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TIBETAN AND HIMALAYAN STUDIES CENTRE
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Tsongkhapa's Understanding of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka in the *Great Treatise*: A Christian Reading

Dr Thomas Cattoi

Abstract

The Great Treatise (ལམ་རིམ་ཆེན་མོ།) by Tsongkhapa (c. 1357-1419) contains an extensive review of the Prāsaṅgika-Svātantrika debate along with its philosophical and spiritual implications. In Sec. 18-21 of Vol. 3, Tsongkhapa engages in an extensive reductio ad absurdum of his opponents' claims, showing the untenable implications of their positions, as well as the compatibility between his understanding of Prāsaṅgika and his program of spiritual transformation. While the Prāsaṅgika-Svātantrika controversy has no obvious analogue within Christianity, Tsongkhapa's defense of Prāsaṅgika invites Christian readers to reconsider how doctrinal claims function within the Christian tradition, how these claims are rooted in the context of early Christianity, and finally, what purpose they serve in the context of spiritual practice. By bringing this interpretation of Prāsaṅgika philosophy into dialogue with the Christian understanding of doctrine, Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity may each gain a clearer appreciation of the distinctive characteristics of their respective speculative traditions.

Speaker

Dr Thomas Cattoi is the William and Barbara Moran Chair in Early Christian Theology and Interreligious Relations at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas (the "Angelicum") in Rome. He specializes in early Christian theology and Buddhist-Christian dialogue; in July 2026, he was appointed president of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies. He has coedited the journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies* since 2015. His most recent monograph is *Seeking Wisdom, Embracing Compassion: A Philokalic Commentary to Tsong kha pa's 'Great Treatise'* (Peeters, 2025).

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