

## Byzantine Fractals?: Perry Schmidt-Leukel’s Approach to Religious Pluralism, Gregory Palamas’ Essence-Energies Distinction, and the Four-Kāya Theory in Tibetan Buddhism

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*The goal of this essay is to review Perry Schmidt-Leukel’s fractal understanding of religious pluralism as outlined in his recent study *Das Himmlische Geflecht* (The Celestial Web) and apply its insights to the conversation between Eastern Christianity and Buddhism— an area of interreligious dialogue often neglected in academic contexts that view different modes of Western Christianity as normative. The first part of the essay will explore the genealogy of Schmidt-Leukel’s fractal model and seek to position it within the broader discourse of religious phenomenology, as well as the ongoing crisis in the field of theology of religions. The second part will bring into dialogue the Palamite controversies surrounding the essence-energies distinction that tore apart late Byzantine theology, and the Tibetan conversation around the Buddha bodies, their number and their role in different schools of Buddhism from the Medieval period until the present. The conclusion will highlight the points of contact between the two controversies: the debate around the “simplicity” of the Godhead and the Buddha nature, or the uniqueness of Christ’s and the Buddha’s experience, while also pointing out irreducible differences that set the traditions apart despite their fractal similarities.*

*Keywords: Buddha bodies, kāyas, Buddha nature, Buddhist-Christian dialogue, The Celestial Web, essence-energies distinction, fractals, Haribhadra, Gregory Palamas, Schmidt-Leukel, Tibetan Buddhism*

The purpose of this essay is to revisit Perry Schmidt-Leukel’s reflections on religious pluralism as articulated especially in his latest work *Das Himmlische Geflecht* (*The Celestial Web*) and explore its implications for the budding comparative conversation between Buddhism and Eastern Christian thought—a promising, yet relatively neglected area of interreligious dialogue.<sup>1</sup> This essay will bring together Gregory Palamas’ metaphysical speculation on the essence-energies distinction as developed in his *Triads of the Hesychast Saints*<sup>2</sup> and Haribhadra’s postulation of a fourth Buddha-body in his writings about Buddhahood’s *kāyas*.<sup>3</sup> The comparison will underscore how both authors wrestle with analogous questions regarding the fundamental accessibility of ultimate reality—be it the Trinitarian God or the *tathāgatagarbha*—and seek to conceptualize the relationship between its irreducible transcendence and its immanent presence in this ordinary world.

Increasingly, classical theologies of religions are losing popularity. This essay argues that Schmidt-Leukel’s fractal hermeneutics of religious difference provides an alternative framework to conceptualize similarities and differences between various traditions. This approach will acknowledge echoes and points of contact between the controversies that characterize different

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<sup>1</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Das Himmlische Geflecht: Buddhismus und Christentum: ein anderer Vergleich* (*The Celestial Web: Buddhism and Christianity: a different comparison*), (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> See Gregory Palamas, *The Triads* (ed. by John Meyendorff, trans. by Nicholas Gendle), (Classics of Western Spirituality. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> See John Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1997), esp. Ch. 10 (“Haribhadra’s Analytic-Inferential Perspective on Buddhahood: Buddha Dharmas as Fourth ‘Body’”) and Ch. 11 (“Responses by Indian Scholars to Haribhadra’s Four Buddha Bodies”), 211–86.

religions, while simultaneously affirming their own distinctive features.

### **Indra’s Net of Religious Diversity: Perry Schmidt-Leukel and the Fractal Model**

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the discipline of comparative theology acquired a character distinct from the comparative study of religions. Against this background, the question of the theological rationale of religious diversity acquired renewed relevance. The Rahnerian approach to this problem—articulated for instance in his work *The Christian Faith*—had provided the post-conciliar generation with a broad Christological framework for dialogue, where all elements of truth present in non-Christian religious traditions were ontologically grounded in the eternal Logos.<sup>4</sup> On one hand, Rahner did not specify how one could distinguish between elements of non-Christian beliefs that were soteriologically helpful and those that were not. However, this approach proved remarkably popular, finding its way also into Catholic magisterial documents. Later, Mark Heim’s approach in *Depth of the Riches*, aptly subtitled *A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, reconfigured the Rahnerian vision in a Trinitarian key. Heim plotted the distinctive “ends” of the world’s traditions—such as *moksha*, *nirvāna*, or “salvation”—onto the different aspects of the Christian Godhead: while *dharma* religions experienced liberation in the Trinity’s impersonal nature, the Abramitic religions encountered the relational dimension of the Trinitarian persons.<sup>5</sup> This idiosyncratic take is not exclusivist, and it does seek to affirm the reality of other traditions’ soteriological aspirations. However, its approach—to apply Paul Knitter’s terminology—can still be understood as a partial fulfillment model; distinct traditions are hierarchically ordered in a sort of *preparatio Christi*, proceeding gradually towards Christianity’s fullness of the truth. Knitter’s reflection on theology of religions offers two alternative approaches to this stance. One, the mutuality model, envisages all religious traditions as phenomenological intimations of an inaccessible reality; the latter remains beyond human understanding, but can be glimpsed through its historically contingent manifestations. The other, known as the acceptance model, engages in linguistic reductionism, and views different religious traditions as offering ethical and behavioral guidance without a metaphysical grounding. In this perspective, contradictions or tensions between different religious systems no longer occur.<sup>6</sup> The mutuality and the acceptance models—the former resting on a Kantian epistemology that sets aside phenomenal and noumenal reality, and the latter presuming a post-modern dissolution of ontology into discourse—eschew the presumption of Christian normativity that characterizes other theologies of religion.

