

## Why Images? Visualized Deities and Glorified Saints in Vajrayana Buddhism and Patristic Theology

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### Abstract

Cattoi makes a comparative study of the role of imagination in the attainment of a spiritual/realized state through his entry into the world of images and iconography as approached by Patristic Theology and Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism.

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**Keywords:** Christianity, Buddhism, Tantrism, Icons, Imagination

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### Introduction

In the 2003 collection *Buddhism and Science* edited by B. A. Wallace, F. Varela and N. Depraz's article "Imagining: Embodiment, Phenomenology and Transformation" explores the non-dual quality of imagination, thereby furnishing a bridge "between a scientific view of imagination and its place in the Buddhist discipline of human transformation".<sup>1</sup> The two authors note that mental images do not merely recall earlier sensory perception, but can also be generated "starting from a verbal description," thereby attesting the reality of "coherent cross-modal activation" across "distinct cognitive entities". Depraz and Varela go on to argue that the Tibetan tradition of mental imagining confirms the insights of the Western phenomenological tradition and of recent neurobiological studies on the intertwining of imagination and present perception. They also contend that the study of the Tibetan tradition reveals the extent to which the human capacity for imagination is also a means for human change and transformation.

The article surveys a variety of methods (ranging from bKa' rgyud deity meditation to related practices such as *tonglen* or *lojong*), coming to the conclusion that the Tibetan tradition views imagination as a "mixed" reality, traversing the entire range from sensory perception to totally imaginative visualization experiences, while at the same time rooting imagination in an embodied organism that is forever undergoing change.<sup>1</sup> The "training of imagination" becomes here a "construction of the self", and the Tibetan tradition has the virtue of exploring the transformative mechanism that this training may have for the subject as a whole.

While the article offers a number of interesting insights on the points of contact between phenomenology and Tibetan thought, Depraz and Varela never actually

1 See Francisco J. Varela and Natalie Depraz, "Imagining: Embodiment, Phenomenology and Transformation," in B. Allan Wallace (ed.), *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003, pp. 195-230.

pause to explore the conceptual framework within which imagination within the Tibetan tradition acquires a transformative power. Why is it exactly that imagination can purify and transform? How does this differ from speculative reflection on pictorial imagination within the Western canon? Christian philosopher/theologian reading this article might start wondering whether analogous practices within their tradition might not offer any insights about the ability of imagination to sustain spiritual progress. Perhaps, they might wonder, exploring the divergence between Christian and Tibetan notions of imagination will actually illumine the multifaceted nature of what is a very complex and elusive phenomenon.

The burden of my paper is to offer a philosophico-theological response to Depraz and Varela's analysis, arguing that a comparative reading of two representative authors from the Vajrâyâna tradition and the early Christian period such as Bokar Rinpoche (1940-2004) and Theodore the Studite (759-816) will help one gain a better appreciation of the distinct ways in which imagination plays a crucial role in the two traditions. In this way, theology can extend to an increasingly secular society that very guidance which allegedly detached approaches to the study of religion choose not to offer whenever they abstain from passing "judgments" on the specificities of different practices. In a global, pluralist context, where individuals are confronted with divergent ethical or religious positions as at no other time in history, the need for theological "judgments" appears even more compelling, despite the ever recurring temptation to gloss over incompatible claims or conceptual inconsistencies.

The final goal of this paper is to suggest that comparative theology may illumine differences between different religious traditions, for which the mere phenomenological study of religious imagination may be unable to offer a satisfactory explanation. In this way, theological reflection can furnish a bridge between the phenomenological study of the mechanisms of imagination and perception, on one hand, and the scholarly study of religion, on the other.

## I

### **Divine Emptiness: Visualizing Divinity in Two Phases**

The cultural and historical circumstances of the Tibetan assimilation of Buddhism during the periods known as Early Transmission and Late Transmission ensured that the Tibetan polity would embrace Buddhism in its Mahâyâna form. The notion of *nirvâna* that is typical of the so-called "Great Vehicle" understands "liberation" as a condition that transcends the suffering of *samsara*, but also finds expression in acts of compassion for the continued suffering of sentient beings; hence the term *apratishhita* (active) *nirvâna*. Within Mahâyâna, the growing identification of the Buddha with this enlightened condition, and the simultaneous tendency to view Buddhahood as the fundamental nature of the cosmos, led to the gradual development of the teaching of the Buddha bodies (*kâyâh*), whereby the whole universe was effectively seen as an

embodiment of the Buddha's own wisdom and compassion. Initially, the Mādhyamika dichotomy between ultimate and conventional reality gave rise to the distinction between the historical body of the Buddha, or *rupakâya* ("body of form"), and a so-called *dharmakâya*, encompassing the ontological grounds (*dharmâh*) of all elements of the cosmos. A further distinction would be introduced by the Yogacâra teaching on the three aspects of reality, which split the *rupakâya* into a *nirmanakâya* and a *sambhogakâya*: the former indicated the body of the Buddha Úâkyamûni, and all aspects of reality (images, relics, different bodhisattvas and lamas), whereby his teachings reach us in this world; the latter embraces the plurality of manifestations of the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas who inhabit the celestial realms. Theoretical reflections on the Buddha bodies reached levels of extraordinary complexity, as can be seen in texts, such as the *Abhisamayalamkara* and its attendant commentarial tradition, which attempt a systematic exposition of this teaching. Leaving aside the nuances of interpretation that divided the different schools of Buddhism in Tibet, the notion of the three *kayâs* sought to articulate a belief in Buddhahood as a reality that is utterly transcendent while remaining totally accessible, and never ceasing to act on behalf of sentient beings.

The text known as *Astasâhasrikâ Prajñâpâramitâ* tells us the story of two devotees: one lovingly makes a copy of the Prajñâpâramitâ sûtras and honors it with "heavenly flowers, incense, and perfumes", whereas the other deposits in a stupa the relics of the Buddha who has entered *nirvâna*, and makes this stupa the object of his worship. Asked which of the two devotees has earned the greater merit, the Buddha indicates the former: indeed, the devotee of the Prajñâpâramitâ has greater merit than one who fills the entire cosmos with stupas.<sup>1</sup> According to Malcolm Eckel, this passage does not wish to create tension between popular forms of worship and the more sophisticated tradition of scribal wisdom, but merely underscores that the honor due to the physical relics of the Buddha is ultimately grounded in the virtues of the *dharma*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the distinction which really matters is that between the *dharma* in its material form, as letters on a page or an object in a reliquary, and the *dharma* as an act of understanding. In this perspective, the worship of material objects that remind one of the Buddha serves a propedeutic purpose, paving the way to the intuition of emptiness that crowns one's spiritual growth.

