

Buddhist Antidotes against Greek Maladies:
Ritschl, Harnack, and the Dehellenization of Intercultural Philosophy

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Abstract

One of the most prolific approaches to the comparative study of Buddhist and Christian philosophy has been the use of Buddhist anti-metaphysicism to overcome the allegedly obsolete metaphysical discourse of Christianity. This approach has been practiced, among others, by Edgar Bruns, Frederik Streng, Joseph O'Leary, and John Keenan. Keenan's 1980–1990s seminal works were determinative in that they appeared to rely on intuitive and evident premises: Christianity became infused with Greek metaphysical concepts early on; consequently, it adopted the forms of essentialism and ontological discourse practiced in metaphysics; that discourse has now become obsolete and must be overcome; Buddhist anti-metaphysicism helps overcome it; hence, Christianity can learn from Buddhism. In this paper, I show that although Keenan presents the first of these claims as self-evident, it is in fact highly polemical. Its origins lie in Albrecht Ritschl's and Adolf von Harnack's Hellenization theory. While the theological and historical background to this theory has been debated, Keenan does not engage in these debates. Even more, he transforms the theory in such a way that it becomes incongruent with its inherent aim. Following the problems implied on these two levels, I suggest that Keenan's project makes itself vulnerable to incoherencies. In the end, I argue for the overcoming of anti-metaphysicism as a basis for Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

Keywords: essentialism, ontology, metaphysics, Hellenization, ancient philosophy, Buddhism, interfaith dialogue, interculturality

Introduction

As of today, large parts of the New Testament have been made available to the reader who seeks to approach Christian texts from a Buddhist point of view. Edgar Bruns has interpreted the Gospel of John;¹ John P. Keenan has written commentaries on Mark, Ephesians, Philippians, and James;² some of the ideas with which he engages can be traced back to Masao Abe's reading of the hymn in

Philippians.³ On the other hand, Buddhist sutras and philosophical texts have been explained by Christian authors: Frederik Streng has translated and commented on works by Nāgārjuna;⁴ Keenan has done so with the Heart Sutra;⁵ and Perry Schmidt-Leukel with the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.⁶

In the case of Keenan's commentaries on the New Testament, the Buddhist interpretation appears so seamless that the texts almost seem to interpret themselves. Keenan handles the Buddhist categories with great facility, and the texts unfold almost naturally under the impact of his Buddhist hermeneutics. What makes this unfolding possible is that Keenan states his motivation and theoretical standpoint confidently, and that he substantiates his reading with what appears to be historical evidence. The historical narrative is as follows: Christianity was founded in Palestine by the Galilean preacher Jesus, as a community gathering around his teaching and person. Over the course of two centuries, the Christian community comingled with the dominant culture of its time, namely Greek culture, and with the main product of that culture: philosophy in the shape of metaphysics and ontology. The "ontotheology of the Fathers,"⁷ the teaching of the first generations of Christian theologians, came to be as the result of that comingling. Today's world has lost the relation to ancient Greek culture, and Christian theology cannot rely on Patristic, metaphysically laden texts anymore. What speaks to the modern mind is evidence-based, conceptually open spirituality such as that of Buddhism. Hence, the Buddhist method deserves to be studied and the results of that study incorporated in Christian thought—"meditation on the antidote" (*pratipakṣabhāvanā*) as "a cure against Greek maladies" (ἑλληνικῶν παθημάτων θεραπευτική, one of Theodoretus of Cyr's main works).

In this paper, I want to look at the initial premise of this construction, which presents itself as the *conditio sine qua non* of Mahāyāna theology: the claim that the inception of Christianity was not driven by metaphysical conceptualization but that this conceptualization was imposed onto it by the Greek mind later on. The problem with this claim is not so much that it is wrong, which would be difficult to prove and require much historical work. The more serious issue with Keenan's construction is that he presents the claim as a piece of evidence itself, although, in fact, it is the contrary: it is by itself a controversial claim that participates in various historical problems.⁸ The context from which the claim emerged has its own logic, aim, and methodology, and the claim itself has been disputed from different points of view. By retracing some important moments of that controversy, I will show that Keenan's project of Mahāyāna theology only works under boundaries that are so strong that they run the risk of constraining intercultural dialogue more than widening it.

Accordingly, I proceed in three steps. I begin by outlining the theory behind Keenan's exegesis and the claim that Christianity is not inherently related to Greek metaphysics. The earliest and main proponents of the theory are German theologians Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack, who follow different approaches but agree on their basic stance. Putting the theoretical and historical background of their theory in perspective will help understand from what intuition and ideological groundwork Keenan's theory originated.

In the second step, I reconstruct Keenan's Mahāyāna theology with reference to the theoretical and historical elements developed in the first part. The goal is not to criticize Keenan's adaptation of Ritschlian–Harnackian theology but to identify the changes required by that adaptation and Keenan's handling and justification of these changes.

Then, in the final step, I will bring these materials together and point out the various incoherencies, historically inaccurate points, and theological problems ensuing from Keenan's justification of Mahāyāna theology. The criticism will not be directed against Ritschl and Harnack, but against the use Keenan makes of them.

The main issue at stake is the question of whether or not anti-metaphysicism and the philosophical "purification" of Christianity are viable ways for interculturality. Keenan's criticism has opened the way to radical views on the metaphysical tradition in Christianity. Have these views contributed to bring Christianity together with other religious traditions?

Early Christianity and Greek Philosophy

The question of Greek influences on the formation of Christianity is fraught with difficulties—difficulties that keep on proliferating whenever one of them is treated in isolation. How can we make a difference between Greek concepts as mere means of expression—the New Testament was written in Greek, and the Church Fathers used the Septuagint almost exclusively—and concepts conveying elements of Greek philosophy? Who among the critics of philosophical intrusions in Christianity can we consider to be the first proponent of a coherent, critical standpoint: Paul, Tatian the Apologete, Methodius of Olympus, the anti-Origenist and anti-Intellectualist, Theoretus of Cyr, Luther? To avoid bogging down in these preliminary problems, I propose, as a point of entry into the problem, to concentrate on two concrete examples of first, a systematic, and second, an historical approach. Hence, instead of elaborating on questions of historical emergence and development, I will jump *in medias res* and read relevant texts by the two major proponents of these approaches: Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack. Ritschl explains the distinction between metaphysics and theology from a theoretical point of view, through questions such as, What modes of reflecting and articulating ideas are specific to philosophy and religion? And what happens when this specificity is not adequately observed? In reading Harnack, a student of Ritschl, I will focus on the historical aspects of the problem: How did it manifest itself in the history of theology? What are its main historical stages? And what are the consequences for contemporary Christianity?

Although Albrecht Ritschl is one of the most important figures of nineteenth-century protestant theology, his system of dogmatics is, in the words of Rolf Schäfer, "virtually lost" ("fast verschollen"). What remains are fragmentary vestiges attached to his name, the remembrance of a once highly influential theology, and traces of that influence in the works of his students. To facilitate the entry into Ritschl's ideas on Christianity and the problem of metaphysics, I begin with better-known theological positions and then go over to a reading of passages in which Ritschl contrasts his

own position against that background. In discussing these texts, I follow Johannes Zachhuber's methodology in his monograph on nineteenth-century German Protestant theology.¹⁰ To counteract "the absence of any definite and conclusive presentation by the theologian himself,"¹¹ Zachhuber proposes to recompose Ritschl's system by putting the different elements spread over the texts together. This requires a close reading of the texts themselves, which is what I propose on the following pages. The leading question will be: What is the relation between metaphysics and theology?

According to Ritschl, Latin scholasticism represents one of the foremost examples of a confusion between metaphysics and theology. In his first proof of God's existence, Thomas Aquinas concludes, on the basis of universal causality, that it is necessary that a first mover exists. He adds to his proof, as a lexical explanation: "and this everybody understands to be God."¹² The logically binding part of the proof is the existence of the metaphysical entity "first mover". What Thomas does not even consider as a part of the problem, is that this entity ought to be called "God"—that is what everybody would concede.

In his "Historical Studies in the Christian Teaching on God,"¹³ Ritschl takes up this point to demonstrate how metaphysics appropriates a theological presupposition without observing the specific grounding of that presupposition. We concede "that the concepts of a first mover who transcends the world, of an ultimate end, of an infinite being are required to make the known order of the world complete and explainable". However, there is no direct transition from that concept to God as the content of Faith: "But that these ideas coincide with the Christian representation of God – that is only claimed, but not proven."¹⁴ The dynamics implied in Thomas's reasoning are metaphysical, and the theological label is only added at the end. Ritschl willingly accepts that calling God a first mover is theologically correct.¹⁵ But what makes this claim correct is that it is posited in the context of theological methodology. Through the way God has revealed itself, it has become manifest that he possesses perfection and that he stands at the origin of the world. Thus, we can apply attributes of philosophical perfection to him, such as "first mover". But the problem with scholastic proofs is that they presume to conflate knowledge about nature and faith in God's existence, although their reasoning only applies to nature. We "can be satisfied with proofs for the existence of God only when we hold a statement about his constitution ready."¹⁶ Historically, one could argue that, in accordance with Ritschl's idea, the proofs were so willingly accepted because they participated in the larger religious context of medieval societies. To somebody who does not accept these assumptions, even if he or she allows the proof for a first mover, the conflation of natural knowledge and theological faith must seem absurd.

A second example from more recent times can help us understand this point better. In a polemical treatise directed against Christoph E. Luthardt (1823–1902), an apologetic author who questioned Ritschl's stance on philosophy, Ritschl discusses "the right that metaphysical knowledge can claim in theology."¹⁷ In the last part of the treatise, he discusses this "right" against the background of a debate in sixteenth-century Protestant theology. At this time, Croatian theologian Matthias Flacius held the view that sin does not determine the human being accidentally,

but substantially.¹⁸ In other words, sin affects the very being of the human person. Ritschl himself admits that this view appears “nasty” and “exaggerated.”¹⁹ He then proceeds to analyze the background of the debate. The root of the problem does not lie in the exaggerated view itself but in the application of categories such as “substance” and “accident” to matters that have no relation to metaphysics.