At the same time, these approaches pose other problems. The mutuality model seems to relegate the divine—or ultimate reality—to a sphere beyond the reach of humans, effectively evacuating all religious traditions of any “revelatory” and experiential content. The acceptance model, suspending all metaphysical claims in order to assuage our postmodern sensitivities, does not do justice to the way these beliefs and practices have been understood by most of its adherents throughout history. As a result, the traditional Christocentric ontology would be replaced with equally unsatisfactory metanarratives, which would make comparative conversation either impossible or meaningless

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 285–322.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: a Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> See Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Ossining, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 2001).

Perry Schmidt-Leukel's reflection on the theology of religions seeks to provide an alternative to this kind of impasse. In his 2005 study *Gott ohne Grenzen*—available in English as *God Without Boundaries* (2017)—Schmidt-Leukel affirmed that speculation about the divine - ultimate reality, or transcendence - should be informed by all insights that the whole of humanity has been able to gather throughout its history, independently of confessional or cultural divisions.<sup>7</sup> Echoing the premise of Jerry Martin's later project *Theology without Walls* (TWW),<sup>8</sup> Schmidt-Leukel continued to work towards a pluralist theology of religions in his more recent work *Wahrheit in Vielfalt* (*Truth and Pluralism*, 2019), laying the foundations for an interreligious theology conceived as an all-encompassing trans-religious project.<sup>9</sup> In this volume, Schmidt-Leukel called for the development of interreligious theology as a discipline practiced together by individuals of different traditions. At the same time, he emphasized that no religious tradition is actually homogenous. Indeed, all religions are characterized by a measure of internal pluralism, reflected not only in a variety of theological formulations, but also in a plurality of spiritual practices. It is this internal pluralism, as opposed to the differences between distinct traditions, that could—or should—become the basis for a new kind of interreligious conversation.

This observation that truth manifests in a plural manner even within a single religious tradition is what informs Schmidt-Leukel's latest study *Das himmlische Geflecht* (*The Celestial Web*), a monograph published in German in May 2022. There, Schmidt-Leukel reflects on the image of Indra's net, a celestial web whose knots carry marvelous and resplendent jewels, and where every jewel reflects the whole web in its own way. On one hand, this image - rooted in the *Atharva Veda*, but also explored in Buddhist texts such as the highly-influential *Avatamsaka sūtra* - perfectly encapsulates the emptiness, or lack of an unchanging ground, that constitutes the totality of the universe.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, this vision of the world suggests that whoever can see the entire world in a fragment never loses sight of the distinguishing characteristics of its totality, envisaging the whole and its parts as mutually penetrating and complementary realities. Schmidt-Leukel's application of this hermeneutics to Buddhist-Christian dialogue implies that Buddhism and Christianity are no longer seen as doctrinal monoliths, but rather as multi-layered and partly heterogeneous structures. As scholars engage in the comparative exploration of this heterogeneity, they will discover a pattern where visible differences between the traditions can also be seen within each tradition. The result is a mutual interpenetration of the two traditions, which according to Schmidt-Leukel can enrich and even correct each other.<sup>11</sup>

Although Schmidt-Leukel does not explicitly propose it, the fractal model could be understood as a framework for a meta-theology of religions from a broad trans-religious perspective. The approach alerts us to the plurality within the traditions, but also to the echoes and similarities between the controversies that affect these same traditions. As such, this method

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<sup>7</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Gott ohne Grenzen: eine christliche und pluralistische Theologie der Religionen* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> See Jerry L. Martin (ed.), *Theology without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Wahrheit in Vielfalt: Vom religiösen Pluralismus zur interreligiösen Theologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> *Das Himmlische geflecht*, 14. See *Atharva Veda* 8, 8, 8; for the reference in the *Avatamsaka sūtra*, see Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture. Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, Boston and London: Shambala, 1993), 656.

<sup>11</sup> *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, 15.

appears to make subtle metaphysical and phenomenological claims about the nature of religious experience and its speculative conceptualization. At the same time, Schmidt-Leuekel offers us tools to articulate and describe these internal differences.

The hermeneutic developed in *Das Himmlische Geflecht* successfully avoids the danger of essentializing religions or imposing Abramitic categories on non-Abramitic traditions.<sup>12</sup> Mark Heim's approach in *Depth of the Riches* relies on a simple distinction between traditions aiming for an "impersonal" goal (such as Hinduism and Buddhism) and others (such as Judaism and Christianity) seeking a 'personal' relationship with the divine. Unfortunately, Heim oversimplifies the discussion and overlooks practices such as *bhakti* Hinduism or Tantric Buddhism no less than the impersonal elements of Christian mysticism such as we can find in Meister Eckhart.<sup>13</sup> To address this point, Schmidt-Leuekel references Wittgenstein's notion of *Familienähnlichkeit* (family resemblance), as well as Peter Antes' observation that each of the denominations within a specific tradition encompasses the distinct tendencies that gave rise to these different denominations in the first place.<sup>14</sup> For instance, Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism embrace fidelity to Scripture and to different modalities of ritual worship, even as each tradition emphasizes one or the other in different contexts or historical periods.<sup>15</sup> As a way to conceptualize this dynamics of internal diversity, Schmidt-Leuekel introduces Benoit Mandelbrot's work on the fractal character of the natural order and its tendency to self-replicate identically at different levels, such as the replication of the structure of whole mountain chains in individual mountains or smaller rock sections.<sup>16</sup> After exploring the work of earlier twentieth century scholars who applied analogous approaches to the study of religion, Schmidt-Leuekel moves on to claim that this fractal approach can underscore the parallels between interreligious and intrareligious differences. In this way, scholars can rediscover the complementary character of different traditions' explorations of ultimate reality and its multiple facets.<sup>17</sup> An earlier example of this approach could be found in the work of John Cobb, who used the categories "cosmic," "acosmic," and "theistic" to distinguish between different religious traditions, but also saw elements of each tendency within each tradition, thereby concluding that Christianity encompasses all three tendencies even if the theistic aspect remains prevalent.<sup>18</sup> For Schmidt-Leuekel, this fractal approach can ground a theology of religions that affirms different religious traditions as distinct, though not mutually exclusive soteriologies, while also offering a renewed

