

***Crucified Wisdom: Theological Reflection on Christ and the Bodhisattva.* By S. Mark Heim. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. xii + 329. ISBN: 9780823281237. \$110.00, hardcover; \$32.00, paperback; \$31.99, e-pub.**

In *Crucified Wisdom*, S. Mark Heim provides a carefully reasoned, theologically thoughtful, and engagingly creative example of theological reflection comparatively pursued. Recalling Buddhist-inspired commentaries of the Gospels (for example, John Keenan's *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahāyāna Reading*)—yet distinct in scope from these—Heim's monograph applies the richly multifaceted lens of the Buddhist bodhisattva ideal to central aspects of Christian theology. In its commendation of Buddhist concepts and categories, this text also sits squarely in the tradition of Buddhist-Christian scholarship of figures like Paul Knitter (*Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*). While less autobiographical than some of Knitter's work and more narrowly focused, Heim's study clearly argues that considering specific, core Christian tenets through the lens of Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings on bodhisattvas can enhance a Christian's appreciation of her own tradition's teachings.

Implied in this statement is that Heim is writing for Christians—particularly scholarly ones willing to invest the time and effort needed to ponder and digest Heim's erudite theological reflections. While more robust attention to how Buddhist practitioners might be aided by utilizing Christian lenses would have been valuable (in order, among other reasons, to nuance the well-trodden trend of Christians using the theological resources of others), that kind of project admittedly would require another monograph-sized endeavor.

As with all theological projects, Heim's book necessarily rests upon certain assumptions and presuppositions, which the author effectively acknowledges in the Introduction's "Theology of Religious Pluralism" section. He writes: "Without Buddhist wisdom, there are dimensions of God's relation with the world and with us. . . that cannot be fully grasped by Christianity alone" (19). Christians endorsing an exclusivist theology of religions are unlikely to support this presupposition, and for that reason will likely find the book irrelevant (at best). Scholars of religion may object to the assertion that "God's relation with the world" can be accurately and meaningfully translated into Buddhist terms, with Buddhist teachings then employed to illuminate dimensions of this divine relationship. But for those supportive of the theological presuppositions stated in Heim's Introduction, the subsequent pages of the book offer a perspective-shifting treasure. The goal of these pages is stated directly by Heim as follows: "My primary concern is. . . to demonstrate the scope for mutual learning and appreciation that is possible [within the limits of Christian-Buddhist reflection]. The rest of this book is an implicit test to see whether the paradigm I have suggested above [that is, regarding a theology of religious pluralism] stands up to the more detailed interaction with Buddhist wisdom. It is an experiment to see whether that interaction can yield learnings that will enhance the trajectory of Christian theology" (20).

In performing this "experiment," *Crucified Wisdom* begins (earlier in the Introduction) with a summary of the respective historical backgrounds of the theological tenets discussed throughout the rest of the book and also traces the contours of Heim's theology of religious pluralism. The book then proceeds in three main sections. Part 1 consists of just the first chapter, which

appropriately provides an opening summary of both Buddhist teaching on the bodhisattva path and Christian doctrines of incarnation, atonement, and reconciliation. This chapter also begins to trace certain resonances and dissonances between these two traditions. Part 2 consists of chapters 2 and 3 and focuses on the bodhisattva path in Mahāyāna Buddhism. This part describes in detail the historical development of this body of teaching before zeroing-in on a specific text (the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* by the eighth-century Indian Buddhist monk, Śāntideva) which is a particularly well known and influential example from the bodhisattva tradition. Finally, in part 3 (that is, chapters 4–6), Heim shifts to Christian theology as he reflects on how the Mahāyāna bodhisattva tradition illuminates underappreciated dimensions of key Christian tenets, including the created self (chapter 4), Trinity and creation (chapter 5), and the ministry of Christ and Christian discipleship (chapter 6). A short conclusion then summarizes the preceding analysis and insights.

As a specific example of the kind of theological reflection Heim undertakes, chapter 6 offers a helpful window. In this chapter, Heim asks “how do bodhisattvas help?” (209): what are the specific ways that bodhisattvas benefit sentient beings? Heim then addresses this question by identifying multiple examples of how bodhisattvas assist other beings, including teaching others, existing as sources of merit-making activities, “direct ethical activity” (212), and extraordinary altruistic acts like giving up their bodies for others’ benefit. The chapter’s second half then offers extensive “Christian reflections” on these bodhisattva roles, starting with an analysis of the echoes between the bodhisattva as an intrinsic source of merit and the “automatic benefits that flow from the devotional or intellectual appreciation of the divine qualities [of the Christian God]” (224). Similarly, the emphasis in the bodhisattva tradition on the bodhisattva’s vow can help Christians appreciate cognate dimensions of Christology that are usually underemphasized, such as the ongoing work of Christ in the world as “conditioned historical events” stemming from Christ’s original “meditative intentions” (as articulated, e.g., in John 17:22) (227).

In sum, Heim’s book has many commendable qualities. First, it clearly exhibits theological erudition as it engages both Christological and bodhisattva traditions with significant depth and nuance. Second, it brilliantly illuminates facets of each tradition that enhance one’s appreciation of resonant facets of the other tradition (although, as discussed above, the emphasis is placed on the benefits to Christian theology). Third, through its previous two accomplishments, the book successfully advances an implicit second-order argument about the value of comparative theological reading (along with the pluralistic—or at least inclusivistic—commitments underlying such engagement).

I once heard a Christian friend make the rather stunning remark that—since Christians have the Bible—there is really nothing that texts or traditions from other religious groups can contribute to a Christian’s spiritual life. Heim’s book begs to differ and argues that Christian spirituality can be enhanced when fundamental Christian beliefs are (re-)considered in light of resonant aspects of other traditions. Seeing these core tenets through a lens never used before, in other words, enables one to see familiar things in unfamiliar ways. Moreover, this unfamiliarity is valuable and productive of new insights and new degrees of appreciation for the core beliefs about which one might assume a thorough knowledge (through years, perhaps decades, of familiarity). It must be accepted at the outset that engaging in this process of de-familiarization in

order to deepen appreciation is one that requires time, patience, and commitment; Heim's book is not a breezy read for an afternoon at the beach. But for those willing to undertake the careful, deliberate reflection demanded by this scholarly reflection (and willing, necessarily, to embrace its theological assumptions), rich insights and fresh theological vantage points await to reward their efforts.

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