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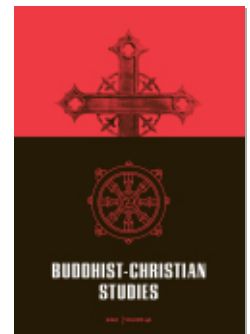
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The *Lotus Sutra* and Christian Wisdom: Mutual Illumination in Interreligious Dialogue

Leo D. Lefebure

ABSTRACT

While the worldview of the *Lotus Sutra* is profoundly different from the Bible and the Christian tradition, much of the Buddha's analysis of the human predicament and many of the virtues that he recommends resonate strongly with Christian values as expressed in the traditional three stages on the spiritual path: *via purgativa* (purgative way), *via illuminativa* (illuminative way), and *via unitiva* (unitive way). Buddhist descriptions of the three poisons offer many points of contact and convergence with Christian analyses of sin in condemning ignorance, greed, and anger. Both Buddhist and Christian traditions describe breakthrough moments of illumination when persons come to see what they had not seen before. In the *Lotus Sutra*, as also in different ways in the Bible and the Christian tradition, learning wisdom is not mastering a concept but going through a process of transformation that one cannot adequately define but that one can display in compassion and charity. Like Pope Francis reflecting on the implications of the doctrine of creation for caring for the earth, many Buddhists have reflected on the implications of Buddhist teachings for ecological holism. In a time of ecological catastrophe, the *Lotus Sutra* and the Christian wisdom tradition join in calling us to acknowledge our ignorance and folly, awake from our delusions, and join together in acting with compassion to care for the earth and all its inhabitants.

KEYWORDS: *Lotus Sutra*, biblical wisdom tradition, illumination, unity, scotosis, hermeneutics, Yamada Etai, Bernard Lonergan

MUTUAL ILLUMINATION AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Traditional Catholic writers identified three stages on the spiritual path: *via purgativa* (purgative way), *via illuminativa* (illuminative way), and *via unitiva* (unitive way).¹ The first stage consists in turning away from sin, going through a painful process of purgation, purification, and penance; this requires abandoning sinful patterns of thinking and acting. The second stage involves illumination, learning to see God, other persons, and the entire world in a new way, free from the distortions

of sinful agendas. The final stage moves toward full union with God, with other persons, and with all creation. The stages are not necessarily successive; they can be seen as a simultaneous and overlapping aspects of the spiritual journey.

While the traditional Catholic writers were not usually thinking of interreligious dialogue in their discussions of these stages, this path has implications for interreligious relationships.² Christians inherit a history of misunderstanding and distortion, of conflict and violence in relations to other religions. To develop healthy interreligious relationships, we need first to acknowledge and repent of the sins of the past. Pope John Paul II challenged Catholics to prepare for the coming of the year 2000 by going through a purification of memory, acknowledging the sins of past generations of Catholics against other religious communities, and asking God's forgiveness.³

As a prologue to seeking mutual illumination, Catholics need to acknowledge and mourn the long history of misunderstanding of Buddhists and Buddhism and the tragic history of empires conquering and dominating traditionally Buddhist lands. Buddhist descriptions of the three poisons offer many points of contact and convergence with Christian analyses of sin in condemning the ignorance, the greed, the anger, and the suffering that resulted from these ventures. In many areas painful memories remain, but much has happened in the recent decades of Buddhist-Christian dialogue to move beyond the painful aspects of our past history.

The theme of mutual illumination directly evokes the second of the three traditional stages of Catholic spiritual life. The illuminative stage presupposes a movement beyond the sinful distortions of our perceptions. This stage challenges practitioners to learn to see more accurately and truly one's partner in dialogue and to be open to learning from the wisdom of the other tradition.

Pondering the wisdom of a sacred text from another religious tradition can be a helpful way to move forward. In the version of the *Lotus Sutra* translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva (344–413), which will be the basis for my discussion, Shakyamuni Buddha proclaims the folly of all living beings and offers hope to all through his wisdom and compassion.⁴ The Buddha's statement makes a claim on the attention of all people by proposing a diagnosis of what is universally awry in human existence and also by promising a remedy; both the diagnosis and the promise apply to the entire human community and also have implications for all living beings. While the worldview of the *Lotus Sutra* is profoundly different from the Bible and the Christian tradition, much of the Buddha's analysis of the human predicament and many of the virtues that he recommends resonate strongly with Christian values. In reading across religious boundaries, differences in worldview make communication and understanding difficult, but points of contact and convergence appear in various ways.

BIBLICAL WISDOM TRADITION

There is an analogy between Jesus of Nazareth and Shakyamuni Buddha as teachers of wisdom who are interpreted by their followers as manifestations of cosmic wisdom. The early Buddhist tradition represented by the Dhammapada presents the wisdom

sayings of Shakyamuni, which frequently bear similarities to the wisdom teachings of Jesus Christ.⁵ The *Lotus Sutra* first presents the historical dimension of Shakyamuni Buddha in chapters 1–15 of the version translated by Kumarajiva and then, beginning in chapter 16, his ultimate or eternal dimension.⁶ In the *Lotus Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical teacher of wisdom, appears as a manifestation of ultimate wisdom and compassion. Some New Testament texts present Jesus, the Jewish teacher of wisdom, as the incarnation of the cosmic Lady Wisdom; the historical dimension manifests the ultimate, eternal dimension. The Buddhist context is clearly and profoundly different from the Christian worldview, especially in the decisive contrast between Christian views of creation and Buddhist views of dependent co-arising; nonetheless, there are points of convergence that merit attention.