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<sup>12</sup> *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> In his book *The Self-Emptying Subject*, Alex Dubilet's discussion of Eckhart's kenotic language foregrounds the ultimate transcendent Grunt, the uncreated and impersonal ground from which the Trinitarian Godhead and our soul flow. See Alex Dubilet, *The Self-Emptying Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 4–22.

<sup>14</sup> *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, 29–30. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* §§ 65–71 (Frankfurt am Mein: Suhrkamp, 1977), 56–60; Schmidt-Leuekel references a personal communication with Peter Antes dated July 14, 2018

<sup>15</sup> While different Protestant churches have emphasized the centrality of Scripture, some Lutheran churches do not disdain ritual; and while Eastern Orthodox Christians are famously attached to their liturgical tradition, they have also traditionally cultivated *lectio divina*. Schmidt-Leuekel's approach helps us recover an awareness of the diversity *within* the traditions.

<sup>16</sup> *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, 54. See Benoit Mandelbrot, *Die fraktale Geometrie der Natur* (Basel: Birkhäuser), 1991.

<sup>17</sup> Already in 2004 William Jackson's monograph *Heaven's Fractal Net: Retrieving Lost Visions in the Humanities* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004) had applied this notion of fractal beyond the natural world to various fields of artistic production, such as music, architecture, mythology, or the figurative arts; see *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, 69. See John Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World. A Way beyond Absolutism and Relativism* (Ossining, N.Y.: Orbis Books).

pathway into the study of religious experience.<sup>19</sup>

In *Das himmlische Geflecht*, we find several examples of this fractal hermeneutics, and the way it casts a new light on Buddhist-Christian relations. Chapter 5, for instance, turns to the question of the relationship between the Christian belief in sin and the notion of karma that Buddhism shares with all *dharma* traditions.<sup>20</sup> The Augustinian tradition understands sin as disobeying a divine command in a way that compounds the hereditary effect of original sin., Hindu and Buddhist texts, for their part, tend to understand karma as the infringement of an intrinsic order of reality. Schmidt-Leukel notes that many contemporary Christians are moving away from the classical notion of sin, problematizing the notion of a God who sits in judgement over us; some openly reject Augustine's belief in the hereditary character of our forefathers' guilt. In a similar way, popular Buddhism in Tibet and elsewhere often conceptualizes karmas' long-term impact using imagery of personal judgement and retribution reminiscent of traditional Christianity. Clearly, this contrast shows how both Buddhism and Christianity can accommodate a "personal" and an "impersonal" understanding of actions that are not conducive to salvation/awakening; this happens even if each tradition does emphasize one aspect over the other.

In Chapter 6, Schmidt-Leukel follows a similar paradigm as he explores the evolution of Christology and the history of theoretical speculation on the person and the role of the Buddha.<sup>21</sup> The Christian tradition has inherited from the first centuries of its history what is customarily called a "high" Christological vision, which affirms the role of the eternal Logos—the second person of the Trinity—as the subject of the incarnation and the agent of Christ's actions. Buddhism, instead, has always drawn a distinction between the Buddha and the gods or *devās* of the Hindu tradition, emphasizing that the Buddha is not divine, and that the truth of his message is not dependent on his ontological status. Contemporary Christianity and Buddhism, however, have not left these old certitudes unchallenged. Ever since Schleiermacher's initial critique of traditional Christian metaphysics and dogma, Christian theologians have increasingly questioned the normativity of classical "Chalcedonian" Christology, opening the way for a rediscovery of "lower" Christologies in line with the vision of the Synoptic gospels. In an analogous way, anyone familiar with the "high" Buddhology of the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions will see how its exalted Buddhas and bodhisattvas are functionally—and soteriologically—analogous to the Christ of Nicaea and Chalcedon. We can see therefore how both Buddhism and Christianity can accommodate "high" and "low" speculative understandings of their founders, even if an irreducible difference remains between a theistic and a fundamentally non-theistic approach. The discussion in Chapter 5 and 6 shows how a fractal reading of religious pluralism helps us rediscover overlooked or forgotten elements of different religious traditions. As a result of this new perspective, we can no longer see specific traditions as distinct, monolithic entities, since all of them are part of Indra's all-encompassing divine net.<sup>22</sup>

What about the theological and spiritual tradition of the Christian East? Schmidt-Leukel's

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<sup>19</sup> This approach would not posit a single goal of "salvation" in a Christian/normative manner, but a variety of soteriological paths that could potentially enrich and complement each other.

<sup>20</sup> *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, Ch. 5 (*Was stimmt nicht mit uns- what is wrong with us?*), 189–220.

<sup>21</sup> *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, Ch. 6 (*Hoffnungsträger / Bearer of Hope*), 211–55.