In the context of Prajñâpâramitâ texts, the notion of *dharma* is characterized by a marked degree of semantic ambiguity, whereby it becomes possible to identify the Buddha simultaneously with the teaching leading to enlightenment, with the material entities (such as images or texts) which serve as vehicles for this teaching, and finally with the so-called "excellent (mental, physical) qualities" which characterize enlightened individuals (this last understanding being already developed in earlier Abhidharma scholasticism).<sup>3</sup> In this way, the *dharma* is both the path and the goal to

2 Depraz and Varela, pp. 215-226.

3 See *Astasâhasrikâ Prajñâpâramitâ: The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary* (trans.) by E. Conze. Bolinas, Calif.: Four Seasons Foundations, 1973, pp. 100-5.

awakening, a process of cognitive purification that already contains within itself the seeds of the non-dual awareness. Since the nature of *dharma* is emptiness (*sūnyatā*), or co-dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*), it is possible to say that the nature of the Buddha is the same as the nature of all things, leading us to the conclusion that all aspects of reality are invested with the Buddha nature.<sup>4</sup> This is why Malcolm Eckel finds it possible to talk of the synchronic dimension of the Buddha's absence from the world even before his *parinirvāna*: even as the Buddha was delivering a sermon to his disciples, thereby being as physically present as one may possibly be, there was a deeper sense in which the Buddha was not there at all. To really *see* the *dharma* it was necessary to go beyond the body of the Buddha and to rise to the level of personal understanding, thereby undergoing a deep process of inner purification that enables one to intuit the empty nature of reality. In this perspective, the motif of the empty throne that sometimes replaces pictorial images of the Buddha are a visual metaphor that reminds devotees to raise their sights higher than the mere world of forms, towards a condition of non-conceptual, non-dual awareness.<sup>5</sup> The practice of *dharma*, therefore, invites us to deconstruct the ordinary process of seeing and to realize reality's intrinsic nature as a pointer towards emptiness.

This attitude of visual apophaticism finds its logical counterpart in the importance ascribed to the Buddha's "silence". In his reflections on the "Middle Way", Nāgārjuna notes that "it is bliss to cease all objectification and bring conceptual diversity to an end", since "the Buddha taught no *dharma* anywhere to anyone".<sup>6</sup> This statement, of course, appears to challenge conventional narratives of the Buddha's life; after his awakening under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha is known to have spent his life offering his followers instruction and advice. Nāgārjuna wishes to stress that a true Buddha leaves the world of concepts behind, and therefore cannot resort to verbal communication to convey his experience; at the same time, this does not mean that the received traditions about the Buddha's life are mistaken or misleading. This apparent contradiction is solved by Bhāvaviveka's commentary to Nāgārjuna's text, where the teaching of Mahāyāna is said to arise out of the Buddha's promise to help sentient beings in their suffering. In this perspective, "real" Buddhahood is identified with the *dharmakāya*, where there is no speech or concept; yet, because of the Buddha's compassion, a *rupakāya* arises from it that offering a teaching "consisting of syllables, words, and sentences".<sup>7</sup> The Buddha's compassion offers a rationale for the plurality of his bodily manifestations, while it also furnishes an explanatory bridge linking the silence that accompanies

4 See Malcolm D. Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 97.

5 See John Ross Carter, *Dhamma: Western Academic and Sinhalese Buddhist Interpretations: A Study of a Religious Concept*, Tokyo, Hokuseido Press, 1998, John Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sourced of Controversy in India and Tibet*, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies, Albany, N.Y., SUNY Press, 1997, Ch. 3.

6 See Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās: Root Verses on the Middle Way*, 22:16, in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās (Mādhyamikasūtras) de Nāgārjuna avec la Prasannapadā Commentaire de Candrakīrti* (French trans.) by Louise de La Valle Poussin, Bibliotheca Buddhica 4, St. Petersburg, pp. 1903-1913, Reprint ed. Osnabrück, Biblio Verlag, 1970.

7 See Malcolm Eckel, *To See the Buddha*, pp. 65-72.

awakening with the emergence of teachings fitting the different needs of the disciples. Since postulating rigid causal relationships would be incompatible with Madhyamaka philosophy, Bhāvaviveka merely observes that the *dharmakāya* is the “agent” behind the different conceptual teachings.

The on-going dialectic between emptiness on one hand, and images and texts on the other, rests on the conviction that ultimate and conventional reality should not be seen in opposition to each other, but rather, the latter is a necessary ladder to reach the former. Ūântideva’s well-known reflections on the way of life of a bodhisattva resort to the metaphor of the “maker of antidotes (*gârudika*)”, who consecrates a post in such a way that it is capable of curing snakebite.<sup>8</sup> In the same way as the maker of antidotes can leave the post behind without jeopardizing its ability to work its effect, the Buddha can leave behind teachings and images in the realm of form, and the latter will continue to help sentient beings even after the Buddha’s *parinirvâna*. The role of practice is thus to engage the visual and the textual reminders of the Buddha’s absence, and appreciate their propedeutic role as apophatic markers, effortlessly emerging from the ocean of *dharmakāya*.

This on-going dialectic between verbal and pictorial vehicles of the dharma deeply informs the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism, whose rendition of the Buddhist tradition, under the name of Vajrayâna, is often construed as a third vehicle alongside the Mahâyâna and the Theravada schools.<sup>9</sup> The focus of Vajrayâna ritual is a whole plethora of divine forms, which practitioners are invited to honor and worship, albeit in a manner which is significantly different from the contractual ceremonial that characterizes, for instance, Vedic or Greco-Roman polytheism. The deities of Tibetan Buddhism are emanations of our own mind, symbolic representations of our mental states that can help us attain *nirvâna*, since they are already one with the enlightened state.<sup>10</sup> The teaching of the Buddha bodies outlined above is then the overarching template allowing Tibetan Buddhists to blend the Mahâyâna notion of active *nirvâna* with the autochthonous element of deity practice. The deities are seen as *sambhogakāya* expressions of Buddhahood, or in other words as forms taken by a reality that, while empty, overflows with compassion for the suffering of sentient beings. Whenever a deity succors a practitioner, the Buddha leaves his empty throne, and enters the realm of form to free us from the clutches of *samsara*.

