



Kristin Beise Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes towards Religious Others*

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KIBLINGER, a faculty member at Thiel College (Greenville, Pennsylvania, USA) has written one of the first sustained studies of a Buddhist theology (or, philosophy, or, better: dharmalogy) of other religions. Typically theologies of religions (until now dominated by Christian scholars and thinkers) have focused on two dominant questions: the relationship between alien religious traditions and the home religion or faith with regard to the truthfulness of their claims, and the salvific or soteriological destiny of the unevangelized (those who have not been adequately exposed to the saving message of the home faith). For both questions, three types of responses have generally been proposed: *exclusivism*, which emphasizes the uniqueness of the home faith and its differences from other religions, and denies that salvation is possible apart from embrace of the central tenets and practices of the home faith; *inclusivism*, which presupposes the salvific power of the home faith without denying the possibility of either truth or saving power in other faiths; and *pluralism*, which assumes the basic truthful salvific parity of all faiths, properly understood, even if the varying beliefs and practices are expressed in and through different cultures and languages. Kiblinger's study adopts and defends an inclusivistic response to both the truth and salvation questions.

The argument of *Buddhist Inclusivism* is prosecuted through six chapters and a conclusion. Kiblinger begins by laying out the rationale for a Buddhist philosophy of religions in general and an inclusivist response more particularly. Chapter 2 analyzes the concept of inclusivism, adopting a rule-theory of religion and doctrine (as articulated by George Lindbeck in his now classic *The Nature of Doctrine*, 1984), defending the viability of inclusivism against exclusivism or pluralism, and sketching a preferred and ideal form of alternate-ends-recognizing inclusivism which privileges the aims and means of the home tradition even while granting the distinctive aims and means of other faiths as understood by their own adherents. Chapters 3–6 expand on Kiblinger’s thesis through presentation of selected examples of inclusivism in the Buddhist tradition (as modeled by Siddhartha Gautama and Aśoka; as seen vis-à-vis the ancient Vedic religion; as displayed by the Mahāyāna toward the Hīnayāna and other traditions; and as developed more recently in the expansion of Buddhism in the Euro-Americas), articulation of a Buddhist alternate-ends-recognizing inclusivism, critical case studies of two prominent Buddhist inclusivists (Thich Nhat Hanh and Masao Abe), and analysis of a contrast case of Buddhist exclusivism (Gunapala Dharmarisi).

Just as Christian theologians have become quite self-critical with regard to their own theologies of religions, so also Kiblinger is careful to subject the most prevalent forms of traditional Buddhist inclusivism to scrutiny. To begin, the common-core theory featured in some forms of Buddhist inclusivism (that of Nhat Hanh, for example) assumes that all religions are manifestations of a common essence or experience, but this both goes beyond the empirical evidence, and is subject to the criticisms of the religion-as-experience theory sidestepped by Kiblinger’s rule-theory of religion. More specifically Buddhist forms of inclusivism include those affirmed within the skillful means, emptiness, and two-truths frameworks. The first asserts that other religious means are accommodations to people at different stages of their spiritual journey to enlightenment, but this inevitably distorts the religious other’s own self-understanding by defining his or her ultimate aims in terms of the Buddhist tradition. The philosophy of emptiness which defines itself as a “positionless position” has been adopted by some Buddhists (e.g., Masao Abe) as a means of elevating Buddhism as a meta-religion or meta-framework which includes or is better able to account for the other historical religious traditions; this “position,” however, is subject to the same critical question directed against the pluralist theology of religions: how are historically situated creatures able to assume an ahistorical vantage point from which to make assertions about their own religious tradition and that of others? Finally, the two-truths theory relegates the claims of other faiths to the conventional level, reserving access to ultimate truths for the Buddha’s dharma alone. Besides not taking the claims of those in other faiths seriously, two-truths also assumes one final and ultimate religious end, to which all religious means are able to provide only varying levels of access.