<sup>22</sup> *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, 366. All traditions being 'part of Indra's net' would not erase their distinctiveness, but affirm their uniqueness, while simultaneously foregrounding the echoes between the traditions' internal diversity.

rigorous and comprehensive monograph casts a new perspective on theology of religions, but his exploration of fractal structures does not extend to a sustained engagement of Eastern Christianity; nowhere in *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, does he bring Eastern Christian authors into conversation with the Buddhist tradition. To compensate for this omission, the remaining part of this essay will apply the fractal method of comparison to the Byzantine debate on the divine energies between the Palamites and the Barlamites, and bring it into conversation with an analogous controversy in Tibetan Buddhism about the doctrine of the Buddha bodies. The application of Schmidt-Leukel's approach to this discussion will serve a two-fold purpose. On one hand, it will alert us to the surprising parallelism between two theological and metaphysical controversies: the Byzantine struggle to reconcile their apparently contrasting beliefs in God's radical transcendence and accessibility, and the Tibetans' analogous difficulty to conceptualize Buddhahood's extraordinary character and universality. On the other hand, it will demonstrate the power of Schmidt-Leukel's fractal hermeneutics to conceptualize analogous differences within different traditions, even beyond the areas of interreligious dialogue discussed in *Das Himmlische geflecht*.

### **Gregory Palamas and the Essence-Energies Distinction in Trinitarian Theology**

While Gregory Palamas (1296–1357/9) and his thought remain relatively unknown among Western Christians, his role and importance in the development of Eastern Christian theology are analogous to that of Thomas Aquinas in the East.<sup>23</sup> Palamas' contribution to Byzantine thought touched on a variety of themes, such as Christology, Trinitarian speculation and sacramental practice. His theological vision was broadly grounded in his monastic sensitivity, which Palamas had acquired during his early years on Mount Athos, especially between 1316 and 1320.<sup>24</sup> The fundamental question that preoccupied Byzantine theology in the early fourteenth century was that of the knowability of the divine reality, both in terms of the medium of knowledge (is the divine known solely by the intellect, or also through the heart and the other senses?) and in terms of its ultimate extent (can the divine be known in its fullness, or partially, or perhaps not at all?). On one hand, Byzantine thought was coming under the influence of Scholastic thought, as many works of Latin theology—including the writings of Thomas Aquinas—were becoming available in Greek translation. This approach promoted a more “intellectual” understanding of our knowledge of the divine, and suggested that our mind could experience a partial apprehension of the divine essence.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the traditional Byzantine understanding of the monastic life, strongly grounded in sacramental practice, was simultaneously being threatened by the popularity of Messalianism in certain monastic circles. Messalianism was a movement that could not be easily systematized, but its adherents affirmed the possibility of a direct experience of the divine in one's

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<sup>23</sup> The literature on Gregory Palamas is vast and keeps growing. The Russian émigré scholar John Meyendorff can be credited for introducing his thought to a Western audience: see his volumes *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (translated by George Lawrence. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 1998; *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (trans. by Adele Fiske. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 28–42.

<sup>25</sup> On the complex relationship between Palamas and Scholasticism (and the fact that Palamas was actually more influenced by Scholasticism than many of his later supporters would care to admit), see Marcus Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 44–50.

own body via the embrace of psycho-physical practices and silent prayer.<sup>26</sup> Palamas felt the need to develop a cogent response to these opposing, yet not unrelated tendencies. In his view, the penetration of Scholasticism and Messalianism into Byzantine theology reflected its failure to articulate a coherent theology of the relationship between divine accessibility and inaccessibility. A purely Scholastic spirituality was insufficient, as it envisioned our relationship with the divine in purely intellectual, rather than transformative terms. Equally, the kind of flight into interiority favored by the Messalians could forget the ontological boundary between God and the individual, and also bypass the church's sacramental economy. A more existential and holistic approach to this question was therefore needed, in order to ground the question of divine knowledge in a more comprehensive anthropology, but also to address the relationship between divine simplicity and our limited epistemological capacities. Palamas set out to do exactly that in his *Triads of the Hesychasts Saints*, but also in other explicitly apologetic works such as *Against Akindynos* or *Against Gregoras*.<sup>27</sup>

According to Palamas, in line with the broader hesychastic tradition, perception of the divine presupposes the achievement of *apatheia*—a condition that comprises both the intellect and the body. In the *Triads*, he tells us that “this body united to us has been joined to us by God as our collaborator, or rather put under our dominion; we must therefore suppress it, if it revolts, and accept it, if it behaves as it should.”<sup>28</sup> In another passage, he tells us that “there are blessed passions, activities common to soul and body, which do not attach the spirit to the flesh, but which draw up the flesh to a dignity near to that of the spirit.”<sup>29</sup> Once an individual has achieved an ordered inner life, one's soul will be full of spiritual joy, and that joy will overflow into the body, transforming it in turn into a vessel of divine grace. When the passions are offered “as a living sacrifice to God,” all our senses are transformed; the eyes are attentive to the divine teachings, and “our tongue, our hands and our feet are at the service of the divine will.”<sup>30</sup> When the intellect has reached full control over the passions, it will descend into the heart (*kardia*) and re-establishes the equilibrium that is so easily disrupted by sin; as such, the practice of pure prayer (*kathara proseuchē*) involves the body no less than the soul.<sup>31</sup> The question then, is the following: what do our intellect and our passions experience when they encounter the divine reality? Can we have a real, transformative exchange that nonetheless preserves the distinct ontological identities of God and the individual practitioner?

