



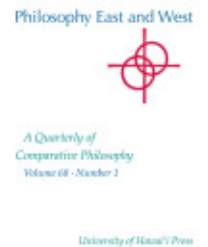
PROJECT MUSE®

The Spirit of Contradiction in Christianity and Buddhism by
Hugh Nicholson (review)

Reid B. Locklin

Philosophy East and West, Volume 68, Number 1, January 2018, pp. 314-316
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2018.0024>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/682216>

What is clear from the accounts of the Qur'anic commentators in the book is how crucial the concept of meaning is to their work. What does it mean for a scriptural passage to be relevant today and how can we work out what it means now as compared with what it meant originally? How can we find out who its original audience was supposed to be, and what problem was it designed to answer then? The different approaches of the various thinkers provide a clear and accurate view of Islamic thought on the topic, albeit with rather more Arab than Iranian thinkers. This would be a useful book to use in courses on theology and Islamic philosophy, and the description of the variety of thinkers and their views would give students interesting material to reflect on and discuss in class.

In conclusion, this is an innovative and valuable addition to the growing literature on the Qur'an and philosophy and is worth serious attention.

The Spirit of Contradiction in Christianity and Buddhism. By Hugh Nicholson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xxi + 318. Hardcover \$55.00, ISBN 978-0-19045-534-7.



Reviewed by **Reid B. Locklin**
University of Toronto
reid.locklin@utoronto.ca

Hugh Nicholson, Associate Professor of Theology at Loyola University of Chicago, has a mildly grim, highly fruitful fascination with polemics and interreligious competition. In his first book, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford University Press, 2011), Nicholson deployed Carl Schmitt to interrogate the contemporary discipline of comparative theology and its purportedly de-politicized engagement with religious diversity. In *The Spirit of Contradiction in Christianity and Buddhism* his theoretical dialogue partners have shifted from political theory to social identity theory and the cognitive science of religion, and his attention has shifted from the study of diverse religious traditions to the construction of those traditions themselves. Specifically, by means of a comparison of the Christological controversies of the first five centuries C.E. and early Buddhist refutations of “personalist” schools (*pudgalavāda*) beginning in the third century B.C.E., Nicholson contends that these traditions’ core, “massively counterintuitive” doctrines of Trinity and *anattā* should be read less as “the products of philosophical reflection” and more as the results of a thoroughly human, socially conditioned and evolutionarily determined predilection for “hegemonic struggle” (pp. 11, 18).

Two theoretical commitments drive Nicholson’s comparison in this volume: “theological correctness” and “metacontrast.” The first of these, drawn from the work of Justin Barrett, refers to the “cognitive effort” required to affirm religious doctrines that are counterintuitive, preserving “relatively few of the inferences we make about

persons." Thus, while Christians may readily affirm a "theologically correct" notion of God as non-corporeal and Trinitarian, remote from ordinary experience, they invariably revert to "more anthropomorphic and intuitive" notions of God in everyday life (p. 7). So, too, for the Buddhist doctrine of "no-self" (*anattā*), which is similarly remote from conventional assumptions about personal identity and agency. The second theoretical commitment, "metacontrast," rooted in the social categorization theory of Jonathan Haidt, Henri Tajfel, and Michael Hogg, highlights the strong tendency of human groups to establish their shared identity by contrast to real or imagined social others. Taken together, these two theoretical commitments suggest a model of doctrinal development that traces the emergence of counterintuitive, theologically correct teachings such as Trinity and *anattā* to the hegemonic struggles of successive generations of religious elites. In short, Nicholson argues that "both the doctrine of the Son's consubstantiality with the Father and the Buddhist doctrine of No-self were, at least in part, the products of social opposition" (p. 19).

