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*Buddhist Inclusivism:  
Attitudes Towards Religious Others*

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# A Review of *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*

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*Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. By Kristin Beise Kiblinger. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005, 145 pages, ISBN: 0-7546-5133-9 (hardcover), US \$100.00.

*Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others* is a most welcome, if wonky, addition to the growing body of literature about Buddhism and interfaith issues. Principally an impassioned plea for Buddhists to think more carefully about their ways of regarding non-Buddhists, author Kristin Beise Kiblinger's book is by sharp turns remarkably astute and highly debatable. On the one hand, a praiseworthy service is done here: Kiblinger identifies an enormously important issue that does indeed require further thinking and written reflection by Buddhist practitioners and scholars. On the other hand, though, it is often *Buddhist Inclusivism's* execution that emphasizes this need. Because the book comes from a scholar who does not self-identify as a Buddhist and it draws deeply from a project with decidedly Judeo-Christian roots (namely, theology of religions), square pegs do not infrequently meet with round holes. Though the book offers valuable critical reflections from outside the tradition, many of the rubrics used, assessments made, and advice proffered will require considerable mulling over by scholars and practitioners of Buddhism.

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Kiblinger—a University of Chicago-educated assistant professor of religious studies at Winthrop College who currently serves on the steering committee for the comparative theology group of the American Academy of Religion—starts with the fairly accurate pronouncement that Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism have not produced much “rigorous philosophical work utilizing the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism” (1). For the uninitiated, these categories refer to three positions that religious communities can adopt in response to the reality of the wide variety of faith traditions in the world. Kiblinger defines exclusivism as when a religious community believes it has a monopoly on the truth, and that only by accepting their doctrine is salvation possible. Pluralism is understood as a kind of “separate but equal” position, in the sense that every religion is thought to be “equally effective in bringing salvation about” (2). Falling squarely between these poles is inclusivism, which involves a religious community’s “feeling that there is overlap” with other religious communities and a “willingness to include the other or something of the other’s” (1).

In the book’s first chapter, Kiblinger answers the question, “Why Buddhist Inclusivism?” Of the three options presented, inclusivism, she argues, is the one enjoying “most widespread popularity” among the world’s religions (2). It is apparent to the author that many religious thinkers who are familiar with these categories have opted to defend positions of inclusivism from within their own traditions. Kiblinger also observes that Buddhism, generally speaking, has enjoyed positive stereotyping as one of the more inclusivistic of the world’s religion. And yet, she wonders about the accuracy of this notion: “tenable” forms of Buddhist inclusivism are definitely possible in her view, but she wonders if we can actually point to any. This, of course, requires a more precise understanding of inclusivism in the context of Kiblinger’s project. In

chapter two, “Issues Regarding Inclusivism Generally,” she offers a definition based largely on theologian George Lindbeck’s work. Her ideal, preferred inclusivists are “rule theorists” or “proportionalists”; those who are “alternate-ends-recognizing.” They are rooted in and completely dedicated to their particular truth claims, but at the same time aware that religious others make their own such claims. In addition, they bring an “anthropologist’s” inquisitiveness and willingness to listen deeply to their encounters with those others (28).

Having presented a standard by which to appraise Buddhist attempts at inclusivism, Kiblinger begins her examination. In chapter three, “Selected Examples of Inclusivism in Buddhist Contexts,” she tries to find her preferred, ideal inclusivism in the various places where Buddhists have traditionally found models and inspiration for their inclusivistic moves. In her estimation, however, the Buddhist traditions’ apologias come up short. Appeals to the examples of Gautama Buddha and King Aśoka, Buddhism’s historical relationship with the Vedic religions, the Mahāyāna’s designation of the Hīnayāna as an ancillary system, *upāya*, Buddhist theories of truth, *tathāgatagarbha*, the Yogācārin concept of the three *kayas*, and other moves are rejected in whole or in part. Most are criticized for slyly attempting to “rise above and surpass other systems” (53) or “hierarchize” (62). By “raising doubts” about Buddhist inclusivists’ use of these selected examples, Kiblinger feels she succeeds in demonstrating that they “have not reflected sufficiently on their moves and justifications [and] developed their position adequately” (33). The only efforts she notes that seem to jell with her preferred, ideal inclusivism are His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s suggestion that Tibetans might adopt “Jewish coping strategies” to address suffering over the occupation of their country by China, and scholar-practitioner Judith Simmer-Brown’s observation that “the model of Jesus as a social activist” might “helpfully inform” engaged Buddhist movements (67).