Surprisingly enough, Ritschl accuses nobody less than Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560), one of the founding fathers of Protestant theology, of having originated this confusion. Against Luther himself, who thought of the scholastic approach as “hopeless and ruinous,”²⁰ Melanchthon bears the blame “of having incorporated the tradition of vulgar metaphysics.”²¹ In what way has he done so? “Melanchthon has cultivated, from the beginning of his position in Wittenberg, and not without success, dialectic, i.e. Aristotle’s teaching on categories and logic.”²² The categories of substance and accident come, of course, from Aristotle and the greater tradition of Greek thought, to which I will come back in the next section. The problem, again, is not that of Aristotle’s or the Greeks’ point of view. The problem lies in the way Melanchthon transposed that methodology, viz., the analysis and categorization of nature, in theological discourse. By squeezing highly complex networks of problems such as Sin, the attributes of divine nature, predestination, etc., in the narrow set of Aristotelean categories, Melanchthon—or, according to Ritschl’s theory that Melanchthon is philosophically schizophrenic,²³ one of Melanchthon’s personalities—falls back into scholastic discourse, thus betraying the Lutheran project of breaking the scholastic mold.²⁴

With scholasticism and its underhanded intrusion in Protestant theology as a starting point, we can now mark the central elements of Ritschl’s theory of metaphysics and theology out more easily. I will do so by getting back to the systematic part of Ritschl’s treatise on *Theology and Metaphysics*.

As outlined above, Ritschl’s main concern is the transposition of metaphysical discourse in matters of revelation. What is the systematic and historical grounding of that transposition? The Greek religion suffered, according to Ritschl, from one major problem. The Greeks had, on the one hand, as all other civilizations, their own gods. However, these gods appeared so involved in nature and human matters that, by the time of Heraclitus and Xenagoras, the traditional way of conceiving their existence had already become obsolete. On the other hand, a more rational conception emerged with Plato, Aristotle, and the subsequent philosophical traditions. But the concern with these traditions is that, in Aristotle, there is no devotional element, no hope for a divine intervention in a situation of need, and no religious nuance whatsoever, while in Plato (at least in Ritschl’s Plato), God is nothing more than an “infinite Being,” indistinguishable from “the idea of the world itself.”²⁵ Against that background, Christianity appeared as something completely new: a monotheism with—if we follow Ritschl, and, as we shall see, Harnack, and even Bultmann—little to no philosophical content, an omnipotent God, and divine intervention in human life. It is a religion that admits the positive aspects of philosophical monotheism by deriving them from the revealed notion of God. On the other hand, this notion has nothing of an abstract and pure concept. The Christian God is able to intervene directly in

history and shares with the gods of polytheistic religions the omnipresence of the divine. Christianity has thus overcome the “Greeks’ despair of their practiced religion”²⁶ under two important aspects: It is comparable neither to a philosophical monotheism, nor to a naturalist religion, in which the divine is not substantially separable from nature and humanity.

This contrast allows us to fully appreciate the tension that determined the intellectual development of early Christianity. We find in Paul, the Apologetes (mainly Justin Martyr), and most importantly, the Alexandrian tradition (Origen’s *Contra Celsum*) a constant endeavor to face the Greek milieu and confront the problems mentioned above, that is, the abstractness of metaphysical monotheism and the engagement of polytheism in natural processes and its anthropomorphism. The risk run by this endeavor is to align Christian discourse with the discourse of Greek philosophy, viz., to assume the dynamics of that philosophy and to pretend that Christian religion is superior to Greek culture precisely in those aspects in which the Greeks piqued themselves on superiority. This is the starting point of the surrender of Christianity to Greek culture and, with that culture, to metaphysics, and it is the starting point of the long and complex process of Christian self-surrender to the Greek mind:

If one makes, as a Christian, a difference between the conditions of religious worldview and those of metaphysical cosmology, it will be impossible to admit metaphysical knowledge of that God in whom one puts the hope to be saved. Or if a Christian engages with the metaphysical knowledge of God, he thereby abandons his Christian point of view, and assumes a standpoint that generally corresponds to the pagan one.²⁷

The turning point is the moment when the content of revelation is transformed through human expression and when that human element is misrepresented as a part of revelation itself. This is the confusion that has led to aberrations throughout the whole history of theology.

It should be noted at this point that, as a corollary to Ritschl’s radical opposition to the human or cultural element, it is not only Greek culture that is ruled out. Ritschl also treats Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism in a sarcastic and negative way. When he mentions them, it is only to show what kind of exotic mistakes the confusion between mysticism and the metaphysics of the Absolute can create.²⁸ Ritschl, who accuses Christians who argue metaphysically of relapsing into heathendom, would certainly not have accepted interreligious dialogue as a means for theological reflection and development. I will come back to this point in the next part of this paper, but it should be emphasized at this point that the theory of the distortion of Christianity through metaphysics does not only affect the relation to Greek culture but to any culture or language outside Christianity.

This corollary is reflected in the state of German Protestant theology in the twentieth century, as Paul Knitter noted.²⁹ With the outruling of religion as a human phenomenon, Knitter says, prospects for interreligious theory have not only been ruled out in theory but “de facto,” and visibly, as manifested in the absence of

dialogue with other religions.³⁰ Although no direct correlation between Ritschl and this absence can be established, Knitter's observation confirms that any emphasis on the incommensurability of Christianity risks to interfere with the opening of Christianity to other religions.

To sum up this far:

1. Ritschl believes that the metaphysical order and the order of Christian faith are constitutively and essentially distinct. The only case in which an exchange is possible is when faith expresses itself through metaphysical language, and this is admissible only with regard to God's nature: "Except in the teaching on God, Christian dogmatics does not offer any possibility to establish a metaphysical thought as a theological one."³¹
2. Historically, what caused the blurring of that distinction is the relapse of early Christians, who tried to justify their adherence to Christ through their enemies' language, into Greek metaphysical thought. Thus, from the Apologetes and the Alexandrian tradition on, Christian theology was inhabited by a schizophrenia that made it resort to Greek language whenever its "own" language seemed to fail.
3. This relapse was not a single event but the original expression of a latent tendency—a tendency that would play an important part in the Christian West until at least Luther and maybe even after him (as Melancthon's example shows). The metaphysical temptation makes its appearance every time the order between faith and philosophical explication of faith is inverted and philosophy puts it in the first place.

Ritschl's treatment of the question in the "Historical Studies" as well as in *Theology and Metaphysics* is determined by a systematical approach. The aim is to identify the metaphysicist tendency that has pervaded Christian theology and to show in what way the Lutheran tradition has tried to free itself from that tendency. Zachhuber defines the aim as "a demand to theologize from within the Christian community."³² In Ritschl, this demand unfolds in "rel[iance] on philosophical principles,"³³ viz., from a theoretical point of view and through a conceptual and structural analysis.

To understand the afterlife of this unfolding, it is useful to take the element that remained unexplored by Ritschl himself as a starting point. The thesis of the intrusion of the Greek mind in early Christianity is, strictly speaking, and despite Ritschl's own theoretical approach, an historical thesis.³⁴ There happened to be, among Ritschl's students,³⁵ a theologian who had distinguished himself in historical studies, such as on the Apologists' references to Gnosticism:³⁶ Adolf von Harnack. One could say that in the same way as Ritschl excelled in philosophy, Harnack did in history.³⁷ Accordingly, to have a better grasp of the idea that metaphysics does not essentially participate in theology and to see how metaphysics came to play a great part in theology anyway, I propose to read some of Harnack's key texts.

Harnack identifies the causes of the massive changes in early Christianity as a "displacement of the fundamental religious interest."³⁸ The displacement is the shift of "the question: 'What must I do to find beatitude?'"—a question that Jesus Christ and the apostles knew how to answer very succinctly³⁹—to the "Greek-philosophical idea

that true religion is essentially a ‘teaching.’”⁴⁰ It is, in other words, the radical transformation of Christian religion, as faith in Christ, into philosophical thought, in the shape of Greek metaphysics. To specify this transformation, Harnack describes the history of early Christianity as a succession of different stages, of which the displacement constitutes the second, following the original enthusiastic spread of the founder’s preaching; and, inside this stage, he identifies three further episodes.⁴¹ The first episode appears as a phenomenon that concerns, according to Harnack, all religious traditions: It represents the time when, two to three generations after the passing of the founder, the “original enthusiasm [. . .] streams out,”⁴² and when the void left by that outstreaming is filled by theory and “tradition”.

In the case of Christianity, Harnack notes, the element that streamed in where the enthusiasm had streamed out was of such influence and significance that it gave early Christianity a new orientation altogether:

*The inflow of Hellenism, of the Greek mind, and the association of the Gospel with it, is the greatest event in the history of the Church in the second century; and it continued, having essentially established itself, in the following centuries.*⁴³

With the loss of the original inspiration, it is Greek metaphysical thought that entered the stage of Christian self-expression. By pinpointing this shift in the second century (and its development in subsequent times), Harnack has given Ritschl’s theoretical intuition a historical grounding. Harnack’s main work, the *History of Dogma*, represents the complete unfolding of that groundwork.

The concept Harnack uses to designate the inflow of Greek culture into Christianity is the infamous concept of “Hellenization” (Hellenisierung). Hellenization is the process through which Christianity assimilated the cultural environment of the ancient Greco-Roman world. However, the concept does not primarily apply altogether to the historical process of assimilation but, more precisely, to a process initiated conjunctly with stage 1 mentioned above.⁴⁴ In parallel to the influence of metaphysics, in particular Medioplatonism and early Neoplatonism, Harnack identifies a development that he calls “acute Hellenization.”⁴⁵ This development represents the intrusion of Gnostic, “orientalizing” sects in the Christian mainstream—intrusions that threatened to berave the Christian faith of its universal, non-elitist reach. I will come back to these sects below. For now, it is important to note that Harnack does make a difference between a “Greek turn” that gave Christianity a new orientation without dissolving it, and an “acute hellenization”, that was prevented, but that could have caused dissolution. Hellenization in the strict sense designates the impending danger of Gnosticism; it is only in the wider sense that Hellenization comes to mean the whole process of inculturation.

If we take a closer look at Harnack’s main work, the *History of Dogma*, we can see that it already presents the signature of the distinction between Gnostic and properly Greek Hellenization developed in the later lectures.⁴⁶ The initial stage of Greek inculturation is that of the first generation of Apologetes, most eminently represented by Justin Martyr. Justin’s *Apologies* are the first documents of Christian-Platonic

metaphysics. In contrast to Gnosticism, these metaphysics were not “rejected by the communities, but they rather subsequently became the fundamentals of ecclesiastical dogmatics.”⁴⁷ Most interesting is Harnack’s comparison between Justin the Platonic philosopher and Valentinus the hellenizing Gnostic:⁴⁸ Justin accepted Christian faith as a religious basis for a moral attitude and a way of life that he had already assumed; Valentinus sought a coherent religious system. Both encountered Christianity as something new to them, but while Justin saw in it a tradition that gave his intuitive Greek monotheism a grounding in reality and history, Valentinus simply tried to understand it. This attempt led him to drop everything that did not make sense to him, which caused Gnosticism to depart from ecclesiastical Christianity, and this is the process of Hellenization the stronger sense.

