Encountering "the Event" as Event:
Transforming Christian Theological Reflection about Religious Others

(Full Paper)

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This paper focuses on the second theme of the conference: "How does an 'ontology of decision,' an emphasis on event, multiplicity, and becoming change the framework and landscape" in which theology operates?

For Deleuze, the event is "a vanishing mediator…which renders disjunct the previous state of an object (the site) and the state that follows.…It makes us present to the present."[1] Alain Badiou tells us that the event is that unpredictable something that allows truth in its newness to disrupt our situations, to break into the status quo.[2] Badiou also grounds subjectivity in the event: the subject is one who acts or lives in fidelity to an event.

My encounter as a theologian with the notion of the event—and associated concepts from the philosophies of Badiou and Deleuze, and from Process theology—has dramatically altered the direction of my work. The event has become the overarching metaphor in my own theological reflection. Indeed, my subjectivity as a systematic theologian is grounded in fidelity to two events which called into question what I had previously taken for granted and which set me on a dramatically different course.

The first event is my encounter as a Christian with religious others, particularly Zen Buddhism. This encounter has transformed not only my understanding of the central

questions and method of Christian theology, but also my understanding of the Christian faith itself, what it means to be a follower of Christ in the presence of religious others.

The second event is my encounter with the notion of "the event" itself, primarily as it is used in the thought of Badiou himself, but also with related concepts in Deleuze and Process thought.

In this paper I will discuss how this second event allows us (a) to make theological sense of the first event, (b) to critique structural weaknesses in traditional approaches to Christian systematic theology, and (c) to envision a way forward.[3]

Event 1: Encounter with Zen

Some years ago, as an Episcopalian working toward an M.T.S. at a Christian seminary, I embarked on a serious study of Zen Buddhism. Although this was not my first exposure to Buddhism (I had read D.T. Suzuki and the Beat writers as a teenager), it was the first time I studied Buddhism seriously, as both student and practitioner. Through Zen practice since then, I have had fleeting yet significant experiences of what many of my Christian students find especially hard to grasp: the "dropping away of self," the fundamental breakdown of separation between subject and object, self and other.

By "nonduality" I do not mean some homogenizing sameness in which all cats are ultimately grey.[4] Rather, I have in mind a nonduality which refuses to subsume either x under not-x, or not-x under x. This sense of nonduality is expressed in a number of ways in the Buddhist tradition: for instance, in the famous tenet of the Heart Sutra, "form is emptiness, and emptiness is form"; or in Nāgārjuna's doctrine of "two truths," superficial and ultimate, "each of which has its proper sphere of application, and each of which is in harmony with the other."[5]

As those familiar with Buddhist teaching know, this meditative experience—what I'll call "the Zen experience," without claiming that it is the same for all practitioners—is not escape to some placid, disembodied, other-worldly transcendence. Rather, it is an immersion in immanence, in "interbeing" or interdependent arising (*pratītya samutpāda*), the realization of radical *non*-separation from the living, breathing, buzzing, spinning world: the world of barking dogs and car horns and the susurration of a summer breeze through the window screens. A world, by the way, which Whitehead and Deleuze might find congenial; a world in which their notions of being as becoming ring true.[6]

Though the Zen experience has had a powerful, indeed transformative impact on my life and work, nothing in Buddhist teaching or practice has weakened my belief in the fundamental authority of Christ, his teachings and example. So I have not been faced with the problem of conversion from Christianity to Buddhism. Rather, the truth of Buddhist teaching has become a vital part of my life as a Christian. This is not to say that the two paths are easily reconciled—but more on that later.

Having undergone something of the Zen experience, I faced a special challenge: as another Christian practitioner of Zen, Ruben Habito, puts it, the challenge is to "articulate [that] experience in a way that issues from and resonates with the Biblical worldview upon which [one] bases her own self-understanding as a Christian."[7]

My theological life would have been simpler—though far less interesting—had I been able simply to add nonduality to my stock of Christian beliefs: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, etc., etc., the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting, and the nonduality of self and other."

But of course it isn't as simple as that. As Habito also notes, articulating the Zen experience from a Christian perspective entails reconsidering "key questions on the understanding of God, of creation, of the role or place of Jesus Christ…in the light of the Christian's Zen experience."[8] In other words, the Zen experience has systemic or structural implications which ripple through the whole web of Christian belief.

Therein lie two quite sticky theological problems, which have been the focus of my work since then.

The first is how to account theologically for the existence of deep, powerful, life-changing truth outside the Christian tradition. If the Church is, as the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer says, "the pillar and ground of truth," how are we to account for and understand the existence of truth outside the Church?[9]

After all, one strand in the Christian tradition holds that no significant, religiously relevant truth exists outside the Christian "thing." Martin Luther asserted that those who are "outside Christianity remain in eternal wrath and perdition."[10] More recently, Karl Barth contrasted Christianity as "the religion of truth over against the religions of error," and characterized non-Christians as "heathen, poor, and utterly lost."[11] While Luther and Barth may turn out to be wrong, it is important not to simply write them off.

The problem, or problems, might be formulated this way. What is the relation of Buddhist truth to "the pillar and ground of [Christian] truth"? Is Buddhist truth "grounded" in the divine revelation recognized by the Church? If it is not so grounded, is it consistent with that Christian truth? Or is it different? Is it something new, something the Christian tradition has somehow missed? If so, how has this happened?

The second, and related, theological problem is the doctrinal ripple effect mentioned above. Changes in one part of the theological system can cause disturbances elsewhere in the system. To demonstrate this, let me take a moment to discuss an example, upon which much of my own work has focused: the effects of the Zen experience on Christian theological anthropology, Christian theological reflection on the human self or person.