The tradition of deity meditation that is practiced with particular fervor by the members of the bKa’ rgyud order entails a similar commitment to the teaching of the three *kāyas*. The contemporary master Bokar Rinpoche, born in Western Tibet in 1940 and recognized as the reincarnation of the previous Bokar Rinpoche at the age of four,

8 See *Mûlamadhyamakakârikâs* 25: 24.

9 Bhāvaviveka’s Commentary to *Mûlamadhyamakakârikâs* 25: 24, quoted in Malcolm Eckel, *To See the Buddha*, p. 75.

10 See Ūântideva, *Bodhi[sattva]caryâvatâra: Introduction to the Bodhisattva Practice*, Ithaca, N.Y., Snow Lion Publications, 1997, 9:37-8.

moved to India in 1960 as part of the waves of refugees pouring into the sub-continent after the Chinese occupation. In India, he would continue his monastic training and eventually succeed the great master Kalu Rinpoche as the head of the bKa' rgyud order. In his writings, Bokar Rinpoche seeks to present the enduring relevance of the bKa' rgyud approach to Vajrayāna, and grounds his speculative reflection on his own experience of practice. The brief work *Chenrezig: Lord of Love* is an example of this approach, which is highly accessible even to Western readers who have had little previous exposure to the Tibetan tradition.

The figure of Chenrezig (often referred to under his Sanskrit name, Avalokiteśvara) is a pivotal symbol in the religious consciousness of Tibet.<sup>11</sup> In line with the Mādhyamaka teaching on the two truths, Bokar Rinpoche distinguishes between an ultimate and a conventional meaning of Chenrezig: the former identifies Chenrezig with the ultimate nature of the mind as simultaneously empty and compassionate; the other is an appearance that allows sentient beings to intuit this reality even as they remain in the world of form.<sup>12</sup> As Mahāyāna Buddhism emphasizes that it is impossible to embark on serious practice without awakening *bodhicitta* (the “mind of enlightenment”, or the desire to help all sentient beings to attain enlightenment), in the context of deity practice the emptiness which is the deity's ultimate nature is associated with absolute *bodhicitta*, whereas the compassion which is its conventional manifestation is viewed as relative *bodhicitta*. Other expressions used to indicate this dialectical relationship of absolute and relative are “knowledge and means” (in the traditional sense of *upāyakauśalya*), as well as “mode of being and mode of manifestation”. On one hand, Chenrezig is the actualization of the compassionate potential that is the nature of our mind; on the other hand, Chenrezig is also a *rupakāya* (and specifically, a *sambhogakāya*), manifesting the qualities of Buddhahood that are present in the *dharmakāya*.

Deity visualization is a method that allows us to move beyond our ordinary condition to a state of awakened realization. According to Bokar Rinpoche, what characterizes Vajrayāna practice is the ultimate unity of the various terms of purification, of which he lists four: 1) the base of purification; 2) the object of purification; 3) the purifying agent; 4) the result of purification.<sup>13</sup> The base of purification is of course the mind, which in our ordinary state is defiled by “temporary conditionings”, but which cannot be permanently defiled by them, since the latter are not part of its ultimate nature. Rather, they are the “object” of purification, lacking intrinsic reality; their root is the tendency to interpret the world dualistically, in terms of a grasping subject-object dichotomy. In line with Yogacāra epistemology, Bokar Rinpoche distinguishes six different areas

11 See David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan Successors*, Boston, Mass, Shambala ed., 2002, Part V, *The Conversion of Tibet*, pp. 381-526.

12 See Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love: Principles and Methods of Deity Meditation* (trans.) by C. Buchet, San Francisco, Clear Point Press, 1991, p. 9.

13 The name Chenrezig is traditionally divided into three syllables, each with its own meaning: “chen” means eye; “re” indicates continuity (and is related to *rgyud*, meaning both “tantra” and “thread”); “zig” means to look. Chenrezig is thus “the one who unceasingly looks down upon all beings with compassion”.

that are in need of purification: the five senses and the mind, each of which creates its own separate consciousness. In fact, whenever one of these consciousnesses grasps a particular object, it is effectively holding on to the “empty” nature of the mind; the mechanism of this process is an illusion. The *dharmā* is thus the “purifying agent” that eliminates conflicting emotions and the layers of illusory thoughts that cover our pure nature. The “result” of the process is the emerging awareness of the non-dual nature of the mind: indeed, the three bodies of the Buddha, which other schools of Tibetan Buddhism use as the basis for cosmological speculation, are here seen as different modalities of the mind: the *dharmakāya* corresponds to “the emptiness aspect of the awakened mind” and is thus lacking in shape or form; the *sambhogakāya* is the manner in which the *dharmā* is taught “without speech” to more advanced practitioners who have let go of most of the supports used by ordinary sentient beings; the *nirmanakāya* is a manifestation of Buddhahood “to guide beings with an impure *karma*” within “the domains of ordinary existence”.<sup>14</sup> Chenrezig is thus the basis, the agent, and the result of purification; indeed, even the object of purification is part of the deity, since they lack inherent existence.

The practice of deity visualization (also known simply as deity practice) is thus a way in which the individual moves towards realization with the aid of the deity, who is none other than his or her true nature. If we turn to the description of this practice as found in Bokar Rinpoche’s writings, one sees a clear confirmation of Varela’s and Depraz’s contention that visual imagination may not be set apart from other manners of perception: indeed, the whole mechanism of visualization sets out to blur the boundaries between visual and linguistic imagination, exploding the dichotomy between the two aspects of worship suggested by earlier Mādhyamaka writers. According to Bokar Rinpoche, the first phase of meditation is actually the recitation of a verse that outlines one’s resolve to develop *bodhicitta*:

Until enlightenment, I take refuge  
in the Buddha, *dharmā*, and sublime *sangha*.  
Through the merit engendered by the practice of generosity  
And other perfections,  
May I realize awakening for the benefit of beings.<sup>15</sup>

Following this preliminary ritual, practitioners begin the so-called *phase of creation*, whereby the image of Chenrezig is visualized in one’s mind as one recites a second text in praise of the virtues of the deity. In fact, the image of Chenrezig grows out of the syllable “HRI”, which Bokar Rinpoche calls “the syllable of white light”. The close weaving of verbal and pictorial elements in the phase of creation reminds one of the inextricable unity between the verbal expression of the *dharmā* and the *dharmā*’s own practitioners, both of which are gifts flowing from the Buddha’s *dharmakāya*. The

14 See Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig, Lord of Love*, pp. 11-4.

15 See Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love*, pp. 43-8.

text extols the extraordinary compassion of Chenrezig, whose perfect features and garments irradiate light towards all sentient beings:

Above myself and all beings of the universe:  
A white lotus and moon disc.  
On them, the letter HRI from which appears the noble Chenrezig.  
His clear and white body emits five colored rays;  
He smiles and looks upon us with compassion.  
Of his four hands, the two middle ones are joined,  
Of the two others, the right holds a crystal rosary,  
The left, a white lotus.  
Silks and jewels adorn him.  
A deer skin covers his shoulder,  
The Buddha of Infinite Light crowns his head.  
He sits in the *vajra* posture,  
To his back is an immaculate moon disc.  
He gathers the essence of all refuges.<sup>16</sup>

In the phase of creation, one begs Chenrezig to extend his compassion to all those who inhabit the eight directions, so that all sounds become the *mantra* of Chenrezig, and all forms become the form of Chenrezig, and especially all mental activity becomes the mind of Chenrezig, the all-encompassing emptiness overflowing with compassion.

Until this moment, the practitioner visualizes herself as paying homage to Chenrezig, whose exalted status is worthy of every honor. Hereafter, though, the distinction between practitioner and deity starts fading away. In a second series of visualizations based on the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hung*, devotees visualize themselves as Chenrezig, cultivating devotion to the *dharma* or compassion for sentient beings. The move away from the dialectic of worship tying deity and devotee, and towards an awareness of the union between the two, is the crux of the phase of creation, since this shift in the structure of meditation enables its purifying function to become operational at the deepest level. Identification with Chenrezig allows one to realize that appearances as we ordinarily perceive them lack an intrinsic existence, but are actually produced by our own mind, which is distorted by the conditioning of the *karma*. In this way, Bokar Rinpoche claims, one is able to attain what he calls “clarity of the appearance”, where we loosen our fixation with illusory conceptualization, and the potential for pure realization that is inscribed in our consciousness can unfold.<sup>17</sup> One must remember that according to the teaching of the Buddha bodies, the whole universe is the theatre of the Buddha’s compassionate activity; identifying with Chenrezig, one is reminded that one’s own actions have also the potential to channel the Buddha’s own compassion.

16 Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love*, pp. 47-8.

17 Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love*, p. 71.



The final characteristic of the phase of creation which is stressed by Bokar Rinpoche is one that defines the core of Vajrayāna Buddhism: the so-called “pride of the deity”.<sup>18</sup> If the “recollection of pure meaning” invites us to rediscover the simultaneity of reality’s empty and compassionate dimensions, “pride of the deity” invites practitioners to let go of their self-understanding as independent subjects, and to replace it with an awareness of one’s identity with the deity. In this way, everyone can say “I am Chenrezig”, one whose ordinary desires are replaced by a desire to alleviate the sufferings of sentient beings. The supersession of an ordinary by an extraordinary (or “divine”) self should not be seen as contradicting Buddhism’s fundamental rejection of any notion of enduring subjectivity, since even the deity is devoid of ultimate existence, and as such there is no such thing as an ultimate “I”. Rather, the “pride of the deity” ensures that we are no longer bearers of negative emotions, but rather channels of compassions. Those who attain this condition can cultivate the six perfections (*paramitās*) characterizing Mahāyāna Buddhism, they can leave behind the ordinary activities of “body, speech and mind”, and attain full clarity of vision.<sup>19</sup>

Bokar Rinpoche resorts to the image of the wave to signify the relationship between the earlier phase of creation and the later phase of completion. The earlier is analogous to the wave rising up from the surface of the water, and the latter imitates the wave that falls back into the ocean. The same water causes the wave to go up and to go down, in the same way as the same mind causes the image of the deity to emerge and eventually to disappear. From the emptiness of mind, Chenrezig emerges in all his splendor, only to dissolve into nothingness as the visualization is completed. Indeed, the phase of completion once more unveils the inextricable link between verbal and visual expressions of the *dharma*; in the same way as the image of the deity emerged from the *mantra*, now the image is dissolved into the *mantra*, reminding us that both forms and sounds are the body of the deity, and both forms and sounds are ultimately empty.<sup>20</sup> Bokar Rinpoche offers rather detailed instructions of this dissolution of Chenrezig into letters and eventually into emptiness: all figures that were visualized in the phase of creation dissolve into the *mantra*, until the *mantra* fades into the syllable “*hri*”, the latter turns into the symbol for the vowel “*i*”, and finally disappears.

The ability to perform such visualization, apart from the elimination of mistaken opinions and the recognition of our empty, compassionate nature, is also believed to

18 Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love*, p. 73. This practice parallels Vaiṣṇavite traditions in South India, where Lakṣmi, the spouse of Viṣṇu, is believed to “dwell” in her mantra, and thus to have, so to speak, a “body of letters”. See P. Pratap Kumar, *The Goddess Lakṣmi: The Divine Consort in South Indian Vaiṣṇava Tradition*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 43-6.

19 Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love*, pp. 67, 60-1.

20 In the 17th century, when the growing dGe lugs ascendancy led to the centralization of political power in the person of the Dalai Lama, the growing prestige enjoyed by dGe lugs scholasticism simultaneously led to a renewed interest in Madhyamaka philosophy and its understanding of the two truths, in ways that would eventually reshape the practices of schools different from dGe lugs. The notion of “pride of the deity” should be interpreted in the light of the Madhyamaka teaching of the two truths, whereby the conventional self is opposed to the “ultimate self”, which is identical to Chenrezig and is simultaneously empty.

result in the accumulation of merit, which can be offered for the sake of other sentient beings. Bokar Rinpoche is always eager to underscore the communitarian dimension of Vajrayâna practice, stressing that anyone who engages in deity practice actually makes it easier for others to achieve enlightenment.<sup>21</sup> The tradition of bKa' rgyud uses the term *mahamudra* ("great sign") to indicate the ability to dwell without distraction in the unity of emptiness and appearance, simultaneously proud of one's identity with the deity and mindful of the ultimate absence of any self, be it ordinary or extraordinary. The text known as *Continual Shower for the Benefit of Beings* observes that merely "touching the letters" of the *mantra* gains one the initiation of innumerable Buddhas and bodhisattvas; if one goes on and visualizes the *mantra* "even once", immense merit is created, all appearances are revealed "to be *dharmakâya*", and the "treasure of activity" on behalf of sentient beings" (symbolized by the *rupakâyâh*) is made available to all.<sup>22</sup>