In the Hebrew Bible wisdom (*chokma* in Hebrew, *sophia* in Greek, and *sapientia* in Latin) is an attribute of God, an attribute of creation, and a human virtue.⁷ The book of Proverbs personifies Wisdom in symbolic form as a gracious woman who represents the presence of God in creation and who offers life to humans (Prov 1:20–31 and 8:1–36); sometimes she is called Lady Wisdom or Woman Wisdom or Sophia.⁸ She is a cosmic figure holding all things together; she is the human virtue of prudent living and understanding; she is also a poetic, symbolic representation of God's presence in creation, redemption, and salvation. In both the Jewish and Christian wisdom traditions, Wisdom is closely related to and in some contexts identical with Word (*Dabar*, *Logos*) and Spirit (*Ruach*, *Pneuma*). The Jewish sapiential tradition developed in the Deuterocanonical books of Ben Sira (Sirach) and the Wisdom of Solomon, which correlate cosmic Lady Wisdom with the revelation of God to the people of Israel (Sir 24; Wis 10–12).⁹

In the New Testament Jesus teaches in the style of a wisdom teacher in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7),¹⁰ and some New Testament authors present Jesus as the incarnation of Wisdom (1 Cor 1:24 and 8:6; Col 1:15–20; Jn 1:1–18; Heb 1:3). The most influential of these texts was the Prologue of the gospel of John. The Word (Logos) of God in Hellenistic Jewish thought was closely linked to Wisdom (Sophia). In the gospel of John, Logos/Sophia comes to dwell in Jesus (1:14). Some scholars have thought this was a Hellenization of the gospel. However, from a Jewish perspective, Daniel Boyarin reads the prologue of John as a typically Jewish homily that interprets the account of creation in Genesis 1:1–5 in relation to Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8.¹¹ According to Boyarin, the Fourth Gospel applies a thoroughly Jewish view of Logos/Sophia to Jesus Christ.¹²

HERMENEUTICS, POLEMICS, AND DIALOGUE

The ancient Israelite teachers of wisdom believed that God had implanted wisdom in creation and that the wise of all nations could discover her.¹³ Thus, they felt authorized to draw upon the wisdom traditions of their colleagues in Egypt and Mesopotamia, incorporating the Egyptian *Wisdom of Amenemope* into Proverbs 22:17–24:22 and borrowing proverbs from the book of Ahiqar.¹⁴ The recognition of folly and the search for wisdom are important points of contact among varying

religious traditions, but the meaning of folly and wisdom in different traditions varies in important ways, taking shape in each case only in a concrete setting. Religious traditions frequently acknowledge that wisdom exceeds direct conceptual definition and draw upon images, narratives, and concepts in creative ways to evoke the contours of a life shaped by wisdom. In the *Lotus Sutra*, as also in different ways in the Bible and the Christian tradition, learning wisdom is not mastering a concept but going through a process of transformation that one cannot adequately define but that one can display in compassion and charity.

The fundamental assumptions of the Buddhist tradition are profoundly different from Christianity because Buddhists do not believe in a God who creates the universe and redeems humankind. This fundamental difference means that all comparisons of wisdom in the two traditions must take into account the underlying cosmologies. There is nothing in the Buddhist tradition that is a precise parallel to *Chokmah/Sophia* playing in creation or to Wisdom as the divine in Jesus Christ. When Buddhists speak of the perfection of transcendent wisdom (*prajnaparamita*), the context is a universe in which everything arises in interdependence with everything else; in the Buddhist universe, there is no Creator who gives the act of existing.

One of the decisive questions for Buddhist-Christian dialogue is how we interpret the differences between the traditions. Each tradition has been interpreted in a polemical, sectarian manner; each tradition has also been interpreted in ways that are more open to interreligious sharing and mutual illumination. We inherit religious traditions that have often been understood to condemn all perspectives other than their own. There is a long history of Christian polemical and exclusivist interpretations of the biblical wisdom tradition, and the *Lotus Sutra* condemns persons who have pursued non-Buddhist doctrines (79).

George J. Tanabe Jr. and Willa Jane Tanabe argue that in the *Lotus Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha never actually preaches the sermon that he promises; thus, the doctrinal center of the text is empty and opens up to multiple interpretations and transformations.¹⁵ Tendai Buddhists interpreted the *Lotus Sutra* in an inclusive manner, believing that its wisdom could be honored by chanting the names of Amida Buddha or Bodhisattva Kannon. Nichiren, however, vigorously opposed this position, comparing earlier Buddhist practices to medicine that has been unused for so long that it has turned into poison.¹⁶ Jamie Hubbard describes the *Lotus Sutra* as presenting an extremely critical stance toward any teaching other than its own.¹⁷ Hubbard notes that Nichiren proposed a vigorous exclusivist interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra*,¹⁸ and he questions the use sometime made of *upaya* ("skillful means") in interreligious conversations.¹⁹ From Hubbard's perspective, there is a sharp clash between the claims of the *Lotus Sutra* and those of any other religion, including Christianity; and he is dismissive of attempts to reconcile the traditions.²⁰ Since he sees the *Lotus Sutra* demanding obedience through faith alone, Hubbard concludes there is little basis for interreligious dialogue apart from polemics.²¹

Taigen Daniel Leighton proposes a noncompetitive interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra*.²² Leighton notes that some have interpreted the *Lotus Sutra* "in a hierarchical, condescending manner to privilege some approaches over others," but he proposes a

fundamental hermeneutical criterion of liberation to guide interpretation: "The purpose of Buddhism is liberation from the karmic cycle of suffering via awakening, and the goal of the Mahayana is the awakening of all beings The one great cause for Buddha's manifesting is also the one great cause of the expounding of Buddhist teachings. So it is a primary hermeneutical principle and criterion of all interpretations of Buddhist texts that they be evaluated based on their effectiveness as liberative instruments."²³

