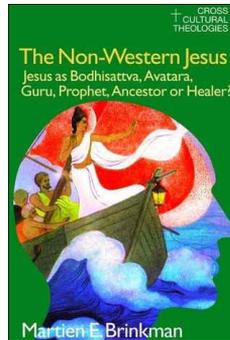


○ **REVIEW OF MARTIEN E. BRINKMAN, *THE NON-WESTERN JESUS: JESUS AS BODHISATTVA, AVATARA, GURU, PROPHET, ANCESTOR OR HEALER?***

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Martien E. Brinkman, in *The Non-Western Jesus*, part of Equinox's *Cross-Cultural Theologies* series, addresses the consequences of a shifting religious landscape for the practice of Christian theology. Brinkman attempts to come to grips with a 'shift in global Christianity's centre of gravity' (p. 5) by focusing on the different ways in which Jesus is understood by theologians working in Asia and Africa, two of the emerging centres of world Christianity. There can be little doubt that this book addresses a real need within academic theology, which remains a largely 'Western' discipline, and there is a good deal of interest to be found here, especially in relation to how these theologies interact with the reality of poverty in the non-Western world. However, it must not be ignored that there are serious problems in the ways Brinkman deals with religious traditions *other* than Christianity.

The book offers a survey of the ways in which Christian theologians seek to understand Jesus by appropriating concepts and paradigmatic figures from other traditions. This is a study of Jesus as, to cite a few examples, a Hindu *avatar*, a Buddhist *bodhisattva*, and a revered tribal ancestor in Africa. Throughout, he focuses on figures that mediate between the human and the divine and on the ways in which theologians have borrowed from non-Christian mediators in their efforts to create native understandings of Jesus. Though influenced by Calvin and his focus on the Trinity, Brinkman considers work from across denominations, from Sri Lankan Jesuits to Korean Protestants. Brinkman derives his approach and his choice of focus 'as much as possible from the reasons given by non-Western theology itself' (p. xi), yielding a focus on syncretic forms of Christian theology. He adopts a framework of 'double transformation', which refers to a process he describes as 'objective' and 'creative':

This book is about the meaning that is ascribed to Jesus in contemporary non-Western contexts. Our guideline for assessing those strongly divergent meanings will be the term double transformation. This term entails that when a concept is transferred from one context to another, both the giver as well as the receiver are changed... In Jesus' case, this transference event (inculturation process) is more complicated, because the meaning attributed to him is always passed on in a community of transmission that wants to preserve unity with the past as well as with as many fellow believers as possible in the present. (p. 1)

In Part I, Brinkman lays out his methodology, a deeply theological approach that views the process of 'inculturation' as a process 'under the guidance of the Holy Spirit' (p. 11) which '*always takes place between two poles: the incarnation on the one hand and the cross and resurrection on the other*' (p. 33). Here, Brinkman asks an essential question: is theology doomed always to be a European, even Eurocentric gesture? Returning to this question towards the end of the book, he answers with a qualified 'no'; contemporary non-Western theology is a relatively new and only partially formed corner of the field that today exists in a necessarily liminal state:

Many contemporary Christians in Asia and Africa thus find themselves in an 'in-between' situation. They have been raised with a Western Christianity based on nineteenth- and twentieth-century missions. For many, therefore, that form of Christianity is thus actually 'true' Christianity. In the meantime, they also (still) carry with them all the religious concepts from their non-Christian parents and grandparents... [S]ometimes that leads to the emergence of creative theology in which both the 'in-between' and the 'in-both' are transcended in an 'in-beyond' situation that does not alienate them from their own cultural context but does add new aspects to it. (pp. 247–248)

'Part II: The Asian Religious Context' begins the survey with a discussion of the work of theologians from across Asia, from Taiwan's Choan Seng Song to Sri Lanka's Alois Pieris (known more commonly as Aloysius Pieris), in relation to their local religious contexts. Part III addresses Chinese conceptions of Jesus in relation to Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist ideas. Here he begins to contemplate 'how closely the depiction of the *bodhisattva Avalokitesvara* approaches the New Testament depiction of Jesus' (p. 61) and explores how theologians working in a Buddhist context have made this comparison. Part IV, 'Jesus as *Bodhisattva*' takes up this question explicitly and offers a history of these comparisons. Part V surveys theology from Japan and Korea, engaging with things as diverse as the Japanese idea of the 'pain of God' and Korean ancestor worship. In two of the book's most compelling sections, Brinkman engages with the work of the Japanese novelist Shusako Endo and speculates about the effect that adopting the local name *Hananim* for the Christian God has had both on theology and on the massive growth of Christianity in Korea.