How is it possible that the Greeks accepted Christianity so easily as “the realization of absolutely moral theism”?⁴⁹ One of Harnack’s most interesting theses is that the dynamics of religion were already present in Greek culture, and that this givenness was the decisive element for the spread of Christianity: “The transfer of religion in philosophy would not have been possible, if Greek philosophy had not already found itself in a development toward religion.”⁵⁰ Philosophies such as Stoicism and Middle Platonism had started to discredit the Greeks’ archaic theology. The quest for a coherent form of monotheism, paired with the awaiting of a yet unknown god coming from the East, opened the way for new religious traditions. Myths such as the coming of Dionysus from India are an example of this Greek “Orientalism”. Other indicators inside Christian theology show that Christianity benefited from this religious quest: Tatian, Clement of Alexandria, and even Origen had their eyes set on a romantic representation of the Eastern “barbarians.”⁵¹ In this sense, Christian monotheism appeared as the material for which the Greek mold had been waiting since the earliest philosophical criticisms of polytheism.

What was, then, the ground on which the Greek inculturation continued proliferating, and what were the elements in Christianity that allowed it to become dominant? The seed from which Greek Christianity—and the whole of Western Christianity—sprung is the idea of the Logos.⁵² The Logos stands, on the one hand, at the peak of the New Testament, and on the other hand, it is a key concept in Greek philosophy from Heraclitus, over Philo, to Plotinus. From its Greek origin, the Logos brought along its functioning as divine reason, which allows God to remain unaffected by the world God created and governs; from the Christian background and its embedding in the creation narratives (Genesis and Johannine Prologue), the Logos received its connotation as the very possibility for God to relate to God’s creation.⁵³

In Justin’s cunning yet opaque elaborations on the Logos, these elements come together as the earliest manifestation of what would later become the classical Logos theology of Christianity. Due to Justin’s and, in general, the Apologists’ trailblazing speculation and their “intellectualism and exclusive doctrinarism,” they can be considered as the “founders” of “philosophical and dogmatic Christianity.”⁵⁴

From this, we can see how Harnack’s genealogy of the Greek influence on Christianity gives the Protestant skepticism against metaphysicism a solid historical basis. Harnack’s work reflects Luther’s opposition to the Catholic deference to the

Platonizing Church Fathers as well as Ritschl's opposition to the metaphysical tendencies that had, in nineteenth-century Germany, again become prominent through the theological assessments of German Idealism. It traces the history of these tendencies back to a precise point in history and pinpoints the bifurcation at which the "orthodox" form of Hellenizing Christianity separated from Hellenizing Gnosticism. In the end, Harnack leaves the reader with the impression that there was a pre-apologetic, first and second generation Christian religion, and that Luther has helped us find our way back to the traces of that religion.

Keenan's Mahāyāna Theology

In contemporary theology and philosophy, various attempts have been made to revitalize Christian religion in explicit or implicit accordance with the Lutheran–Ritschlian–Harnackian project.⁵⁵ We find, in particular, a string of attempts that has been prominent for more than three decades but that presents, in spite of its compliance with the dehellenization project, certain risks of creating a new alienation of Christianity. The attempt is that of interculturality, in the shape of Buddhist-Christian "Mahāyāna theology".

The initiator and most prominent proponent of Mahāyāna theology is John P. Keenan. In his seminal 1989 work, *The Meaning of Christ*, as well as in subsequent responses to critics, Keenan has developed a methodological framework for incorporating Buddhist thought in Christian theology. In emphatic phrasing, Joseph O'Leary states: "He is the first theologian to reveal that Mahāyāna Buddhism has become structurally necessary to Christian faith."⁵⁶ This raises the question: To what does this "necessity" respond?

Keenan's basic assumption is that "[a]lthough the Christian faith did not originate in a Hellenistic culture, its thinkers adopted Hellenistic philosophy early on as a handmaid to theological understanding (*ancilla theologiae*)."⁵⁷ With this assumption, we find ourselves in the thick of the Ritschlian–Harnackian Hellenization theory outlined in the first part of this paper: The Greek element is not essential to the Christian revelation, but it came into play at a later point, as an instrument of self-expression: "The relationship between theology and philosophy remains doctrinally fluid and historically contextual."⁵⁸ But in order to see where Keenan takes this theory, I first go through the key elements of his position, before adducing, in the last part, my points of criticism.

Keenan's basic assumption relies on the presence of a hiatus between the point where Christian faith "originated" and that of Hellenistic inculturation. In other words, there was a time when Christian communities already existed, but these communities had not yet incorporated any element of Greek culture. This hiatus presupposes a Harnackian model of history, where the initial stage of theological development, as represented in the Pauline epistles, the Gospel of John, the Ignatian corpus, etc., is linguistically Greek, but free from metaphysical concepts. The Harnackian model requires the historian to admit a theological interstice, in the shape of a pre-Hellenistic stage of Christianity, where the Greek language is already spoken, but where it has not yet implanted Greek ideas in the Christian mind.

The essential difference between Christian revelation and Greek metaphysics is that Greek metaphysics is *culturally determined*. Being culturally determined is being expressive of a historical and geographical situation that cannot be simply transferred to a different context or to a universal level. Such determination would put Christianity's universalism at risk, since it would render its message unintelligible for other periods of history or cultures. And this is precisely what Keenan says about metaphysics: "Not only is ontological theology incongruent with the philosophic seeking that characterizes my time and place, it seems to me that ontology in general has run out of steam."⁵⁹ Here, the idea is that ontology or metaphysics is a product of a philosophical seeking typical of a certain time and space, that is, ancient Greece, and that, since that seeking is antiquated, its answers cannot possibly relate to the present situation: "It is further a recognition that the metaphysical framework, although vastly persuasive within the classical Greek and Latin cultures of Patristic Christian times, no longer exercises that function apart from those cultures."⁶⁰

To understand the following steps in the construction of Mahāyāna theology, two points should be noted. The first one is that Keenan's idea here presents the form of an *argumentum ad populum*, and that it refers to a non-generalizable form of experience. I will come back to this problem in the last section. While this type of argument is fairly common in both contemporary theology and intercultural studies, its main issue is that it puts popular opinions and clichés in an authoritative position, where they do not essentially belong. For example, we would find it strange to conclude, from the fact that most people lost their interest in theater, compared to the situation in ancient Greece, that we should give up theater; or to conclude, from the circumstance that people read fewer books since they switched to other media, that we ought to consider reading outdated. Even without being a traditionalist, elitist, or intellectualist, one can find Keenan's appeal to the popular mindset imprudent.

The second point is that Keenan departs from classical Protestant assumptions by representing metaphysics as obsolete. The position in which Ritschl found himself at the end of the nineteenth century was that of metaphysical revival, prompted by the afterlife of German Idealism. Warding off metaphysics meant, in that position, fighting against a living tradition. Keenan, on the other hand, has to drop this important element, and hence he substitutes, to the danger of metaphysics, what he conceives as contemporary alienation to metaphysics and oblivion of ontology. Thus, the background to the question is fundamentally different.

The obsolescence of Greek metaphysics explains the "structural necessity" to find a new conceptual framework for Christian theology. This is the point at which Keenan brings in Mahāyāna and, most importantly, the concept of "emptiness". To understand the purport of this move and the way in which Keenan presumes to take his inspiration from Buddhism, it is useful to begin by looking at what he rejects or pretends not to do. What he refuses is, in his own words, to simply practice Buddhist "full-blown metaphysics,"⁶¹ that is, to replace traditional Western metaphysics with Buddhist metaphysics, without acknowledging the structural problems inherent to the principle of metaphysics itself. Keenan thinks that this is precisely what philosophers such as Masato Abe, the Kyōto school Buddhist scholar,

did: “When Abe speaks of a ‘locus of emptiness,’ he is expressing his own rather idiosyncratic philosophy of absolute nothingness, not the emptiness philosophy of any traditional Mahāyāna scripture or commentary.”⁶² Accordingly, Abe’s “dynamic, self-emptying ‘absolute nothingness’ is as much of a philosophic construct as Hegel ever managed.”⁶³ Since Hegel represents, in Keenan, the very archetype of the metaphysical villain, anyone who appears to side with him must, by default, be rejected.

Keenan’s criticism of traditional metaphysics calls for a revolution on a higher, non-metaphysical level. The aim of the reference to Mahāyāna is not to replace, as Abe did, the content of one metaphysical system with that of a different one. The aim is, on the contrary, to abandon metaphysical views altogether. Keenan contends that this interpretation of Mahāyāna is the authentic one, as opposed to Abe’s “speculative and ethereal” standpoint that takes us back to a “1950s Roman Catholic seminary,”⁶⁴ which is the native land of those who “have not been equipped to delve into the scriptures, commentaries, or doctrines of Buddhism in the original languages of that tradition.”⁶⁵ Mahāyāna goes beyond any metaphysical speculation; “it consistently teaches that ultimate meaning is beyond any theory or any viewpoint and is realized only in a silent awakening from entanglement with all proliferative discourse.”⁶⁶ This unhypostatizable, contentless non-position ultimately is what emptiness is: “Mahāyāna theology does not represent a Buddhist ‘position,’ but rather the emptiness of all positions.”⁶⁷

The answer to the structural necessity of renewing theology is emptiness, understood as an unprejudiced, open-minded gaze on Christianity. Emptiness is, in Ritschlian terms, the remedy against the confusion between the metaphysical and the theological order; in Harnackian terms, a perspective on the time between Christ’s preaching and 120 AD, when the original enthusiasm was lost and replaced, in Apologetic literature, by the ambition to make headway against Greek metaphysics. When a theologian positions himself in emptiness, he understands that the New Testament, and the Gospels in particular, speak to the reader in an uncontaminated way. Even if they use Greek language, they do so contingently, while the meaning to which they point lies deeper and remains unaffected by its mode of expression. As Keenan says with regard to the theology of the Eucharist: “One need not be Greek or European”⁶⁸ to understand and participate in Christian religion.

Keenan does not go so far as saying that Mahāyāna theology straightforwardly refutes the metaphysicist theology of the Church Fathers. In an extensive response to his critics, he affirms that he does not question the “validity”⁶⁹ of the Patristic teachings, but only their “assumed normative status of the ontological framework.”⁷⁰ The difference is thin and almost intangible, in that the form of the Patristic teachings cannot be separated from their content or meaning. Affirming that there are two “Natures” in Christ, or that he is one “Person”, is a statement that cannot be translated into a conceptual system from which essentialist or generally ontological statements are banned. Keenan here resorts to the Buddhist notion of “skillful means” (*upāya*⁷¹), which allows him to practice a separation between what language is meant to achieve, and what it is in itself. Accordingly, he posits a reading of the Patristic texts that attempts to “enunciate today what they [sc. The Patristic texts] enunciated

in their time.”⁷² However, he fails to explain the exact layer of meaning that remain valid in Creeds, conciliar, and theological texts.