The Buddhist doctrine of *anattā*, or no-self, is, as Lynn de Silva observes, "the bedrock of Buddhist teaching."[12] While variously understood, the teaching of *anattā* (Pali; *anātman* in Sanskrit) essentially holds that the common human experience/sense of separate and independent selfhood is delusory. This follows naturally from the nondual experience—or one could say that the teaching of *anattā* attempts to express in words the nondual experience.[13]

Anattā constitutes a radical challenge to the atomistic individualism that still dominates Western thought, and Western *Christian* thought. Individualism absolutizes separate bodily existence and fails to express the totality—the individual in a wider web of relationships with others. It does not recognize the insight that (as Mary O'Neill puts it) one enjoys one's existence only in the company of the other.[14] Despite recent challenges by new theologies stressing relationality and change—particularly feminist and Process theologies—we in the West still tend to think of the person as a separate and self-contained being, a spiritual or mental "substance" or "essence," externally related to the world and other selves.

The message of much Christian teaching remains profoundly individualistic. This is particularly true with common understandings of salvation. Many hold that *your*

salvation, and thus your ultimate destiny, is ultimately separate from *mine*. We are *soteriologically* separate, and thus, ultimately, *ontologically* separate. Take for example the traditional Christian rejection of universal salvation. If some persons will be saved and others not, then the distinctions between individuals carry over in some sense from this life to the next.

This individualistic anthropology is expressed particularly forcefully in evangelical and fundamentalist circles—not surprisingly, given the evangelical emphasis on the personal/individual decision of faith in Jesus Christ. An extreme but not unrepresentative example is visible in the following remarks by Baptist pastor W. A. Criswell:

> The great thing Jesus did for us was to set forth the worth of the individual, the priceless gift of personality. He worked upon the principle that society derives its life from the individuals who compose it. The individual man remains forever separate. He is incapable of fusion.[15]

Equally telling is the choice of language which R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips use in framing their evangelical perspective on Christian salvation. They write: "We hold that *individual* salvation depends on explicit *personal* faith in Jesus Christ." Elsewhere they speak of God's having revealed "his method for saving *individuals*."[16]

While these voices from Christianity's right wing do not speak for all Western Christians, they do reflect a broader individualism in Western Christian anthropology, an individualism whose roots run deep in the Christian tradition. As Charles Taylor shows in *Sources of the Self*, the monadic self has its roots in a gradual trend toward inwardness in Western thought, beginning with Augustine's belief in an inward path to God, deepening with Descartes' *cogito*, and culminating in Locke's point-like self.[17] The

result is a sense of the self as primarily interior, ontologically separate from God, other human selves, and the wider world.[18]

Reinforcing this trend toward interiority and separateness is what Catherine Keller has described as the patriarchal "hero-warrior" ideal, an "ontological belligerence" in which the human self attempts to absolve itself from relation with the other.[19] Furthermore, Keller observes, Western Christians have projected this illusion of radically independent selfhood onto God: the strong separation between God and world resembles "a patriarchal man-to-man relation."[20] As Mary O'Neill notes, this extends to understandings of the savior, Jesus, who is often depicted as "a lone male redeemer."[21]

The Buddhist teaching/experience of no-self and "interbeing" throw such notions into question.[22] In other words, the ontological and/or epistemological problems facing Christians seeking to make sense of the nondual experience are *systemic* and *structural* in nature. Roger Trigg notes this interlocking aspect in Christianity: "The self, consciousness, rationality, moral understanding and free will are all linked in a way that means that an attack on one can easily become an attack on them all."[23] We can add to Trigg's list Christian notions of God, Christ, and salvation.

After several attempts at a Buddhist-Christian comparative theological anthropology, I determined that I could not adequately address the anthropological questions without a satisfactory overarching conceptual framework with which to get at the systemic or structural problems. That brings us, then, to the second "event": my theological encounter with the concept of the event itself, in the philosophies of Badiou, Deleuze, and Whitehead.

Event 2: Encountering Philosophies of the Event

Christian truth has traditionally been conceived as a fixed and stable unity, revealed once and for all by, in, and through Christ. We see this, for instance, in the Catholic idea of "deposit of the faith," wherein Scripture and Tradition are seen as the font of eternally unchanging revealed truth. The bishop of my Episcopal diocese alludes to just such an idea when, in attempting to justify his continued opposition to the ordination of women to the priesthood, he speaks of his intention "to uphold and maintain the catholic faith and order of the Church and to pass on a secure future to our children and our grandchildren."[24] The world may change, our understanding may develop, but the deposit of the faith never changes.

Under such a view, the theological task, however construed, is fundamentally one of reflecting on that fixed and unchanging "pillar and ground of truth"; theological formulations are valid insofar as they replicate, correspond to, cohere with, or are faithful to that stable unity. Furthermore, the witness of religious others is measured against the presumably fixed "truth" of Christianity. Difference from what Christians recognize as truth equates at best to theological irrelevance, at worst to heresy, error, and evil.

Philosophies of the event radically challenge these notions—or fantasies—of a fixed Christian truth. In their different ways, Badiou, Deleuze, and Whitehead ask us: What if there are no stable identities? What if being is becoming? What if, as Deleuze contends, "difference is behind everything," and "behind difference there is nothing"?[25] Or, as Badiou assumes, there is nothing but infinite multiplicity?[26] What if identities such as "the deposit of the faith" are only surface constructions?

If we take becoming, multiplicity, and difference as our ontological starting point, the theological task must be rethought—perhaps along the lines of Deleuze's concept of

philosophy: it "does not settle things. It disturbs them.…by moving beneath the stable world of identities and show[ing] them to be little more than the froth of what there is."[27] The theological task becomes one of opening up new ways of seeing a world created by God as characterized by becoming, multiplicity, and difference.

One of the effects of this sea-change in views of Christian truth and the theological task is to focus attention on the discursive construction of Christian identity. Whatever else it may be, Christianity is also a community of *discourse*. By discourse I mean its sense as generally found in cultural studies: "the forms of representation, conventions and habits of language use producing specific fields of culturally and historically located meanings."[28] This sense of discourse owes much to the work of Michel Foucault, particularly *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.[29] Foucault's important insight is that discourse works to *construct* what its practitioners—for example, psychiatrists and psychologists in the discourse of psychopathology—accept as "real," "true," and/or "given." Foucault shows that the objects of a given discourse—e.g., madness—do not exist "outside" or "before" the discourse, which then describes or enumerates them. Rather, discourses "systematically form the objects of which they speak."[30]

A central activity of Christian discourse is to mark the *boundaries* of the Christian community. The discourse of those who recognize themselves in relationship with God in Christ *constructs* "the Christian"—and, explicitly or implicitly, the "not-Christian," religious others. Christians and religious others do not exist apart from the discourse of Christians themselves.