John Meyendorff draws a distinction between two different modes of apophatic thought: one in which God's unknowability is merely a consequence of the limitations of the human mind, and the other where radical divine transcendence and inaccessibility is an inherent property of the Godhead.<sup>32</sup> Barlaam, Palamas' first and most philosophically minded opponent, espoused the first of these two positions. He affirmed that the vision of God experienced by many mystics, including the great Denys the Areopagite, is nothing more than a created habit or an extrinsic gift—something that is received as a result of ascetic struggle, but not an actual encounter with the divine reality. In his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Denys tells us that the aim of spiritual practice is a

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<sup>26</sup> *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 32–7; 136–37.

<sup>27</sup> *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 81–101.

<sup>28</sup> *Tr.* II, 2, 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Tr.* II, 2, 12.

<sup>30</sup> *Tr.* II, 2, 20.

<sup>31</sup> *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 18–25.

<sup>32</sup> *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 203–204.

“continual love of God;” this consists in a “knowledge of beings as they are,” or a “science of the holy truth.”<sup>33</sup> Barlaam comments this passage saying that “the best gift which God has given us is the hierarchy, its end is the knowledge of beings; as the words of Dionysius teach us, knowledge of beings, that is to say philosophy, is the best thing we possess.”<sup>34</sup> Since the same Denys tells us that Being-in-itself, Life-in-itself, and Deity-in-Itself are providential powers flowing from the imparticipable God, Barlaam concludes in *Against the Messalians* that these realities are not eternal, but started to exist at a particular moment in time.<sup>35</sup> Akindynos and Gregoras, who would later resume Barlaam’s struggle with Palamism, albeit with less philosophical sophistication than their predecessor, would also contend that deified individuals participate in an inferior or created glory—something Akindynos calls “the divinity of men.”<sup>36</sup>

Palamas, for his part, is quite willing to acknowledge the value of an apophatic stance grounded in philosophical reasoning. This kind of apophatic contemplation is based on a knowledge of created beings; at the same time, “negation by itself is not enough for the intelligence to reach super-intelligible beings” such as God. True contemplation is not the result of intellectual detachment, but a unitive experience that mystically happens by the grace of God after intellectual detachment is achieved.<sup>37</sup> Denys himself seemingly suggested that entering into the divine darkness was actually a positive experience of God—an ignorance surpassing knowledge, “a cloud that is more than brilliant.” There, “divine things are given to the saints,” who enjoy “a participation in divine things, a gift and a possession that is more than a detachment.”<sup>38</sup> This is the basis of the distinction between God’s essence and God’s energies—something Palamas and later Palamite thinkers seek to trace back to the writings of Evagrius and the Cappadocians, but that the author of the *Triads* develops within a broader Trinitarian and Christological framework.

According to Palamas, the divine energies are the Trinitarian God’s manifestation in the created order, and cannot be considered as “beings” distinct from God, or as emanations in a Plotinian or gnostic manner. The energies have no hypostasis of their own; rather, they flow from the Trinitarian hypostasis, whose common nature is a “superessential essence.” As every nature comprises an essence and its energetic manifestation, so does the divine nature contain an unknowable essence that we can encounter in its energies. While Denys had talked of a God who is “more than God” (*hypertheos*), Palamas stays away from this terminology to avoid all kind of ditheism or Arianism: in the *Triads*, both essence and energies are eternal, uncreated, and part of the divine nature shared by the Trinitarian hypostases.<sup>39</sup> The essence-energies distinction is the framework for an encounter with the divine, which is a real experience of communion with a personal God without blurring the boundaries between creature and creator.

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<sup>33</sup> *Eccl. Hier.* I, 3 (PG 3, 376A)

<sup>34</sup> Here Barlaam is quoted by Palamas in *Tr.* II 3, 73.

<sup>35</sup> *De Divinis nominibus* XI, 6 (PG 3, 953D–956A); Barlaam is again quoted by Palamas in *Tr.* III, 2, 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Against Palamas* I, quoted in *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 205.

<sup>37</sup> *Tr.* I, 3, 17–9. One may note in passing that the standard critique levelled against “Latin” (Scholastic, Thomist) apophaticism by Orthodox apologists is that these Western attempts at negative theology are mere intellectual exercises and do not lead to an authentic transformative experience of the divine.

<sup>38</sup> *Tr.* I, 3, 18; see Dionysius, *Ep.* V (PG 3, 1073A).

<sup>39</sup> Palamas discusses this point in *Tr.* I, 3, 23 and II, 3, 8.



An important aspect of Palamas' theological reflection—and one that reveals his indebtedness to the hesychastic tradition of Athos—is its Christocentric character. Palamas turns to the mystery of the Transfiguration for a narrative rendering of his theology of deification: his interpretation of this event shows that the uncreated energies of the Godhead were fully enhyposatized in the person of the Logos, and that Christ's humanity is the privileged channel to access God's deifying grace. On the day Christ was transfigured on Tabor, it was “from the outside” (*exothēn*) that his body “lightened the souls” and illumined the bodies of those of his disciples who had already achieved dispassion. Now that Christ is no longer with us in the flesh, the very same grace illumines our souls and bodies “from within” (*endothēn*), as we receive the gift of grace in the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist.<sup>40</sup> This kind of “incarnational” theology ensures that the hypostatic union resolves the tension between apophatic and kataphatic practice; as we receive God's uncreated energies, we also acquire the divine likeness after the pattern of the incarnate Logos. In a paradoxical manner, the divine essence in its ultimate inaccessibility grounds the accessibility of the divine energies in the incarnation, and the divine energies introduce us to a relational and transformative encounter with the Godhead.