If we take *upāya* in a Christian context to mean something like a metaphor or a finger pointing to the moon, that would certainly miss the point, since the one idea that overarches the whole history of theology from John to modernity is that the “Word” as *logos* is the expression of God and God himself and not just a metaphor or, in Docetic terms, a contingent garment that we have to lift to see the reality underneath. And even if we admitted such an interpretation, we would then only replace one network of meanings with a different one, exchanging the Platonizing allegory of the Church Fathers with a new Buddhist allegory. However, since Keenan’s claim implies that there is something more to the “validity” of Patristic theology, I will assume that peculiarity for now and come back to the problem of theological orthodoxy in the last section.

What we can affirm with certainty at this point is, of course, the undeniable originality of Keenan’s Mahāyāna theology, but also, on the other side of that originality, its strong dependence on the theoretical framework of nineteenth-century Protestant theology. The foregoing analysis has shown that at every step of his argument, Keenan uses ideas derived from Ritschlian and Harnackian theology, although these ideas sometimes appear in a different context or with different connotations. The following key elements attest to the coincidences of Ritschl/Harnack and Keenan:

1. Greek metaphysics serves Christianity as a language and as a conceptual framework.
2. The framework is contingent and does not participate in revelation itself.
3. Hellenizing theology became dominant only in the second century AD.
4. Between the first generation of the Apostles and the Greek turn, there is a historical gap, and that gap bears the traces of Non-Hellenized Christian communities.
5. We must seek to renew our awareness of the original meaning of the gospel and Christ’s preaching by overcoming our clinging to a Greek metaphysical framework.
6. De-hellenizing theology means making it independent of metaphysics.
7. Since Luther positioned himself against the traditional Catholic view of the Greek heritage, Protestant theology appears to be the most suitable platform for a renewal.

Keenan’s Mahāyāna theology transforms the de-hellenization project into intercultural propaedeutics, that is, a theoretical prelude to the Buddhist reading of Christian documents. Mahāyāna is, according to Keenan, anti-essentialism and anti-metaphysics. Its key concept, and the root of its anti-metaphysics, is emptiness. Assuming the Mahāyāna standpoint and positioning oneself in emptiness means looking at theological and philosophical texts in an unbiased way. Our bias derives from the Hellenistic approach to Christianity and the subsequent confusion between metaphysics and theology. By overcoming the bias, we may relate the gospel and the

foundations of Christianity to our contemporary concerns without being constrained by obsolete doctrinal formulations.

Paradoxically, it appears as if we were able to go back to the original meaning of the gospel by taking an eastward detour. Through Mahāyāna theology, we arrive at what Georg Essen calls the Harnackian “proper sphere of Christian faith” (“Eigensphäre des christlichen Glaubens”⁷³).

But is it really so simple?

Criticisms and Concerns

I will now go through various points of criticism based on the two preceding sections. I will do so (1) by pointing out some of the main concerns about the Hellenization theory raised by recent scholarship, (2) by showing in what way Keenan makes Ritschl’s and Harnack’s theoretical and historical basis become unsound, and (3) by emphasizing Keenan’s bias in the treatment of both Buddhism and Greek theology.

The question of Hellenization has been so popular and controversial in German and international scholarship that a task as simple as retracing the main points of the debate is likely to turn into the work of a lifetime. As of today, we find positions as diverse as the claim that Harnack’s history of dogma is still valid or relevant, that things have become so complicated that no simple response can be given, or that Harnack was wrong and that the Greek inculturation participates in Christianity itself. In the past twenty years, the debate was reflat on various occasions, such as the 2009 dispute between Johann B. Metz and Jürgen Habermas,⁷⁴ the famous Regensburg speech of Pope Benedict XVI, Notger Slenczka’s 2015 Neomaricionist plead against the inclusion of the Old Testament in the Christian canon,⁷⁵ and Esther Kobel’s recent monograph on Paul’s intercultural background.⁷⁶ The most complete survey on the history of the debate from Harnack to recent times is Christoph Marksches’s short 2013 monograph.⁷⁷ However, even Marksches’s attempt at an outline of the debate cannot be considered complete, since Marksches himself is aware of the tentativeness that inevitably determines the historical analysis of the problem.⁷⁸

In light of these problems, it is evident that giving an answer to the question of Hellenization in a context such as this paper—either in support of Harnack’s history of dogma, or against it—is impossible. Accordingly, I will not venture to challenge Harnack’s standpoint or to engage in scholarship on Hellenization; instead, I will show that it is precisely Keenan’s lack of engagement with that scholarship that makes his generalizations and his transformation of de-hellenization into Mahāyāna theology questionable.

As for Harnack, Keenan’s claim that Greek influences on Christianity were contingent requires the hypothesis of a historical gap between “original” and Hellenized Christianity. Georg Essen calls this gap a “hiatus between Jewish culture and Hellenistic culture.”⁷⁹ The idea of such a gap goes back to Harnack’s statement that “original Christianity presented itself as Christian Judaism,”⁸⁰ and that the Greek mind substituted itself for the Judaic element at a later stage. However, if we take this idea at face value, it will turn into one of the most vulnerable aspects of Harnack’s

history of dogma. It is undeniable that the Judaic element was powerful and probably even dominant in the first days of Christian community life. But the problem does not lie there; rather, it lies in the hypothesis of *non-Hellenized Judaism*.

This hypothesis was the main point of criticism in the groundbreaking work of German theologian Martin Hengel, whom Marksches assisted during his time at Tübingen. In his 1969 monograph on Judaism and Hellenism,⁸¹ Hengel analyzed various aspects of the interaction between Judaic and Hellenistic cultures, such as politics, economy, language, religious practice, and philosophy. Of particular interest is his analysis of Qohelet, Sirach, and Proverbia, in which he identifies various Near Eastern and Greek influences. To cite two notable examples, we have the idea of “Wisdom” in Sirach and the philosopher Aristobulus. In a brilliant analysis of Sirach,⁸² Hengel finds that certain traits attributed to divine Wisdom allow parallels to be drawn with Isis, the Egyptian goddess later admitted to Greek mythology. He sees evidence for this assumption in Oxyrhynchus fragments that document the inculturation of Isis in Palestine.⁸³ Elements from the descriptions of Isis can be related to Sirach’s presentation of Wisdom.⁸⁴ As a further example of Jewish and Greek exchange, Hengel mentions Aristobulus of Alexandria, the famous Peripatetic philosopher in whose thought “the sacred tradition inextricably blends together with the thought forms and views of Greek philosophy.”⁸⁵ On the basis of earlier scholarship, Hengel convincingly argues that Aristobulus’s example shows how attractive Aristotelean metaphysics, with its strong metaphysical monotheism, must have appeared to Jewish philosophy in late antique times.

Hengel’s criticism is not primarily aimed at the question of how Greek culture influenced the emergence of Christianity. His conclusion is much more reserved: we must be skeptical against all attempts to draw a clear line between Palestinian Jewish culture and Hellenized Jewish culture.⁸⁶ Instead, Hengel argues for the inclusion of Palestinian Judaism in the Hellenistic cultural realm. While this certainly does not refute Harnack’s Hellenization theory, it casts doubt on the legitimacy of Keenan’s emptiness hermeneutics. What if, once we have shaken off the doctrinal shackles of Patristic ontotheology, we discover that behind Patristic ontotheology, there is not a purified, pre-apologetic, non-metaphysical, Jewish (Palestinian) form of Christianity but another layer of Jewish (Hellenistic) ontotheology? This question is not an answer to the problem of Hellenization, but a hint to the possibility that the background to the problem may be much more complicated than the question of whether Christianity is Greek or not. The spheres of Greek, Roman, Jewish, Alexandrian/Egyptian, Gnostic, and Christian culture may have been much more fluid than Harnack, who makes them play distinct and disparate roles, presupposes. Hence, Keenan’s ambition to peel everything he finds unappealing off Christian theology might lead to a complete disarticulation of the language and the content of the New Testament. The Greek influence—and with it, that of metaphysics—is much older than the Church Fathers. Accordingly, there has most probably never been any gap between original Christianity and Hellenistic culture. The romantic dream of restoring the original and pure meaning of Christianity cannot withstand the reality of the cultural complexity in which that meaning has articulated itself.

Second, Keenan makes himself vulnerable to the reproach of applying double standards to Buddhism and Christianity. In fact, while his desire to free Christian theology from its metaphysicist and essentialist clichés is supported by an erudite tradition of historical scholarship, he seems to give up that same historical methodology when it comes to Mahāyāna emptiness. Did emptiness fall from heaven? Or were the Prajñāpāramitā sutras given to Nāgārjuna by the nāgas that emerged from the sea? It seems incoherent to assume that the metaphysicist tendency in Christian theology is the result of an intricate history that must be appreciated through critical methodology, but that the Buddhist no-view-standpoint is a revelation that stands outside of criticism.

If we take concepts at face value, we could argue that, for example, Christian negative theology allows us to position ourselves in an absolute realm of knowledge, in which we see God hyper-essentially, that is, beyond existence and/or essence,⁸⁷ and in the sheer emptiness of all attributes. If Keenan objects that this is still metaphysical language, we will have to answer that the philosophical background to emptiness is just as highly technical and artificial as that to hyper-essentiality. To understand emptiness, we have to understand the four types of causes and conditions, the notion of *svabhāva*, the dynamics of dependent arising, the two truths, and other concepts that emerged from opaque historical developments. Harnack's historicist methodology could be applied to these developments and the history of Mahāyāna as a whole, and while this would not lessen the relevance of Mahāyāna philosophy, it would allow us to understand that even the no-view-standpoint is a constructed, controversial, and historically determined idea. Applying the same standard of historical criticism to both positions may attenuate Keenan's plead for opening Christianity to Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Likewise, Keenan's account of Mahāyāna emptiness, as opposed to metaphysical essentialism, appears simplistic. As a translator of Yogācāra sutras, Keenan is aware, first, that emptiness appears as an element of highest importance in Yogācāra, and that, second, Yogācāra has a very complex history, in which Abhidharma plays a much greater role than the Prajñāpāramitā sutras or Mādhyamika. In fact, foundational documents such as the *Madhyāntavibhāṅgabhāṣya* divide emptiness into many different types, whose explanation depends on other elements of the system.⁸⁸ If we approach emptiness as pointing to the absence of *svabhāva* (*nīḥsvabhāvatva*), we will also find that key texts of Yogācāra, such as the seventh chapter of the *Saṃdhibinirmocanasūtra*, refer to different types of *nīḥsvabhāvatva*.⁸⁹ One could even go so far as to say that the differentiation of emptiness or absence of *svabhāva* acts as the foundational element for the self-determination of Yogācāra, since typical Yogācāra sub-theories, such as that of *trisvabhāva*, are closely connected with the differentiation of *nīḥsvabhāva* (see, e.g., *Trīṃśikāvijñāptikārikā* 23). Reducing Mahāyāna emptiness to the idealized concept of a no-view-standpoint and an ethereal dream in which the difficulties that ensue from philosophical reflection are miraculously abandoned does not do justice to the actual complexity of Mahāyāna.