Other Buddhists have interpreted the *Lotus Sutra* in accordance with the hermeneutical criterion of compassion as a basis for interreligious engagement. In August 1987, Yamada Etai (1895–1994), the leader of the Tendai tradition in Japan, invited religious leaders from many different traditions to come to Mt. Hiei for two days of prayer seeking better understanding in the service of world peace. Yamada believed that the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* could be understood in a way that is open to and accepting of other religious traditions, offering a positive basis for dialogue. Evoking the image of the magic city in the *Lotus Sutra*, Yamada hoped that his interreligious gathering could "serve as a conjured city on the way to building religious cooperation."²⁴ Yamada understood the *Lotus Sutra* to affirm that all teachings lead ultimately to the *Lotus Sutra*. Crucial to Yamada's perspective is the conviction that all beings have Buddha nature.²⁵ Yamada follows Zhiyi (538–97) in seeing the chapter on Avalokiteshvara or Kannon as the summation of the working and message of the *Lotus Sutra*. Yamada believed the central message of the *Lotus Sutra* is to forget oneself and benefit others (*moko rita*), and he sought to follow the example of Kannon by developing the implications of the *Lotus Sutra* for interfaith work for peace. On his visit to Japan in 1981, Pope John Paul II quoted the words of Saicho, "to forget the self and to benefit others," as representing the core of compassion. Yamada welcomed this statement and believed the pope was affirming this traditional Buddhist teaching as an expression of a universal truth.²⁶ For Yamada, the pope's evocation of this central Buddhist ideal was a revelatory moment; for him it called to mind the story in chapter 8 of the *Lotus Sutra* of the poor man who carries a jewel in his garment without knowing it: "It was as though some time in history we had stumbled for a moment and swallowed a great diamond. We have always had it right here in our belly. So now we have to do an operation or something to take it out and use it for the sake of humanity."²⁷ Compassionate care for the world provides an important point of convergence between the traditions.

There is also a long history of conflicting interpretations of the biblical and Christian wisdom traditions. While the ancient Israelite sages recognized wisdom in other traditions, the Christian wisdom tradition has often been interpreted in exclusivist ways that condemn all those who did not explicitly accept Jesus Christ as God's revelation. Many have read the gospel of John as excluding all who do not accept Jesus and his message;²⁸ others note that the light shines in the darkness prior to the Word becoming flesh (Jn 1:5) and point out that Jesus also says that he has other sheep not of this fold (Jn 10:16) and conclude that Jesus is the manifestation (not the limitation) of the universal Logos or Wisdom, which extends the offer of salvation to all persons in all religious traditions.²⁹ The gospel continues to inspire

vigorous debate and conflicting interpretations, and some scholars have changed their perspective over time.

In each tradition, hermeneutical assumptions are of decisive importance in shaping the conclusions drawn. One can compare Leighton's hermeneutical criterion of liberation and Yamada's hermeneutical criterion of compassion to Augustine's claim that the all-embracing hermeneutical criterion for Christians interpreting the Bible is charity (*caritas*): scripture teaches nothing but the double love of God and neighbor. Anyone who interprets a biblical text in a way that violates charity does not understand it properly.³⁰ Anyone who interprets the Bible in a way that reinforces *caritas* has found a true interpretation; according to Augustine, the human author of the text may not have been conscious of this interpretation, but the divine author, who is love itself, foresaw and approves any interpretation that finds love. Thus, Augustine sums up the message of the entire Bible: "Scripture, though, commands nothing but charity, or love, and censures nothing but cupidity, or greed, and that is the way it gives shape and form to human morals."³¹ Charity for Augustine "is any urge of the spirit to find joy in God for his own sake, and in oneself and one's neighbor for God's sake"; cupidity or greed is "any impulse of the spirit to find joy in oneself and one's neighbor, and in any kind of bodily thing at all, not for God's sake."³²

There is a central conundrum in naming the diversity in this relationship. If we focus on the claims of truth, the *Lotus Sutra* and the Christian wisdom tradition conflict; if we focus on the claims of charity and compassion, they converge. While both traditions historically have presented a wide variety of theoretical perspectives on ultimate reality, human existence, and the universe, neither tradition can be fully understood apart from walking its path; and both traditions warn us that their ultimate significance is incomprehensible and ineffable. This makes any theoretical attempt to define their relationship apart from practice dubious.

RECOGNIZING OUR FOLLY

In the *Lotus Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha tells Shariputra that he sees "through the Buddha eye" that living beings are blinded by greed and infatuation and "their vision is so impaired they can see nothing"; the result is that in their ignorance they "enter deeply into erroneous views, hoping to shed suffering through greater suffering" (42). Filled with compassion, the Buddha realizes that his wisdom is "subtle, wonderful, the foremost"; he also notes that living beings, "dull in capacity, are addicted to pleasure and blinded by stupidity" (42). Shakyamuni warns that those who do not know themselves seek happiness and security in external things only to learn that this inevitably leads to disappointment and anger. Until we learn our true identity, we cycle back and forth among the three poisons of ignorance, craving, and anger without finding any secure resting place. Left to our own resources, the *Lotus Sutra* warns us, we are like children playing in a house on fire heedless of the existential danger they are in (56–57); on our own, we are like an impoverished young man who is heir to a great inheritance but who has no clue as to his true identity (81–85). We need to surrender our confidence that we know who we are. Until we recognize our folly and

need for wise guidance, we will not be in a position to hear the preaching of the *Lotus Sutra*.

For both the Buddhist and the Christian traditions, genuine wisdom begins with the recognition of our limits, indeed, of our folly. The book of Proverbs warns us: "Do you see persons wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for fools than for them" (Prov 26:12).³³ The Apostle Paul admits that in the present world we seek only reflections in a mirror, riddles we do not understand, and we know only imperfectly (1 Cor 13:12). In the gospel of John, Jesus offers sight to the blind; when his opponents insist that they are not blind, Jesus tells them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (Jn 9:41). The later Christian tradition combined the admission of ignorance of Socrates with the biblical tradition of recognizing one's ignorance. Augustine argued that no human can boast of knowledge.³⁴ For Augustine, wisdom comes as a gift and is not a possession of which we can boast.

