

**In Review: Thomas Cattoi's *Divine Contingency: Theologies of Divine Embodiment in Maximos the Confessor and Tsong Kha pa* (Gorgias Press)**

**By Aimée Upjohn Light**

Though humbly refraining from claiming as much, Thomas Cattoi's new book *Divine Contingency: Theologies of Divine Embodiment in Maximos the Confessor and Tsong Kha pa* is the first in what will come to be seen as the "next generation" of interreligious work. Writing at the intersection of the quest for metanarratives of religion and the return to confessional approaches, Cattoi's sweeping historical treatment of two of the greatest figures in Christianity and Buddhism, Maximos the Confessor and Tsong Kha pa, puts to work the methodology so long called for but which has—until now—failed to be put into practice. The methodology is a return to tradition-bound approaches necessitated by our inescapable faith commitments that actively seek to learn from and affirm positive value in religions other than our own. Though the organization of the book makes it an even more challenging read than it would otherwise be, *Divine Contingency* is groundbreaking. Both as a piece of interreligious scholarship and as the instantiation of a methodological shift which is long overdue in Western theological and interreligious circles, *Divine Contingency* marks the beginning of a new era of interreligious scholarship in the West.

Not for the feint of heart, *Divine Contingencies* expects of the reader a thoroughgoing knowledge of Christian Patristic studies as well as some familiarity with the developments of Buddhism in Tibet. Though clearly enough written to be accessible to determined graduate students, *Divine Contingencies* is intended primarily for the audience of authors against whose backdrop of books the work is written. Clearly the next in the line of substantial work which includes *Theology After Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology*, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue*, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* and *The Depths of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, Cattoi's *Divine Contingencies* should please not only Frank Clooney, Paul Griffiths, Jacques Dupuis and S. Mark Heim, but those many scholars who have followed their conversation for close to two decades.

The quest for a pluralist meta-narrative of religions has been going strong since the publication of John Hick's problematic *An Interpretation of Religion*, and the call to jettison the quest in favor of more realistic, tradition-bound approach has been loud for at least a decade. Yet tradition-bound approaches have retreated into provincial, self-oriented studies which reach out to the resources of other traditions only as vehicles for affirming the ontologies operative in the home religion. S. Mark Heim's *The Depths of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* is one such study. Though creative and laudable for its efforts to avoid the incoherence of pluralism yet eschew the colonial and imperialistic tendencies of inclusivisms, Heim's thesis of multiple religious ends falls into the trap set for any interreligious project which seeks to affirm multiplicity while holding to its own ontology: the illusion of affirming multiplicity while continuing to make absolute and totalizing truth claims.

Heim's multiple religious ends thesis held that members of multiple religions actually get the ends they desire, but that these ends are accounted for by the Trinitarian God's relationality. Because, however, it is the Trinitarian God who is the accounting principle, Christian salvation cannot help but be the fullest communion with this God who is only partially accessed through other paths. Everyone attains the religious end which she longs for, but only Christians get the best one—and only a Trinitarian Christian metaphysic is right.

What has been called for as far back as Francis Clooney's 1993 book *Theology After Vedanta* and as recently as critiques made by Paul Griffiths and by myself in *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* is not another veiled attempt to account for religious multiplicity. Such is Heim's project, which reinscribes the colonizing and imperialistic tendencies of any inclusivism. Instead, what we in the West need is a frank admission of our own locatedness, our epistemic boundaries and faith commitments, and within that framework a learned appreciation for other faith traditions and a contrast with our own. We ought not sugarcoat the differences or seek false identification in the quest for an impossible meta-position. We ought not highlight only the differences in order to show our own superiority. We must honestly admit our own beliefs and respectfully study the beliefs of others to put in bas relief the things that are shared as well as commitments which differ. Yet such an approach requires a lifetime of learning—a commitment which few but Thomas Cattoi have made.