## II

### Image and Prototype: Aspiring to a Deified Condition

If we now turn to the experience of the early Christian East, we will be able to observe a number of striking similarities between what we have seen so far, and the theological reflection on sacred images that developed in the cultural area of Byzantium. After the definition of the two wills of Christ by the third Council of Constantinople (682), the great Christological controversies of the first centuries had effectively reached their conclusion with the general acceptance of the doctrinal settlement reached at Chalcedon in 451. This 5th century council had asserted the uniqueness of Christ's person (*hypostasis*) in opposition to the Nestorian tendency to postulate a human and a divine subject in Christ; at the same time, it had also stressed that this person was simultaneously possessed of a divine and a human nature (*ousia*), whose manner of union was characterized as "undivided and unconfused" (*adiaretôs kai asygchytôs*). The implication of this formula is that Christ's humanity is anhypostatic, resting in the divine hypostasis of the eternal Word, but lacking a human hypostasis of its own.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the second person of the Trinity "touches" each one of us, through the common humanity that we mysteriously share with him; and through this wonderful exchange (*admirabile commercium*), we are made participants of the properties of the divine nature. The Chalcedonian paradigm, therefore, furnishes a coherent doctrinal definition no less than a template for spiritual practice; the glorified humanity of Christ is the eschatological horizon towards which we are already moving here in this earthly life.

By the eighth century, the focus of the theological debate shifted from the terms used to conceptualize the hypostatic union to the question of the role of images in the context

21 Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love*, pp. 54, 64-5.

22 Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love*, p. 83.

23 Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love*, p. 55.

of practice. The first iconoclastic crisis was brought to an end in 787 when the council fathers meeting in Nicaea condemned the assertion that pictorial representations of Christ and the saints violated Old Testament injunctions against graven images. The question, however, was far from being settled. In the early ninth century, a second bout of iconoclasm led Byzantine theologians to reconsider the issue one more time, exploring further the connection between sacred images and individual spiritual practice. It is at this juncture that we encounter the figure of Theodore the Studite (759-826), a monastic reformer whose role in the second iconoclastic controversy would eventually be analogous to that played by John Damascene in the first.

Between the years 815 and 821, as he was subject to repeated exiles because of his opposition to state-sponsored iconoclasm, Theodore produced a whole series of writings on icons and spiritual practice. In the three *Antirrhetici Adversus Iconomachos*, Theodore defends icon veneration on the basis of the simultaneous connection and distinction linking sacred images and prototypes.<sup>24</sup> In the first *Antirrheticus*, for instance, Theodore responds to a series of objections raised by iconoclasts, but at the same time he outlines a theology of the image that grounds spiritual practice in the mystery of the incarnation. The iconoclast, for instance, suggests that venerating images is idolatrous, since Theodore responds that the icon explodes the dichotomy of comprehensibility and incomprehensibility: the attributes of the uncircumscribable nature are those by which Christ is recognized to be divine, and the attributes of the circumscribed nature are those by which Christ is recognized to be human.<sup>25</sup> The distinction between the two *ousiai* is enduring, and neither one changes into the other; at the same time, Christ is one and the same in the two natures, and to deny that would be tantamount to denying that the Word ever took flesh. The simultaneity of circumscribability and uncircumscribability enables Theodore to gainsay objections coming from opposing heretical groups. On one hand, thinkers influenced by Arianism might observe that Christ is “visible” and “tangible”, and therefore conclude that he only began to exist in the virgin’s womb; yet, Theodore notes, the eternal Son was not “contained” by Christ’s humanity. On the other hand, docetic critiques of Chalcedon might object that the incarnate Word could not possibly eat, drink, sleep or generally undergo the passions characterizing our changeable human nature; but even if “it is not orthodox to say that He assumed a particular man”, one cannot say that “He came only in appearance and fantasy”, since He can be “seen and described, touched and circumscribed”.<sup>26</sup> This is “the new mystery of the divine dispensation” (*to kainoprepes tēs oikonomias mystērion*): the divine and human nature are come together in the hypostasis of the eternal Word.<sup>27</sup>

24 Bokar Rinpoche, *Chenrezig Lord of Love*, pp. 109-110.

25 See John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, pp. 55-7; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 117-122. Theodore the Studite clearly espouses this position, as we see from *Antirrheticus* 1, 4 (PG 99, pp. 433-434).

26 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrhetici Adversus Iconomachos Tres* (PG 99, pp. 327-436), English transl. by C.P. Roth, *On the Holy Icons*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981.

27 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus* 1, pp. 2-4 (PG 99, pp. 329-334).

*Antirrheticus I* goes on to show that a correct understanding of the incarnation overcomes any sterile opposition between “material forms” (*hylikes hypotypôseis*) and “mental contemplation” (*kata noun theôria*). Some claim that, since Christ takes flesh by intervention of the Holy Spirit, it would be more appropriate if we imitated this incarnation spiritually within us, “through sanctification and righteousness” (*di’ hagiasmou kai dikaiosunēs*).<sup>28</sup> Yet, according to Theodore, this would be a grave error, since Christ did not choose to come to us in a merely mental way, but rather by the appearance of his actions and sufferings, which were “undeniably like ours” (*kath’ hfēmas*). Thus, if we stopped short of portraying Christ as he was manifest in the flesh, we would not adequately honor the eternal Word’s “sublime condescension” (*panupsistos sygkatabasis*) in becoming “matter” (*hyle*). Some object that the Scriptures enjoin Christians to “glory in the cross”, but they make no mention of images; yet for Theodore even this objection is flawed, since Christians who glory in this chief instrument of Christ’s passion also represent it in painting and sculpture, ascribing praise to the representation much as they do to the original cross. And if this is the case of the cross, why should it not be the case of the images of Christ? Christ’s portrait is related to its original much as an effect is related to its cause; thus it is legitimate to call Christ’s image “Christ”, even as there are not two “Christs”, but merely one.<sup>29</sup>

Where Theodore draws a distinction is between the presence of Christ in his images, and in the Eucharistic species. In *Antirrheticus 1, 10*, Theodore quotes some “heretics” saying that Christ may only be represented by the bread and the wine consecrated in the liturgy.<sup>30</sup> Theodore notes that the Eucharist cannot “represent” Christ, since it is “consubstantial” (*homoousia*) with him; in asserting that the liturgical action is a mere figure of the incarnation, heretics show their failure to understand the difference between a sacramental act, which makes the signified reality fully present, and devotional practices that are mere commemoration of the ministry of Christ, such as the custom to carry branches on Palm Sunday, or to exchange kisses of peace on the day of Easter. On the contrary, pictorial images and their prototype differ in essence (*ousia*); the former redirect the viewer’s attention to the latter, and as they share the same likeness, the prototype may be venerated in the image.<sup>31</sup> Icons are made of wood and paint, whereas Christ is human and divine; yet, despite its poverty and unworthiness, the material frame of the former is mysteriously united to the hypostasis of the eternal Word.<sup>32</sup>

28 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus 1*, p. 4 (PG 99, pp. 331-334).