### **Tibetan Buddhism and the Controversy around the Buddha Bodies**

In the Vajrayāna tradition of Buddhism, preoccupation with the dialectic between transcendence and immanence is colored by the tradition's broader rejection of theism, no less than by the effective conflation of the Buddha nature with the totality of phenomenal reality. Many terms and categories are borrowed from Madhyamaka philosophical reflection on conventional and ultimate truth.<sup>41</sup> It would be a misunderstanding of the Tibetan tradition to think of a conventional, phenomenal reality undergirded by a distinct ultimate reality characterized by emptiness. Rather, Madhyamaka affirms the existence of one single reality that can be seen from two distinct perspectives: the validity of cause-and-effect laws at the conventional level continues to apply, and practitioners should not dismiss them as incompatible with the doctrine of emptiness. In Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, the third noble truth affirms the fundamental unity between *samsara* and *nirvāna*; the reason we are not aware of this reality is obfuscated by our ignorance and attachments, and by the resulting association of conventional reality with *samsara* and of ultimate reality with *nirvāna*. In this perspective, the goal of spiritual practice is to gain an insight into the nirvanic character of all reality, which at the same time is also the theater of all Buddhas' and bodhisattvas' compassionate activity. If the entire natural order is nirvanic, and *nirvāna* is identical with the *tathāgatagarbha*, all phenomenal reality, and all ordinary causal mechanisms - flow from the fundamental reality of enlightenment, and simultaneously help sentient beings achieve awakening. This effective Buddhological pantheism implies that awakening or enlightenment consists in the realization of one's own Buddha nature, which in turn is no different from the universal *tathāgatagarbha*.<sup>42</sup>

How is Buddhology, and more specifically, metaphysical speculation on the Buddha's different modes of manifestation related to the spiritual trajectory of the individual who is pursuing awakening? All schools of Tibetan Buddhism distinguished between the emptiness of the *dharmakāya*, or body of *dharma*—which comprises the dharmic “seeds” of every aspect of

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<sup>40</sup> *Tr.* I, 3, 38. The term *enhyposatosis* is here taken from its post-Chalcedonian Christological milieu and applied to a Trinitarian context to describe the relationship between the energies and the persons that share the divine essence.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, second ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 76–79.

<sup>42</sup> *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 103–28; see also Sallie King, *Buddha Nature* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 1991.

phenomenal reality—and the contingent quality of the different *rupakāyāh* or bodies of form, which include all manifestations of Buddhahood in conventional reality. These bodies of form can appear in our ordinary world, in which case they are known as *nirmanakāyāh*; examples of this are the body of the historical Gautama Buddha, but also all objects that transmit his teaching, such as *sūtra* scrolls, reliquaries, or paintings. In addition, the broader Mahāyāna tradition believed in the existence of distinct “pure realms” created by the merits of certain Buddhas and bodhisattvas. These realms were destined to become the residence of especially advanced devotees; those fortunate enough to access them would find it easier to move on to *nirvāna*. The bodies of the glorious bodhisattvas who create “pure realms” are known as *sambhogakāyāh*; in the Tibetan cultural areas are portrayed in countless thangkas or *stūpas*. In the same way as Madhyamaka philosophy asserts the fundamental unity of ultimate and conventional reality, all Tibetan schools of thought agreed on the fundamental unity and ultimate emptiness of the *dharmakāya* and of the different forms of *rupakāyāh*; the latter serve as skillful means for sentient beings seeking to move beyond their samsaric condition.<sup>43</sup> In this particular metaphysical horizon, there is no ultimate distinction between the Buddha nature that encompasses the universe as a whole, and the enlightened character of every sentient being. Indeed, the goal of spiritual practice is the realization that all ontological boundaries are conventional projections that lack enduring subsistence; the Buddha’s own realization of *nirvāna* is identical to the experience of all sentient beings who reach awakening.

Meditative practices developed by different Tibetan schools may use the visualization of *sambhogakāyāh* Buddhas as the starting point, but the end-goal is the realization of one’s fundamental emptiness in the *dharmakāya*.<sup>44</sup> In the Gelug tradition, the realization of the body of dharma is the culmination of a complex process of philosophical training and metaphysical practice that goes through a number of carefully scripted stages. The latter are clearly mapped out in the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (“The Ornament of Realization”), one of five Sanskrit texts believed to have been transmitted to the sage Asaṅga (fourth century) by the bodhisattva Maitreya.<sup>45</sup> In turn, the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*’ eight chapters summarize the chief themes of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* (“The Perfection of Wisdom”). The first three chapters explore the “three knowledges” that are the goals of practice: the wisdom that is attained by the Buddhas (*sarvākārajñatā*), the knowledge of all paths of practice (*mārgākārajñatā*), and the highest level of wisdom (*sarvajñatā*) which can be attained by *śravakas* or *pratyekabuddhas*, or in other words, Hinayana practitioners. The following four practices—which instead are only open to practitioners of the Great Vehicle—represent successive stages of development on the way to *nirvāna*: full awakening to all aspects of reality (*sarvākārābhisambodha*), the achievement of clear realization or insight (*murdhābhisamaya*), sustained clear realization over time (*anupurvābhisamaya*), and the ability to achieve clear realization in an

<sup>43</sup> The literature on the Buddha bodies is vast. See again *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 172–86; for a more extended discussion, see Guang Xing, *The Concept of the Buddha: its evolution from early Buddhism to the trikāya theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> For a simple introduction to these visualization practices, see Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig, Lord of Love: Principles and Methods of Deity Meditation* (Ashland, Oh.: Clearpoint Press, 1991). A more detailed approach can be found in Herbert Guenther, *The creative vision: the symbolic recreation of the world according to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of Tantric visualization otherwise known as the developing phase* (Novato, CA: Lotsawa Press, 1987), a translation of a classical century text by *Dge-rtse paṇḍita* (1764–?).