In chapter four, “Towards a Tenable Form of Buddhist Inclusivism,” Kiblinger’s stated task is to critically reflect on Buddhists’ inclusivistic moves and suggest “a proper form of Buddhist Inclusivism” (68). She critiques the common use of emptiness as a position, noting that Buddhists often claim it as a “non-position” or “positionless position” and thereby end up making claims to “surpass all [other] positions,” whether they are aware of it or not (74). Similarly, the author expresses concern about appeals to the Ekayāna theory, and the tendency among Buddhist inclusivists to “assume that there is a single religious aim shared by competing religions” (75). Then, drawing on the Triyāna theory as it is articulated in Asaṅga’s *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, Kiblinger suggests using the three vehicles as the basis for a “tenable” form of Buddhism inclusivism. With a number of assists from the work of theologian S. Mark Heim, she argues that use of the Triyāna theory offers “a range of options” for thinking about religious others that, “on the one hand, preserves a sense of superiority for the Buddhist home tradition while, on the other, does not compromise the distinctiveness of the other traditions” (80). She closes the chapter briefly considering other resources to help Buddhists find their way to her preferred, ideal form of inclusivism.

Chapters five and six function more like appendices. In chapter five, “Case Studies of Two Prominent Buddhist Inclusivists,” Kiblinger fleshes out her project by closely examining the inclusivistic moves of Buddhists Thich Nhat Hanh and Masao Abe. In chapter six, “The Contrast Case of Exclusivist Gunapala Dharmasiri,” the author, in an attempt to further clarify her thesis, considers an entirely different approach to religious others: a Buddhist exclusivist’s.

These final chapters, with their critiques of modern Buddhist leaders who are actively engaging the topic of attitudes toward religious others, represent *Buddhist Inclusivism* at its best. The author makes very

compelling cases for critically reevaluating the work of these prominent figures, and Buddhist teachers and thinkers would do well to take note of her observations here. As feedback from an informed non-Buddhist about how Buddhists might improve their efforts in this area and avoid unintentionally offending others, these pieces are absolutely vital. *Buddhist Inclusivism* is also an extraordinarily well-timed volume. While its subject is of general importance, the book will be especially valuable to those involved with the burgeoning Buddhist chaplaincy movement in the United States. Last year the Institute of Buddhist Studies inaugurated a chaplaincy emphasis within its graduate degrees, and a Master of Divinity program with a chaplaincy focus was accredited at the University of the West this past summer. These institutions join Naropa University (which offers a Master of Divinity degree), as well as several new non-accredited training programs at American dharma centers, in offering theological education for Buddhists pursuing professional careers in chaplaincies serving religiously diverse populations. Because chaplains must adhere to specific standards for respectful spiritual care set by federal and state law, regulatory organizations, and certifying bodies, work in clinical settings will certainly have these practitioners reflecting deeply on their attitudes toward religious others. As the number of Buddhist chaplains and students in these kinds of programs grows, then, it will be important to offer them more examples of the kind of rigorous critical analysis that Kiblinger calls for and offers in *Buddhist Inclusivism*.

Still, while I am grateful for Kiblinger's efforts and mostly inclined to agree with her underlying thesis, she overstates her case: Buddhist scholar-practitioners have certainly produced more work relevant to this issue than gets discussed in the book. Rita M. Gross and Terry C. Muck's collections *Buddhists Talk about Jesus, Christians Talk about the Buddha* (Continuum, 2000) and *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation, Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer* (Continuum, 2003), both of which represent germane conversations between prominent Christian and

Buddhist theologians, are neither mentioned nor included in the bibliography. (Gross herself even utilizes and reflects upon the categories of exclusivism and pluralism in her piece “Meditating on Jesus” for *Buddhists Talk about Jesus, Christians Talk about the Buddha*.) The interfaith dialogues co-initiated by Buddhists at Naropa University and the Abbey of Gethsemani, and the books they have produced—Susan Szpakowski’s *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists in Dialogue* (Naropa University, 1987; reprinted by Vajradhatu, 2005) and Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman’s *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (Continuum, 1999), respectively—are never referred to either. Though not intended primarily for academic audiences, the dialogues and their accompanying books include exchanges that would definitely be interesting and/or helpful to consider, such as those that underscore differences between Buddhist and Christian views of ultimate reality, approaches to dialogue, goals of contemplative practice, and so on. While comprehensiveness was not one of Kiblinger’s stated goals, it nonetheless seems the case that important resources on this subject have not been tapped or acknowledged. As such, her more emphatic prose can often seem exaggerative.