29 Theodore the Studite, *ibid.*

30 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus 1*, p. 7 (PG 99, pp. 335-336).

31 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus 1*, p. 9 (PG 99, pp. 337-340). Theodore cites Basil of Caesarea’s *De Spiritu Sancto* 18, 45 (PG 32, 149), where Basil observes how the emperor’s image is also called “the emperor”, and the former may receive the honor that is due to the latter.

32 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus 1*, p. 10 (PG 99, pp. 340-341). In fact, the notion that only the Eucharistic elements could legitimately represent Christ was the position adopted at Hieria in 754. The Nicene Council of 787 would overturn this decision; see J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, Vol. 2, p. 109.

A theme is touched upon tangentially in the second *Antirrheticus*, but which is important for the sake of our comparison with the Tibetan tradition, is that of the different degrees of veneration that is due to different liturgical objects, such as icons, gospel books or crosses. Some so-called “moderate iconoclasts” conceded that images of Christ could be made, but claimed that they could only be used as teaching tools, and should not be the object of veneration.<sup>33</sup> Others drew a further distinction and argued that icons depicting episodes from Christ’s earthly ministry were legitimate, but one could not portray Christ after the resurrection, since his resurrected body defied the limits of human art. Responding to the objections from the first of these two groups, Theodore argued that in the case of Christ one could not admit of different degrees of honor (*timē*). For him, the grace of Christ is present in the icons no less than in the letter of Scripture or the wood of the cross; thus, it makes no sense to honor some of these channels of divine grace, and ignore or despise others.<sup>34</sup> As far as the portrayal of resurrected Christ is concerned, Theodore notes that both before and after the resurrection Christ displayed both human and divine properties; we know from the Gospels that he walked on the waters of the lake of Tiberias long before his passion, and that he ate with his disciples after the resurrection. While no mention is made of this teaching, it is clear that the notion of “communication of the idioms” (*koinōnia idiomatōn*) undergirds Theodore’s approach, which admits of no opposition between Christ’s humanity before and after the events of Easter. Using what is perhaps a questionable etymology, but one that is nonetheless useful for his overall argument, Theodore argues that the Greek term *eikōn* (“image”), comes from the term *eoikos* (“similar”); given that similarity is a characteristic of every icon, and as long as similarity is present one may not choose to abstain from venerating an image.<sup>35</sup> Following John of Damascus, Theodore resorts to the Aristotelian notion of *pros ti* relation to conceptualize the relationship between the image and the prototype, so that it is the *distinction* between the two that justifies venerating the former, and shields defenders of the icons from the accusation of idolatry.

Finally, the third *Antirrheticus* takes up again the discussion of circumscribability and uncircumscribability, this time however offering some reflections on the implications of this dialectic for spiritual practice. Ever since Origen’s *De Principiis*, but especially Athanasios’ double treatise *Contra Arios-De Incarnatione*, speculative reflection on Christology had made ample use of the Stoic theme of the *logoi spermatikoi*, which envisaged a cosmic intelligence (or Logos) ruling the cosmos by means of its blueprints (the individual *logoi*) scattered throughout the universe. The obvious identification of this overarching intelligence with the eternal Word of God, already foreshadowed in the Johannine prologue, entails that the whole universe is seen as the cosmic manifestation

33 Again, Theodore echoes Basil’s language. In the passage of *De Spiritu Sancto* quoted above, Basil also says that the honor given to the image “moves over to the original” (*epi ton prototypon anapheretai*).

34 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus* 1, pp. 11-12 (PG 99, pp. 341-344).

35 Catherine Roth, in the introduction to her translation of the *Antirrhetici*, notes that this more “detached” approach was common among Western Christians at the time.

of the Logos, and also as the unfolding of his pedagogical plan. In this perspective, the uncircumscribability of the Logos is a mark that divine providence (*pronoia*) continues to sustain the natural order and to use it as a propedeutic tool (*paideusis*). At the same time, Christ's option for circumscribability at the incarnation marks the hypostatic union as the highest point in this propedeutic course, so that there is no discontinuity between the cosmic order ruling the world, and its manifestation in the flesh. For Theodore, the icon of Christ is the pictorial representation of this continuity between the two aspects of the Logos' pedagogical work on behalf of humanity.<sup>36</sup> As the image is hypostatically united with the eternal Word which moves the heavens, worshippers can reflect on the inner congruence between the laws of nature that sustain the world, and the human form of Jesus of Nazareth, itself a manifestation of divine love for humanity.

As the incarnation crosses the threshold dividing the cosmic and the contingent, however, it also accomplishes a more extraordinary transformation: that of impermanence into permanence, or, to use a paradoxical expression coined many centuries later by Gregory Palamas, that of the created into the uncreated. In *De Incarnatione*, Athanasios of Alexandria had argued that the primary goal of the incarnation was to prevent the destruction of creation by the forces of sin, which were driving the work of God's hands into the abyss of nothingness.<sup>37</sup> In this perspective, the incarnate Word is not primarily seen as the one who atones for humanity's offense against God, but rather as a doctor that heals the wound of sin. The perichoretic exchange of properties between the two natures ensures that the incarnation accomplishes an irreversible ontological transformation of humanity: our nature can become the bearer of the divine properties, and effectively undergo "deification" (*theôsis*). In the icons of Christ, the divine *ousia* cannot be portrayed, but icons portray Christ's deified humanity, and as such veneration of this humanity is not idolatrous. In the words of Theodore, "there is one 'indivisible veneration' (*ameristos proskunêsis*) of Christ and of His image".<sup>38</sup>

In this perspective, the icon is a marker reminding us that the cosmic order ruling the universe entered history by assuming our humanity, and indeed a humanity that could be seen and touched even after the resurrection. In the third *Antirrheticus*,

36 Theodore derives the notion of *timç* from Basil, who reflects on the relationship between "honor" and "holiness" in his work on the Holy Spirit. See again Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto* 18, p. 45 (PG 32, pp. 149), L. Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 133-4.

37 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus* 2, 23 (PG 99, pp. 367-368).