The *Lotus Sutra* also warns against premature claims to possess wisdom. When Shakyamuni Buddha promises to preach the Dharma, 5,000 monks, nuns, and laypersons rise from their seats and withdraw. The *Lotus Sutra* describes them as "overbearingly arrogant" because they think they are already wise (30). The *Lotus Sutra* explains: "What they had not attained they supposed they had attained, what they had not understood they supposed they had understood. And because they had this failing, they did not remain where they were" (30). The response of the Buddha is to remain silent and allow them to leave. A little while later the Buddha warns that monks or nuns who claim to be arhats but do not believe his Dharma suffer from overbearing arrogance (33). The *Lotus Sutra* states bluntly: "This Law is not something that can be understood through pondering or analysis. Only those who are Buddhas can understand it" (31). This constitutes a stark warning to all of us who are not (or not yet) Buddhas. When we discuss the Dharma in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, participants who are not yet fully enlightened beings do not know what we are talking about.

According to both traditions, the failure to acknowledge one's ignorance brings much suffering. While the Buddha offers his teaching to all, he also issues very stern warnings that those who disparage the message of the *Lotus Sutra* will suffer in Avichi hell through immeasurably long periods of time and may be reborn as beasts of burden or as humans who are "puny, vile, bent, crippled, blind, deaf, hunchbacked" (75). There is no prospect of rebirth in the biblical wisdom tradition, but there are stern warnings. In Proverbs 1:20–31, Lady Wisdom offers her teaching freely to all in the city streets. When many people ignore or reject her offer, she sternly warns them that she will abandon them to their suffering and laugh at their calamity (Prov 1:22–27). She presents a sharp contrast: "the complacency of fools destroys them; but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster" (Prov. 1:32–33).

Both the *Lotus Sutra* and the New Testament warn of religious hypocrisy and foretell religious quarrels that will become quite vicious, even deadly. In the *Lotus Sutra*, bodhisattvas warn that after the Buddha has departed from this world, ignorant

people will curse them: "In that evil age there will be monks with perverse wisdom and hearts that are fawning and crooked who will suppose they have attained what they have not attained, being proud and boastful in heart" (193). Forest-dwelling monks will "claim they are practicing the true way, despising and looking down on all humankind" (193). Jesus similarly accuses some leaders of his time of hypocrisy (Lk 12:1) and of arrogance and looking down on others while being proud and boastful (Lk 18:10–14); Jesus warns his followers not to perform religious acts in order to be noticed (Mt 6:1–6).

Both the biblical and Buddhist traditions know that folly can lead to violence. The Wisdom of Solomon tells of a just person who accuses the ruling powers of corruption; they take offense, mistreat him, put him to death, only to see him honored after death while they are humiliated and punished (Wis 2–3); this was one of the models for early followers of Jesus to interpret his death and resurrection. In the *Lotus Sutra*, the bodhisattvas foresee: "Evil demons will take possession of others and through them curse, revile and heap shame on us. But we will bear these difficult things. We care nothing for our bodies or lives but are anxious only for the unsurpassed way" (194–195). The predictions of the bodhisattvas resonate strongly with Jesus's warnings that people will say ill things of his disciples; Jesus tells his followers not to worry because precisely at such times they are blessed/happy (Mt 5:11–12).

In the biblical tradition, Wisdom does not appear on command. When Job urgently seeks to find Wisdom, he discovers to his frustration that Wisdom is "hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air" (Job 28:21). Hiding throughout the cosmos, she is not to be found by human effort. Similarly, the *Lotus Sutra* warns that we cannot command Wisdom; on our own we are caught in patterns of folly from which we cannot free ourselves. In both traditions, Wisdom comes as a gift, though one that is difficult to accept and understand.

Jesus warns his hearers that his message is very difficult to understand and that many people shut their eyes and ears to avoid being changed and healed by him (Mt 13:14–15). The Buddha similarly warns that many people will reject him and refuse to understand, and he tells his followers: "I expressly say to you, do not preach this sutra to persons who are without wisdom" (77). The Buddha proclaims: "This *Lotus Sutra* is preached for those with profound wisdom. If persons of shallow understanding hear it, they will be perplexed and fail to comprehend" (73). Those in lesser forms of Buddhist practice cannot comprehend the message of the *Lotus Sutra*, and the Buddha insists on faith even for his loyal follower Shariputra: "Even you, Shariputra, in the case of this sutra were able to gain entrance through faith alone. How much more so, then, the other voice-hearers. Those other voice-hearers—it is because they have faith in the Buddha's words that they can comply with this sutra, not because of any wisdom of their own" (73).

Like Shariputra, the disciples of Jesus have limited ability to grasp their teacher's message; they repeatedly misunderstand him, and he describes them as having little faith (Mt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20; Lk 12:28). Nonetheless, Jesus can work with this little faith and gradually transforms them into disciples. The Buddha tells Shariputra not to preach the *Lotus Sutra* to those who lack faith and slander the sutra;

he predicts long sufferings for such persons (74). After Jesus's opponents accuse him of casting out devils through Beelzebul, the chief devil, Jesus rebukes them harshly and warns that every sin can be forgiven except for blasphemy against the Spirit (Mt 12:31–32). Jesus accuses his critics of speaking from evil in their hearts (Mt 12:34–37).