Cattoi's claim is that it is by looking to a figure outside of our tradition, in this case Tsong Kha pa, that we gain a newfound appreciation both for that tradition and for an element of our own tradition. In this case, it is by looking to Tsong Kha pa's thinking on the status of the created, embodied world that we come to awareness of the radical affirmation on the part of Maximos of the Confessor that the created order is truly good, salvific and willed by God. Unlike his predecessors Origen, or at least the Origenist school and Evagrius, Maximos affirms the transformative value of contemplation and the practice of virtues. The reality of this world is not something of negligible value or a state to be gotten over. Rather, the reality of this world is the very vehicle of our transformation.

Similarly to Maximos, Tsong Kha pa's wisdom is a response to a predecessor—in this case not the Origenist school but the rDzog chen tradition (Tib. For “great perfection”). rDzog chen, part of the Ancient School of Buddhism introduced to Tibet in the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E., holds like all Mahayana that Buddhahood is attainable in this samsaric world. Unlike some other schools, however, rDzog chen holds that spiritual practice merely retrieves a facet of reality that is and always has been present. What we do does not create something new or transform our being, does not impact our spiritual attainment. Rather, it calls to light what was always the case.

Tsong Kha pa, like Maximos, rejects rDzog chen's almost Origenist understanding of the already present nature of our spiritual goal, instead opting for a Maximus-like view of the need for development or change, and the consequent instrumental importance of the world and our being and practice within it. In short, our being-in-the-world affects spiritual change or attainment, not a return to or realization of what already is.

In Maximos's Christianity, this is the ontological presupposition as well as generated worldview of the incarnation. In Tsong Kha pa, belief in the necessity of our practice is founded on the rejection of the ontological foundation of our being, pure awareness, as being identical to primordial Buddha itself. In rDzogs chen, our goal is to access our primordial condition of awareness; viewing our practices as transformative is wrong-headed. Like Maximos, Tsong Kha pa rejects this ontological optimism.

Far from being pessimistic, however, Maximos and Tsong Kha pa are both radically optimistic about the possibility for human beings to attain our spiritual end. Though denying the identification of what is with what should be, both hold that there are transformative mechanisms available to us for furthering our spiritual journeys.

For Maximos and Tsong Kha pa, contemplation is a crucial spiritual practice. In both Mahayana and Vajrayana, the Tibetan rendition of Mahayana, the Buddha is seen not only as perfect religious teacher, but as the embodiment of the true nature of things. Though other Buddha embodiments manifest, the body of Gautama is not only the bearer of teachings, but the interpretive key to the universe. It is through familiarity with the Buddha who sustains the world that we gain wisdom and become compassionate. Thus we may rightly say that in Tsong Kha pa's Buddhism it is the natural order and contemplation of the natural order that are the mechanisms for our transformation. One cannot help but be put in mind of Maximos's belief in the transformative power of contemplation in and of the created order and the incarnation. Both figures exhort us to spiritual practices in and through the world.

Cattoi's analysis of the differences between Christian understandings of the plenitude of creation and the emptiness which is the end of Buddhist wisdom must remain the subject for yet another analysis of this outstanding work. His point that Maximos's and Tsong Kha pa's similar understandings of the transformative nature of spiritual practice and the world in which it rests lead to radically different ends must, however, remain the focal point of a correct understanding of Cattoi's book. Cattoi's project has exactly compared the similarity in the two authors, forcing an appreciation of what this strain of Buddhist spirituality shares with one of the greatest Church Fathers. Yet Cattoi unflinchingly points us to the fact that these systems which share something fundamental guide us to radically different ends. What Cattoi has accomplished is a faith-based yet radically open and learned assessment of what one of our heroes in the Christian West shares with one of Tibet's spiritual masters.

What this review seeks to highlight is not Maximos and Tsong Kha pa's similar view of the worldly mechanism of transformation; nor is it their divergence on the nature of creation as plenitude versus emptiness, though these comparisons are of vital interest to specialists in Patristics and Buddhist studies. Instead, what should be highlighted is the existence of a new breed of interreligious scholarship. Thomas Cattoi's *Divine Contingency* is surely the first of what will become a new wave of authorship called for by the post-pluralist meta conversation on religion; a way of doing interreligious work that must be informed by great learning in not one, but multiple religious traditions. The need to actually engage in hands-on learning across religious boundaries as well as to speak from one's own orientation has been clear for years. Cattoi is the first to attempt such an ambitious project.