38 It might be of interest to observe that in the 16th century John Calvin, a great opponent of the veneration of images, would actually question this construal of the dialectic of circumscribability and uncircumscribability. According to Calvin, divinity surpasses humanity by so great a margin that even in the hypostatic union Christ's humanity could only encompass a portion of the divinity of the Logos; during the years of Christ's earthly ministry, the part of divinity that could not be contained (later known as *extra Calvinisticum*) continued to guarantee the functioning of the universe. If even in the incarnate Christ the divine nature was not present in its totality, the veneration of images of such a prototype appears to be even less justifiable. See Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 185-190; E. David Willis-Watkins, *Calvin's Catholic Christology: the Function of the So-called 'Extra-Calvinisticum' in Calvin's Theology*, Leiden E.J. Brill, 1966, pp. 120-155.

Theodore's fictional interlocutor notes that since Christ's humanity lacked a human hypostasis, it could not possibly have any distinguishing features, and as such it could in no way be represented in art. Theodore responds, however, noting that "generalities have their existence in particular individuals", since humanity only exists in specific human individuals, and if the latter were eliminated, humanity would be eliminated too; therefore, if humanity had not subsisted in Christ as an individual (or in other words, if it had not rested in the individual hypostasis of the Word), He would only have taken flesh "in a fantasy".<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note how Theodore contrasts "generalities" (*ta katholou*) and "particular things" (*ta kath'hekasta*), the first being seen with "the mind and thought" (*nous kai dianoia*), the second with the eyes "which look at perceptible things" (*hoi ta aisthēta blepontes*).<sup>40</sup> For Theodore, while Christ took humanity in general, he did so in a way that could be contemplated "in an individual manner" (*en atomō de theōroumenēn*); thus, one may not say that Christ can "be touched only by thought" (*dianoia psēlaphētos*).<sup>41</sup>

Outlining the dialectic relation between a verbal/intuitive understanding of the mystery of Christ and its perception in the flesh, Theodore asserts that "sight precedes hearing" (*opsis akoēs protera*) both "in the position of its organs and in the perception by the senses".<sup>42</sup> The argument here is largely Aristotelian: all knowledge begins in sense perception, and as such even inspired authors, such as Isaiah and Ezekiel, had to undergo visionary experiences before they could compose their prophetic message. Theodore applies this argument to the incarnation, which acquires an epistemological, no less than an ontological priority over the words of Scripture: while the hypostatic union presupposes the pre-existence of the eternal Logos, if one examines the books of the New Testament, one finds that "the composition of the text originates in observation" (*tēn logographian eis historian katalēgousan*).<sup>43</sup> Earlier in the 7th century, Maximos the Confessor had outlined the Christocentric import of the "two laws", the law of nature and the law of Scripture, both of them grounded in the event of the incarnation. Theodore merely observes that the order of knowing follows the order of being, and as such we would have no New Testament if it were not for the experience of the first generation of disciples, who met Christ face to face and later wrote his message.

What about the images of the saints and the Mother of God, which, in Theodore's times as it would be throughout the history of Christianity, were also the object of veneration among Christians? The usual "heretics" object that those who dwell in

39 Athanasios, *De Incarnatione* (PG25b, pp. 95-197).

40 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus* 3C, Section Title (PG 99, pp. 419-420).

41 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus* 3A, pp. 14-5 (PG 99, pp. 395-398).

42 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus* 3A, p. 16 (PG 99, pp. 398-399).

43 This teaching is echoed by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa*, where the teaching of anhypostasy is tempered by a reference to Christ's *suppositum*. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Tertia Pars*, Q. 17, Art. pp. 1-2 (on whether Christ is one or two); Q. 50 (on the "parts" of Christ following his death).

heavenly glory receive no honor from being represented in material pictures, and that to keep “their memorial in words” (*hē dia logou stēlographia*) would be a worthier memorial of their lives. Theodore responds to this objection saying once more that “hearing is equal to sight” (*ison gar opseōs hē akoē*), and it is necessary to use both senses, since by removing one we would also be removing the other.<sup>44</sup> As with the images of Christ, intellectual veneration of their memory with the aid of words does not contradict sensory veneration of their material form with the aid of images.

### III

#### **Imagination as Transformative Power? A Theological Comparison in the Light of Phenomenology**

In their article on the points of contact between European phenomenology and Tibetan notions of imagination and perception, Depraz and Varela outline how early twentieth century phenomenology challenged earlier Cartesian or empiricist notions of imagination. Phenomenology emphasized the centrality of the imagination within human consciousness, but did also highlight the presence of a chasm between images presented to our perception by external reality, on one hand, and images recalled to memory or created *ex novo* by the mind, on the other. The two scholars note how Husserl used the term *Bilderbewusstsein* for the former and *Phantasie* for the latter, noting that the first action is a positional act, whereby we come to understand reality, and the latter is a non-positional act, whereby we actually neutralize the factual existence of the positional object. Remembrance appears to hover on the threshold between these two manners of perception; on one hand, it is grounded on a lived experience that was, at the time of its occurrence, a positional act; on the other hand, intentionality is now detached from the source of the image, and as such we move into non-positional ground.<sup>45</sup> In his work *L'imaginaire*, Jean Paul Sartre makes a similar point when he distinguishes the static quality of perceptive vision and the more dynamic approach that is a play in imaginative reconstructions. Using a terminology with surprising Buddhist echoes, Sartre notes that our “imagining consciousness” (*conscience imageante*) is “open” (i.e., not tied to particular extrinsic realities), and actually envelops “a kind of nothingness” (*néant*), investing the act of imagining with a radical freedom.

As we explore the conceptual underpinnings of *Chenrezig Lord of Love*, we notice how Bokar Rinpoche presupposes the teaching on the different Buddha bodies to articulate his understanding of visualization. The simultaneity of *dharmakāya* and *rupakāya* ensures that the order of the universe is given symbolic pictorial representation in the mental images of the deity. In this perspective, the earthly life of the historical Buddha did not accomplish an ontological transformation in the structure of the cosmos, nor did it mark an irreversible change in the way sentient beings could approach or practice the *dharma*. Rather, the life of Gautama Buddha was just one of the ways in

44 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus 3A*, p. 2 (PG 99, pp. 391-392).

