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## Editorial

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# Editorial

In the recent film *Children of Men*, by Alfonso Cuarón, the viewer is dragged willy-nilly into a world of horror and ugliness in the year 2027. Nuclear war, the collapse of economies and of the environment, massive waves of refugees, and ubiquitous paranoia have made the world more a place of death than of life. At the very heart of the crisis is the collapse of human fertility: since about 2008, no women have brought human children into the world. Prominent in the obsessions of this ugly, infertile world are extremists of various stripes, including environmental terrorists and Islamists. The film effectively projects into the near future all the trajectories that currently dominate the political matrix that is dished up regularly in the mass media. One might say, from a contemplative point of view, that what we see in *Children of Men* is the manifestation in the material world of the mental fabrications of the deluded relative mind, in short, a hell-realm (*naraka-loka*).

There are no evident Buddhists in the film, but the aging midwife who is for a while a symbol of hope repeats the mantra of Avalokiteśvara on numerous occasions and makes frequent use of the word “*śānti*” in a futile attempt, along with various obscure and manic ritual gestures, to implore the aid of higher powers in a world gone mad. There are also repressed references to the Christian mystery as well, such as when the young African woman who is indeed, miraculously, pregnant claims humorously to be “a virgin” or when the newborn child is carried out of a shattered apartment building in the midst of a battle between insurgents and the military: everyone, on both sides, pauses from the work of slaughter to touch the feet of the infant in the manner of a Beato Angelico *Adoration of the Magi*. This viewer, contaminated by his “Buddhist-Christian Studies,” sees things that perhaps the filmmaker did not wish to be so obvious. It is almost too easy to see the Āryan Truth of Suffering coupled with the dogma of Original Sin in this Britain become a Dantesque *malebolgia*.

All of which raises the question, perennial in our discipline, of the value and the validity of comparison. Several of the articles in our 2007 issue take up the exercise of comparison in an effort to tease out previously unnoticed meanings on both sides of the Buddhist-Christian conversation. At first glance, our authors’ methods seem to embody the essence of simplicity: take a Buddhist text and a Christian text in the English language, examine their contents to determine commonalities and differences of terminology and meaning, and draw conclusions that may advance the dialogue between Christians and Buddhists. Anyone who has undertaken this exercise, however, is well aware of the logjam of difficulties that emerge before a single paragraph has been written. In the first place, there is

the question of the relative validity of translations. In our Zen/Ch'an-Catholic Dialogue in California over the past five years, it has become clear that some of the terminology that is used to translate Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhist technical terms needs to be reexamined because of the historic drift of the English language away from its medieval scholastic and contemplative inheritance. Thus, a term like "contemplation" should not be used for "discursive reflection" as in modern English, but for the formless, graced state of absorption in God, as it meant to the fourteenth-century European mystics. Another problematic term is "participation," as in "participation in the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4 Latin: "*per haec efficiamini divinae consortes naturae*"). The meaning of this phrase in the mystical tradition suggests a substantial sharing in the divine life, up to and including the transformation of the human person that is called "divinization." Thus we have in the *Rule of St. Benedict* (Prologue): "Let us open our eyes to the light that divinizes us" (*deificum lumen*), a phrase that even the Benedictine translators have been reluctant to render in its astonishing integrity, but that participation is truly immersion in the life of the Trinity itself. Another problematic term is "substance." Although Western scholasticism made famous use of this term, borrowing it from Aristotle, it is important to recall that the Catholic theologians did not impose Aristotelianism on theology; rather, it was Aristotelian terminology and logic that was placed at the service of theology (*philosophia ancilla theologiae*). But when we come to the translation of *niḥsvabhava* as "no self-nature" or "no-substance," we have to ask ourselves if the English translators are simply using a dictionary, or are they even more simplistically embracing (unconsciously?) the post-Reformation rejection of scholastic terminology? In order to arrive at some understanding of terms like these, dialogue is imperative. In fact, I would claim that a community of dialogue is imperative. It is not enough to work from a dictionary; it is not enough to ask one or two native speakers what they think a particular word means; it is not enough to read two traditional texts along side one another to come up with a "comparison." Like the isolated readings and unguided practices of "nightstand Buddhists," this kind of scholarship can be an exercise in solipsism. At the very least, a journal such as *Buddhist-Christian Studies* should be at the service of those scholars who would like to engage in comparison, but who are impatient with deracinated methodologies. A deeper reading, some startling new insights, are always welcome, but somehow they need to be in conversation with living Buddhists and believing Christians.

Some will raise objections to this. I can recall a witticism of my now deceased thesis advisor, Alex Wayman, at Columbia University. He told us one day in a seminar that one of his scholarly Buddhist antagonists once asked him, "With all these translations and articles that you are producing, you surely need the guidance of a guru. Who is your guru?" Wayman replied, "My main gurus are Nagarjuna and Asanga." To which the challenger replied, "But they are dead." And Wayman replied, "Maybe to *you* they're dead...!" Wayman always objected to an over-reliance on the "word of the guru," preferring to consult the

ancient texts themselves as broadly as possible to establish the meaning of words and the import of key concepts. He was well aware that a “living tradition” can in fact forget (sometimes, conveniently forget) unwelcome meanings, inconvenient truths. For this reason, this issue of *BCS* welcomes some comparisons that bring to bear both a rigorous examination of textual meaning along with sensitivity to living traditions of practice, in a variety of permutations.