Nicholson brings an enviable command of primary languages, source texts, and secondary analyses to advance this claim. Following an elaboration of his theoretical framework in chapter 1, the three chapters following trace the evolution of the doctrine of consubstantiality in Christian tradition. Chapter 2 is perhaps better regarded as an extension of the theoretical discussion in chapter 1, insofar as Nicholson provides a bird's-eye view of the full development and modifies theologian George Lindbeck's notion of "Christological maximalism" to articulate a dynamic of "Christological one-upmanship" as its primary driver (p. 49). Nicholson then uncovers this mechanism in the emergence of *logos* theology in the Gospel of John and the second-century apologist Justin Martyr (chap. 3) and the polemical replacement of this theology by the doctrine of consubstantiality in the fourth- and fifth-century Arian controversies (chap. 4). Chapters 5 and 6 can be read in parallel with chapters 3 and 4. In these chapters, Nicholson advances an alternative reading of Buddhist tradition as a parallel, dialectical process of doctrinal "one-upmanship," beginning in rival, equally plausible readings of the Pali Canon (chap. 5) and culminating in ever more polemical and contrastive refutations of the earlier *pudgalavāda* tradition in a period stretching from the *Kathāvatthu* in the third century B.C.E. to Śāntarakṣita in the eighth century C.E. (chap. 6). In both cases, the hegemony of new, counterintuitive orthodoxies is established by re-positioning an intra-group rival as an out-group, maximizing doctrinal differences and rhetorically associating the rival with formal, archetypical "others": Jewish Jesus-deniers in one case, and Vedic *ātma*-affirmers in the other.

Intriguingly, given the roots of Nicholson's method in cognitive science and social-identity theory, the intent of *The Spirit of Contradiction* is explicitly constructive, rather than reductionist. In the conclusions of chapters 4 and 6, for example, Nicholson notes how the Trinitarian "Neo-Niceneism" of the fifth-century Cappadocians and the Madhyamaka teaching of Nāgārjuna, respectively, continue the process of metacontrast, while also embodying new "middle ways," softening the binary oppositions of their predecessors and recovering core insights of vanquished rivals. In his conclusion (chap. 7), Nicholson returns to Nāgārjuna, along with Augustine

of Hippo, to show how subsequent generations of thinkers, forced to work within boundaries established through social opposition, arrive at authentically new philosophical insights. “As paradoxical as it seems,” he writes, “creativity and constraint do not stand in an inverse relationship. Constraint incites or stimulates the imagination as much as it limits it” (p. 188). This new “model of theological creativity,” in Nicholson’s view, qualifies the work as a contribution not only to historical genealogy but also to comparative theology (p. xiv).

Nicholson is less than fully convincing on this score. The book is heavily theory-driven, by design. This is key to its originality, but it inevitably positions the sources he studies as exemplifications of the theory, rather than as vital philosophical and theological traditions in their own right. Moreover, there is a significant asymmetry between his treatments of the two traditions. Partly, as Nicholson readily acknowledges, this has to do with the sources themselves: with no *pudgalavāda* works still extant, and the Buddhist argument spanning over a millennium, Nicholson’s claims on this side of the comparative ledger are inevitably “highly speculative” (p. 136). The structure of the book further exacerbates this asymmetry, as the principle of “one-upmanship” that drives the comparison is developed as much from the Christian historiography and even Christian theology of chapter 2 as from the social identity theory of chapter 1. The “external history” of Christian evolutionary development thus provides the template for redescribing the Buddhist developments. As a result, the argument is far more convincing in the Christian case, but far more interesting, with more significant consequences, in the Buddhist case. The work’s persuasiveness as an interpretation of early Buddhism will largely depend upon its readers’ willingness to follow Nicholson the full length of this interpretive journey.

This criticism notwithstanding, *The Spirit of Contradiction* attempts more than some works twice its length, and its original—and counterintuitive—claims merit serious consideration. It well models the kind of modest, chastened objectivity opened to comparative study by new advances in cognitive science. It thus recommends itself not merely to scholars of Christianity and Buddhism, but also to the syllabi of graduate and advanced undergraduate courses in comparative method.

Doing Philosophy Comparatively. By Tim Connolly. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. x + 232. ISBN 978-1-7809-3839-4.



Reviewed by **Shirong Luo**
Simmons College
luo8@simmons.edu

In *Doing Philosophy Comparatively* Tim Connolly has accomplished an admirable feat: the first comprehensive and systematic introduction to comparative philosophy, written in a lucid and accessible style. Although it is designed to be used as a text-