The ancient warnings from both traditions continue to have great relevance for our present situation, and the Canadian Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan offers a cogent philosophical reflection on the process of systemic blindness, which he calls by the Greek word, *scotosis*. In his dissertation written at the Gregorian University in Rome, Hiroshi Munehiro Niwano offers a very helpful study of the relation between the thought of Lonergan and the *Lotus Sutra* on conversion and being in love.³⁵ Lonergan believes that in principle humans seek insight and knowledge and goodness, but that in practice we frequently flee insight when it threatens our self-image or our standing in the world. When threatened, we avoid challenges and cling to prejudices and biases. The flight from insight leads to the decline of individuals, of communities, and civilizations. Lonergan warns us: "Besides the love of light, there can be a love of darkness. If prepossessions and prejudices notoriously vitiate theoretical investigations, much more easily can elementary passions bias understanding in practical and personal matters. Nor has such a bias merely some single and isolated effect."³⁶

Lonergan names the unconscious process of systemic bias and oversight "*scotosis*," and he calls the resulting blindness "*scotoma*."³⁷ Lonergan explains that *scotosis* "arises, not in conscious acts, but in the censorship that governs the emergence of psychic contents. Nonetheless, the whole process is not hidden from us, for the merely spontaneous exclusion of unwanted insights is not equal to the total range of eventualities. Contrary insights do emerge."³⁸ Both as individuals and as groups, we avoid insights that threaten our fragile constructions and call us to change; we repress our awareness to avoid painful acceptance of responsibility. Lonergan comments: "The refusal of insight is a fact that accounts for individual and group egoism, for the psychoneuroses, and for the ruin of nations and civilizations."³⁹ The long, sad history of Christian empire stands as an example of bias and distortion interpreting Christian faith to dominate other communities.

Fortunately, the love of darkness and the resulting blindness are never totally successful. Buddhists deny that our ignorance is our true identity, and the *Lotus Sutra* repeatedly promises us that we are heirs to a treasure greater than we imagine. Lonergan believes that repression is always uneasy because it is an aberration of the fundamental drive of the human mind. He hopes that insight can arrest and reverse the disease of oversight and the flight from insight. However, to be freed from the disease of *scotoma*, humans must go through an intellectual conversion, which Lonergan describes as a radical clarification gained through the appropriation of one's rational self-consciousness.⁴⁰ Lonergan offers a contemporary philosophical analysis of systemic ignorance, which invites his readers to the heart of the traditional via purgativa, that is, honesty and acceptance of responsibility for our sins and failings. Both the *Lotus Sutra* and the Christian wisdom tradition warn us that if we trust our own

resources alone, we risk going astray and mistaking our ignorance for wisdom, harming ourselves and others. Thus, the recognition of ignorance is one of the most important moments in our awakening. In both the *Lotus Sutra* and the Christian wisdom tradition, acknowledging that we are ignorant, foolish beings in desperate trouble and in need of help can open us to hear a word of promise.

ILLUMINATION AND IDENTITY

Both Buddhist and Christian traditions describe breakthrough moments of illumination when persons come to see what they had not seen before. In the *Lotus Sutra* after the parable of the ignorant son, there is a moving moment of revelation when the hearers comment: "So we did not know that we were in truth the sons of the Buddha. But now at last we know it. With regard to the Buddha wisdom, the World-Honored One is never begrudging" (86). The gift is unexpected: "Though originally we had no mind to covet or seek such a thing, now the great treasure of the Dharma King has come to us of its own accord" (87). What was previously inaccessible now becomes available: "This storehouse of the *Lotus Sutra* is hidden deep and far away where no person can reach it. But now the Buddha, teaching, converting and leading to success the bodhisattvas, opens it up for them" (166). To share his wisdom, the Buddha rains down the Dharma rain, which brings emancipation (102–104). The second part of the Book of Isaiah describes the Word of God as coming down like rain and snow that fertilize the earth and allow it to provide food (Is 55:10).

In the book of Proverbs, Lady Wisdom promises that she is the true treasure, and her gifts are more valuable than gold and precious jewels (8:10–19). Jesus proclaims that the *basileia* of God (Mk 1:15) is the greatest treasure; *basileia* has variously been translated as kingdom or reign or rule; it is the same Greek word used by the Byzantine Empire to describe itself: *basileia ton Romaion*. In the teaching of Jesus, the rule of God comes as an unexpected treasure, a gift beyond any merit. Its appearance calls people to revise their values and to act in new ways. Jesus compares the *basileia* to a buried treasure, which a man discovers in a field; he then goes and sells all he has to purchase it (Mt 13:44). Immediately after this image, Jesus compares the rule of God to a pearl of great price; when a merchant comes upon it, he sells all he has in order to acquire it (Mt 13:45–46). Jesus manifests the rule of God in healing lepers (Mt 8:1–4; Lk 17:11–19) and a man born blind (Jn 9:1–12) and also in forgiving a woman accused of adultery (Jn 7:53–8:11). To those who receive his message, he gives the power to become children of God (Jn 1:12). In encountering Jesus, many people find physical and emotional healing, forgiveness, a new vision of themselves, and the beginning of a new way of life. When Jesus unexpectedly announces he will dine with Zacchaeus, this affluent tax collector promises to repay all those he has cheated and to give half of his wealth to the poor (Lk 19:1–10). Jesus challenges a Samaritan woman concerning her past relationships; far from feeling humiliated, she runs to her neighbors to tell them she has found a remarkable prophet who could be the Christ (Jn 4:1–29).

In both traditions, rays of light are the outward symbol of inner illumination. In the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha emits rays of light when he prepares to preach: "At that time the Buddha emitted a ray of light from the tuft of white hair between his eyebrows, one of his characteristic features, lighting up eighteen thousand worlds in the eastern direction. There was no place that the light did not penetrate" (6; cf. also 122). Jesus describes himself as the light of the world (Jn 8:12), and he tells his followers that they are called to be the light of the world similar to a city on a hill that cannot be hidden (Mt 5:14). In the Transfiguration of Jesus, Peter, James, and John see him radiant with brilliant light accompanied by Moses and Elijah (Mk 9:2–8; Mt 17:1–8; Lk 28–36).