Furthermore, the resources that allow us to understand Yogācāra and its specific interpretation of emptiness are not primarily Prajñāpāramitā sutras but

Abhidharmic schools such as Sarvāstivāda. Typical Yogācāra works such as Asaṅga's *Abhidharmasamuccaya* and Sthiramati's commentary on Vasubandhu's *Trīṃśikāvijñaptikārikā* resemble, in their endeavor to unfold a comprehensive system of categories, Western medieval Aristotelean scholasticism more than they resemble Prajñāpāramitā sutras such as the *Vajracchedikā*. From Keenan's description of Mahāyāna, we can conclude that he applies a vulgarized Harnackian history of dogma to Buddhism, and that he sees Mahāyāna as a restoration of "original" Buddhism and a departure from what he calls "Abhidharma Buddhism." "The earliest scriptures of the Mahāyāna school of Buddhism - the Prajñāpāramitā sutras - arose in India as a direct critique of the vast and complex ontological theories of Abhidharma Buddhism."⁹⁰ Hence, while he does admit that there are "ontological theories" in Buddhism, he seems to project these in a time of philosophical corruption. One could speculate that he sees Mahāyāna in a position similar to that of early Protestantism in the face of the Hellenistic-Scholastic Catholic tradition. While that provides us with a confessional explanation, it does not help us understand how to think of Mahāyāna as independent of Abhidharma, or opposed to it.

With Harnack, we saw that one of the main explanations of how early Christian teachings were transformed into Hellenistic dogmatism, is that the original enthusiasm, understood as religious and prophetic fervor, was lost, and that its traces were handed down in the shape of codified tradition. Harnack himself describes this transformation as a "general principle in the history of religion, seeing that we find it in the evolution of every religion."⁹¹ If Keenan agrees to maintain this principle in his analysis of the history of Christianity, it seems appropriate to do the same with Buddhism. As in the case of Christianity, the aim of this historical analysis is not to criticize the form of a certain religion or the validity of the religious stance in general. On the contrary, the aim is positive: It is to understand the dynamics of the developments that take place between first-generation adherents and the later, more rigid tradition. The task is difficult, since the stages that precede the first documents of a religious tradition are by definition objects of speculation rather than of history. Such is not only the case for Christianity at the time of the Apostles but also for Buddhism before Aśoka's edicts and the Pali Canon. However, if we look at later Mahāyāna sutras and compare them to the enthusiastic awakening narratives of the Suttapiṭaka, it appears undeniable that a transformation has taken place: Conceptual and technical proliferations have progressively substituted themselves to the existential and human concerns that characterize the Buddha's discourses. In Theravāda Buddhism, we can make similar observations about a possible loss of inspiration with regard to Abhidharmic schools such as Sarvāstivāda. These schools have been labeled "Buddhist Scholasticism"⁹²—a label that conveys similarities with Scholasticism in the original Western sense, that is, medieval Aristotelean metaphysics as taught at the universities of the Latin West. And in fact, we find on both sides a somehow rigid form of thought that seeks to dissociate itself from ordinary experience and to fill any gap that might affect the system. If we take these parallelisms into account, we can see that the Harnackian critique of Hellenization is also relevant to Buddhism. Buddhism underwent significant transformations in the millennium between the

fifth century BC and the fifth century AD. These transformations, with their increasing codification and conventionalism, are susceptible to falling into the Harnackian model of a loss of enthusiasm, which would allow significant parallelisms with early Christian history. History thus offers a much more complex image than Keenan's reduction of Mahāyāna to emptiness.

As discussed above, Ritschl opposes metaphysics to theology but concedes that theology can nevertheless serve a positive purpose, namely to rearticulate theological facts. The metaphysical expression of theology is valid as long as it does not convey the impression that its validity is grounded in itself. While Ritschl openly criticizes theological naturalism, that is, the attempt to infer theological facts from the observation of nature, he does not reject the principle of metaphysics itself. This contrasts with Keenan's methodology, that is much less considerate of the long tradition of Christian theology: To him, metaphysics has the same function today as objects in a museum. It is a symbol of the way in which past civilizations have attempted to approach and incorporate abstract matters. With the overcoming of that civilization, its symbols conserve their indicative force, but we understand that the thing to which they point is a projection of the mind that invented them. These projections have become alien to our world, and we cannot pretend to use them as they were used in ancient times. But does this precipitate conclusion not oversee the contemporary state of philosophy?

First, we must note that metaphysics is—against Keenan's belief or personal impressions—still far from being dead. For example, German philosopher Jens Halfwassen believes that while metaphysics has been declared dead innumerable times, it has always regenerated itself and assumed a new, more complex shape.⁹³ The reason behind this metaphysical "resilience" ("Unverwüstlichkeit" in Halfwassen's terms) is that the power of thought cannot easily be limited or constrained by external, ideological bonds. Forcing philosophy not to unfold metaphysical problems has not succeeded yet, and it is unlikely that it will ever do so. Second, it seems strange, on Keenan's part, to advocate the complete disjunction of theology from metaphysics in intercultural philosophy, since it was metaphysics that initiated the recognition of Non-Western philosophy in the West. People, such as Schlegel, Deussen, Schopenhauer, and Hegel, were the first ones to admit Indian traditions in philosophy and did so essentially on the grounds of texts and authors—such as the Upanishads or Śān'kara—that inquire the principles of Being and thus respond to the label "metaphysics".

Paradoxically, this development took place no later than half a century after Kant had attempted to abolish philosophical theology, because he thought that it was based on a confusion between subjective mental structures and objective existence. By rejecting metaphysics, Keenan hazards a gesture that appears, in the light of the history of philosophy, questionable. Third, from an ethical point of view, Keenan's opposition to metaphysics runs the risk—against Ritschl's acceptance of it as a valid means of theological expression—of closing new pathways for interculturality or denying their usefulness, instead of keeping them open. This seems problematic insofar as it contradicts the aim of interculturality and interfaith dialogue. Keenan's response to possible objections reinforces this impression in an unfortunate way; as, for

example, in the case of Masato Abe, a Japanese Buddhist, whom Keenan criticizes for not understanding Buddhism in its original East Asian context but through a Western, Roman Catholic lens.⁹⁴ A certain irony appears in the fact that a Western Christian scholar criticizes a Japanese Buddhist scholar for misinterpreting Buddhism.

As mentioned above, Harnack estimates that one of the main reasons for the transition from early, “inspired” Christian theology to the later form of Hellenistic, ontological theology is the loss of enthusiasm. Hellenistic theology represents a succedaneum for the inspiration that brought together the first Christian communities. It makes the traces of this inspiration accessible, in a codified and traditional form, to civilizations and times that could not access it otherwise. Accordingly, Harnack’s history of dogma is motivated by the endeavor to show that there is a tendency, in Christian theology, to incorporate the *Zeitgeist* in such a way that the original stream of inspiration is diverted to fit into the cultural patterns of that *Zeitgeist*. But if we accept this point of view, does it not lead us to recognize in Keenan’s project an example of what Harnack criticizes: a new attempt to incorporate a non-Christian tradition, with the goal of bonding with contemporary cultures?

Keenan’s main ideas are, on the one hand, the obsolescence of metaphysics and, on the other hand, the spiritual quest of self-discovery that characterizes contemporary Western societies. But is it expedient to call for an overcoming of metaphysics on the ground of its cultural commitments, when the new theological standpoint is, in the very same way, culturally committed? In other words: Is it justified, on Keenan’s part, to propose the supersession of Hellenization by “Buddhification”⁹⁵ for the sole reason that he finds Buddhism more accessible and stimulating and believes that other people also do? On this point, where Harnack’s historical criticism appears most convincing and coherent, Keenan’s Mahāyāna theology presents a considerable weakness. Keenan does not explain in what way Mahāyāna Buddhism can help us unravel the history of theology to find our way back to earlier stages of theological development. Instead, he estimates that traditional theology has arrived at a dead end, at which returning on the same track, as Harnack did in his *History of Dogma*, is not an option. What Keenan proposes instead is to switch to a completely different standpoint—Mahāyāna Buddhism. The doubt as to whether this switching is required by the problem itself, or if it derives from Keenan’s personal preferences, remains unresolved.

While Keenan could respond to this objection that he does not presuppose Harnackian criticism but takes the present religious situation as a starting point, Mahāyāna theology will, due to the concurrent structure of its reasoning, nevertheless have to disprove the stance on non-Christian religions adopted by the German-speaking Protestant theologians who follow Ritschl and Harnack. As mentioned in the first section with reference to Paul Knitter’s survey on German theology and its position on non-Christian religions, the verdict on this position presents itself as “[o]verall [n]egative.”⁹⁶ There are two reasons for this.

The first reason lies in the strong influence of Luther on modern theology. Luther’s intuition was that faith is not a natural disposition, but that it is given by God.

Accordingly, knowing God is not a result of religious efforts on the part of a believer, but it derives from God's own action and God's will to save humanity. God *gives* Faith. Faith does not begin with a natural proclivity, or spiritual thirst, or any other human disposition. Owing to this principle, the position of classical German-speaking Protestant theology on religion in general, on the comparative study of religion, and on metaphysics is menaced by a negative bias. Keeping the theological foundations of Christianity pure requires that no other religion or system be associated with it.

The second reason lies in the transposition of this idea into the history of dogma by Ritschl and Harnack. Their opposition to Hellenism springs from the fundamental assumption that Hellenism distorts the genuine content of faith and falls back into a form of naturalist metaphysics, where the concept of God is derived from natural processes. These reasons made twentieth-century German theology skeptical of inter-religious dialogue and, owing to this skepticism, incapable of counteracting the "lack of a formed and integrated Theology of the Non-Christian Religions."⁹⁷ This observation appears particularly pertinent with regard to Karl Barth. Barth rejects the idea of religion in general and thinks that it is "opposed to revelation."⁹⁸ He takes the Christian revelation as an exclusive point of reference. This exclusivism "obstructs any real encounter with them and colors them as, essentially, irrelevant for theology,"⁹⁹ and historically seen, it did so in the interwar period, when cultural and religious dialogue appeared most necessary. Despite this necessity, Barth's "apocalyptic "no" to religion"¹⁰⁰ became highly influential and established itself as a dominant trend in the twentieth century. This dominance puts a considerable burden on inter-faith dialogue.