At this point, the philosophy of Alain Badiou is helpful. Christianity and Christian theology have the character of what Badiou terms a *situation*: a structured presentation of a multiplicity, a collection of multiples selected out of the wider plural reality and, in Badiou's terminology, "counted for one."[31] Within the richly plural context of human religious life, some religious practitioners self-identify as "Christians," and mark off certain multiplicities (beliefs, practices, texts, traditions, perspectives, behaviors, communities, institutions, and so on) as "Christian."[32]

In so doing, they explicitly or implicitly exclude other multiplicities as "not-Christian." What is excluded from the situation Badiou terms its *void*. In terms of Christian theology, we might say that the voices of religious others are conspicuous by their absence from the theological conversation. A Buddhist's experience of *satori* or a Vodounist's experience of possession by a *loa*, for example, have rarely been a factor in Western Christian theological reflection. However, non-Christians frequently serve as the "other" over against which Christian theologians have defined what is essentially Christian. And this process of definition—this process of identity-formation and boundary-drawing—frequently involves making claims about the nature of religious others without recourse to the witness of religious others themselves.[33] Let me give five examples, drawing upon some of the major "names" in modern and postmodern Christian theology.

Friedrich Schleiermacher argues that the distinctive essence of all religions is the "feeling of absolute dependence," which he claims is both a universal feature of human consciousness, and the presence or manifestation of God in the human interior.[34] While this suggests a fundamental commonality between Christianity and other religions,

Schleiermacher also takes it for granted that the Christian theologian's task is to establish the superiority of Christianity over all other religions, and he attempts to do just that by ranking religions according to a hierarchy of development, with Christianity (not surprisingly) at the top. Yet the only religion of which Schleiermacher demonstrates substantial knowledge is Christianity itself.[35] His comments about religious others are based not on any genuine familiarity with them, but on *a priori* beliefs. In some cases, his remarks about religious others are distressingly inaccurate.[36]

Religious others are the implicit key to Karl Barth's claims for the supremacy of Christianity in his *Church Dogmatics*.[37] For Barth, Christianity is the only religion which, in response to divine revelation, understands all religion (including Christianity itself *qua* religion) as unbelief. Religious others, being lost in utter darkness, have nothing of value to say to Christians.[38] Yet Barth makes this claim *a priori*, without any significant examination of what religious others themselves have to say.[39] In Barth's discourse, religious others are truly *void*: their voices are virtually absent.

At first glance, Karl Rahner would seem to express greater tolerance for religious others by speculating that God works through the historical institutions of humans, including those of non-Christians. These latter can thereby be called "anonymous Christians," Christians without realizing it. Yet his essay advancing this theological hypothesis offers no evidence from religious others themselves. Without examining the witness of religious others, it is difficult to see how Rahner can be sure that Christians are not in fact anonymous Buddhists or anonymous Muslims or anonymous Wiccans.[40]

In his landmark manifesto of postliberal theology, *The Nature of Doctrine*, George Lindbeck asserts that religions are language-like entities that are mutually

incommensurable and untranslatable. For Lindbeck, membership in the Christian

situation involves speaking the Christian language, and interpreting the world through its

system of discursive and nondiscursive symbols. Since Christians have "ways of

experiencing and being oriented toward self, neighbor, and cosmos" that are "radically

(i.e., from the root) distinct" from religious others,[41] Christians and religious others can

have little in common apart from their mutual isolation.[42] But here again, the intensive

empirical support is lacking. How does Lindbeck know that the Buddhist experience of

kensho, for example, is radically distinct from any Christian experience, without

consulting Buddhists themselves?

A final example: Gustavo Gutiérrez. One might expect Gutiérrez's theology to be

more open to the witness of religious others, since for him, being Christian is less a

function of belief and more a matter of openness to the neighbor and participation in

liberative praxis. Yet his own theology methodologically excludes non-Christian

voices—most distressingly, the non-Christian indigenous peoples of Latin America. This

implies a double-standard regarding the witness of the marginalized. Although Gutiérrez

holds that God's gracious presence works efficaciously in the lives of non-Christians, he

fails to accord their witness to that divine presence the authority of Christian witness.

Again, this elevation of Christian sources over non-Christian suggests that the former are

somehow closer to divine truth.[43]

These examples also suggest another aspect of Badiou's notion of the void: it is

not simply excluded from a given situation; it also *constitutes* the situation by the very

fact of its exclusion.[44] The situation cannot exist *qua* situation *without* that which is not

counted as belonging to it.[45] Similarly, "The Christian" only exists over against, or in

contradistinction to, what is deemed not-Christian.

Since the void is constitutive of the situation, there is always the possibility that

the situation can dissolve into the void. Thus we find a perennial concern in the Christian

tradition to maintain authenticity and orthodoxy, what is considered distinctively

"Christian" over against the perceived threat of "alien" influences or ideas. In order to

stabilize the situation—to prevent the void from breaking into and disrupting it—

something is needed to order the elements and establish their relation to one another.

Badiou calls this ordering dynamic the *state* of a situation.[46]

In Christian theology, the state is associated with the selection of norms, those

criteria by which the adequacy of given theological sources or formulations are

measured.[47] It has been accepted practice among Western Christian theologians to

restrict the range of theological norms to texts arising within the Christian community:

the Bible, the Christian tradition (including, in my own community, the common liturgy

of the Prayer Book), the work of other Christian theologians. Two other commonly cited

theological norms, reason and experience, are usually restricted to the reason and

experience *of Christians*.