In both traditions, illumination transforms people, freeing them from the bonds of selfishness and greed and inviting them to compassion and concern for all who suffer. Seeing the world in a new way leads to acting in a new way. Jesus tells his followers to give to those who ask them (Mt 5:42) and advises them that whatever they do or do not do to the least of his siblings who suffer, they do to him (Mt 25:31–46). In the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha tells the Medicine King that after he has departed, people should enter his room, put on his robe, and sit on his seat. Shakyamuni then explains: "The 'Thus Come One's room' is a state of mind that shows great pity and compassion toward all living beings" (166). For both traditions, illumination, wisdom, and compassion are inseparable.

The presentations of illumination in the *Lotus Sutra* and the New Testament use concrete, first-order language, including images, metaphors, and parables, to convey a message that transcends ordinary comprehension. In both traditions, later thinkers reflected on the first-order language in more abstract, doctrinal categories. Paul Groner and Jacqueline Stone comment, "The term 'Buddha-nature' does not appear in the Lotus Sutra, but this story [of Never-Disparaging Bodhisattva] suggested that it was implicit in the Lotus Sutra. This approach began with Vasubandhu's commentary and came to be accepted by most commentators."⁴¹

Philo of Alexandria and the Hellenistic Jewish author of the Wisdom of Solomon developed the understanding of Chokmah/Sophia by interpreting her in light of Greek philosophical concepts. This shaped the intellectual world of later Christian scholars who pondered the concrete language of the biblical tradition in light of their engagement with Greek philosophy, giving rise to the dogmatic tradition of affirming Trinitarian and Christological doctrines while simultaneously negating any literal understanding of them.

HISTORICAL AND ETERNAL IDENTITIES

The process of illumination in each tradition opens the eyes of disciples so that they can see the identity of the historical teacher of wisdom as a manifestation of ultimate reality. In the *Lotus Sutra*, there is an important turning point in chapters 15 and 16. Bodhisattvas express concern about the difficult times that will come in the future after Shakyamuni Buddha has entered extinction (212–213). The Buddha assures them that there are numerous bodhisattvas who will care for the sutra, and suddenly

huge numbers of bodhisattvas appear and honor the Buddha. Shakyamuni affirms that he has taught these figures even though many of them appear to be far older than he. Maitreya asks how this can be, since Shakyamuni was enlightened only about forty years earlier (220–221). In the beginning of chapter 16, Shakyamuni reveals that even though countless people believe that he was enlightened only forty years earlier, in actuality he is immensely old and was enlightened in the distant past: “But good men, it has been immeasurable, boundless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of kalpas since I in fact attained Buddhahood” (225). Maitreya and his companions cannot comprehend this revelation. Shakyamuni repeats that for immense periods of time, he has been helping living beings because of his compassion. The narrative of his departing from the palace is an example of skillful means, and his coming extinction from this world will also be an expedient means (226–227). Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of an historical dimension of the Buddha and an ultimate or eternal dimension in the *Lotus Sutra*.⁴² Some Buddhists have interpreted this in light of the Trikaya, the Three Bodies of the Buddha.

According to the *Lotus Sutra*, the life and teaching of the historical Buddha are an appearance of a cosmic reality that embraces all things. The *Lotus Sutra* tells us: “The Buddha is like this when he appears in the world, comparable to a great cloud that covers all things everywhere,” and then he begins to teach (102). According to Ben Sira, Lady Wisdom comes forth from the mouth of the Most High and covers the earth like mist (24:3). The Lord instructs her to pitch her tent in Jacob and make Israel her inheritance (24:8). The root of the Greek verb translated as “to pitch a tent” is the same root used in the gospel of John to interpret the incarnation of the Logos, which “dwelt,” literally, “pitched his tent,” among us (Jn 1:14). The life of Jesus in history is the dwelling, or the “pitching of the tent,” of the Logos/Sophia, which brings light so his followers can see and share his glory.

In the gospels, many people have great difficulty discerning who Jesus is. The New Testament not only applies the major leadership roles of the Jewish tradition to Jesus but also transforms them by claiming he is more than a prophet and more than a wisdom teacher (Mt 12:41–42; Lk 11:31–32). In the gospel of John, Jesus tells his interlocutors that before Abraham came to be he is (8:58) and that Abraham rejoiced to see his day (8:56). Many of his hearers are scandalized. After Jesus dies, he rises from the dead and then ascends into heaven. In one sense he is absent, but when he appears to Saul on the road to Damascus, Jesus asks Saul why he is persecuting him (Acts 9:4). The risen and ascended Lord Jesus is not absent after all but is present in his disciples. The *Lotus Sutra* promises that after Shakyamuni Buddha passes into nirvana, he will still compassionately care for his disciples: “In order to save living beings, as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana but in truth I do not pass into extinction. I am always here, preaching the Law. I am always here, but through my transcendental powers I make it so that living beings in their befuddlement do not see me even when close by” (229). Nonetheless, the actual content of the Buddha’s preaching remains somewhat vague and has been interpreted in various ways.⁴³

The *Lotus Sutra* presents the earthly life of Shakyamuni as a manifestation of a much older reality that is present in many different dimensions throughout the universe. The seeming extinction of Shakyamuni Buddha is an expedient means to teach ignorant beings (227). Early Christians saw Jesus as the revelation of God the Father, in some way distinct from God and yet one with God. There were some early Christians who viewed his coming into this world and his death as merely an appearance, but the mainstream tradition rejected this perspective as Docetism and insisted on the reality of his death and resurrection. Most early Christian writers identified Lady Wisdom of the biblical tradition with the Logos, the divine in Jesus Christ; Irenaeus of Lyons identified Lady Wisdom with the Holy Spirit.