What does this mean for Mahāyāna theology? As I have suggested in the second section, Keenan takes up ideas from the Ritschlian–Harnackian Hellenization critique and makes these ideas support his claim that Hellenism does not participate in revelation but only serves as a language and instrument of expression. However, under these assumptions, Keenan cannot simply put a different religious system as an *ancilla theologiae*¹⁰¹ in lieu of Hellenism, seeing that such a move would straightforwardly contradict the Ritschlian–Harnackian assumptions that he made in the first place. What the critics of Hellenization and the later proponents of that criticism (Barth, etc.) sought after, was getting rid of all *ancillae*, so that Christianity can speak its own language. What Keenan appears to do—striving for a cross-cultural supplementation of new languages and concepts—contradicts this aim.

I have already pointed out that Keenan's reasoning relies, at one point, on a fallacy that I have called *argumentum ad populum*. Keenan's main reason for dismissing metaphysics is that it does not correspond to the spiritual quest of contemporary generations anymore. This is a fallacy insofar as it takes a popular, debatable phenomenon to represent the general state of things itself. As I have suggested, observing the popular transmission of ideas can be a helpful tool in sociological and cultural contexts, but in the face of overarching, highly complex historical developments, it can in fact lead to generalizations with dangerous consequences. Several observations can help us see why Keenan's claim misses reality.

First, although there has never been any time at which metaphysics was completely absent from the debates in the intellectual milieu of religion—not even now—there has never been any time at which metaphysics acted as a determining and ultimate factor in popular religious practice. Accordingly, it seems inappropriate to say that Christians, or others, cannot identify with metaphysics anymore, because in reality, they have never done so in the way Keenan presupposes. Metaphysics lies in the background of religion and theology and does so essentially in specific intellectual milieus. For example, even at the peak of scholastic Aristotelianism in the Latin West, metaphysics was an academic discipline only loosely interconnected with popular devotional practices. Rejecting or reaffirming metaphysics in the intellectual milieu does not have immediate consequences for the whole phenomenon of religion.

Second, even Harnack, the most emphatic critic of Hellenization, did not conceal his profound admiration for Clement and Origen, the most consequent proponents of Christian Neoplatonist metaphysics.¹⁰² This is true even though metaphysics was not at all, in late nineteenth-century Germany, at the peak of its popularity. Harnack consciously refrained from dismissing it on the ground of its alleged obsolescence. Origen appeared to him as a model of theological audacity. Hence, even Harnack, the father of the historical approach to the theory of Hellenization, did not refer to the unpopularity of metaphysics to justify his call for a theological renewal.

Third, saying that metaphysics has disappeared completely from the intellectual horizon of philosophy, religion, and Buddhist-Christian studies is an overstatement. While it is true that the Anglophone philosophical mainstream has alienated itself from the roots of philosophy in ancient Greece, it would do injustice to contemporary ambitions in the study of ancient and comparative philosophy to generalize this alienation. In the case of intercultural philosophy, Amber Carpenter's *Buddhist-Platonist Dialogues*, the Centre for Intercultural Philosophy at Leiden, Pierre-Julien Harter, and classical scholarship such as McEvilley¹⁰³ and Kloetzli¹⁰⁴ show that metaphysics has not lost its relevance to interculturality.¹⁰⁵

One could go as far as saying that Keenan's Christian anti-metaphysicism presents itself as paradoxically Eurocentric. While it is true that in the West, liturgical practice, art, and architecture have dissociated themselves from the metaphysical influences of Dionysian and late antique philosophy, Eastern Christianity has retained many such elements in the interior design of its churches, where the hierarchies of saints, angels, and the Christ Pantokrator reflect the Dionysian—eminently metaphysical—conception of the celestial hierarchy. The fact that there has been an Orthodox and Eastern trend in Western Christianity, and that there have been notable conversions to Orthodoxy in intellectual milieus—Jean Meyendorff, Gabriel Bunge, Placide Deseille, John McGuckin, and Olivier Clément—shows that Christian traditions that present strong influences from late antique theology, that is, influences that Keenan finds obsolete, have not lost their attractiveness for Western Christians. These and other punctual observations cast doubt on Keenan's generalization of metaphysical alienation.

Fourth, and most importantly, Keenan shows himself unconcerned with scholarship that contradicts his project. One of the best examples of such scholarship is

Thomas Cattoi's 2008 monograph on Tsong kha pa, Maximus Confessor, and Evagrius Ponticus. Cattoi's central idea is to establish, with reference to Francis X. Clooney, a "theology of contingency."¹⁰⁶ This idea is remarkable insofar as it puts a strong emphasis on a doctrinal element prominent in the Cappadocian tradition: that of the element of creativity in the order of reality. Creativity creates "multiplicity,"¹⁰⁷ and from multiplicity, which "is not oppositional, but integrative,"¹⁰⁸ arises the harmony that reflects, in historical progress, the divine plan. Cattoi elaborates a modern and intellectually ambitious reading of Patristic philosophy.

Although Keenan mentions this reading, he passes over its main idea, namely contingency and the function of creativity in the cosmic order. He says about Patristic philosophy in general: "I believe that inordinate ontological urges are to be controlled, for they encourage us to articulate ideologically rigid theologies in place of enunciating as best we can the subtle message of the gospel."¹⁰⁹ It seems incongruous that while Cattoi directly contradicts the principle of ideological rigidity through the idea of creative freedom, Keenan insists on dismissing it, just because it participates in a larger metaphysical context that he finds unappealing. While it is true, as Joseph O'Leary has pointed out,¹¹⁰ that Cattoi refuses to place Mahāyāna emptiness above the idea of freedom as reflected in Maximus's Chalcedonian Christology, it nevertheless seems difficult to see how this amounts "to consign Chalcedon to the box of a heavy ontological vision that not many Western theologians will find attractive,"¹¹¹ as O'Leary further claims. On the one hand, Maximus is certainly one of the most creative and audacious theologians of Christianity, and his system is everything but "a box." On the other hand, Tibetan ideas about emptiness, such as the opposition between *rang stong* and *gzhan stong*, cannot realistically be invoked as examples for a less dogmatic and intellectualistic system of categories. Considering Chalcedonian Christology as a "box" seems like a heavy presupposition by itself. From this point of view, it seems impossible to adhere to Keenan's dismissal of the metaphysical tradition in Christianity.

There are certainly aspects of Keenan's Mahāyāna theology that can be fruitful for intercultural and interfaith dialogue. But if we pursue these aspects and try to align them with traditional questions and problems, we will see that, in the end, they lead us back to the point of the earliest systems of Christian theology, which are those that Keenan altogether considers outdated: those of Apologetic and Alexandrian theology.

The approach of these systems is remarkably liberal. Clement's attitude is to admit that there is only one Truth, but that this Truth admits more than one expression or articulation: "There is only one way leading to Truth, but different streams flow into it as into an endless river."¹¹² The various expressions of truth have a pedagogical aim. They serve as educational applications that articulate Truth in such a way that it becomes understandable for the people of a certain historical and cultural context.

In his application of that principle, Clement even goes as far as attributing Greek philosophy an authority comparable to that of the Jewish Law in the Ancient Testament. Philosophy "educated the Greeks just like the Law educated the Jews."¹¹³ In the end, the expression given to Truth does not affect its essence. The origin of Truth is divine, for "God is the cause of all beauty."¹¹⁴ The different human traditions participate in Truth and divide it in such a way that every tradition receives

a part of it: “The different sects, Greek and barbarian alike, have each received a share in Truth, but glorify themselves as if they possessed it completely.”¹¹⁵ Conflicts arise when different parts or expressions of Truth are being passed off as absolute Truth. But in principle, every tradition possesses its own symbols and representations of it.

Accordingly, Clement would certainly not object to the inclusion of Mahāyāna in the realm of Truth. If there are things that Buddhist philosophers have articulated with greater clarity or precision than Christians, there can be no damage in admitting so. If Nāgārjuna helps us attain a more universal or comprehensive concept of divine indeterminableness, or overcome the limitations attached to traditional discourses such as Thomistic ontotheology, we cannot reject these insights just because they originated from a different religious tradition. Hence, if we follow Keenan’s idea of appreciating Christian texts and concepts with the help of Mahāyāna philosophers, and if we leave his overstatement of metaphysical obsolescence aside, we arrive at the point of Alexandrian universalism. The principle of this universalism is the readiness to support any version or expression of truth that concurs with the basics of Christianity. The interesting new aspect is that in Alexandrian theology, this support is essentially retroactive, since it is pre-Christian philosophy that is in question. In the case of Mahāyāna theology, we face intuitions that have not played any active part in the formation of Christianity, and that present themselves as external objects of comparison and dialogue partners. In view of these consequences, it seems that freeing Keenan’s project from its problematic engagement with the theory of Hellenization ultimately leaves us with a modernized form of Alexandrian, liberal theology. This is certainly a positive result, but one that takes us back to where Keenan does not want Christianity to be: in the Greek world.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have identified the theoretical and historical background of a premise implied in Keenan’s Mahāyāna theology. The premise is that the alliance between early Christianity and Greek culture is contingent, in that it does not participate in revelation or in the initial constitution of Christianity. The alliance is a product of later inculturation and depends on social and historical factors unrelated to the preaching of Christ. This is, in sum, the theory of Hellenization.

In the first part, my aim was to analyze Keenan’s presupposition by tracing it back to two key elements of Hellenization: one theoretical, the other historical. I developed the theoretical aspect through a reading of Ritschl’s texts on metaphysics and theology. Ritschl estimates that metaphysics and theology do not participate in the same mode of discourse and do not refer to the same object. This does not mean that one excludes the other. Metaphysics can help unfold theological facts in the light of the structure of reality, and the history of philosophy provides many examples for such an explanation. However, metaphysical statements cannot replace theological statements or be placed above them. Theology requires a different approach, and confusing this approach with that of metaphysics can have fatal consequences for both disciplines. Harnack unwinds the history of theology to the moment when the confusion made its

appearance, that is, the defense of Christianity against the rising hostility on the part of Greek and Roman culture. This moment marks the beginning of Apologetic literature in the second century. From this point onward, Harnack believes, Christianity incorporated elements of Greek philosophical culture that allowed it to be embraced by communities that had no cultural connection with the Semitic culture, but that were in search of a religious tradition supporting their metaphysical and ethical worldview. And so, Greek culture became the ally of Christianity.