The situation and its state also structurally limit what can be known within the

situation. Here we can apply the distinction Badiou draws between *knowledge*, which is

only situational, and *truth*, which is universal and exceeds the situation. A truth is, from

within a situation, always something new, something extra.[48]

So long as Christians operate solely within the Christian situation, what they can

"know" is limited to the elements collected therein. Since the state of the Christian

situation works to keep the void (religious others) "off the radar," Christians can have

little or no sense of either the wider realm of human religiosity or the ways Christian

elements relate to it. As the void which is constitutive of the Christian situation, religious

others point to the insufficiency and limitations of that situation, and reveal a truth greater

than the knowledge available therein—truth not only about the Christian situation itself,

but also about God, humanity, the cosmos. If no attempt is made to listen to the voices of

those outside the Christian situation (as constructed by particular instances of theological

discourse), Christian theology loses access to that truth and remains trapped in its own

circular self-affirmation.[49] This is precisely what happens in the work of the five

theologians I cited earlier.

Barth famously criticized Schleiermacher for losing access to the otherness of the

divine Other by conflating God with the human self. Yet the problem in Schleiermacher

goes deeper than Barth realized. By excluding the voices of religious others from his

theological discourse, Schleiermacher also blocks access to other human experiences of

the Ultimate. God is reduced to that which the Church mediates and what members of

that Church "experience."[50]

Despite his own well-founded warnings against absolutizing the Christian

religion, Barth effectively conflates divine revelation with what *Christians* recognize as

divine revelation. Even where he allows for divine revelation via "other lights," he insists

that these can be true only insofar as they correspond to and confirm the revelation

recognized by Christians. As a result, he absolutizes the Christian situation and

domesticates God accordingly. God, it seems, cannot speak in ways other than those in

which God has spoken to Christians. Because Barth's discourse blocks out the

experiences of religious others, God is reduced to what *Christians* experience as "God," and God's redemptive action is reduced to the activity of the Church.[51]

For Rahner, there is no unmediated access to God. Since humans are intrinsically and necessarily historical and social beings, God acts in history through their social institutions (thus his reference to "the incarnational and social structure of grace")—including religions other than Christianity. Although Rahner opens the door to a recognition of God's presence among religious others, he then closes it by holding, *a priori*, that only Christianity bears the fullness of divine, saving truth. Once again, God is effectively reduced to what Christians "know" about God.

Lindbeck takes to heart Rahner's insight that there is no unmediated access to the divine. Yet his focus shifts almost completely to what mediates, i.e., to language and the tradition of the Church (including the biblical texts). In Lindbeck's discourse, the conflation of God with the texts of the Church, which is implicit in Barth's discourse, is fully manifest. Lindbeck's discourse gives the impression that God is somehow intrinsically bound up with, and does not exceed, the language/tradition of the Church. As Ronald Thiemann comments with respect to *The Nature of Doctrine,* Lindbeck risks replacing "God" with the "text."[52] Put differently, Lindbeck's turn to the text directs Christians away from a concern for the otherness of the divine Other—that which exceeds any human situation, including the Christian—and toward the "knowledge" of the Christian situation, as that knowledge is constrained by the doctrinal rules that constitute that situation's state. What exceeds the Christian situation is regarded either as inaccessible or as comprehensible only in terms of Christian "knowledge."

Again, one might expect the picture to be different with Gutiérrez, for he fully recognizes that we cannot know and worship the divine Other apart from encounter with, and service to, human others. Of the five theologians considered here, only Gutiérrez succeeds in opening Christian theological discourse to the witness of socially, politically, and economically marginalized persons. Nonetheless, while Gutiérrez recognizes that there can be no respect for the Divine Other apart from respect for human others, he seems to have missed the equally important corollary: there can be no respect for human others apart from respect for *religious* others. So long as religious others are left out of the theological conversation, the analysis of structural sin will remain incomplete. Equally important, Christian encounter with the divine Other will be blocked, and Christian understanding of that Other will be distorted.[53]

It could be argued that there is nothing wrong with the approach taken by these eminent theologians. Theological reflection must start somewhere, and it is appropriate for a distinctively Christian theology to start from distinctively Christian sources and norms. Boundary-drawing is necessary: we draw boundaries around certain concepts in order to use them (as Cressida Heyes puts it), and Christian theology is no exception. Any properly Christian theology must establish some criteria to separate what is Christian from what is not. As Christians we naturally and necessarily begin with the truth-event which is most important to us, that which (as Badiou would say) constitutes us as subjects: the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The Christian theologian attempts in her own way to do theology in fidelity to that truth-event as she understands it. Accordingly, she establishes, explicitly or implicitly, criteria for what is Christian and what is not. She sets the boundaries of the Christian situation. The selection of sources

establishes the Christian situation itself, what "counts" as pertinent to theological reflection; the selection of norms acts as the state of the situation, organizing the sources in relation to one another. This process necessarily includes some voices, marginalizes some, and excludes others altogether.

Yet necessity carries costs. The Badiouan framework reveals a potential problem—a *structural* problem inherent in the nature of the situation. The Christian situation and its state restrict what kinds of things can be known, experienced, formulated. They marginalize or exclude voices which offer a critical perspective on what is "known" within the Christian situation.

Since truth in the Christian sense cannot be separated from the otherness of the divine Other, this structural problem is also a theological problem, because it absolutizes the discursive construction "the Christian" and blocks access to the otherness of the divine Other. By failing to grapple with the relevance of the otherness of religious others, theology also risks losing sight of the otherness of the Divine Other. Without encounter with the witness of religious others, Christian theology reduces the Divine to what is "known" within the Christian situation.

God is not the knowledge of the Christian situation. The comments of the French Benedictine monk Abhishiktānanda are pertinent here: "Man [sic] only begins to know God truly when he realizes that he knows nothing about him….As long as man attempts to seize and hold God in his words and concepts, he is embracing a mere idol."[54] While God can and does reveal Godself through what is known in the Christian situation, that knowledge can only prepare Christians for encounter with that which exceeds it, the

otherness of the divine Other. And a vital part of that encounter is encounter with religious others.

A Way Forward

What is needed, then, is what Deleuze and Guattari call a "line of flight" from and within the circular re-presentation of the Christian situation to itself. What is needed is the event: transformative encounter with the void of the Christian situation, religious others. This event relativizes the content of the Christian situation, disrupts the order imposed by its state, calls into question the "taken-for-granted-ness" of "the Christian," reveals the limitations of knowledge available within the Christian situation, and transforms Christian understanding and self-understanding.

It is important to keep in mind that this event—like the Zen experience of radical nonduality and interbeing—is not escape to some transcendent truth, but a realization of what was always-already there, "a production within the realm of that from which [one] takes flight."[55] Badiou calls a point at which the event "happens"—at which the void breaks in, suspending or disrupting the state of the situation—the *eventalsite* of a situation.[56] An important eventalsite in the Christian situation is the affirmation of the otherness of the Divine Other, which holds that God and God's revelation infinitely surpass any merely human reckonings, including those of the Church. Though this doctrine is a warrant for the authority of the revelation which the Church proclaims, it also calls Christians not to mistake human understandings of God for divine truth. As the void which is constitutive of the Christian situation, religious others point to the insufficiency and limitations of that situation, and reveal a truth greater than the

knowledge available therein—truth not only about the Christian situation itself, but also about God and humanity.[57]

In other words, encounter with religious others is not merely an ethical nicety or a theological afterthought, to which we can turn *after* settling the other problems of systematic theology. The question of religious others lies at the very heart of Christian systematic theology, because it radically questions both the basis of our identity-formation as Christians and the soundness of our choice of theological sources and norms.

By disrupting the logic of the Christian situation and thereby revealing its finitude, encounter with religious others also witnesses to the sublime excess, the utter freedom, and the universality of the divine Other. It is for this reason that the event of encounter with religious others also helps Christians come to a deeper understanding of themselves and their faith. Such encounter reveals that the God Christians worship cannot be circumscribed by the Christian situation any more than God can be identified with a particular nation, class, ethnic group, or cause. Furthermore, such encounter reminds Christians that there is no encounter with the divine Other without respect for human others—including *religious* others.[58]

I am calling, then, for a theology faithful to the event of encounter with religious others; a theology which is both explicitly Christian and explicitly open to the void of the Christian situation; a theology in which the voices of religious others are not only audible but share equal space with Christian voices. For example, a Christian theology in encounter with Zen might consider questions such as the following:

- What do we as Christians learn about ourselves by our traditional exclusion of the witness of Zen Buddhism?

- What does the Zen Buddhist have to say about the Ultimately Real, about what it means to be human, and about our relations with one another and with the cosmos?

- What can the Christian learn from the Zen Buddhist? How does the Zen Buddhist witness relate to what our Christian sources say? What do the similarities and differences tell us about those sources and the possible action or presence of the God to whom Christians witness?

- Do our Christian theological formulations address the concerns of the Zen Buddhist? Do they ring true to her? Do the "theological" formulations of the Zen Buddhists ring true to the Christian?

To suggest what such a theology would look like, let me give two examples.

The first is the classic encounter between the Buddhist philosopher Masao Abe and a number of Christian and Jewish theologians, some years ago, collected in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*. Abe presents what he, as a Buddhist, speaking in Buddhist categories, can say about the Christ-event. One Jewish and several Christian thinkers responded, among them some familiar names here at Claremont, John B. Cobb, Jr., and Catherine Keller. Abe's dialogue partners not only evaluate his account against what they know as Jews or Christians, but also recognize and appreciate the validity of this outsider's account, allowing it to inform their own perspective.

Dr. Keller's response in particular illustrates the shape of a Christian theology faithful to the event of interreligious encounter. She approaches Abe's proposal as a

Christian and a feminist. While she is not uncritical of Abe's proposal—particularly

when what he has to say is too reminiscent of the androcentric and patriarchal state of the

traditional Christian situation—she also recognizes ways in which Abe's contribution can

inform and enhance the Christian feminist project, including Abe's insistence on "the

dynamism of dynamic Sunyata" and its contribution to a possible ontology of

relationships.[59] The result is theological discourse which is authentically Christian and

yet transcends the bounds of the Christian, a theology that recognizes truth beyond the

bounds of the Christian.

A second example is the relatively new field of comparative theology, manifested

in the work of theologians such as James Fredericks, John Keenan, and Francis Clooney.

Reflecting the postmodern distrust of *a priori* universals and grand narratives,

comparative theology (as Fredericks writes) "does not start with a grand theory of

religion in general that claims to account for all religions," nor does it "look for some

abstract lowest common denominator or essence that all religions, including Christianity,

share."[60] Indeed, comparative theology holds that a complete and satisfactory theology

of religions is not possible prior to in-depth dialogue with other religions. Instead, it is a

matter of "doing before knowing," "a theology that arises *through* dialogue," "a Christian

theology done by means of dialogue with those who follow other religious paths."[61]

Fredericks and Keenan bring Christian theology into direct conversation with Buddhist

texts and teachings; Clooney does the same for Hinduism. This is a Christian theology

which is explicitly open to the void of the Christian situation, a theology in which the

voices of religious others are not only audible but share equal space with Christian

voices.

My main complaint about comparative theology to date is that in its stress on "doing before knowing"—on dialogue first and theologizing second—comparative theology may be just as guilty of apriorism as the theologians I discussed earlier. Fredericks is case in point. While he explicitly aims to refrain from *a priori* theorizing about the nature of other religions or Christianity's relationship with them, Fredericks assumes the *possibility*, even the likelihood, that other religions have something true to say to Christians.[62] But on what grounds? Why should Christians believe or even hope that truths of any *religious* importance[63] might be found outside the Christian community, its texts and traditions? This is a theological question, and Fredericks' willingness to engage in the comparative theological project suggests an implicit theological answer: an implicit, *a priori* theology of religions; implicit notions about the relationship between Christianity and religious others, and between God and religious others. In other words, a knowing *before* doing. Yet this theology of religions remains unstated and undefended in Fredericks' presentation.

Comparative theology to date lacks a systematic basis: an overarching framework which specifies the relation between Christians and religious others, and establishes the theological relevance of transformative encounter with religious others. Perhaps the framework I have outlined here, centering on interreligious encounter as event, will help to put comparative theology on a sound footing.