The concrete language of the New Testament about Jesus Christ was interpreted in conflicting ways. After vigorous debates over the identity of Jesus Christ, in 451 the Council of Chalcedon described Jesus Christ using Greek terminology as being one person or hypostasis who has two natures, one human and one divine. The divine nature of Jesus Christ is perfectly one with the other Persons of the Trinity and is the creator of all other reality; his human nature is identical to ours in all respects except our sinfulness. In Chalcedonian Christology, the divine nature is the creator of the human nature of Jesus Christ; the two natures are inseparable but unconfused.

There is nothing in Buddhism that corresponds exactly to Chalcedonian Christology. In Buddhist perspectives on the Three Bodies of the Buddha, the ultimate Dharmakaya can be compared to the divine nature of Jesus Christ; the Enjoyment Body Sambhogakaya can be compared to the body of the Risen and Ascended Lord Jesus who can move in the heavens and on earth; the Appearance Body Nirmanakaya can be compared to the human nature of Jesus in history, but the correspondence is not exact. The mainstream of Christianity insisted on the reality of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and rejected views of Jesus as simply an appearance of God. Nonetheless, the different dimensions of the identities of Shakyamuni Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra* and Jesus Christ in the Christian tradition bear comparison.

Buddhists also reflected on the status of the text of the *Lotus Sutra* in relation to ultimate reality. The *Lotus Sutra* views earlier Buddhist teachings of the three vehicles as expedient pointers to the ultimate truth that is beyond words. However, as Paul Groner and Jacqueline I. Stone note, devotees of the *Lotus Sutra* itself apprise it differently than the earlier teachings: "Once the ultimate truth of the one-vehicle is revealed, the words of the *Lotus* are ultimate truth."⁴⁴ This claim in turn gave rise to further debates, with some monks viewing the one vehicle of the *Lotus Sutra* as itself an expedient means and others, including the Tendai and Nichiren traditions, holding that "the words of the sutra embodied ultimate truth"; Nichiren viewed each of the characters in the sutra as "the Buddha's mind and the Buddha's body."⁴⁵ For some Japanese Buddhists, the text of the *Lotus Sutra* was itself sacred and was placed in a reliquary, analogous to the relics of the Buddha; many hoped the text of the *Lotus Sutra* could help protect the Japanese nation.⁴⁶ As we saw earlier, some interpreted the *Lotus Sutra* in an expansive way that is open to finding wisdom in alternate teachings,

while others interpreted the Lotus in a more exclusivist manner as the sole teaching with ultimate truth.⁴⁷

QUEST FOR UNITY IN A WORLD OF DIVERSITY

According to traditional Catholic spirituality, the path of illumination leads to the path of union. This can be understood as a mystical union with God, such as Aquinas's evocation of desiring to be dissolved and be with Christ; Buddhists have their own tradition of articulating nonduality. There are, however, dangers in the path toward union, as exemplified by imperial attempts to impose unity by force and religious efforts to enforce unanimity through persecution. Partners in interreligious dialogue can understand the quest for unity not as the imposition of a single identity but rather as the quest to shape a healthy community of the world's religious traditions that respects diversity and difference.

Interpreters of the Buddhist and Christian wisdom traditions have variously legitimated or challenged the established powers. In the book of Proverbs, Lady Wisdom proclaims that kings rule by means of her (Prov 8:15), and she challenges and rebukes those who violate her precepts (Prov 1:20–31); the opening verses of the Wisdom of Solomon present King Solomon admonishing all rulers on earth to love justice and warning them that Wisdom will hold them accountable (Wis 1:1–15). The wisdom tradition challenged the corruption of established powers. In the Wisdom of Solomon, the just man challenges the corrupt establishment, only to suffer persecution and death (Wis 2–4). Most important of all, Jesus was viewed as a threat and suffered violent execution, and the Apostle Paul proclaims Christ crucified as the Wisdom of God, folly to Greeks and a scandal to Jews (1 Cor 1:21–25).

Christian emperors invoked biblical wisdom in order to justify their imperial projects and legitimate their authority. The Byzantine Emperor Justinian dedicated the imperial church in Constantinople to Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom; and he also constructed a Little Hagia Sophia lower down the hill. Charlemagne followed the lead of Justinian by modeling his royal chapel in Aachen on the Little Hagia Sophia Church in Constantinople. Imperial propagandists could invoke Wisdom as patron of the Christian Roman Empire. A long line of later Christian empires conquered and oppressed other peoples while claiming to spread the values of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Buddhists have assessed the practical implications of the wisdom of the *Lotus Sutra* in varying ways. Many Japanese Buddhists honored the *Lotus Sutra*, believing that it supported the Japanese governing authorities. Nichiren interpreted the *Lotus Sutra* as a basis for social and political critique of the established powers, and as we have seen, some of his followers suffered persecution and death. For Nichiren and his followers, the *Lotus Sutra* deserved a higher commitment of loyalty than governing authorities and offered a basis for admonishing the rulers of the state.⁴⁸ By holding out the confidence that all will become Buddhas and promising a future Buddha land, the *Lotus Sutra* affirms life in this world.