45 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus 3A*, p. 2 (PG 99, pp. 391-392).



which the compassionate nature of the *dharmakâya* gave rise to bodies of form so as to rescue all beings mired in *samsara*. There is no ontological distinction between the presence of the historical Buddha, the presence of his later disciples, or the presence of the Tantric deities worshipped by Vajrayâna Buddhists: they all lack an inherent subjectivity, emerging from the abyss of nothingness only to return into it once their mission is accomplished. Buddhas, deities and bodhisattvas are expressions of the soteriological value of emptiness, as every sentient being is a mere conventional expression of *úûnyata*.

In this perspective, deity practice appears to correspond to the Husserlian notion of *Phantasie*, or, in more Sartrean terms, to the “open” expression of the *conscience imageante*, which, rather intriguingly, was actually said to envelop a kind of “nothingness” (*néant*). The visualization of Chenrezig in the phase of creation is not based on an extrinsic visual stimulus; yet, the practitioner is also resorting to memory to develop a composite image of the deity, trusting that it will guide us to a better intuition of reality’s pure nature. As the phase of creation is followed by the phase of completion, the individual moves back and forth on the sensory-imaginative spectrum, developing an image on the basis of memory and letting it go, reminding oneself that reality is fundamentally compassionate but also fundamentally empty.

The goal of deity practice is thus a form of epistemological, rather than ontological purification. And yet, if we turn to Depraz’ and Varela’s analysis of the Tibetan use of imagination, we will soon see how these two authors appear entirely oblivious of this fundamental fact, failing completely to consider the doctrinal presuppositions of this practice. The Christian tradition of *theôsis* that underpins the Byzantine theology of the image where does on the contrary assert the possibility of an ontological transformation, and the reason for this difference is the distinctive notion of subjectivity and embodiment underpinning the Christian notion of incarnation.

The Chalcedonian tradition that permeates Theodore’s writings understood the coming of Christ as the pivotal event in the history of the cosmos, an occurrence after which nothing could ever be the same again; at a certain point in time and in a certain geographical location, the eternal Logos assumed our common humanity, and from that moment onwards humanity and divinity would be inextricably linked forever. The hypostatic union expresses the dialectic of divinity and humanity in a manner that is analogous to the dialectic of *dharmakâya* and *rupakâya*; what is utterly transcendent becomes totally accessible, the order of the cosmos becomes tangible. Yet, in the incarnation of Christ, the two realities or *ousiai* remain perfectly distinct -“undivided and unconfused”- even after Christ’s return to the Father. According to tradition, Christ “reigns now in heaven with the scars of his wounds”, preserving his humanity for all eternity.

In this perspective, individual practitioners are ontologically distinct from Christ, and will forever remain so; even the saints whose images are also worthy of veneration

can never be said to be on the same level as the incarnate Word, since they never acquire the fullness of the divine nature. The rationale for the veneration of icons is ontological difference; images are asymptotic markers, pointers towards an eschatological goal which at the same time never entails the loss of our identity. Pursuing “deification” is distinct from cultivating “pride of the deity”; for the bKa’ rgyud school, one must retrieve an awareness that one is already one with the deity, whereas for the Church fathers, one must struggle to achieve ontological (divine) characteristics that one does not already possess.

To return to the Husserlian terminology used before, the Christian approach to sacred images is thus one of *Bilderbewusstsein*, resting in an extrinsic reality that our senses can perceive. One might object that in the Tibetan tradition, great use is also made of concrete images (*thangkas*, *mandalas*, and statues), and that there is nothing in the Christian tradition following Chalcedon that prohibits one from praying to a mental image of Christ or the saints. Yet, it still remains the case that Eastern Christians, in particular, have always ascribed great importance to the actual, bodily veneration of real images; in the same way, the bKa’ rgyud tradition always emphasized the special propedeutic role of mental visualizations.

This divergence reflects the different notion of embodiment and selfhood that characterize the two traditions: Christianity centers on one specific incarnation, whereas Buddhism can accommodate an infinite number of manifestations, all of which are ultimately empty. The Christian practitioner has a dialogical relationship with the divine; even as one progresses in one’s spiritual life, one does not *fully* lose one’s own identity in God. The goal of the Buddhist is a fundamental *elisisio alteritatis*; no-one differs from the Buddha, all emerge from the *dharmakâya* and all return to it. As such, it will be pedagogically more appropriate that the Christian worship an image that is actually distinct from oneself, since one can never be equal to Christ; analogously, the Tibetan Buddhist should create an image in one’s mind and then let go of it since he or she is not distinct from what is represented in the image. Thus, one is here confronted with two practices that appear similar at first, but actually have virtually opposite rationales and virtually opposite goals; their respective presuppositions on cosmology, history and selfhood appear to be an instance of irreducible difference.

A fitting observation at this point might be that the joint reading of Christian and Buddhist authors is not meant to result in a “monological” critique of Buddhist ontology on the part of Christian theology; rather, it might encourage the reformulation of traditional Christian doctrines using the conceptual armory of the other tradition. In line with Steven Bevan’s understanding of the theological tradition as “a series of contextual theologies”, the elaboration of an Asian (Vajrâyâna!) theology of the image would actually be in continuity with the tradition of the early church, which gave us the great synthesis of Nicaea and Chalcedon.<sup>46</sup> While the elaboration of such a

46 Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus* 1, 17 (PG 99, pp. 348-349).

theology would go beyond the purview of this paper, a Christian theology of the image that retrieves elements from Bokar Rinpoche's understanding of deity practice would be no less "culturally determined" than Theodore's response to the iconoclasts - or indeed, Athanasios' critique of Arianism, - and would also show that the theological endeavour should not fear treading new ground.

Where Depraz' and Varela's reflection on phenomenology and imagination do not do justice to the Vajrâyâna tradition is in their failure to notice that the Vajrâyâna understanding of Buddhahood actually envisages no possibility of authentic ontological change. Christian theologians can supplement their analysis suggesting how the theology of the icon developed by Theodore the Studite does on the contrary presuppose that the sensory perception of a pictorial artifact, and the adoption of an attitude of veneration towards the latter, may instead accomplish an ontological transformation encompassing the body no less than the soul. While the Husserlian dichotomy between *Bilderbewusstsein* and *Phantasie* appears to dovetail the distinction between the Christian and the Tibetan approach, it appears that Sartre was incorrect when he ascribed greater transformative power to the latter. Finally, whether the glorified saints venerated in the Byzantine icons, where humanity and divinity mingle without confusion, portray a greater feat of spiritual transformation than the visualized deities of Tibet, where one lets go of all boundaries to rest in the unchanging reality of emptiness depends on one's orientation to the spiritual/divine dimension of the anthropo-cosmic reality.