Part VI engages with the Indian Hindu context and outlines the work of contemporary writers like Raimundo Panikkar and historical figures like the sixteenth-century missionary Roberto de Nobili. Brinkman's discussion of the portrayal of Jesus as a *dalit* (an 'untouchable' or outcaste Indian) offers a fascinating illustration of the larger theme of poverty. Part VII moves to Indonesia

and to the ways in which Indonesian Islam interacts with Christian theology. In 'Part VIII: The African Jesus', Brinkman pays particular attention to the ways that traditional tribal ancestor worship and healing practices have informed African conceptualisations of Jesus. The book finishes with three concluding chapters, the first of which reiterates and defends his methods. The second offers a succinct summary of his conclusions about each of the alternative formulations of Jesus. A very brief final chapter takes on a final question – 'Was Jesus already in Asia and Africa before the missionaries came?' – and offers three affirmative answers, one each from theological, historical, and anthropological perspectives.

As a glance into the world of non-Western theology, Brinkman's book often makes for fascinating reading, nevertheless, on a formal level, it is often too unfocused to provide a truly effective survey across diverse geographic and religious territory. In places, it is also clumsily written (or perhaps poorly translated). In the end, these are minor problems in light of the book's larger failings. Granted that this is a work of comparative theology and not a sociological or historical survey of non-Christian religions, we must grant Brinkman some latitude in his treatment of other traditions; however, there is no getting around the fact that his treatment of these other traditions is at best overly simplistic and at worst deeply suspect. For example, when discussing Japan, he draws a firm distinction between Shinto and Buddhism that is historically untenable. Placing him firmly within a long tradition in European scholarship, Brinkman's treatment of Islam is particularly bad. In a glaring example of his attitude towards Islam, Brinkman couches his discussion of differences within tradition largely in neutral language, citing for example the differences 'between Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and Protestants within Christianity'. In a striking contrast, in the same sentence he refers to the 'Shi'ites and Sunnis intent on killing each other in Iraq and elsewhere' (p. 22), both associating Islam as a whole with violence and ignoring the long tradition of sectarian violence in Christianity. His refusal to give Islam its due is perhaps most evident in his tacit refusal to acknowledge the role of Islam (and thus the Qur'an) in European history, writing simply that 'the West has only one holy book' (p. 40).

In addition to simple factual and historical errors, the terms he uses to translate non-Christian ideas are often imprecise and, on several occasions, are simply wrong. For example, translating the Sanskrit Buddhist term *nirvana* as 'salvation' imposes a Christian idea onto a term that literally translates as 'extinction' or 'snuffing out'. There are problems also in his use of the term *arhat* and in his equation of the Buddhist notion of *karuna* with 'God's compassion'. Likewise, to translate the Hindu idea of the *guru* as 'wise man' misses something essential about the specific religious functions of the *guru* in Hinduism. In the case of Islam, he translates the Arabic term *fatwa* as 'condemnation' when a *fatwa* is in fact a pronouncement of authoritative judgement on a matter of law, a judgement which can be either positive or negative. In almost all of these cases, Brinkman errs, perhaps unconsciously, on the side of making the traditions discussed seem *more similar* than they really are. The cumulative result is to render non-Christian figures like the *bodhisattva* all too open to comparison with Jesus, implicitly justifying their appropriation by Christian theology. Though he does state his limitations very early on – 'I cannot, of course, jump over my own Western shadow. Therefore, it is a *Western study on non-Western theology*, written primarily for a *Western readership*' (p. x) – the effect of all of this flattens out the differences that exist between traditions and unconsciously reinscribes European Christian universalism in the guise of cross-cultural study. Though some of this may be unavoidable, there is still

something unsettling in this gesture, all the more troubling in a work that purports to challenge the Eurocentric nature of contemporary theology.