Tanaka Chigaku (1861–1939) pioneered modern interpretations of the *Lotus Sutra* in relation to social and political engagement. He drew upon the *Lotus Sutra*'s warnings of decline in order to call for a restoration of proper social practice based upon the sutra's principles.⁴⁹ Tanaka believed that the *Lotus Sutra* supported Japanese nationalism, resulting in what some called "Lotus nationalism." Tanaka maintained Japan had a divine mission to unify the world and reconstruct global civilization in accordance with Nichiren's interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra*, using violent force to bring peace if necessary.⁵⁰ George Tanabe suggests that the *Lotus Sutra* presents a danger: because the promised sermon is not preached, the text remains empty, and this leaves it open for multiple appropriations. Tanabe warns: "Since the text is empty, it means that what Tanaka saw was not his own personal interpretations drawn in the context of the Nichiren tradition, but a clear mandate issued by a scripture whose meaning, as far as he was concerned, was as absolutely self-evident as it was absolute."⁵¹

Others have interpreted the implications of the *Lotus Sutra* very differently from Tanaka. Nikkyo Niwano emphasizes the importance of the *Lotus Sutra* for rejecting imperialism and resolving conflicts nonviolently: "Buddhism in general and the *Lotus Sutra* in particular are profound teachings on peace. This is because Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, who expounded the teachings, actually lived his life in accord with the teachings he handed down to us."⁵² Niwano highlights the teaching of the Buddha that "if one seeks retribution for vengeance through revenge, the chain can never be broken," and he adds: "these are important teachings that we should be practicing right now."⁵³ Niwano emphasized the lessons for peacemaking in the parables and teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*, for example, the description of the bodhisattva who bowed to everyone he met, saying: "I cannot despise you, because you will all become Buddhas"; even though some thought he was mocking them and attacked him, he did not respond in kind but continued his path of respect, eventually becoming Shakyamuni Buddha in a later life.⁵⁴ Both the *Lotus Sutra* and the biblical wisdom tradition have ambiguous histories of interpretation, being variously invoked to support or critique political empires seeking unity.

The different forms of illumination offered by the *Lotus Sutra* and the Christian wisdom tradition lead to compassion and new ways of acting in the world. Jesus taught his followers they could distinguish true prophets from false ones by their fruits (Mt 7:16). Jesus described himself as a physician who came to heal the sick (Mk 2:17). Shakyamuni Buddha presents himself as a physician offering an analysis of the dilemma of human existence and a prescription for a path to liberation. Augustine's hermeneutical principle of charity for interpreting the Bible and Yamada Etai's hermeneutical principle of compassion for interpreting the *Lotus Sutra* offer bases for deciding among the competing interpretations.

A WORLD ON FIRE AND CARE FOR THE EARTH

The Buddha's parable of humans as children playing in a house on fire, heedless of the danger and preoccupied by their toys (56–57), bears a special resonance during a time of global warming and threatened ecological catastrophe. Even though scientists have

issued repeated warnings that grow ever more ominous, the world's economic and political leaders have so far failed to act on the scale needed to respond to this crisis. Arguably the most urgent demand upon interreligious conversation comes from the looming climatic crisis that threatens the entire community of life on this planet. This poses the question of what kind of illumination and unity may be possible with regard to other forms of life and all beings on our planet.

The parables of the Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra*, like those of Jesus in the gospels, convey an urgent summons to acknowledge danger, awake from ignorance, learn wisdom, and act with compassion. With a similar sense of urgency, Pope Francis describes the contemporary world as caught in a type of Third World War and summons the Catholic community to serve as a field hospital for all who suffer.⁵⁵ Catholics in the setting of a field hospital have good reason to listen to the Buddha's practical wisdom with interest and to collaborate with Buddhists and all persons of good will.

The Buddha and his followers have long challenged anthropocentrism and called for compassion and care for the entire community of life on this planet. Pope Francis notes that the suffering that humans cause affects not only other humans but all living beings. In 2015, inspired by the vision of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis promulgated the encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, which issues a dramatic call to all humans to care for the earth as our common home: "The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change" (13).⁵⁶ After describing the multiple challenges that all humans face, Francis proposes a vision of integral ecology based on the recognition, long familiar to Buddhists, that "everything is interconnected" (138). This principle has a special importance for interreligious relations. Earlier popes had made statements on interreligious relations and on poverty and also on ecology, but Pope Francis has emphasized more than his predecessors the intrinsic relations among these areas of concern. Environmental devastation causes damage especially to the poor; responding effectively requires us to see connection between caring for our common home and developing better relations with other religious traditions and all persons of good will.

Pope Francis grounds his appeal in principles that many different religions can accept in their own manner. Francis believes that an ecological revolution must be informed by religious and ethical principles that go beyond the domain of empirical science (200). In this context, he calls for renewed interreligious dialogue on these issues, and the wisdom of the *Lotus Sutra* merits particular attention. The encyclical *Laudato Si'* takes its title from the famous *Canticle of the Sun* of St. Francis of Assisi, which praises God through all creation. In the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis writes: "The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face" (233). In a footnote to this passage, Pope Francis quotes the Muslim spiritual writer Ali al-Khawwas: "There is a subtle mystery in each of the movements and sounds of this world. The initiate will capture what is being said when the wind blows, the trees sway, water flows, flies buzz, doors creak, birds sing,

or in the sound of strings or flutes, the sighs of the sick, the groans of the afflicted” (233, n. 159). This is probably the first time in history that a papal encyclical has quoted a Muslim mystical writer.

As we have seen, the fundamental cosmological assumptions of the *Lotus Sutra* are very different from the creation-based theologies of Christianity and Islam; nonetheless, the Christian and Islamic mystical valuations of the entire cosmos find a resonance in the *Lotus Sutra*. The Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra* repeatedly expresses his concern for all living beings and his undying resolve to pursue them with expedient means until all can find emancipation. Influenced by the *Lotus Sutra*, the Japanese Buddhist tradition has long valued every aspect of the natural world. While very different from Christian perspectives on creation, this cosmology offers a basis for developing an integral ecology. Like Pope Francis reflecting on the implications of the doctrine of creation for caring for the earth, many Buddhists have reflected on the implications of Buddhist teachings for ecological holism.⁵⁷ In a time of ecological catastrophe, the *Lotus Sutra* and the Christian wisdom tradition join in calling us to acknowledge our ignorance and folly, awake from our delusions, and join together in acting with compassion to care for the earth and all its inhabitants.

NOTES

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