Kiblinger prefers instead the “three vehicle” (*triyāna*) theory found most explicitly in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, which identifies at least three means to two

ultimate ends: the path of the śrāvakas who obtain enlightenment understood in terms of the non-existence of the self by hearing the teaching of a Buddha; the path of pratyekabuddhas who obtain the same end on their own (without the help of a buddha's teaching); and the vehicle of the Mahāyāna teaching which includes but also goes beyond the other two vehicles and leads to enlightenment understood in terms of the non-self constitutedness of all phenomena (not just human persons) and brings with it the commitment to achieve the salvation (enlightenment) of all sentient beings.

It is from this platform that Kiblinger develops further her own ideal Buddhist form of alternate-ends-recognizing inclusivism. While the three vehicles theory was initially developed by the Mahāyāna to account for the Hīnayāna, she suggests that it lends itself naturally toward a Buddhist inclusivism that can grant the validity of other religious ends on their own terms. Another feature of Kiblinger's inclusivism is the central role of the Buddhist doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* or interdependence which requires that each religious tradition, including the various forms of Buddhism, needs others. More specifically, in the public square, multiple religious traditions need to be inclusivistic in order for specific kinds of interchange to take place since if only one religious tradition is inclusivistic, it cannot on its own foster respectful but yet critically engaging dialogue with those in other faiths. Finally, Kiblinger's proposed Buddhist inclusivism is as much "path-oriented" as it is "doctrine-oriented," which allows emphasis on religious means (exemplified or embodied in the practices of devotees) as well as it does on ends (explicated usually in terms of doctrines).

Kiblinger acknowledges throughout her reliance on the multiple-religious-ends theology of religions proposed by Christian theologians such as S. Mark Heim (e.g., *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, 1997; and *The Depths of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, 2001) and Joseph DiNoia (*The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective*, 1992). In fact, she admits that her own project was inspired precisely by invitations by Heim to assess the applicability and viability of his proposal for other religious traditions. Given my background and training in Christian theology (rather than Buddhist studies), allow me to pose questions to *Buddhist Inclusivism* informed in part by other Christian theological responses to Heim, et al.

First, most Christian theologians have countered that admittance of multiple religious ends neither squares with the predominant self-understanding of most Christians about the ultimate fate of human beings, nor encourages the kind of missionary attitude at the heart of Christian faith traditionally conceived. Arguably, Kiblinger's alternate-ends-recognizing inclusivism has many more connections with dominant trajectories in the Buddhist tradition than Heim's proposal has with the Christian tradition. Further, it is also arguable that Buddhist expansion has been conducted over the centuries presuming an inclusivistic attitude at least, and a multiple-ends stance in more than a few cases. Hence this first objection to Kiblinger's thesis is not as unsurmountable as when it is posed to Heim.

But second, Heim has also been criticized for formulating a Christian theology

of multiple religious ends that is practically bereft of scriptural or biblical support. On this point, Buddhist scholars will have to weigh in on Kiblinger's handling of her sources. In her favor, however, is that there is no one canon of Buddhist scriptures, which opens up the possibility of developing an approach that is broadly based on various schools in the Buddhist tradition.

Last (for our purposes) is the fact that while Heim speaks as a Christian to those in his own community of faith, Kiblinger does not self-identify religiously as a Buddhist even while she is attempting, in this work, to take this particular conversation to the next level among Buddhologists and Buddhist intellectuals. Kiblinger does argue for the possibility that individuals can become sufficiently adept in the grammar of another religion (note again her commitment to a rule-theory of religious doctrine) so as to do constructive intellectual work within that other tradition. Still, both the rule-theory of religion and her emphasis on path-orientation assume that practices are just as (if not more) constitutive of a religion than are doctrines. If that is the case, then how plausible are Kiblinger's proposals as they are uninformed by Buddhist practices? Of course, the same critical question can be posed to Heim, et al., and this simply means that the multiple- or alternate-ends-recognizing theories/theologies of religion are still in their infancy, needing corroboration at least in part from practitioners with at least dual-religious affiliations or with multiple-religious identities.

Amos YONG
Regent University School of Divinity
Virginia Beach, Virginia, USA