<sup>45</sup> *Buddhahood embodied*, 109–27; for the text of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, see Edward Conze, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra: Introduction and Translation from Original Text, With Sanskrit-Tibetan Index* (Roma: Serie Orientale, 1954). For the structure of Gelug tradition, see Georges Dreyfus, “Tibetan scholastic education and the role of soteriology,” in Paul Williams (ed.), *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*, vol. VI (London and New York: Routledge), 32–57.

instant (*ekaksanābhisamaya*). The result of these practices—discussed in chapter eight—is the *dharmakāya* of the Buddhological tradition, a condition of utter emptiness and luminosity that is identical with Buddhahood.<sup>46</sup>

Is the *dharmakāya* then a logical-epistemological concept, or an experiential reality? In his commentary on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, Ārya Vimuktisena (sixth century), influenced by the non-dual yogic tradition, understands the expression “essence body” (*svabhāvikakāya*) in chapter eight of the text as synonymous with *dharmakāya*. In this way, he suggests that the emptiness of all the *dharmas* is indistinguishable from the essence of Buddhahood available to all sentient beings. In this perspective, there are only three kinds of body; as already mentioned, the ultimate experience of the Buddha is no different from the experience of all other practitioners.<sup>47</sup> Other commentators, however, deploy a more rigidly philosophical approach to the text, drawing a distinction between the *dharmakāya*, on one hand, and the *svabhāvikakāya*, on the other. One of these authors is Haribhadra (eighth century; not to be confused with the fifth-century Jain writer of the same name), who drove an ontological wedge between a so-called *svabhāvikakāya* and the regular *dharmakāya*, effectively postulating the existence of four Buddha bodies. In this perspective, the *svabhāvikakāya* is epistemologically exclusive to the Buddha; the lower *dharmakāya*, instead, bridges the gap between the Buddha’s own enlightenment and the phenomenological reality of the world of form, furnishing the ground for all kinds of ordinary or exalted *rupakāyāh*.<sup>48</sup> Haribhadra’s approach—which would be regarded as normative by such an authority as Tsong kha pa (1357–1419)—suggested that as long as practitioners were not fully enlightened, they could only gain an insight into the “lower” dimension of the body of *dharma*. Eventually, however, they would be able to work their way gradually to the full experience of Buddhahood.<sup>49</sup> According to John Makransky, these different interpretations of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* reflected the difficulty to conceptually reconcile an understanding of the enlightened state and the Buddha nature that stressed their transcendent character, and the fundamental immanence of *bodhicitta* that permeated the whole of phenomenal reality. The three-body theory stressed the accessibility of *nirvāna* to all sentient beings, and the fact that the whole natural order is identical with the Buddha nature. The four-body theory, for its part, implied that awakening was the culmination of a lengthy trajectory of practice, and emphasized the extraordinary character of the enlightened experience.<sup>50</sup> This second approach was more consonant with the lengthy monastic training of the Gelug tradition, while other schools such as Kagyud and Nyingma were more sympathetic to the three-body theory and its more “democratic” approach.

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<sup>46</sup> For the pedagogical role of this classification, see Georges Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press: 2003), Ch. 8, 174–182.

<sup>47</sup> *Buddhahood embodied*, 159–86.

<sup>48</sup> *Buddhahood embodied*, 225–48, where Makransky also discusses Haribhadra’s refutation of the three-body interpretation.

<sup>49</sup> *Buddhahood embodied*, 289–306. Tsong kha pa’s Buddhological vision also undergirds his gradualist approach to awakening, which stresses the important role of ethical practice.

<sup>50</sup> *Buddhahood embodied*, 15, 18. This controversy effectively reflects a long-standing tension within the Tibetan tradition that opposes a more philosophical and speculative approach to the path and a more experiential and “yogic” understanding.

## Comparative Conversations and Conclusion

Scholars of Eastern Christianity familiar with the Palamite controversy will not fail to notice the uncanny points of contact with the Tibetan debates outlined above. Each tradition wrestled with the question of the relationship between the transcendence and the immanence of Buddhahood or the Trinitarian Godhead—and wondered how the experience of salvation or enlightenment of ordinary practitioners related to the ground of *nirvāna* or the divine reality. Similarly, each tradition understood that the answer to these questions would have important implications for the way spiritual practice should be understood. Was the divine reality easily accessible to anyone embarking on a spiritual path, or were salvation and awakening experiences necessitating protracted effort that not everyone was able to undertake? Similarly, both Tibetan Buddhism and Byzantine Christianity were preoccupied with the metaphysical implications of the debate. Were Christ and the Buddha ontologically unique, or could anyone attain the same level of spiritual achievement as the founders of the two traditions?

Within the Christian tradition, ever since the articulation of Chalcedonian Christology in 451 and the condemnation of Origenism in the sixth century, the theological consensus had underscored the uniqueness of the hypostatic union—an event where the divine Logos is the subject of all actions of Christ, who acts through a human and a divine nature.<sup>51</sup> As such, the deification of the individual entails a partial, though never a complete appropriation of the divine nature. In the late Byzantine period, Palamas' essence-energies distinction applies an analogous conceptual framework to our relationship with the Trinitarian Godhead, which we experience fully in the divine energies, but whose inaccessible essence ultimately eludes us. Critics of Palamas, who seemingly affirmed our ability to perceive the divine essence, challenged the essence-energies distinction, and emphasized foregrounding the centrality of the intellect in our apprehension of the divine reality. They also questioned the *Triads'* apparent introduction of an ontological distinction within God. In the end, the Palamite vision affirmed the ontological “otherness” of the divine nature, as well as the reality of individual deification. At the same time, it viewed our appropriation of the divine energies as falling short of the fullness of the hypostatic union. Palamas' opponents, for their part, had developed alternative approaches that downplayed or fully questioned the separateness of the divine nature, or postulated a direct apprehension of the divine reality, thereby undercutting the need for sacramental practice and institutional mediation.