In addition, it’s an open question just how much the book actually conforms to the strict guidelines set and boundaries delineated early on. Though Kiblinger makes all the requisite qualifications about offering criticism from outside the examined religious traditions, the book never completely shakes its paternalistic tendencies: *Buddhist Inclusivism* essentially lays out the myriad ways it perceives Buddhists to be doing things wrong without ever really reflecting on the possible limitations, biases, and assumptions in its own set of evaluative tools. The author is wary of attempts to give Buddhism some kind of “meta-religious or neutral” status—and very rightly so—but there should have been an equal wariness about ascribing that status to the methodologies of those Christian scholars whose work informs Kiblinger’s as well. Buddhist inclusiv-



ists can certainly learn much from these theologians of religion, but there is also significant dissonance here that requires more substantial consideration. (Where, for example, is the conversation about the differences between Biblical hermeneutics and Buddhist hermeneutics in the midst of all this talk about things insufficiently developed and questionably interpreted?) At any rate, it is not clear to this reviewer that the tools for analysis here do not at times deny the “uniqueness Buddhism claims for itself,” and I suspect that other Buddhist readers will agree (74). In fact, specific aspects of the book are already being challenged within the scholar-practitioner community: in part of an individual paper he will present to the Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection Group of the American Academy of Religion later this year, frequent *JBE* contributor Abraham Vélez de Cea will argue that Kiblinger’s application of Heim’s work to her project “fails to do justice to Buddhist traditions.”

Chapter four of *Buddhist Inclusivism* also has some problems. Things get off to a rocky start with the author positioning herself as “an outsider-scholar” doing “normative work,” and, in the process, dismissing the importance of practice for Buddhists thinking about their attitudes toward religious others (70). Though Kiblinger makes sound points about the importance of critical distance and the usefulness of outside observers, she misses something essential here: for Buddhists of all stripes, the crucible of contemplative practice—whatever that may be—is ideally where doctrines are tested and positions developed. It strikes this reviewer as wrong-headed for an outsider-scholar to offer recommendations to “inclusivistic-minded” Buddhists with the assertion that their practice is “helpful, but not necessary” (70). Also bothersome is the fact that these recommendations are for a “systematic [Buddhist] inclusivist position”—one that will need to be “fine-tuned by individual communities” (70). In doing this, the author is, of course, careful to note that Buddhism is not “a singular thing” (70). Still, to say that a generalized position would only require “fine-tuning” by individual communities

fails to take into consideration the full level of variance among of these communities. Many in the field of Buddhist studies have begun to make a rhetorical switch to talking about Buddhist *religions* precisely because these differences are so great. Practically speaking, then, the development of a systematic Buddhist inclusivist position would be an undertaking of some difficulty, yielding results of probably arguable value. It is enough for Kiblinger to present her observations and criticisms, and then invite those scholar-practitioners from within the various Buddhist communities to think more about their attitudes toward religious others. Those particularists willing to rise to the occasion have an important touchstone in Buddhist hospital chaplain Mikel Monnett's exceptional article "Developing a Buddhist Approach to Pastoral Care: A Peacemaker's View" (*Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, vol. 59, nos. 1-2): much can be learned from the way the author eschews constructing a generalized Buddhist approach to interfaith spiritual care, and instead limits himself to extrapolating from the teachings of the Zen Peacemaker Order a theology of ministry. (The article, like *Buddhist Inclusivism*, was published in 2005, and is obviously not mentioned in the book.)

In the end, *Buddhist Inclusivism* is not so dissimilar from the books by Abe and Nhat Hanh that Kiblinger critiques: off beam at times, but eminently useful. Even when the book doesn't quite work, it still manages to stimulate an enormous amount of thinking about this issue—the kind of thinking that the author rightly notes there is not enough of. One suspects that the impact of the book will be very significant indeed, and that it will serve as an important catalyst for future work in this area. As an effort to convince Buddhists to put more careful attention on their ways of regarding non-Buddhists, it seems likely that anyone who reads it will deem *Buddhist Inclusivism* an unqualified success.