By way of introduction, here is the “menu” that our editorial board has called up for our readership:

- Joseph Bracken examines dependent co-origination and finds it a powerful stimulus to new thinking about the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.
- Judith Barad makes use of the comparative method to analyze mercy and compassion in St. Thomas Aquinas and the fourteenth Dalai Lama; her work can be readily allied to the work of James Fredericks and Wioleta Polinska in the current issue.
- Lai Pan-chiu and So Yuen-tai present an exposition of the disconcerting figure of Zhang Chunyi (1871–1955), perhaps a figure of “anti-Buddhist-Christian dialogue” whose views seem to recount a cautionary tale. When exclusivist missionary theology meets rising postcolonialist rhetoric, we inherit a truly extravagant hermeneutics whose violence risks pulling down the whole household of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.
- James Fredericks takes on the complex task of proposing a more adequate sociological analysis of the current situation of religions in the climate of immigration. The religious dialogue community might see this as the background for a “pastoral letter” on the need to create social conditions that might favor the growth of the *virtue* of solidarity.
- Kate Dugan surveys the contributions of women to the interreligious dialogue network in the United States, making available some of the resources and insights of the Pluralism Project at Harvard Divinity School.
- Wioleta Polinska asks whether religious views have an efficacious voice in the political and economic decisions being made around the world, other than to be an excuse for extremism. Could dialogic religious praxis be a catalyst for a broader dialogue of cultures? Can contemplative praxis, exemplified by Thich Nhat Hanh, overcome polarization in the way we formulate liberationist rhetoric and action?
- Kenneth Tanaka provides a pastoral and sociological report on the evolving life of the Jodoshinshu community that can be linked to the methodology of James Fredericks’s paper. Jodoshinshu has long been a kind of American incarnation of Buddhist-Christian exchange. Through the increasing participation of non-Japanese-background practitioners, it continues to inform our study and dialogue.
- Jonas Barciauskas alerts us to the fact that Web resources, though ubiquitous, are sometimes also iniquitous. The data is “out there,” we know, and our students are using it extensively. We have by now lost track of the number of Google searches we do per day. How do we know what is reliable and what is not?

It is my hope that, in upholding the venerable but not always welcome practice of comparison, *BCS* may stimulate a prolonged in-depth conversation among scholars on the very possibility of comparison. It would seem that the dialogue between Buddhists and Christians requires this in our times. There are many who question the value of what we are doing. What is the outcome, what is the purpose, where is the fruitfulness, of Buddhist-Christian dialogue? We are astonished at these questions. Do they come from obtuseness, from contempt, from incomprehension? And at the same time, we are astonished at the numbers of people who dip into our online edition for materials that are undoubtedly being used in classrooms and discussion groups around the world. One of the most important contributions of Buddhist-Christian dialogue to the wider encounter among world religions is that of philosophical and linguistic rigor. With the translation of Buddhist texts into English and French in the nineteenth century, it was no longer possible to restrict “philosophy” to the Hellenistic sources. The same may be said of the Sanskrit *darśana* and Chinese thought: philosophy today, even if reluctantly, is “philosophy East and West.” In fact, we have barely moved beyond the basics of translation into an in-depth appreciation of the inner life of these traditions. Comparison is one of the methods that allows at least a measure of that desired in-depth appreciation. Now if philosophy has traditionally been the “handmaid” of theology, it becomes clear that the comparative study of texts places theology itself in need of renovation, as the late Pope John Paul II suggested in his encyclical on philosophical studies, *Fides et Ratio*. A flood of previously undigested ideas, terms, and methods necessarily impacts the way people think about and even appropriate the Christian mystery. Even today, when the issue of “identity” seems to consume the energy previously generously given to ecumenical and interfaith initiatives, we cannot help but notice that the questions of people of our times have been reframed in terms coming from the absorption of non-Hellenistic philosophies. The karma may not have run over the dogma, but it does seem that when the dogma barks, it is starting to have more than a few retroflex consonants!

Primary to this process of mingling has been the wide diffusion of spiritual practices, immigrant communities, and accessible publications throughout the world. We cannot even now restrict this diffusion of the cultures of South, Central, and East Asia to the “postindustrial world.” It is everywhere. Latin America may be experiencing massive conversions to Pentecostalism, but we should also take note of the adherence of Latino elites to Buddhism. I have also run into fervent African Buddhist monks and nuns in Taiwan and in Dharamsala, a few wisps of smoke they seemed at the time, but as the *pramāṇa* tells us, smoke on the mountain means fire among the trees.