In Tibet, all schools of thought agree that the Buddha nature—or *tathāgatagarbha*—encompasses the totality of the natural order, and that Buddhahood is identical to the awakened state. The consensus is that every practitioner can experience the same nirvanic insight of the Buddha, and indeed, that there is ultimately no ontological distinction between the Buddha and any sentient being. The Gelug approach resting on Haribhadra's reading of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* distances itself from this position and affirms the existence of a fourth *kāya* representing an epistemological insight that is exclusive to the Buddha. This alternative approach stresses the extraordinary character of the Buddha's experience of liberation, and at the same time it emphasizes that this experience can only be achieved through a lengthy philosophical and meditational practice, such as the lengthy training of the Gelug school. In this context, the split

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<sup>51</sup> See John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), Ch. 3 (“The Origenist Crisis in the fifth century”), 47–68.

within the *dharmakāya* serves an analogous function to the essence-energies distinction: it secures the ultimate transcendence of the ontological foundation of reality, while also providing a framework for this reality's presence in our ordinary world.

Schmidt-Leukel's fractal theory of religious pluralism offers us the tool to conceptualize the internal pluralism within the Byzantine and the Tibetan tradition, as well as their surprising echoes and similarities. Apart from offering scholars of Buddhist-Christian dialogue a new set of tools to articulate the analogy between these controversies, the phenomenological claims implicit in *Das Himmlische Geflecht* alert us to the parallelism between the two debates. This is clearly one more example of the internal pluralism characterizing all religious traditions. If a manualist approach to Buddhism and classical Christianity, as already noted above, set up the uniqueness of Christ's divinity against the non-divine character of the Buddha, the high Buddhological speculation of the various Tibetan schools and the theologies of deification of the Eastern Christian tradition appear to qualify this contrast. The inaccessible energies in the *Triads of the Hesychast Saints* and the *svabhāvikakāya* of the Gelug school are guarantees of transcendence in worlds with radically distinct assumptions about ultimate reality. For Palamas, one strives to achieve a personal relationship with a Trinitarian God through the medium of the divine energies. For Gelug practitioners, sentient beings explore the lower-level *dharmakāya* in order to approximate gradually the Buddha's own enlightenment. The created order and the bodies of form lure us into a more intimate relationship with the divine or grant us a better insight into fundamental emptiness.

Continuing the conversation begun in his 2005 monograph *Gott ohne Grenzen*, Schmidt-Leukel is making ontological claims about the nature of religious experience, but at the same time is also developing a descriptive model of ultimate reality accounting for the internal diversity withing different traditions. *Das Himmlische Geflecht*'s fractal phenomenology avoids the kind of essentialism that mars Mark Heim's Trinitarian theology of religious ends. In recognizing the internal pluralism of different traditions, both Buddhism and Christianity affirm a transcendent reality that is the ontological ground of the natural order—with all the qualifications needed to talk about Buddhahood's "groundless ground"—and that is simultaneously an immanent energy accessible to practitioners. In both cases, one side of the debate is preoccupied with the "simplicity" of the Godhead or the oneness of the *dharmakāya*—and indeed, of all Buddha bodies—whereas the other is willing to modify this undifferentiated quality, so that accessibility does not jeopardize its extraordinary character.

In both traditions, the imitation of Christ and the imitation of the Buddha provide a paradigm for practice, even if Christ's experience is unique to him and the Buddha's experience ultimately is not. In both cases, some thinkers privilege a logical and intellectual approach to ultimate reality, affirming the apperception of the divine essence, or the nature of *svabhāvikāya* as an insight unique to the Buddha; others prefer an experiential approach, such as that provided by the Palamite encounter with the divine energies, or the three *kāyas* interpretation of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*. A fundamental difference between these two fractal structures is that in the Byzantine tradition, those fostering a more intellectual kind of practice are strong advocates of divine simplicity, whereas in Tibet it is the Gelug schools of thought that supports a four-*kāya* approach.

This conversation confirms the heuristic fruitfulness and validity of Schmidt-Leukel’s approach and its value for the often-neglected dialogue between Eastern Christianity and Buddhism. What might arguably be missing from this framework is a way to conceptualize elements that *resist* the fractal structure and are unique to specific traditions.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps, to echo Catherine Cornille’s discussion of the interreligious learning processes that characterize dialogue—something Schmidt-Leukel reviews in Ch. 9 of *Das Himmlische Geflecht*—this discussion of irreducible differences will be the next stage in the “intensification of learning” made possible by the fractal approach.<sup>53</sup>



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<sup>52</sup> As an example of irreducible difference, one could point to the centrality of the belief in a creator God in Christianity, and the emphatic denial of such a notion within the broader Buddhist tradition; or, similarly, the assertion of the uniqueness of Christ’s incarnation versus the variety of *avatāras* in Vaiṣṇavite Hinduism. In each case, the Christian tradition appears to make claims that are explicitly challenged by the other—a situation the fractal approach does not address.

<sup>53</sup> *Das Himmlische Geflecht*, 358–66.