

To explain the implications of Balthasar's general proposals, Benestad offered a reflection on the Catholic understanding of the common good. His starting point was St. Augustine on the nature of a republic in his *City of God*. Augustine's second definition of a republic is "a fellowship of a multitude of rational beings united through a sharing in and agreement about what it loves. . . . It is a better people if it agrees in loving better things; a worse one if it agrees in loving worse things." Otherwise stated, there can be various levels of solidarity or shared common goods in any particular regime. Christians have a duty to work prudently to refine and elevate the agreement about what the political community loves. This kind of work seems to involve something more than what Bauerschmidt means by living in community as disciples of Jesus.

DAVID L. SCHINDLER

*John Paul II Institute*

*Washington, D.C.*

---

#### COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Topic: Buddhist Theology—Some Reflections

by a Contemporary Buddhist Scholar

Moderator: Francis X. Clooney, Boston College

Presenter: John Makransky, Boston College

This discussion of some questions in contemporary Buddhist theology took place within the general framework of comparative theology as understood over the years at the CTSA. When we begin comparative theology, we remain rooted in our own faith communities and continue to seek to know God better through understanding our religious experience, sacred scriptures and traditions, and through faithful theological inquiry; the distinctive mark of comparative theology is that we *also* seek to learn from other religious traditions in their rich particularities, and then to see our own faith and theology differently because of what we learn from the other tradition or traditions. Although comparative theology is most commonly practiced by Christians, in this seminar we had a rare opportunity—to learn from John Makransky, a practicing Buddhist thinker (in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition) who himself has also been learning from Christian spirituality and theology. This report seeks not to summarize all that Makransky said precisely as he said it, but to highlight some major points in his presentation, as understood by this reporter.

First of all, the term "Buddhist theology" is admittedly provocative, since Gautama the Buddha has generally not been thought of as a "god" nor as "God." Makransky's presentation therefore began with the affirmation that Buddhism is oriented to transcendence, a higher realization which takes the seeker beyond the

dissatisfactions of ordinary human seeking and desire, to an enduring contentment given through religious practices undertaken in community. In Makransky's view, this Buddhist quest to travel the higher way is better described as theology than philosophy.

In part, Makransky's presentation was a valuable reminder to us of how the Buddhist tradition grew and became remarkably vibrant and diverse in numerous cultures. In the fifth century BCE, Gautama marked out the Buddhist path by his own realization of lasting peace and by his consequent teaching of the Dharma. This Dharma was expressed particularly in terms of the Four Noble Truths; it was a meditative and practical teaching which arose in encounter with the array of human limitations, discontents and disorders, and which offered ordinary people a way forward toward complete and unending contentment, a graciously unexpected transcendent joy. As remembered in the earliest Buddhist sources, Gautama was the one who excelled in "skillful means" (*upaya*), helping those who came to him to find their way along the path to the cessation of suffering. His insight was said to be most remarkable, and also his trust in the ability of his disciples to speak his mind and put his way in their own words. Out of these earliest experiences of discovering and teaching the way beyond suffering, the multiple Buddhist traditions arose, in India and then all parts of east Asia. Each tradition in its setting—Thai, Burmese, Tibetan, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, etc.—refined its own successful articulations of the Buddha's wisdom, expressing in new settings what was remembered as passed down from the time of Gautama. Especially in the Mahayana traditions, there was always a strong sense that these successful paths were new and original embodiments of the original Dharma—and just a few of the "four quadrillion ways" in which the Buddha's Dharma could be expressed.

By recounting how Buddhism developed as a tradition of skillful means, Makransky also was setting the stage for a consideration—by us in the audience but also by himself and fellow Buddhists—of how Buddhism might be understood and developed in contemporary North America. As in its earlier settings (and like other religious traditions which have had to put down new roots in new cultures) Buddhism in North America is now confronted with the question of how one is to teach the Dharma, the way to the ending of suffering authentically and successfully, *here and now*. Each of the great Asian Buddhist traditions has put down roots in America, each has its own way of teaching, meditating, clarifying the mind, gathering community, and each has its own ways of connecting these practices right back to the original teachings of Gautama. As Makransky admitted, these traditions are also liable to become reified, hampered by their time-tested limits, and even by ahistorical and somewhat mythological assertions that their particular ideas and methods were indeed exactly and precisely what the Buddha thought and taught. Sadly, successful versions of skillful means can become competitors which end up restricting the Dharma instead of making it available once more, in innumerable new ways.

Against this background, Makransky's wider question—for Buddhists and for us at the session—was therefore how traditions can find within themselves the resources to be "liberated" from their own efforts to appropriate and control the past, from bad habits which flatten their rich traditions into the appearance of a single formulation seemingly fixed from the beginning. Makransky emphasized the need for faith in the ongoing vitality of the original way, the persistent willingness to keep embodying in new ways the original truths of the tradition.

Throughout, and of course with this CTSA audience in mind, Makransky was mindful of parallel issues in the Christian theological traditions, similar graces, successes and pitfalls. Without claiming that similarities indicate identity or the total exclusion of differences, Makransky drew parallels with the plural understandings of Christ found in the New Testament, the rise of historical criticism and a consequent reappropriation of traditional doctrines and practices, and the variety of ways in which the ongoing work of the Spirit in the Christian tradition has been recognized and celebrated by diverse Christian churches.

In important aspects, the traditions of Gautama and Jesus remain very different, and efforts to retrieve and renew their heritage today have to be based on different grounds, with differing strengths and problems to be recognized. But Makransky's presentation made it quite possible to see how much we share; contemporary Buddhists can learn from New Testament scholarship and biblical Christologies; Christians can learn from the Buddhist sense of skillful means and the Buddhist embrace of the "quadrillion ways" in which the Dharma keeps on being embodied.

By the time Makransky's presentation was completed and discussion ensued, a remarkable atmosphere had been created in which the questions of original insights and tradition, truth and practice, were alive across the boundaries between Buddhism and Christianity. At the CTSA in Ottawa, it seems, we had found a moment in which to reflect together on the vital sources of our faith, religious practices, and theology, and to examine together the revitalization and deepening of our traditions, in this contemporary moment of human need and hope. As might be expected, so brief a time dedicated to so complex set of issues left us with many questions about Buddhism, about the specific problems Makransky pointed to, and about the nature and value of comparative theology. But these important questions had now been given a fresh setting in which to be articulated, remembered and relived in the months to come, as we continue to think about how our traditions still enable believers to walk on the original way, in new settings which amazingly lead to goals set forth in the beginning.

FRANCIS X. CLOONEY, S.J.  
*Boston College*  
*Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts*