

Multiple Religious Belonging

André van der Braak*

Zen-Christian Dual Belonging and the Practice of Apophasis: Strategies of Meeting Rose Drew's Theological Challenge

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Abstract: An important subset of the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging is that of Buddhist-Christian belonging: people who claim to belong to, owe allegiance to or believe in both the Buddhist and Christian faiths. This phenomenon has not yet been the subject of much normative theological investigation, as opposed to descriptive and empirically-oriented social scientific study. Recently, however, two theological studies have appeared on dual Buddhist-Christian belonging: Rose Drew's *Buddhist and Christian?* and the collection of essays *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*. From a theological point of view, is it possible to be authentically both Buddhist and Christian? Rose Drew has formulated two demands that can be applied in investigating such a theological question. In this article, I will first critically assess several possible strategies for dealing with those two demands, and then explore an approach to Zen-Christian dual belonging that focuses on the practice of apophasis.

Keywords: Buddhism; Zen; Zen-Christian dual belonging; apophasis

An important subset of the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging is that of Buddhist-Christian dual belonging: people who claim to belong to, owe allegiance to or believe in both the Buddhist and Christian faiths. A growing number of people describe themselves as both Buddhist and Christian. For example, theologian Paul Knitter, a practicing Roman Catholic, famously declares that he is a “card-carrying Buddhist” as well, and that without Buddha, he could not be a Christian.¹

The phenomenon of Buddhist-Christian dual belonging has not yet been the subject of much normative theological investigation, as opposed to descriptive and empirically oriented social scientific study. Recently, however, two theological studies have appeared on dual Buddhist-Christian belonging: Rose Drew's *Buddhist and Christian?*, in which she interviews six self-declared Buddhist-Christian dual believers,² and *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*, a collection of essays edited by Gavin D'Costa and Ross Thompson that describes itself as a kind of “feasibility study of whether it makes religious sense to call oneself both Buddhist and Christian.”³ Does dual belonging inevitably distort the essence of both Christianity and Buddhism, or does it merely change their cultural expression? From a theological point of view, is it possible to be authentically both Buddhist and Christian? Rose Drew has formulated two demands that can be applied in investigating such theological questions. In this article, I will first critically assess several possible strategies for dealing with those two demands, and then explore an approach to Zen-Christian dual belonging that focuses on the practice of apophasis.

1 Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*.

2 Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*

3 D'Costa and Thompson, *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*.

*Corresponding author: André van der Braak, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands; E-mail: a.vander.braak@vu.nl

1 Authentic dual religiosity

Rose Drew's landmark study *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* is one of the first detailed explorations of Buddhist and Christian belonging. She interviews six individuals, all Christians, who have also embraced Buddhism: Roger Corless (Roman Catholic and Tibetan Buddhist in the Gelugpa tradition); Sr. Ruth Furneaux (an Anglican eremitic nun and Soto Zen and Satipatthana (mindfulness) practitioner); Ruben Habito (Roman Catholic and Zen Master in the Sanbo Kyodan lineage); Maria Reis Habito (Roman Catholic, Zen practitioner and disciple of a Taiwanese Buddhist Master); Sallie King (Quaker and Western Zen practitioner), and John Keenan (Episcopalian priest who sees himself as philosophically Buddhist).

In the theoretical introduction to her book, Drew describes her study as partly descriptive and partly normative. The descriptive part of her study is not the focus of this article: her six interviews with dual believers are a most helpful contribution to the illumination of the religious lives of actual dual believers.⁴ However, the normative part of her study will be investigated in this article.

In her attempt to formulate what she calls “the Buddhist-Christian challenge,” Drew quotes one of her interviewees, Ruben Habito, who:

reflects that the best thing about being Christian and Buddhist is “being able to receive nourishment and enrichment from these two traditions,” but that the most difficult thing is, on the one hand, “trying to see how apparently contradictory or incompatible elements can be seen in a more coherent picture” and, on the other hand, trying to be faithful to each of these traditions and respect their integrity “in a way that does not compromise either.”⁵

Drew translates this into two demands. The first is:

One must find satisfactory ways of *integrating* the Christian way of thinking and being and the Buddhist way of thinking and being, such that dual belonging does not involve turning a blind eye to apparently outright contradictions nor entail being pulled in opposite directions by one's religious commitments.⁶

Drew cites three challenges to integration of the traditions that face those claiming dual allegiances:

1. Philosophical: the obstacle of conflicting claims to truth. To the extent that the dual believer wishes to affirm the truth of both Buddhism and Christianity, it must be possible to find some level at which the teachings of both traditions do not contradict each other to the extent that they can be integrated with each other.
2. Psychological: the threat of a split personality. Drew quotes the psychologists Fowler and Erikson to suggest that living two parallel but potentially entirely separate religious lives is unhealthy, potentially leading to a split personality disorder. Therefore, it is imperative to come to “a unified framework of meaning.”
3. Soteriological: the need to follow one path. Skipping to-and-fro between two religious paths is likely to hinder spiritual progress. This echoes suspicions voiced by Catherine Cornille elsewhere that the dual believer is somehow not wholeheartedly committed, and therefore not able to succeed.⁷ Drew quotes Ruben Habito who recalls a Japanese saying that ‘Those who chase after two rabbits will catch neither’: “Perhaps in declaring my aspiration to live as a Buddhist, and my aspiration to live as a Christian, I am ... rendering myself unable to live up to either in a faithful and authentic way.”⁸

⁴ For another example of such empirical research see Homrighousen, “Spiritually Bilingual.”

⁵ Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*, 7-8.

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Cornille, “Introduction,” 3.

⁸ Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*, 161.

Drew's second demand is to ensure that the unique character, insight and integrity of each tradition is preserved, and that what is special and attractive about each is not lost.⁹ With regard to this need to preserve distinctions, Drew gives two arguments: (1) Buddhism and Christianity *are* distinct traditions; they offer different insights. Therefore, a dual believer must be authentically Buddhist and authentically Christian. (2) Buddhism and Christianity are each effective vehicles for spiritual transformation in their own right. Therefore, they do not require mixing with other vehicles.

Drew argues that the extent to which a dual believer meets this dual challenge (integrating Buddhist and Christian world views, as well as preserving the unique distinctions between Buddhism and Christianity) will determine whether or not their resultant religiosity can be considered authentic from the perspectives of both traditions involved.¹⁰

2 Meeting the challenge

How one approaches Drew's dual challenge, or even how relevant one considers it to be, is also dependent upon one's way of conceiving religion. Although it is notoriously problematic to define religion, in this article I will follow George Lindbeck's three ideal types of theological approaches to religion, outlined in his seminal work *The Nature of Doctrine*.¹¹ These three types constitute all-embracing and fundamentally different notions of what religion is.

The *cognitive-propositional* model approaches religious traditions primarily in terms of their institutional doctrines, and the ways in which they function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities. Religions are thus seen as similar to philosophy or science.¹² The truth of religious doctrines lies in their ontological correspondence to objective reality. The second type focuses on the "*experiential-expressive*" dimension of religion: the essence of religion is to be found in the inner feelings, attitudes and existential orientations that arise as a response to the divine. Religious doctrines are not to be seen as cognitive and discursive truth claims that correspond to reality, but as noninformative and nondiscursive expressions of those feelings, attitudes or existential orientations.¹³ The truth of religious doctrines lies not in their correspondence to the divine (which is beyond conceptualization), but in how well they articulate or represent and communicate the experience of the divine. The various religious traditions each articulate this experience in their own way, but the experience itself is held to be universal and common to all religious traditions.¹⁴

Lindbeck himself introduces a third, "*cultural-linguistic*" model of religion (taken from anthropologist Clifford Geertz and other social scientists), which approaches religions as forms of life that are similar to languages and cultures. The truth of religious doctrines lies, in a Wittgensteinian sense, in their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action.¹⁵ Religious doctrines are not hypotheses about reality, nor descriptions of religious experience. They are "different idioms for construing reality, expressing experience, and ordering life. Attention, when considering the question of "truth," focuses on the categories (or "grammar" or "rules of the game") in terms of which truth claims are made and expressive symbolisms employed."¹⁶

Lindbeck himself was critical of the cognitive-propositional and experience-expressive models of religion, and considered only his own cognitive-linguistic model as truly representative of religion. Since his work appeared in 1984, his cognitive-linguistic type has been adopted by several theologians who are sometimes described as "particularists"¹⁷ or as followers of Knitter's "acceptance model."¹⁸

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹¹ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*.

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶ Ibid., 34.

¹⁷ Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions*.

¹⁸ Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*.

3 Cognitive-propositional approaches to dual belonging

From a cognitive-propositional approach to religion it is not easy to find a way to meet Drew's first demand regarding the need for integration of Buddhist and Christian truth claims. Since both Buddhist and Christian doctrines are considered to function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities, it is hard to see how they can be combined. The two traditions seem based on certain beliefs that are fundamentally incompatible (for example, the belief in a personal Creator God (Christianity), versus the denial of such a God (Buddhism)). It is tempting to conclude that claims to dual belonging are incompatible with crucial parts of the content of Buddhism and Christianity, and is therefore illegitimate. Evangelical theologian Daniel Strange takes this approach when he says that those who claim dual Buddhist-Christian allegiance are guilty of idolatry and unfaithfulness.¹⁹ Also, Theravada Buddhist Asanga Tilakaratne maintains that the Christian concept of a savior, transcendent or otherwise, is not found in the Buddhist path. Therefore, the Buddhist teachings on nirvana are incompatible with Christian accounts of salvation. He denies that Buddhists and Christians can ever be more than *kalyana mittas* (good friends).²⁰

One possible strategy for finding ways to integrate seemingly contradictory Buddhist and Christian doctrines is the attempt to reinterpret the teachings of one tradition in terms of the other.²¹ For example, John Keenan and Joseph O'Leary have used Buddhist Madhyamaka teachings to reinterpret some Christian doctrines. Two of Drew's interviewees (Reis Habito and King) interpret Christian salvation in terms of the Buddhist notion of being fully present in the moment.²² Whereas such a reinterpretation of doctrinal issues can lead to convergence and common ground, meeting Drew's first demand of doctrinal compatibility, it seems more difficult to meet Drew's second demand of preserving the distinctions between Buddhism and Christianity. As Catherine Cornille notes, one must wonder whether it still makes sense in such a case to speak of *dual* belonging.²³

4 Experiential-expressive approaches to dual belonging

Theologians who accept the experiential-expressive model of religion, tend to defend the possibility of Buddhist-Christian belonging not by reinterpreting religious doctrines themselves, but by reinterpreting their ontological and epistemological status. Religious doctrines do not directly correspond to the divine, but serve as indirect expressions of our experience of it. They should be seen as "fingers pointing to the moon," as the Buddhist Zen tradition puts it.

At first sight, such a strategy seems very compatible with especially Mahayana Buddhist hermeneutics, in which two types of truth are distinguished: conventional (or relative) truth and ultimate (or absolute) truth. All religious doctrines, including Buddhist ones, are only conventionally true, and are to be judged according to their pragmatic efficacy. The hermeneutic principle of *upaya* (skilful means) holds that various doctrines can be effective for listeners with various backgrounds and degrees of comprehension. From such a perspective, Christian doctrines such as the belief in a Creator God, can be soteriologically effective for listeners with a Christian background. Their use could be justified as an application of *upaya*.

Paul Knitter uses the Zen image of religious teachings as fingers pointing to the moon, although he adds that Buddhist fingers point to different parts of the moon than Christian fingers, and therefore add complementary knowledge.²⁴ He argues for a complementarity between his own Liberationist Christianity, with its stress on compassion and social justice, and his Nyingma Tibetan Buddhism, which stresses that compassion must arise out of spiritual wisdom.²⁵

¹⁹ Strange, "'There Can Be Only One'."

²⁰ Tilakaratne, "The Ultimate Buddhist Religious Goal."

²¹ Cornille discusses this strategy in "Strategies of Negotiation in Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging," 152-154.

²² Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*, 135.

²³ Cornille, "Strategies of Negotiation in Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging," 154.

²⁴ Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*, 72.

²⁵ Knitter, "The Question of Salvation/Liberation."

An often-used image within this approach to religious diversity is that all religions are different paths to the same mountain top. However, such a metaphor would make Buddhist-Christian dual belonging impossible, since one cannot walk two paths simultaneously. Drew therefore follows the German theologian Perry Schmidt-Leukel in modifying the metaphor to religions being different hill-walking guides that guide one on the way to the mountain top. Such maps can be drawn from various perspectives, with different considerations in mind.²⁶

This strategy meets Drew's first demand by addressing her three motivations for the need for integration: it takes away the philosophical contradiction between Buddhist and Christian doctrines by relativizing their ontological status. It removes the risk of a psychological split identity by relativizing their ultimate character. And it argues that combining Buddhist and Christian doctrines can be soteriologically effective as a form of *upaya*. It also seems to meet Drew's second demand in not syncretistically merging Buddhist and Christian traditions but keeping them as separate approaches to the divine. However, particularist critics argue that this strategy does not do full justice to the uniqueness and particularity of both Buddhist and Christian traditions.

5 Cultural-linguistic approaches to dual belonging

When viewing a religious tradition from a cultural-linguistic perspective, "its doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are integrally integrated to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops."²⁷ Consequently, one could defuse the apparent contradiction between Christian and Buddhist truth claims by arguing that they are not incompatible (in the sense that they cannot both be true at the same time), but incommensurable. Truth claims are commensurable if theologians can discuss them in terms that permit a direct comparison of theologies, even to the point of determining which theology is more true. On the other hand, truth claims are incommensurable if they are embedded in starkly contrasting conceptual frameworks whose languages lack sufficiently overlapping meanings to permit theologians to directly compare them. From this perspective, Christian and Buddhist truth claims are as incapable of contradicting one another as a game of golf is of contradicting a game of tennis.

Playing golf and playing tennis are both "forms of life". Philosopher of religion Paul Griffiths defines a form of life as "a pattern of activity that seems to those who belong to it to have boundaries and particular actions proper or intrinsic to it."²⁸ Therefore, marriage is a form of life, as is playing squash or tennis. Griffiths defines a religion as "a form of life that seems to those who inhabit it to be comprehensive, incapable of abandonment, and of central importance."²⁹

For Griffiths himself, as for most particularist theologians, this implies that combining religious forms of life is impossible, due to their comprehensive and centrally important nature. However, some theologians have argued that dual belonging is still possible from a cultural-linguistic approach. Theologian Michael von Brück for example, has compared dual belonging to being bilingual.³⁰ Different religious (and secular) traditions can be seen as different languages in which to engage with the divine. Just as most of us grow up within one language but manage to learn other languages later on, we can become proficient in multiple "religious languages," and speak them when the situation requires so. And just as the ability to speak a language makes one part of that linguistic community, being able to "speak" a religious tradition makes one a religious believer of that tradition.³¹

²⁶ Drew, "Chasing Two Rabbits," 30.

²⁷ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 19.

²⁸ Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, 7.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Von Brück, "A Theology of Multiple Religious Identity," 199-206.

³¹ However, von Brück stresses that, just as one learns one's native language in a different way than later languages, one's native religious belonging is qualitatively different from later religious belongings. See Von Brück, "Identität und Widerspruch."

Such “religiously bilingual” dual believers construct their sense of religious belonging using beliefs, experiences, expressions and practices of Buddhist and Christian forms of life.³² Strictly speaking, religious belonging is always inherently multiple in the sense that it is made up of diverse, complex, and ever-changing mixtures of relationships, commitments, and communal practices.³³ Therefore one needs to question definitional boundaries that distinguish religious practices of one religious form of life from another, even to the extent of viewing them as mutually exclusive.³⁴

With regard to dual Buddhist-Christian belonging according to the cultural-linguistic model of religion, its authenticity is not so much a matter of the cognitive-propositional compatibility of Buddhist and Christian doctrines, but of the performative compatibility of Buddhist and Christian practices and ways of life. Griffiths calls this *compossibility*. In establishing such compossibility it becomes necessary to be more specific about which forms of Buddhist and Christianity are being combined. As Griffiths emphasizes, there are many ways to sort religions into kinds, just as is true for sorting plants or animals. The default way of sorting religions into “world religions” is not the only way to cut the cake. When it comes to Buddhist-Christian dual belonging, it seems important to make more fine-grained distinctions. Which forms of Buddhism and which forms of Christianity are being combined? As Griffiths notes, some Buddhist and Christian forms of life are clearly not compossible:

It seems reasonable to say that Greek Orthodox Christianity and Gelug Tibetan Buddhism are different religions just because it is performatively impossible to belong to both at once – in much the same way that it’s performatively impossible simultaneously to be a sumo wrestler and a balance-beam gymnast, or natively to live in the house of English and the house of Japanese.³⁵

However, other Buddhist and Christian forms of life may be more similar to cycling and speed skating: two forms of life that are not only compossible but that even strengthen one another.³⁶

6 Apophysis

So far I have described three strategies that meet Drew’s two demands to varying degrees. (1) From a cognitive-propositional approach to religious doctrine, taking religious doctrines as true descriptions of reality and trying to address doctrinal contradictions, one could show that such doctrines are not truly incompatible by translating Christian doctrines into Buddhist terms and vice versa. In this strategy it becomes possible to meet Drew’s first demand of conceptual integration, but at the risk of blending Christian and Buddhist doctrines, thereby not meeting her second demand of preserving the unique distinction of each tradition. (2) From an experience-expressive model of religion, one could relativize the ontological and epistemological status of religious doctrines, and find common ground in the nonconceptual experience of the divine that those doctrines point towards. This is a valid strategy for meeting Drew’s first demand, although for particularist critics, this strategy fails to fully meet her second demand. (3) From a cultural-linguistic approach to religious doctrine, one could attempt to defuse the

³² For an empirical study of eight “bilingual” Buddhist-Christians, see Homrighousen, “Spiritually Bilingual.”

³³ Sociologist of religion Thomas Tweed defines religion as “confluences of organic-cultural flows.” Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 54.

³⁴ As Buddhism is coming to the West, its boundaries and its identity as one of the “world religions” are becoming increasingly problematic. Many contemporary Western Buddhist practitioners prefer to label themselves as “hybrid” rather than as Buddhist. Some contemporary Western Buddhists, such as Jon Kabat-Zinn and Stephen Batchelor, wonder if the very sorting together of various forms of life as “Buddhism” has become an obstacle to disseminating the doctrines and practices formerly known as “Buddhist” to a wider audience.

³⁵ Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, 13.

³⁶ Abraham Velez de Cea argues that Griffiths’ argument could be applied to single religious belonging as well: “Paraphrasing Griffiths, it is reasonable to say that the Franciscan order and Opus Dei are different Catholic institutions just because it is performatively impossible to belong to both of them at once. Likewise, it is performatively impossible to fully endorse the theological systems of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus at the same time, or to fully live the religious life as an enclosed Carthusian nun and a Missionary of Charity in the streets of Calcutta.” Velez de Cea, “An Alternative Conception,” 175.

apparent contradiction between Christian and Buddhist doctrines by claiming that religious traditions are not contradictory but incommensurable systems of thought and practice. In this case, Drew's first demand is met not by looking for common ground, but by using practical compossibility as a criterion to avoid, as Drew puts it, "being pulled in opposite directions by one's religious commitments."³⁷ This third strategy most fully meets Drew's second demand.

In her recent contribution to *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*, the British theologian Janet Williams first reviews these strategies and then adds her own challenge: perhaps authentic dual belonging does *not* require that, in Drew's words, one finds "satisfactory ways of integrating the Christian way of thinking and being and the Buddhist way of thinking and being."³⁸ Perhaps, rather than attempting to "fix" contradictory Christian and Buddhist truth claims through reinterpreting them, relativizing their ontological and epistemological status, or treating them as incommensurable, one should simply accept that they do indeed contradict each other. However, she explicitly contests the inference that mutually exclusive beliefs render dual belonging theoretically illegitimate. She argues that a spiritual life that embraces opposites of faith and practice is not only possible, but has the capacity to be richly rewarding, and indeed constitutes a mode of belonging which is an authentic expression of elements intrinsic to the tradition.³⁹

Williams finds such modes of belonging in the apophatic strands of both Christianity and Buddhism. "Apophasis" is the Greek word for "negation" or "denial," and is the opposite to "kataphasis," affirmation.⁴⁰ Williams points to two different understandings of apophasis in the Christian tradition. The first understanding has been formulated by Thomas Aquinas as a *via negativa*, complementing the *via positiva* and transcended by the *via eminentiae*. Apophasis is complementary to affirmation, but it eventually needs to be transcended by a superlative affirmation of the divine, thereby leaving the Christian truths as set out in revelation or philosophy intact. The second understanding takes apophasis as denying the accuracy of both affirmative propositions and their opposites. In this view, "apophasis is a second-order discourse, concerning not the divine subject, but the discourse which addresses the divine: it generates no statements about God, but statements about theological language."⁴¹ This second version of apophasis is an ongoing process that forms an integral part of spiritual education. Williams notes that there is a consensus that the second version of apophasis is theologically and soteriologically significant.⁴²

In her article in *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*, Williams only uses resources from the Christian apophatic patristic tradition to show that the Christian notion of a Creator God is both being affirmed and denied, in order to penetrate to a deeper realization, since "the role of doctrine within Christian faith and life must be subordinate to flourishing, to abundant existence."⁴³ In what follows I will first extend Williams' approach by using resources from the Zen tradition, in order to argue that also in the Zen tradition, apophatic practices can be found in which Buddhist doctrine is considered subordinate to flourishing.⁴⁴ Afterwards, I will relate such Zen apophasis to Zen-Christian dual belonging, reviewing the various approaches to religious doctrine that I have just discussed.

³⁷ Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*, 8.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Williams, "Going Beyond the Creator God," n2, 218.

⁴⁰ In the theological tradition, apophasis has been extensively discussed. See e.g. Turner, *The Darkness of God*; McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*; Gendle, *The Apophatic approach to God*.

⁴¹ Williams, *Denying Divinity*, 4.

⁴² Ibid., 6. Kenney ("The Critical Value of Negative Theology") also distinguishes between the apophasis which is faithful to the ancient realist ontology and (modern) versions which are not.

⁴³ Williams, "Going Beyond the Creator God," 230.

⁴⁴ In an earlier book, Williams has pointed out various affinities between the Zen Buddhist and patristic Christian apophatic traditions. Williams, *Denying Divinity*.

7 Zen

Zen⁴⁵ has exercised a fascination over Western philosophers, theologians, psychologists and spiritual seekers. Since it made its entry in Western culture around 1920, in the writings of the Japanese religious scholar D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966), it has captured the imagination of many. It has been hailed as a universal religion, founded on individual experience rather than conformity to church structures, meditation rather than ritual, critical investigation leading up to ‘the Great Doubt’ rather than belief in religious dogma’s. For many Christian believers, Zen served as a perfect complement for a Western Christianity that was perceived as lacking spiritual vitality. It was presented to the West as a universal mysticism that contained the core of all religions without cultural baggage.⁴⁶

Most theological approaches to Zen-Christian belonging have been from an experiential-expressive model of religion. The famous Zen metaphor of all doctrines being “fingers pointing to the moon” seems well suited to explain Zen-Christian dual belonging. Both Zen and Christian doctrines need to be transcended in order to arrive at a transformation of consciousness.

With regard to the Zen tradition, it is clear that its scriptures are full of apparently outright contradictions: the *Heart Sutra* rejects all Buddhist doctrines as empty;⁴⁷ the *Vimalakirti Sutra* mocks established Buddhist heroes such as Sariputra and shows the superiority of layman Vimalakirti over respected Buddhist monks;⁴⁸ Zen master Linji Yixuan (d. 860) recommends that “if you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha,” and shouts that “nirvana and bodhi are hitching posts for donkeys.”⁴⁹ The Zen practitioner is being pulled in opposite directions by his religious commitments: both great faith and great doubt; both great effort and realizing the futility of all effort; both self-power (*jiriki*) and other-power (*tariki*).

The Zen tradition is rooted in two Indian Buddhist philosophical traditions: the Tathāgathagarbha tradition and the Mādhyamika thought of Nāgārjuna. Its discourse on enlightenment contains elements of both kataphasis and apophasis.⁵⁰

The kataphatic strains in Zen thought are connected with the Tathāgathagarbha notion of Buddha nature. The term *garbha* means both “embryo” and “womb.” Therefore, on the one hand, it points to the fact that every sentient being possesses the germ to attain Buddhahood. On the other hand, it refers to the universal essence of Buddhahood (also expressed as Buddha nature). In Tathāgathagarbha thought, enlightenment is conceptualized as the realization of one’s Buddha nature. “Buddha nature,” however, is but one of the many Buddhist terms and concepts, such as *nirvāṇa*, *paramārtha*, and *sūnyatā*, that are to be properly used in a soteriological way, not a metaphysical way. In order to avoid their reification, they need to be deconstructed again and again. Therefore, apart from the kataphatic strain in Zen thought, a continuous apophatic strain can be discerned, which goes back to Mādhyamika thought and its emphasis on *sūnyatā*. Philosopher Youru Wang describes the inner struggles within the evolution of Zen discourse on enlightenment as an ongoing dialectic between kataphasis and apophasis, between the substantialization of Buddha nature and its deconstruction.⁵¹ According to Wang, the Chinese adaptation of Tathāgathagarbha thought eventually evolved into the deconstruction of Buddha nature in Zen.⁵²

⁴⁵ Of course, what is known in the West as the single entity of “Zen” in reality comprises a varied and heterogeneous collection of Buddhist traditions in China, Japan, Korea and other East Asian countries, that span about 1500 years.

⁴⁶ E.g. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. See also Braak, “Enlightenment revisited” and Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*.

⁴⁷ Lopez, *The Heart Sutra Explained*.

⁴⁸ Watson, *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, 87.

⁴⁹ Watson, *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, 52, 26.

⁵⁰ See Braak, “Toward a philosophy of Chan enlightenment” and Gimello, “Apophatic and kataphatic discourse in Mahayana.”

⁵¹ Wang, *Linguistic Strategies*, 54.

⁵² Nāgārjuna’s apophatic thought has been extensively interpreted in terms of and compared to deconstructive thinkers such as Derrida, following Magliola’s influential book *Derrida on the Mend*. According to Magliola, the Zen tradition contains a logocentric, absolutist strain (connected with the Northern School of Zen, rooted in the kataphatic Yogācāra philosophy) and a differential strain (connected with the Southern School of Zen, rooted in the apophatic Mādhyamika tradition). However, it is dubious whether Magliola’s characterizations of the Northern and Southern School are in line with recent scholarship on the history of Chan.

8 Two understandings of Zen apophasis

In contemporary formulations of the apophatic character of Zen, two understandings can be distinguished that are connected to different approaches to religious doctrine. The first understanding has been the most popular: Zen is an anti-ritualistic tradition that relativizes all religious doctrine in order to arrive at a direct realization of the nonconceptual ultimate Buddhist truth, the experience of enlightenment (*satori* or *kenshō*). The Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945) described the Zen enlightenment experience as a “pure experience” prior to the subject-object distinction. The nature of such a “Zen experience” is summarized by Zen scholar Hee-jin Kim as follows:

Enlightenment is construed as seeing things as they really are rather than as they appear; it is a direct insight into, and discernment of, the nature of reality that is apprehended only by wisdom, which transcends and is prior to the activity of discriminative thought.⁵³

Kim strongly criticizes such an interpretation of Zen enlightenment. He identifies several problems with this reading: (1) it implies a strong separation between “things as they really are” and “things as they appear to be”; (2) it suggests that insight is reached by leaving behind all discriminative thought; (3) “seeing” is conceived predominantly in epistemological, intuitive, and mystical terms; (4) it privileges a pre-discriminative state of mind; (5) it assumes a final duality that negates all difference and multiplicity.⁵⁴

Kim offers another interpretation of Zen enlightenment based on the work of the Zen thinker Dōgen (1200–1253): rather than transcending duality through an unmediated, nonlinguistic awareness of things as they really are, enlightenment means fully realizing duality and embodying it. The Zen form of life is then aimed at practising and embodying such an ongoing realization which takes place in the midst of language and thinking, rather than by rising above them.

Such an interpretation of Zen is in line with more recent interpretations of Zen, that criticize Suzuki’s presentation to the West. Rather than a kind of universal mysticism that gives access to an enlightenment experience “beyond words and letters” (fitting in with an experience-expressive approach to religious doctrine), Zen has more recently been understood as a form of life that is very much “within words and letters” (fitting in with a cultural-linguistic approach to religious doctrine).⁵⁵ Zen philosopher Dale Wright, for example, suggests that Zen enlightenment is an awakening *to* rather than *from* language. “Enlightenment” can only be realized when we are well established in the language game of Zen. Being proficient at the Zen language game means knowing how to use “live words”: words that facilitate the kind of ongoing performance of enlightenment that Peter Herschok has termed “improvisational virtuosity”: the capacity to freely and spontaneously respond appropriately to a wide variety of situations, perfectly in tune with all persons and circumstances involved. The Japanese-American religion scholar and Zen practitioner Victor Hori elucidates such an understanding of enlightenment by using the example of gravity. Rather than desiring to transcend gravity (which would leave us completely incapacitated, floating helplessly and out of control), we should strive to master gravity, which allows us to move about with grace and beauty. Just as there is no free flying beyond gravity, there is no Zen enlightenment beyond thought and language in a realm of pure consciousness.⁵⁶

In this second understanding of the apophatic character of Zen, enlightenment is indeed beyond conceptualization, not however because it is somehow a “mystical” and transcendent state of mind, but rather in the same way as riding a bicycle is beyond conceptualization. Enlightenment is not something to be experienced but something to be continually performed. In order to reach such a performance, one needs to become proficient in the language game of Zen, mastering a reservoir of skills and practices. Wright calls attention to the importance of the shared language game within the Zen Buddhist monastic world. Zen doctrines are more than just a tool, more than just fingers pointing to the moon. Zen monks are

⁵³ Kim, *Dōgen on mediation and thinking*, 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ For an overview of recent debates on these two interpretations of Zen, see Heine, *Zen Skin, Zen Marrow*, 3–14.

⁵⁶ Hori, “Kōan and Kenshō,” 309.

raised and educated in Zen monasteries. Enlightenment occurs not in the absence of language, but through language, through very complex Zen language games that include liberating “live words,” stultifying “dead words,” pointing, shouting, silence, and anti-language rhetoric. Westerners take such anti-language rhetoric language literally, but it is a form of language. Rather than speak about awakening *from* language, we should speak about awakening *to* language, by becoming proficient at the Zen language game, and learning how to use live words.⁵⁷

9 Zen-Christian dual belonging

So far, I have attempted to show that, just like some apophatic Christian traditions, the Zen tradition envisions a form of spiritual life that embraces opposites of faith and practice, not as a temporary suspension of judgement in order to reach a higher nondual truth, but as an ongoing spiritual practice that is valid in and of itself. What are the implications of this for authentic Zen-Christian dual belonging?

In my view, the apophatic elements in Christianity and Zen allow for forms of authentic Zen-Christian dual belonging that can leave aside Rose Drew’s first demand of conceptual integration. And whereas many Zen-Christian dual believers may practise apophasis from an experiential-expressive approach to religious doctrine (viewing it as a path towards the realization of a nondual enlightenment experience), in my understanding a cultural-linguistic approach to religious doctrine is most fruitful for a theological legitimization of Zen-Christian dual belonging. Zen-Christian dual believers who practise apophasis in the spirit of Dōgen from a cultural-linguistic approach to religious doctrine view it as an ongoing practice within duality. In terms of the mountain metaphor: Zen apophasis is not one of the paths to the mountain top, it is the ongoing practice of walking the path while realizing that there is no mountain top.⁵⁸ From this point of view, such Zen-Christian dual believers can be seen as participants in Zen and Christian language games. And although they may feel free to ignore Drew’s first demand, they are still able to meet Drew’s three conditions that give rise to that demand: philosophical justification, psychological balance, and soteriological effectiveness.

1. Apophasis provides a philosophical justification for holding incompatible or mutually exclusive religious beliefs (such as the belief in emptiness and the belief in Buddha nature, or the belief in the human nature of Christ and the belief in his divinity). This is because religious beliefs are not seen as ontologically corresponding to objective reality, nor are they considered to be expressions of feelings, attitudes or existential orientations. Therefore, the only requirement is that they are practically compossible as two types of religious discourse.
2. From a psychological point of view, one’s identity is not only determined by allegiance to certain doctrines. The Austrian scholar of religion Karl Baier has argued that for Buddhist-Christian believers who practice apophasis, the need for a kataphatic identity (the articulated sense of who I am based on a religious narrative) is superseded by the experience of an apophatic identity (who I truly am is beyond all religious narratives), a process that is actively stimulated by the apophatic traditions in Buddhism and Christianity.⁵⁹
3. From a soteriological point of view, being religiously bilingual allows one to participate more fully in both forms of life, and find even richer ways of embracing opposites of faith and practice. Zen-Christian dual belonging can be very helpful in deconstructing various deeply-implicit forms of kataphatic identity (based on deeply-held, but unexamined, Buddhist and Christian narratives) in order to make room for true faith in one’s apophatic identity.

⁵⁷ Wright, “Rethinking Transcendence,” 133. See also Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*.

⁵⁸ The Jesuit and Zen-Christian dual believer Samy cites Dōgen scholar Kim: “opposites of dualities are not obliterated or even blurred; they are not so much transcended as realised. The absolute freedom in question here is that freedom which realises itself in duality not apart from it.” Ama Samy, “Zen and Christians,” 92, citing Kim, *Dōgen Kigen: Mystical Realist*, 52f.

⁵⁹ Baier, “Spiritualität und religiöse Identität,” 212f.

10 Conclusion

In the first part of this article, I have outlined Rose Drew's two demands for authentic Buddhist-Christian belonging: integrating Buddhist and Christian world views, and preserving the unique distinctions between Buddhism and Christianity. I reviewed various strategies for meeting these demands, using Lindbeck's three approaches to religious doctrines: as cognitive-propositional truth claims about the divine; as experiential expressions of feelings, attitudes or existential orientations; or as cultural-linguistic idioms for construing reality and ordering life. All three approaches can be found in the various forms of Christianity and Buddhism. Therefore, in discussing Buddhist-Christian dual belonging, we always have to specify which forms of Buddhism and Christianity are being combined, and which approach to religious doctrines is being followed.

For example, some western Zen-Christian dual believers follow an experiential-expressive approach to religious doctrines. They justify their dual belonging by pointing out that all religious doctrines are fingers pointing to the moon, and should be seen as stepping stones to the non-dual experience of enlightenment (or the non-dual union with God). Other western Zen-Christian dual believers follow a cultural-linguistic approach to religious doctrines. They have attained a unified framework of meaning by viewing themselves as religiously bilingual, and consider the religious languages of Zen and Christianity as mutually complementary.

In the second part of this article, I have followed Janet Williams in exploring another approach to Buddhist-Christian belonging, focusing on the Zen tradition. Rather than holding on to the need for arriving at a unified framework of meaning, I have zoomed in on several forms of life in the larger Zen and Christian traditions that use apophasis as an important practice, in which contradictory and mutually exclusive doctrines are not rejected but embraced as part of a form of spiritual life that embraces opposites of faith and practice. Therefore, apophasis changes the dynamics of dual belonging in important ways, because the need for a unified framework of meaning falls away. While this cannot adequately explain all forms of Buddhist-Christian belonging, I think that apophasis is a useful category that deserves further exploration.

However, in such further exploration, it is important to keep the various complexities around the notion of apophasis in mind. Apophatic practice is most commonly understood as one of the stages of the spiritual path, a means to an end, a strategy that must be left behind when the goal (the revelation of Christian truth, or the non-dual experience of enlightenment) has been realized. This seems also to be the understanding of apophasis that Catherine Cornille presupposes when she argues, in a brief reference to Williams' article, that Williams – as does Paul Knitter – “also grounds the possibility of Buddhist-Christian dual belonging in a radically apophatic approach to ultimate reality,” and therefore subsumes her apophatic approach under the focus on the transcendent unity of all religions (the experience-expressive model of religion).⁶⁰

However, in this article I argue that both Christian and Zen traditions have two interpretations of apophasis, one in which apophasis is merely instrumental, and ultimately needs to be transcended by either the *via eminentiae* or the non-dual experience of enlightenment, and another in which apophasis is an ongoing spiritual practice. The first interpretation of apophasis would indeed fit in an experience-expressive approach to religious doctrines. However, the second interpretation of apophasis would be more compatible with a cultural-linguistic approach to religious doctrines. Apophasis as a second-order discourse is a religious practice that provides Buddhist-Christian dual belonging with theological legitimacy. Not because it leads to a converging world view, but because it allows bilingual Buddhist Christians to freely move back and forth between two discourses, while understanding the deep differences in doctrine and expression between Buddhism and Christianity.⁶¹ In my opinion, it is the second interpretation of apophasis that holds most promise in further developing a theological interpretation of Buddhist-Christian dual belonging.

⁶⁰ Cornille, “Strategies of Negotiation,” 149f.

⁶¹ Homrighausen, “Spiritually Bilingual,” 66.

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