version of Ps. 115:11.

14. Joseph Stephen O’Leary, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 222.

15. The literature on Madhyamaka, the teaching of the Buddha-bodies, and the relation between the two is immense. See for instance Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994); Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambala, 2002), 82–83, 359–360, 413–415, 421, 435.

16. On the shift from the Theravada to the Mahāyāna notion of Buddhism, see John Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 323–336, 345–362.

17. See for instance Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ*, 61–64, “The Question of Hellenization.”

18. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ*, 232. One should note, however, that in the years following the publication of Keenan’s work, the traditional tendency to understand “Antiochean Christology” as a synonym for “low Christology” has been increasingly questioned; see John J. O’Keefe, “Impassible Suffering? Divine Passion and Fifth-Century Christology,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 37–60. Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), argues that the label “Antiochean” masks such a variety of positions that it becomes virtually empty.

19. See Lai, “A Mahāyāna Reading,” 216–218.

20. See *ibid.*, 221.

21. See *ibid.* See for instance the passage in the *Sutra of Hui Neng* where the opposition between the Northern and the Southern school of Zen provides Hui Neng with the opportunity to assert that “true dharma” is “beyond existence and non-existence,” and indeed, it is necessary to let go of the “bigoted” notion of nonexistence. See *The Sutra of Hui Neng: Sutra Spoken by the Sixth Patriarch on the High Seat of “The Treasure of the Law,”* trans. C. Humphreys and Wong Mou-Lam (Carmel, NY: Buddhist Association of the United States, 1998), chap. 8.

22. See Lai, “A Mahāyāna Reading,” 222. Perhaps “the Chalcedonian definition” would be a better term than “the Creed.”

23. The deliberate aporias of the Chalcedonian definition are thus a development of the indictment of Eunomios’s *technologia* in the orations of Gregory of Nazianzos. See for instance Gregory of Nazianzos, Or. 28, 4 (PG 36: 29–32).

24. The term “transformative impact of the event of the incarnation” presupposes the traditional Christian belief that the coming of Christ effects an irreversible transformation in the ontological fabric of the universe.

25. See John Meyendorff, *Christ in Early Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), chap. 7 (“The Cosmic Dimension of Salvation: Maximus the Confessor”), 131–152.

26. See for instance Plotinus, *Enneads* (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), v–vi.

27. See Sarah Coakley, “What Does Chalcedon Solve and What Does It Not? Some Reflections on the Status and Meaning of the Chalcedonian ‘Definition,’” in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins, SJ (eds.), *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 143–163.

28. It should be noted that Keenan never offers a thorough analysis of the notions of univocity, or indeed analogy. For a more careful discussion, see Allan Wolter, *The Transcendentals and Their Function in the Metaphysics of Duns Scotus* (Great Falls, MT: St. Bonaventure, 1946).

29. Lai, "A Mahāyāna Reading," 219.
30. See Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied*, 176.
31. Athanasios of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione*, 2 (PG 25b: 97–100); also E. P. Mejerling, *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius: Synthesis or Antithesis?* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).
32. See Maximos the Confessor, *Ambigua* 1–7 (1036d–1101c); also Polycarp Sherwood, OSB, *The Earlier Ambigua of St. Maximus the Confessor*, *Studia Anselmiana* 36 (Rome: Herder, 1955).
33. For instance, the *Kephalaia Gnostika* of Evagrius Pontikos claim that every individual soul will eventually return to an undifferentiated *nous*, accepting the teaching of *apokatastasis* even if it contradicts New Testament eschatology. See for instance Antoine Guillaumont, *Les 'Kephalaia Gnostika d'Evagre le Pontique et l'histoire de l'Origénisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens* (Paris: Seuil, 1962).
34. For an English translation of Tsong kha pa's major work, see Joshua W. C. Cutler ed., *Lam Rim Chen Mo: The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, trans. Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2004). For a basic introduction to the *dGe lugs* understanding of the Buddha-bodies, see Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 176.
35. This is the background of Tsong kha pa's discussion of conventional reality as a skillful means to attain enlightenment. The pursuit of the six perfections (*Lam Rim Chen Mo*, 2:340–426) is thus a gradual engagement of the cosmic order which is a sacramental manifestation of Buddha nature.
36. For the genealogy of Tsong kha pa's Buddhological speculation, see Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied*, 211–256 (on Haribhadra's interpretation of the *Abhisamayālamkāra* teaching on the bodies of the Buddha), 289–307 (on Tsong kha pa's appropriation of Haribhadra's thought in a Tibetan context).
37. See for instance Keenan's discussion in *The Meaning of Christ*, 237: "the traditional doctrine has been unable to identify these two [human and divine] dimensions within the same Jesus, for, even though defining him as one person in two natures, that person remains a divine person [. . .] the balancing act can be at times dizzying."
38. Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 3–5.
39. See the discussion in Frank X. Clooney, SJ, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 4–6.
40. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 18.