Conclusion

What I have learned from and through these two events—encounter with Zen, and encounter with philosophies of the event—is that a Christian theology faithful to the event of encounter with religious others recognizes that Christianity is, like life, "an open

and creative whole of proliferating connections."[64] Rather than seeking to correspond to

some fixed and stable "truth," theology becomes an intensely creative project. As Todd

May summarizes Deleuze:

> To affirm our creativity is to open ourselves to the experimentation that the future
> offers us rather than clinging to the illusory identity that the present places before
> us. If we are capable of creativity, it is because we are not threatened by the
> prospect of blazing a path to its limit across a territory that offers no assurances,
> except that we cannot exhaust its resources.[65]

A Christian theology faithful to the event of encounter with religious others will

be concerned with the Deleuzian questions: "'What connections might we

form?'…'What actualizations can we experiment with?'"[66] Such a theology resembles

Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizome": it "connects any point to any other point"; it "is

composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither

beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it

overspills."[67] Such a theology realizes that what makes the "we" is not the stability of an

identity ("the Christian") but participation in the formation of connections with one

another, with those who are different, and ultimately, with the Logos who, as Cobb and

Griffin note, is the source of the creative transformation which characterizes our world.[68]

Endnotes

[1] Badiou 2007, 39.

[2] Badiou writes: "whatever convokes someone to the composition of a subject is something extra, something that happens in situations as something that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for. Let us say that a *subject*…needs something to have happened, something that cannot be reduced to its ordinary inscription in 'what there is.' Let us call this *supplement* an *event*, and let us distinguish multiple-being, where it is not a matter of truth (but only of opinions), from the event, which compels us to decide a *new* way of being" (Badiou 2002, 41). The event is what the state of the situation cannot see. Thus Badiou can speak of the event as "excluded by all the regular laws of the situation" (41-2). The event "brings to pass 'something other' than the situation, opinions, instituted knowledges; the event is a hazardous [*hasardeux*], unpredictable supplement, which vanishes as soon as it appears" (67). Hallward comments that "The mobilization of a truth…imposes *revolutionary* change upon a situation's logic" (Hallward 2004, 11). Badiou gives some examples of the event: "the irruption, with Galileo, of mathematical physics; an amorous encounter which changes a whole life; the French Revolution of 1792." Badiou 2003a, 62.

[3] These remarks reformulate arguments presented my forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *No Longer the Same: Why Religious Diversity Must Change Christian Theology*, which is a revision of my doctoral dissertation (Brockman 2006).

[4] However, this is one sense in which "nonduality" is understood, in some forms of Hindu, Buddhist, and Daoist thought: i.e., as David Loy writes, "that the world itself is nonplural, because all the things 'in' the world are not really distinct from each other but together constitute some integral whole" (Loy 1988, 21).

[5] Jackson 2000, 231.

[6] "Buddhism often speaks against belief in God, but by God it understands an ultimate ground of being, a substance underlying and relativizing the flux of events, or a static being transcending the flux. Process theology denies God in these senses, too. In place of an ultimate ground of being Whitehead speaks of creativity as ultimate. But creativity, far from having eminent supratemporal reality, has no existence in itself and is to be found only in actual instances of the many becoming one. In place of a substance or static being underlying or transcending the flux, Whitehead speaks of God as a formative element of the flux." Cobb and Griffin 1976, 141.

[7] Habito 1994, 152.

[8] Ibid.

[9] "An Outline of the Faith," Book of Common Prayer, 854.

[10] Quoted in Cracknell 1986, 11.

[11] Barth 2004, 344, 343.

[12] de Silva 1979, 1.

[13] For a helpful discussion of this teaching, its basis in experience, and some of the different ways it is understood in the Buddhist community, see Habito 2005, 47-51.

[14] O'Neill 1993, 141.

[15] Criswell, quoted in Wuthnow 1988, 57.

[16] Ockholm and Phillips 1995, 214, 196. Emphasis mine.

[17] Taylor 1989, 211. Taylor associates this development with what he calls the three "powers" of the modern self: disengaged reason, self-exploration, and personal commitment. According to Taylor, disengaged reason, in which the mind is seen as detached from an objectified body and world, has its roots in the Cartesian *cogito* and Locke's "punctual self." ("Punctual" because Locke holds that the reason is to be detached not only from the world but from its own ideas, leaving a pointlike existence—a "view from nowhere.") Self-exploration becomes important in Puritan self-analysis (attempting to discern signs of grace and election); in the Rousseaunian idea that nature, the source of unity and harmony, lies within the self, and is accessible to reflection; and in Kant's concept of the moral law as within the human self. Personal commitment arises principally out of the Protestant concept of salvation by faith alone, thereby isolating the individual soul before a divine Judge, and making the personal commitment of faith of supreme importance.

[18] I take it to be implied by much traditional Christian teaching. For example, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglo-Catholics still ask for the Blessed Virgin Mary's intercession, as well as the prayers of other departed saints, such as Francis or Jude. The implication is that these intercessors have retained their separate personal identities in the afterlife.

[19] Keller 1986, 26-27.

[20] Keller 1986, 33-36.

[21] O'Neill 1993, 146, 151.

[22] The term "interbeing" comes from Thich Nhat Hanh.

[23] Trigg 1995, 457.

[24] Rt. Rev. Jack L. Iker, address to the Forward in Faith International Assembly, in London, UK, 20 October 2007. URL: http://fwviamedia.org/iker.html. Accessed 25 October 2007.

[25] Deleuze 1994, 57.

[26] For example, Badiou writes in his *Ethics*: "The multiple 'without-one'—every multiple being in its turn [is] nothing other than a multiple of multiples—is the law of being….Infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*." Badiou 2002, 25.

[27] May 2005, 19.

[28] Brooker 1999, s.v. "Discourse," 66-67. I have removed the small capitals used to indicate that terms have their own entries elsewhere in this glossary.

[29] Foucault 1972.

[30] Ibid., 49. Foucault writes: "It would be quite wrong to see discourse as a place where previously established objects are laid one after another like words on a page" (ibid., 42-43.) Elsewhere he writes: "I would like to show that 'discourses', in the form in which they can heard or read, are not, as one might expect, a mere intersection of things and words: an obscure web of things, and a manifest, visible, coloured chain of words; I would like to show that discourse is not a slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between a reality and a language (*langue*), the intrication of a lexicon and an experience; I would like to show…that in analysing discourses themselves, one sees the loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things, and the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practice.…[The task] consists of not—of no longer—treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (ibid., 48-49).

[31] Badiou 2004, 121.

[32] I am speaking here of the Christian situation formed by the self-identity of Christians themselves, not what Muslims, Buddhists, etc. consider "Christian." This is because my overall concern is with Christian theology and its encounter with religious others.

[33] Christianity thus acts as what Deleuze calls a reactive force: whereas "Active forces affirm their difference" and create rather than compare, "Reactive forces are what they are only through their negation of active forces" (May 2005, 67). Todd May describes Nietzsche's criticism of institutional religion: "The history of institutional religions is a history of populations that define themselves by what they are not, that take their solace not in what they can do but in their not being something else. '*You are evil, therefore I am good.*'" Ibid.

[34] On the feeling of absolute dependence, see Schleiermacher 1999, 26, 133. On piety, see ibid., 171. Regarding the interior manifestation of God, Schleiermacher writes that it is "a co-existence of God in the self-consciousness" (126). What Schleiermacher means by this is unclear. While he clearly refers to the co-existence of God in the human consciousness, he elsewhere asserts that he means something else. In his first letter to Lücke, Schleiermacher denies that this "being of God in humans" is "therefore God itself." Schleiermacher 1981, 46.

In *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher writes: "so far as the rational self-consciousness is concerned, it is certain that the God-consciousness which (along with the self-consciousness) belongs to human nature originally, before the Redeemer and apart from all connexion with Him, cannot fittingly be called an existence of God in us, not only because it was not a pure God-consciousness (either in polytheism or even in Jewish monotheism, which was everywhere tinctured with materialistic conceptions, whether cruder or finer), but also because, such as it was, it did not assert itself as activity, but in these religions was always dominated by the sensuous self-consciousness....[J]ust as the unconscious forces of nature and non-rational life become a revelation of God to us only so far as we bring that conception with us, so also that darkened and imperfect God-consciousness by itself is not an existence of God in human nature, but only in so far as we bring Christ with us in thought and relate it to Him." Schleiermacher 1999, 387.

These attempts to clarify his position are highly confusing. How "the *being* of God" differs from "God" escapes me; it seems a distinction without a difference.

[35] This is ironic, since as Richard Crouter notes, in the *Speeches* he criticizes the "cultured despisers" of religion for relying on deductive concepts of religion "without having taken the trouble to justify this understanding inductively through knowledge of particular instances of actual religion." Schleiermacher 1988, 88 n. 23. Of course, the present wealth of scholarship in religion studies was not available in Schleiermacher's day.

[36] For example, when Schleiermacher refers to "the influence of the sensible upon the character of religious emotions" in Islam, he does not specify what he means, how this influence is manifested, or even where he gets this idea. Furthermore, although he categorizes Islam as monotheistic, he associates this "influence of the sensible" with polytheism, implying that Islam is tainted by polytheistic elements. Given the Prophet Muhammad's uncompromising assertion of the oneness of God and the Qur'an's vigorous rejection of Arab polytheistic practices, it is difficult to regard Schleiermacher's characterization of Islam as built on anything other than prejudice. Despite Schleiermacher's recognition of the need to situate Christianity in terms of religious others, their voices are almost completely absent from the *Speeches* and the *Glaubenslehre*. Schleiermacher makes sweeping statements about the character of "religion" and of particular religions, yet offers precious few examples demonstrating that he is actually familiar with the religions to which he refers. He occasionally refers to the polytheism of the ancient Greeks, and at one point mentions "the Norse and Indian [religious] systems," though without explaining what he means. Schleiermacher 1999, 43, 44. While he sometimes supports claims about the character of Judaism with citations from the Hebrew Bible, and in one case, to Philo (151), he demonstrates no familiarity with the rabbinical literature (e.g., Mishnah, Talmud), kabbalistic texts, near-contemporary Jewish thinkers like Moses Mendelssohn, or the texts and traditions of Jewish worship. His philosophical debt to the Jewish philosopher Spinoza is well known. However, this debt seems not to have translated into an interest in Judaism itself. As for Islam, the *Glaubenslehre* never cites the Qur'an, the *hadiths*, or any other sources recognized as authoritative by Muslims. Indeed, the only religion of which Schleiermacher demonstrates substantial knowledge is Christianity.

[37] This runs counter to the views of Joseph DiNoia and Peter Harrison. Contending that Barth cannot be simply located on the "exclusivist" end of the spectrum, Di Noia uses strong language in Barth's

defense: "a close reading of CD I/2, paragraph 17 gives the lie to the frequently voiced complaint that Barth's theology of religion fosters negative attitudes towards other religions and undermines positive engagement with their adherents"; in support of his own reading, Di Noia stresses Barth's insistence that a Christian approach to other religions be tempered by "the forbearance of Christ," by modesty and tolerance (Di Noia 2000, 253-54, 252). Peter Harrison goes one step further: he contends that "Barth's evaluation of the religions was in reality quite positive" (Harrison 1986, 208).

[38] "In religion," Barth writes, "man bolts and bars himself against revelation by providing a substitute, by taking away in advance the very thing which has to be given by God." Barth 2004, 303. "And now we can see a second way in which revelation contradicts religion, and conversely religion necessarily opposes revelation. For what is the purpose of the universal attempt of religions to anticipate God, to foist a human product into the place of His Word, to make our own images of the One who is known only where He gives Himself to be known, images which are first spiritual, and then religious, and then actually visible?" (Barth 2004, 308).

[39] His excursus on Pure Land Buddhism adds nothing, since it is structured so as to support his overall insistence that religious others are irrelevant to Christian theological reflection. See Brockman 2006, 248-50.

[40] Rahner 1966, 115-34.

[41] Ibid., 40.

[42] These concerns are echoed by Paul Knitter and David Tracy. While Knitter appreciates Lindbeck's intent "to preserve, honor, and protect the real differences between the faiths.…[and] to make sure that [each religion's] identity and integrity are not violated by another religion," he is concerned that Lindbeck's tends to turn religion, and language generally, from a "prism" (lens) into a "prison." Knitter 2002, 182-3, 224-5. David Tracy also acknowledging Lindbeck's positive contribution to contemporary theology, but contends that the cultural-linguistic approach is "a methodologically sophisticated version of Barthian confessionalism." Tracy 1985, 460-72., 465, 469-70.

[43] See Brockman 2006, especially 358-76.

[44] Badiou's sense of the void as ground of being draws upon the concept of the null or empty set. Set theory holds it as axiomatic that each and every set contains the null set (symbolized as $\varnothing$). The null set is defined as that which has no elements in common with a given set. For instance, let m equal the set of all males, and f equal the set of all females. The intersection of m and f is the null set ($m \cap f = \varnothing$). However, $\varnothing$—that which is not part of the set—is also *constitutive of* that set. The relationship between situation and void is equivalent to that between any set and the null set. See Hallward 2003 for further information.

[45] As Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens put it, "The void of a situation is simply what is not there, but what is necessary for anything to be there." Feltham and Clemens 2003, 15-6.

[46] As Hallward puts it, the state "ensures that the potentially anarchic organisation of social combinations remains structured in such a way as to preserve the governing interests of the situation. The state keeps things in their place" (Hallward 1998, 92). As Hallward explains, "A situation counts elements; the state of a situation counts its *parts*, the ways of combining the elements" (92). In Badiou's terminology, the situation "presents" its elements, whereas the state of the situation "represents" (re-presents) them. "The state [of a situation] is what arranges a situation in such a way as to ensure the power of its dominant group (or ruling class)" (Hallward 2004, 9).

[47] Pamela Dickey Young defines a theological *source* as "any element that enters into the formulation of one's theology, anything that informs one's theology"; this could include, for example, religious texts or the experience of particular groups of people. Young defines *norm* as "a specific criterion or set of criteria by which any given theological sources or formulations are judged to be adequate or inadequate for theology in general or for the type of theology being done, and which is used as the structuring principle for a theologian's own theology." Among the norms that have been used in Christian theology are Scripture, the historical Jesus, women's experience, and human reason. Young 1990, 19-20.

[48]Badiou 2003a, 61. Badiou also speaks of truth as "subtracted" from what is known. As Hallward notes, Badiou uses the term *soustraction* to mean "that truth *is* properly immediate, and so is *revealed* (comes to be) through the elimination of the mediate. It means that the living reality of human experience is what remains after the whole realm of the 'cultural' has been 'deposed' (though not eliminated)" (Hallward 1998, 97). This does not mean that Badiou understands truth to be transcendent in a metaphysical sense. Quite the contrary: he holds that truth is purely immanent within—in fact, a subset of—a given situation (Badiou 2004, 121). Indeed, according to Hallward, "Badiou believes that there is no truth in general; there are only particular truths in particular situations" (Hallward 2003, 154). However, Hallward's understanding would seem to be contradicted by Badiou's Theorem 6 in *Saint Paul*: "What grants power to a truth, and determines subjective fidelity, is the universal address of the relation to self instituted by the event, and not this relation itself." Badiou then comments, "This could be called the theorem of the militant. No truth is ever solitary, or particular" (Badiou 2003b, 90).   Truth "is nonetheless heterogeneous to all the subsets registered by forms of knowledge" in a situation, because, unlike those subsets, a truth cannot be captured by means of any predicate of the language of the situation (Badiou 2004, 124).

[49] That is, since each particular instance of theological discourse constructs its own situation and void, the voices which are repressed will vary from one instance to another.

[50] See Brockman 2006, 217-24.

[51] Brockman 2006, 272-73.

[52] Thiemann 1986, 378.

[53] Brockman 2006, 368-69.

[54] Abhishiktananda 1984, 5.

[55] Todd May, commenting on Deleuze's notion of line of flight. May 2005, 128.

[56] The evental site (*site événementiel*) is not easily explained. In *Being and Event*, Badiou refers to it somewhat cryptically as "an entirely abnormal multiple; that is, a multiple such that none of its elements are presented in the situation"; he goes on to say that "it is *on the edge of the void*" (Badiou 2005, 175). Hallward calls the role it plays "one of the most important and most slippery aspects of Badiou's philosophy of truth" (Hallward 2003, 117). This site is associated with the void: "a truth is nothing other than the process that exposes or represents the void of a situation—or, for it amounts to the same thing, that suspends the state of a situation. This exposure begins with an event, the occurring of which is located at the edge of whatever passes as uncountable in the situation" (Hallward 2004, 9).

[57] That is, since each particular instance of theological discourse constructs its own situation and void, the voices which are repressed will vary from one instance to another.

[58] To clarify, I am not claiming that God does *in fact* speak through religious others (although I believe that God does so speak). Such a claim would require a different argument than what I have presented thus far. Rather, I am making the far more modest claim that God in God's otherness cannot be identified with, or confined to, the knowledge of the Christian situation. Consequently, encounter with those excluded by that situation opens us to the divine otherness.

[59] Keller 1990, 111-14.

[60] Fredericks 1999, 167-68.

[61] Fredericks 2004, 26.

[62] For example, he refers to the need for "an openness to the *truths* of non-Christian religions," and speculates that "The aspects of the [Buddhist] Dharma that differ most starkly from the Gospels may constitute the most valuable *truths* Buddhists have to teach Christians" (Fredericks 1999, 163, emphasis mine).

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[63] By this I mean to exclude purely mundane truths apparently recognized by all religions, such as the fact of birth and death, or the fact that life involves suffering, or that humans are often unhappy, and so on.

[64] Colebrook 2002, 5.

[65] May 2005, 68.

[66] May 2005, 133.

[67] Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21.

[68] Cobb and Griffin, 100.

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