As for a next step beyond comparison, I think the path ahead requires an even stronger commitment to textual study and revision of the translations we have inherited. The way to translate more accurately is to combine knowledge of the texts as Wayman did, with knowledge of the contemplative practices that underlie both Christian and Buddhist teachings. It is my hope that the articles in

this issue may contribute to a refinement of our understanding of the materials that are so abundantly available to us in translation. More than this, I hope that our Buddhist-Christian conversations will explore the inner aspect of our respective practices, with the kind of critical reflection on the category “experience” that both Prof. Ronald Epstein and Rev. Alan Senauke have called for a number of times in our California dialogue. I am persuaded that my Christian colleagues have been too ready to identify the apophatic dimension of contemplative practice with one or more Buddhist expressions of “awareness,” “emptiness,” or non-duality. At a certain point, we are going to have to clarify that Christianity and Buddhism, themselves very complex historical phenomena, can be distinguished on the deepest level of what they claim to be the fulfillment of human possibilities. From a Christian viewpoint (see the work of the Anglican theologian N. T. Wright), what a Buddhist contemplative encounters at the deepest level of spiritual freedom seems to be “the whole human being seen from the point of view of one’s inner life, that mixture of feeling, understanding, imagination, thought and emotion which are in fact bound up with the life of the body and mind, but which are neither in themselves obviously physical effects nor necessarily the result, or the cause, of mental processes” (*The Resurrection of the Son of God* [Fortress Press, 2003], p. 283). One can be free in the midst of these phenomena of the human condition through meditation practice and still be “deaf to the music of the age to come.” In other words, from a Christian point of view there is really no transcendence in Buddhist attainment, even though earliest Buddhism insisted that there is a radical distinction between the world of cyclic existence and the state of perfect freedom in nirvana. Nirvana is still locked away within inescapable subjectivity, just as Paul Williams asserts in his autobiographical book, *The Unexpected Way*. Wright points out that the term “*pneuma*” in the Pauline writings refers to the human spirit, which is not to be identified with a nonmaterial immortal entity that survives the death of the body, but rather the “centre of the personality and the point where one stands on the threshold of encounter with the true god [sic].” When Paul describes “someone as ‘spiritual’ (*pneumatikos*) he does not simply mean that they are more in touch with their own ‘spirit’ . . . but that the Spirit of the living god has opened their hearts and minds to receive, and be changed by, truth and power from the age to come.” (ibid.) In other words, there is a power that is active in this present age and that is not dependent on the operative presuppositions, even at their best, of consciousness in this world. When I hear the description of the ongoing inner state of my respected Buddhist colleagues in dialogue, I hear people who are *psychikoi*, “soul-minded,” and open to the luminosity inherent in this created world, but I do not hear the resonances that I identify with Christian hope of the “life of the world to come.” These are two very different articulations of the inner life. At best, a Christian might explore the suppleness of the *psychikoi* in order to gain a direct experience of our human psychosomatic luminosity, but ultimately if this discovery fails to open out into the wisdom and life that comes from the source of that luminosity, it has to be seen as a spiritual impediment. Sublime spiritual

experience of the immanent can be an obstacle or an opportunity. Time and again one sees this insight in the Buddhist writings (a leap from a hundred-foot pole . . . the radical otherness of nirvana . . . beyond birth and death . . . without boundary or center), but nearly always accompanied by a resistance to divine self-disclosure. In practice, unless one is a full-fledged dual practitioner, it would be impossible to overcome this divide. Without a lively sacramental participation in the life of grace, how would one even begin to know what “power from the age to come” might actually mean? James Fredericks’s comments on the negative reactions of Theravada Buddhists to the terminology of the “Holy Spirit” is a case in point; for these good *bhikkhus*, talk of a “spirit” is talk of *bbut*, of dangerous entities that tend to possess and make use of human beings for their own ends.

Similarly, on the Christian side, the very willingness to see in psychosomatic awareness and luminosity an experience that can be identified with *unio mystica* shows an inherent unwillingness to take seriously enough the distinction between immanent experience of spirit and the transcendent reality of Spirit (Rom. 8:16). We have been too ready to say, “What you are experiencing in enlightened awareness is the same as what we mean by the Holy Spirit,” but I think given the rudimentary state of our textual and contemplative comparisons, it is premature and risky to construct such an equation. One can take whatever position one might wish on the validity of these claims and the efficacy of the spiritual systems that we have inherited, but in the end one cannot faithfully describe them without noticing the great difference in perspective.

I hope these digressions will underline for our readers the enduring significance of comparison in the work of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. As we affirmed in our recent dialogue in California, one comes to the sacraments of initiation in Catholic Christianity (baptism, confirmation, and eucharist) as an adult with a growing awareness of an inner calling; similarly, if not identically, adults who take refuge in the Buddha do so impelled by an inner awareness of the maturation of their true nature. The essays in the current issue of *BCS* would like to open up the ways in which we articulate that calling, that awareness, and its moral implications for life in this world. In the end, how we embody our respective discoveries does indeed create on earth either a pure land or a hell-realm.

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