In the second part, I outlined Keenan's Mahāyāna theology against this theoretical and historical backdrop. Keenan does not engage with the history of theology and addresses historical problems only punctually. His main concern with the presence of metaphysical elements in theology is that these elements prevent Christianity from appealing to the mind of the contemporary faithful. Thus, while the premise is the same, in that Hellenization was a contingent event, the consequence is not that we must reappraise the earliest Christian documents without projecting later Hellenism into them, but that we may as well switch to a different system of reference or conceptual framework. Since Mahāyāna is exactly that—a conceptual framework that seems to speak to contemporary minds—it can help us reappraise the original spirit of Christianity without engaging with the vicissitudes of Western intellectual history.

In the last part, I elaborated on various points of criticism against Keenan's project. The main issue emerging from these points of criticism is that, while Mahāyāna theology assumes hypotheses derived from nineteenth-century German Protestant theology, it goes against the consequences that this theology establishes for itself. De-hellenization was not only not intended as a path leading to a new inculturation, but it was also the result of the endeavor to deconstruct inculturation as such and to identify elements in Christianity that are not derived from the alliance with local cultures. By choosing to replace Greek culture with Mahāyāna, Keenan makes the theory of Hellenization turn against its own aim. Further issues, such as the fact that Keenan does not engage with scholarship on Hellenism in the context of Jewish culture—scholarship that relativizes clear-cut distinctions between Christianity and Hellenism—reinforce the impression that Keenan follows personal intuitions or preferences more than the history of theology.

I add one observation to the objections made in the last part of this paper. Keenan's monograph, *The Meaning of Christ*, dates from 1989. In the late 1980s, the Catholic intellectual tradition (from which the enthusiasm leading to Vatican II had originated) was still palpable, and the scholarship that had revitalized the study of Patristic sources—Congar, Mondésert, Chenu, Lubac, Daniélou, and others—still had a strong presence in the theological mainstream. On the outside, it might have seemed that the endeavor to renew Christianity by reappraising traditional sources and doctrines actually inhibited the harmonization of Christianity with the reality of today's world. In light of this impression, one can understand that to scholars such as Keenan, traditional Christian Churches still appeared incapable of conversing with other religions and opening up to them. However, times have changed considerably.

Theological fundamentals, in the shape of what Keenan would call "ontology", have withdrawn from the popular mind to such a degree, especially among

Christians, that even basic concepts, such as the Trinity, the function and aim of liturgy, etc., now seem old-fashioned. On the other hand, we find in many popular spiritual or intellectual movements, be they Westernized Krishnaism (or other traditions participating in classical Indian philosophy), yoga, or even popular atheism, with its ontologically connotated identification of the world with the material universe, traces of the ontological thinking that Keenans considers outdated. In the face of our current situation, his call to abandon our metaphysical commitments appears somehow anachronistic. These commitments have in fact dissolved, and it is their dissolution that seems to take spiritual nomads elsewhere.

I dare to ask, in the end, if a more positive approach to late antique and medieval Western traditions may not be a better way both to communicate with Non-Western traditions and to open new perspectives on the Christian tradition. In the context of intercultural studies, a philologically accurate representation of, say, Neoplatonist mysticism would benefit exchanges with Buddhism and other South, Southeast, and East Asian traditions more than hasty generalizations. This would not only contribute to a better understanding of the implications of intercultural work but also help transform intercultural philosophy into a less quarrelsome, and more relevant domain of scholarship.

Notes

1. Edgar J. Bruns, *The Christian Buddhism of St. John: New Insights into the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1971).
2. John P. Keenan, *The Wisdom of James: Parallels with Mahāyāna Buddhism* (New York: Newman Press, 2005); *The Emptied Christ of Philippians: Mahāyāna Meditations* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2015); *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahāyāna Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).
3. Masao Abe, “Kenotic God and Dynamic Śūnyatā,” in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. J. B. Cobb, Jr., and C. Ives (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 3–67.
4. Frederik J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967).
5. John P. Keenan and Linda P. Keenan, *I Am/No Self: A Christian Commentary on the Heart Sutra* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).
6. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Buddha Mind – Christ Mind. A Christian Commentary on the Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Leuven: Peeters, 2019).
7. John P. Keenan, “The Prospects for a Mahāyāna Theology of Emptiness: A Continuing Debate,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 30 (2010): 3–27, at 5.
8. Keenan broaches the problems but does not confront the context of nineteenth century scholarship; see the chapter on Hellenization in John P. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 61–64 and 46–48. I come back to his treatment further below.
9. Rolf Schäfer, *Ritschl: Grundlinien eines fast verschollenen dogmatischen Systems* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Siebeck, 1968).
10. See Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F. C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 175.

11. Ibid.
12. Sth Ia q1 a3 resp.: *Ergo necesse est devenire ad aliquod primum movens, quod a nullo movetur, et hoc omnes intelligunt Deum.* ('Hence it is necessary to come to a first mover, who is moved by nothing else, and this everybody understands to be God.')
13. Albrecht Ritschl, "Geschichtliche Studien zur christlichen Lehre von Gott. Erster Artikel," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze von Albrecht Ritschl*, ed. Otto Ritschl (Freiburg i. Br. & Leipzig: Mohr Siebeck, 1896), 25–64.
14. "Nun soll einmal zugestanden werden, daß die Begriffe des die Welt transcendirenden *primum movens*, *ultimus finis*, *ens infinitum* zum Abschluß und zur Erklärung der gekannten Weltordnung notwendig sind [. . .]. Aber daß diese Gedanken und die christliche Vorstellung von Gott sich decken, ist nur behauptet und nicht bewiesen." Ritschl, "Geschichtliche Studien," 28.
15. "Deshalb ist es theologisch möglich und erlaubt zu urtheilen: Gott ist *primum movens*, *ultimus finis*, *ens infinitum*." Ibid., 29.
16. "Wenn hingegen klar ist, daß man durch Beweise für Gottes *Dasein* nur befriedigt wird, sobald man ein Urtheil über das *Wesen* Gottes stillschweigend bereit hält, so ist nicht zu leugnen, daß die Resultate jener Beweise und der Inhalt der Offenbarung sich der *Art* nach unterscheiden und entgegentreten." Ibid.
17. "den Anlaß zu prüfen, welchen Anspruch metaphysisches Erkennen hat in der Theologie zu gelten." Albrecht Ritschl, *Theologie und Metaphysik: Zur Verständigung und Abwehr* (Bonn: Adolf Marcus, 1881), 4. Thanks to Philip Hefner's translation, this text has been accessible to Anglophone scholarship: Philip Hefner, *Albrecht Ritschl: Three Essays* (Fortress Press, 1972).
18. See Ritschl, *Theologie*, 52.
19. "Anstößig" and "übertreibend," *ibid.*
20. "heillos und verderblich," *ibid.*, 55.
21. "die von Melanchthon in Aufnahme gebrachte Überlieferung der vulgären Metaphysik," *ibid.*
22. "Melanchthon hat nicht ohne Erfolg die Dialektik, d.h. die aristotelische Kategorienlehre und Logik seit dem Anfange seines Amtes in Wittenberg cultivirt." *ibid.*, 58.
23. See *ibid.*, 60. There is one Melanchthon, who follows Luther, and another one, who follows Aristotle.
24. See *ibid.* 62.
25. "das [. . .] endlose Sein," "die Idee der Welt selbst," *ibid.*, 9.
26. "die Verzweiflung an der von ihnen [sc. den Griechen] ausgeübten Religion," *ibid.*, 8.
27. "Draus folgt, daß, wenn man als Christ die Bedingungen der religiösen Weltanschauung von denen einer metaphysischen Kosmologie zu unterscheiden vermag, man keine metaphysische Erkenntnis des Gottes zugestehen wird, an den man um seine Seligkeit glaubt. Oder wenn ein Christ sich auf metaphysische Erkenntnis Gottes einläßt, so giebt er damit seinen christlichen Gesichtskreis auf, und tritt auf einen Standpunkt, welcher im Allgemeinen der Stufe des Heidenthums entspricht." *Ibid.*, 9.
28. See *ibid.*, 13 and 17.
29. Paul Knitter, "What is German Protestant Theology Saying about the Non-Christian Religions?" *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 15 (1973): 38–64, at 39.
30. The scope of this statement is by no means absolute. It is evident that, for example, the Hegelian schools of theology had a pronounced interest in Asian religions and followed Hegel in that respect. Ferdinand Christian Baur, the initiator of the Tübingen School and one of the most influential theologians of the nineteenth century, saw in the triadic models

of Buddhist thought (such as the three Jewels) prefiguration of trinitarian theology. See Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Die christliche Lehre von der Dreieinigkeit und Menschwerdung Gottes in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung, Erster Theil* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1841), 13–19.

31. “Abgesehen von der Lehre von Gott bietet die christliche Dogmatik keine Gelegenheit dar, direct einen metaphysischen Gedanken als theologischen aufzustellen.” Ritschl, *Theologie*, 38.

32. Zachhuber, *Theology*, 136.

33. *Ibid.*, 175.

34. Ritschl did write a historical survey on early Christianity, but there he does not look at the interaction with Greek culture: Albert Ritschl, *Die Entstehung der altkatholischen Kirche: Eine Kirchen- und dogmengeschichtliche Monographie* (Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1857).

35. The relation between Ritschl and Harnack is complex; to avoid engaging with questions that are unrelated to the topic, I use the term “student” in a wide sense here. See Rolf Schäfer, “Ritschl, Albrecht/Ritschlsche Schule (1822–1889),” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Vol. 29, ed. Gerhard Müller (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1998), 233.

36. Adolf von Harnack, *Zur Quellenkritik der Geschichte des Gnostizismus* (Leipzig: E. Bidder, 1873).

37. Trillhaas calls him a historian; Osthövener, the editor of Harnack’s *Essence of Christianity*, agrees but adds: “Harnack war als Historiker Systematiker.” Claus-Dieter Osthövener, “Adolf von Harnack als Systematiker,” *Zeitschrift Für Theologie Und Kirche* 99, no. 3 (2002): 296–331, at 296.

38. “Verschiebung des Grundinteresses der Religion,” Harnack, *Wesen*, 121.30–31.

39. “Die Frage: ‚Was muss ich tun, dass ich selig werde‘, die Jesus Christus und die Apostel noch sehr kurz zu beantworten vermochten,” *ibid.*, 121.32–33.

40. “der griechisch-philosophische Gedanke, daß die wahre Religion in erster Linie ‚Lehre‘ sei,” *ibid.*, 121.23–24.

41. The stages are: (i) a preparatory stage, given in the New Testament through the presence of Greek elements such as language, concepts in John, Paul, and Luke, and other formal elements; (ii) an initial stage, beginning in the years around 130, with the composition of apologetic literature; (iii) a second stage, in which broader elements of Greek culture, such as sacred mysteries, theological conceptions, and liturgical practices entered Christian theology; and (iv) a third stage, about one century later, that saw the complete transition of Hellenism into Christianity. See *ibid.*, 115–119.

42. “*der ursprüngliche Enthusiasmus* [. . .] *strömt aus*,” *ibid.*, 115.27–28.

43. “*Das Einströmen des Griechentums, des griechischen Geistes*, und die Verbindung des Evangeliums mit ihm ist die größte Thatsache in der Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts, und sie setzte sich, grundlegend vollzogen, in den folgenden Jahrhunderten fort.” *Ibid.*, 115.30–33.

44. See endnote 41.

45. “akute Hellenisierung,” Harnack, *Wesen*, 118.40.

46. See *ibid.*, 413–464, the chapter on ecclesiastical Christianity and philosophy, in contrast to the *What is Christianity?* lectures.

47. “Diese Versuche sind nicht, wie die sog. Gnostischen, von den Gemeinden abgelehnt worden, sondern sie sind vielmehr in der Folgezeit die Grundlage der kirchlichen Dogmatik geworden.” Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, Vol. 1 (Freiburg i. Br.: J.C.B. Mohr, 1888), 413.

48. See Harnack, *Lehrbuch*, 416.

49. “die Verwirklichung des absolut sittlichen Theismus,” *ibid.*, 418.

50. "Diese Umsetzung der Religion in Philosophie wäre nicht möglich gewesen, wenn die griechische Philosophie sich nicht selbst in der Entwicklung zu einer Religion gefunden hätte." *Ibid.*, 418.

51. "Man blickte zu den Barbaren aus." *Ibid.*, 419.

52. On the Logos, see *ibid.*, 443–450.

53. See *ibid.*, 444: "Der Logos ist die Hypostase der wirksamen Vernunftkraft, welche einerseits die Einheitlichkeit und Unveränderlichkeit Gottes trotz der Verwirklichung der in ihm ruhenden Kräfte schützt, andererseits eben diese Verwirklichung ermöglicht."

54. "Durch ihren Intellectualismus und exklusiven Doctrinarismus haben die Apologeten das philosophisch-dogmatische Christentum begründet." *Ibid.*, 463.

55. Joseph O'Leary thinks that Heidegger is responsible for incorporating Luther's contempt of metaphysics in philosophy; see Joseph O'Leary, "Origen's Metaphysical Interpretation of the Johannine Logos", in *The Philosophy of Logos*, Vol. 1, ed. Konstantinos I. Boudouris (Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture, 1996), 140–155, at 140. O'Leary himself has embraced Heidegger's criticism and estimates that it is relevant to the problems in contemporary theology, since the pluralism of our time does not allow any specific cultural framework, such as Greek metaphysics, to be dominant: "In a pluralist world, the presence of God is no longer associated with a single metaphysical or symbolic economy" (Joseph O'Leary, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996], 168). Keenan's and O'Leary's standpoint has brought about, even in recent times, some disturbingly impertinent and excessive statements, such as: "If Christian theology is to be relevant today, it must continue to deconstruct the classical metaphysical categories that impede the appreciation of what is possible or true, especially in the encounter with non-Christian and non-Western thought, culture, and religious practice." (Susie P. Babka, "Sunyata' and Otherness. Applying Mutually Transformative Categories from Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Christology," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 35 [2015]: 73–90, at 74.)

56. Joseph O'Leary, "The Significance of John Keenan's Mahāyāna Theology," *The Eastern Buddhist New Series* 30, no. 1 (1997): 114–132, at 115.

57. John P. Keenan, "The Prospects for a Mahāyāna Theology of Emptiness: A Continuing Debate," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 30 (2010): 3–27, at 4.

58. John P. Keenan, "The Emptiness of Christ: A Mahayana Christology," *Anglican Theological Review* 75, no. 1 (1993): 48–63, at 50.

59. Keenan, "Prospects," 5.

60. *Ibid.*, 7.

61. John P. Keenan, "Mahāyāna Emptiness or « Absolute Nothingness » ? The Ambiguity of Abe Masao's Role in Buddhist-Christian Understanding," *Théologiques* 20, nos. 1–2 (2012): 341–363, at 343.

62. *Ibid.*, 348.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, 252.

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

67. Keenan, "Prospects," 4.

68. John P. Keenan, "A Mahayana Theology of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24 (2004): 89–100, at 94.

69. Keenan, "Prospects," 7.

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*

72. Ibid., 8.
73. Georg Essen, "Hellenisierung des Christentums? Zur Problematik und Überwindung einer polarisierenden Deutungsfigur," *Theologie und Philosophie* 87 (2012): 1–17, at 7.
74. See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, "Die Grenze zwischen Glauben und Wissen. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte und aktuellen Bedeutung von Kants Religionsphilosophie," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 44, no. 4 (2004): 460–484.
75. Notger Slenczka, "Die Kirche und das Alte Testament," in *Das Alte Testament in der Theologie*, ed. Elisabeth Gräß-Schmidt (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2013), 83–119.
76. Esther Kobel, *Paulus als interkultureller Vermittler: Eine Studie zur kulturellen Positionierung des Apostels der Völker* (Brill | Schöningh: Paderborn, 2019).
77. Christoph Markschies, *Hellenisierung des Christentums. Sinn und Unsinn einer historischen Deutungskategorie* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012).
78. Markschies estimates that there is so much literature that it has become difficult to even make a new contribution; see *ibid.*, 33.
79. Essen, "Hellenisierung," 7.
80. "Das ursprüngliche Christentum ist seiner Erscheinung nach christliches Judentum gewesen." Harnack, *Lehrbuch*, 244.
81. Martin Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus. Studien zu ihrer Begegnung unter Berücksichtigung Palästinas bis zur Mitte des 2 Jh. v. Chr.* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1969).
82. See Hengel, *Judentum*, 284–292.
83. See *ibid.*, 285.
84. Keenan reads these texts (*Meaning*, 17–25), but surprisingly, he does not allude to the historical problem of Hellenism in the context of Judaism at all. The chapter would have offered a possibility to note that the exchange between Hellenistic, Jewish, and Christian is highly complex and that Hengel pointed this out quite convincingly.
85. "in der sich die eigene heilige Überlieferung mit den Denkformen und Anschauungen der griechischen Philosophie untrennbar verbindet," Hengel, *Judentum*, 295.
86. See *ibid.*, 567.
87. As in Ps.-Dionys. *de myst. th.* I, 1, where God is addressed as ὑπερουσιε/*superessentialis*.
88. See commentary on I, 16. Gadjin Nagao (ed.), *Madhyāntaravibhāga-bhāṣya* (Tokyo: Suzuki Research Foundation, 1964), 24.15–21, the sixteen types of emptiness.
89. Etienne Lamotte (ed.), *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra. L'Explication des Mystères*, Recueil de travaux publiés par les membres des Conférences d'histoire et de Philologie, second series 34 (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1935), 193–208.
90. Keenan, "Prospects," 9.
91. "allgemeine[s] Geset[z] in der Religionsgeschichte, denn wir treffen es in der Entwicklung jeder Religion," Harnack, *Wesen*, 114.11–12.
92. As in Charles Willemen, Bart Dessein, and Colette Cox, *Sarvāstivāda Buddhist Scholasticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).
93. Jens Halfwassen, "Die Unverwüstlichkeit der Metaphysik," *Philosophische Rundschau* 57, no. 2 (2010): 97–124.
94. Keenan, "Emptiness," *passim*.
95. Glenn Wallis, *A Critique of Western Buddhism Ruins of the Buddhist Real* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 149.
96. Knitter, "German Protestant Theology," 63.
97. *Ibid.*, 38.
98. *Ibid.*

99. Ibid.
100. Ibid., 40.
101. As Keenan himself calls it, see Keenan, *Meaning*, 121.
102. See Harnack, *Lehrbuch*, 547–604, which are some of the deepest and most beautiful pages in the Harnackian work. When Harnack speaks of Irenaeus and Tertullian, he has a slightly condescending tone. When he speaks of Origen, he seems to become aware that he is on the verge of contradicting himself in his judgment on metaphysical intrusions in theology. His effusions of admiration show how deeply impressed he was with Origen’s inspiration.
103. Thomas McEvilley, “Plotinus and Vijnanavada Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West* 30, no. 2 (1980): 181–193.
104. Randolph W. Kloetzli, “Nous and Nirvāṇa: Conversations with Plotinus – An Essay in Buddhist Cosmology,” *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 2 (2007): 140–177.
105. Inspired by these and others, but not on a level with them, I mention my attempt to incorporate Neoplatonic and Buddhist ideas in a reading of the Johannine Prologue: Fabien Muller, *Kenologische Versuche: Der Johannesprolog zwischen Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu und Meister Eckhart* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2022).
106. Thomas Cattoi, *Divine Contingency: Theologies of Divine Embodiment in Maximus the Confessor and Tsong kha pa* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2008).
107. Ibid., 51.
108. Ibid.
109. Keenan, “Prospects,” 16–17.
110. See Joseph O’Leary, “Divine Contingency: Theologies of Divine Embodiment in Maximus the Confessor and Tsong kha pa – By Thomas Cattoi,” *Reviews in Religion & Theology* 17: 577–579, at 579.
111. Ibid.
112. Strom. I 5 29 1: μία μὲν οὖν ἡ τῆς ἀληθείας ὁδός, ἀλλ’ εἰς αὐτὴν καθάπερ εἰς ἀέναον ποταμὸν ἐκρέουσι τὰ ρεῖθρα ἄλλα ἄλλοθεν. Ed. Otto Stählin (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1906).
113. Strom. I 5 28 3: ἐπαιδᾶγωγὴ γὰρ καὶ αὐτὴ [sc. philosophy] τὸ Ἑλληνικὸν ὡς ὁ νόμος τοῦ Ἑβραίου εἰς χριστόν.
114. Strom. I 5 18 2: πάντων μὲν γὰρ αἴτιος τῶν καλῶν ὁ θεός.
115. Strom. I 13 57 1: αἱ τῆς φιλοσοφίας τῆς τε βαρβάρου τῆς τε Ἑλληνικῆς αἱρέσεις, ἐκάστη ὅπερ ἔλαχεν ὡς πᾶσαν ἀύχει τὴν ἀλήθειαν.