



PROJECT MUSE®

---

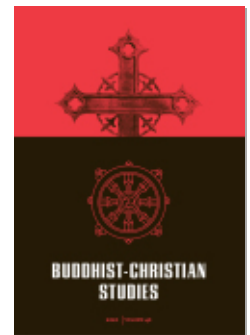
*Nostra Aetate* and Encountering Buddhism

Peter Feldmeier

Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 40, 2020, pp. 273-286 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2020.0015>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/775607>

# *Nostra Aetate* and Encountering Buddhism

Peter Feldmeier, Ph.D.

*University of Toledo*

## ABSTRACT

Peter Feldmeier points to Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* as a key turning point for Catholicism's posture toward the religious other. Here we find that God works in and through these religions and is intimately involved in the souls of all peoples in the context of their religions. While retaining the traditional perspective of holding Christ as the absolute revelation of God, *Nostra Aetate* also provides the foundation for seeing religious others as bearers of insight unique to their own religion. Feldmeier then points to advancements beyond *Nostra Aetate*, particularly with the leadership of Pope John Paul II, to greater appreciation of postmodernity in the theological academy, and the development of the discipline of comparative theology. Collectively, they have allowed the seeds of *Nostra Aetate* to germinate and flourish. Using his own life as an example, Feldmeier shows how being influenced by Buddhism provides additional perspectives for rethinking or enriching Christian faith. Specifically, he shows how Buddhist sensitivities allow one to hear Jesus's teachings in a deeper way, reconsider sin more holistically, rethink how to better imitate Christ, and see how Buddhist meditation strategies could facilitate Christian transformation, even traditionally understood. Feldmeier shows that post-Vatican II Catholicism has had a complex and not wholly receptive relationship with the religious other, particularly Buddhism. Paradoxically, some of these stumbling blocks have provided impetus to a deepening engagement with Buddhism.

KEYWORDS: *Nostra Aetate*, comparative theology, postmodernism, vipassana, bodhi-sattva, mysticism, Pope John Paul II, Theravada

## THE CHURCH AND THE RELIGIOUS OTHER

As has already been noted, the Church has had an ambiguous, if not ambivalent or even contentious, relationship with non-Christian traditions throughout its history. Thus, the shift in the modern period in recognizing religious liberty and the indwelling presence of God in every person constitutes a real movement. "Conscience," Vatican II taught, "is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths."<sup>1</sup> Further, it declared, "All men are bound to seek the truth . . . and to embrace it and hold on to it as they know it."<sup>2</sup> The term,

“as they know it,” can scarcely be overplayed. The Council fathers recognized that the development of conscience and the experience of God within one’s soul involve one’s religious upbringing. God directs all consciences in the context of what makes sense to them. Further, to the degree that these religious expressions do make sense and are life-giving to their adherents, their truths *as they are expressed in those religions* bind them. In this sense, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and so on are saved not in spite of their religions but *through* them, through their mediations of God’s grace. In a later encyclical, Pope John Paul II highlighted this belief by asserting that God “does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches . . .”<sup>3</sup>

*Nostra Aetate* acts as Vatican II’s completion of thought. It praises and “encourages the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians” and “rejects nothing of what is true and holy” in them (#2). Specifically, when it addresses Buddhism it attests that “Buddhism in its various forms testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world. It proposes a way of life by which men can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination” (#2). Did the Council fathers mean that Buddhism merely *imagines* it provides the means for perfect liberation and illumination, even if it is deluded? Or were they asserting that it totally liberates? When we read *Nostra Aetate* in the context of the whole of Vatican II, particularly the documents mentioned here, one must conclude that this cannot mean they thought the Buddhist message was absolutely true and complete, making Christ’s gospel superfluous to them. *Nostra Aetate* itself is clear enough: “The religions often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life . . . . In him . . . men find the fullness of their religious life” (#2). On the other hand, the style and even actual words affirm Buddhism as having a liberating message of some kind. The ambiguity is almost certainly intentional.

The ambiguity and also implicit possibilities in *Nostra Aetate* are furthered with developments in Christian thinking about the religious other. I see three principal advancements. The first comes through the leadership of Pope John Paul II, who has influenced much of Catholic thought since the time of the Council. John Paul not only highly encouraged interreligious dialogue, he also suggested that other religions have their own unique gifts to share.

A second advancement comes from the increasing strength of postmodern thought among scholars. Western culture has become sensitive to the fact that all articulations of truth come from a paradigm or lens of interpretation; all are rooted in philosophical and cultural assumptions that are not universal. This will be important as we investigate below the Buddhist understanding of “no self” (*anatta*) and claims such as “all is emptiness” (*shūnyatā*). Are these modes of thinking we are used to? Are they propositional claims like we use in the West? Are they strategies for spiritual practice?<sup>4</sup>

A third advancement comes from the development of the theological discipline of comparative theology, where one crosses over into the texts and religious imagination of other faiths and then returns to one’s own asking new questions or bringing new insights into one’s religious horizons. What I will examine here draws on the fullest

meaning of *Nostra Aetate* from the perspective of comparative theology. Here we will see, in different ways, how Buddhism can “make possible fresh insights into familiar and revered truths”<sup>5</sup> and can show how Buddhism might have truths that speak from a different point of view than we are used to, but to which we should pay attention.

#### MY OWN EXPERIENCE WITH *nostra aetate* and beyond

My experience of the Catholic Church was that it relatively quickly embraced the assumptions and even ambiguities found in Vatican II and especially in *Nostra Aetate*. From Catholic grade-school on, I learned about other religions with respect. It wouldn’t even have been odd at the time for a priest’s homily to include a story that came from another religious tradition.

It wasn’t until college, however, that I began to imagine other religious traditions might have spiritual gifts that I did not know about or could not be found fulfilled in my Christian faith. I was a religious studies major and, though I spent most of my courses studying Judaism and Christianity, I also experienced for the first time Asian religions, particularly Buddhism. Imperceptibly and over a long time I began to switch my understanding about how religious views worked. Initially, I considered truth to be from a singular perspective and a bit of a zero-sum game. My perspective corresponded to the principle of noncontradiction: If one religion makes a given claim and another religion makes a competing claim, then at best only one of them is right. Certainly, they can’t be both right.

One professor gently encouraged us to think differently. Not all religions use language or concepts the way we do in the West. Some have different starting points and maybe different ending points. I found myself not only fascinated by the religious other, but wonderfully enriched by letting go and allowing myself to be imbued with the wisdom of the East.

By the time I was in the seminary, I was meditating on Zen and Daoist texts as a kind of *lectio divina*. I was regularly crossing over and allowing these texts to speak to me in their own right, or at least as I understood them at the time. Even before I had learned about the kind of Christian mysticism where all conceptualizations about God have to be set aside or transcended, I was reading about Zen enlightenment, which no one could rightly speak directly about and the Eternal Dao that transcended name and form. Admittedly, I was often reading these texts according to my own religious lens.

In 1989, I attended an eight-day contemplative retreat run by a professor of religious studies and three Carmelite priests. It was advertised as learning the spirituality of St. John of the Cross and a meditation practice from Theravāda Buddhism called *vipassana* (insight). I was anxious to learn about John of the Cross, whom I had only heard of, and most open to learning a Buddhist practice. My goals for the latter were modest: even if I learned to breathe better during meditation, I would consider this a success. In preparation for the retreat, I read *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* by St. John, which describes the nature of our minds and hearts and how they can be best purified. It all made sense.

By the end of the retreat I was sold. *Vipassana* meditation really did seem to correspond to some of the central aims of St. John, and I finally got comfortable with the

meditation method. I committed myself to two hours of *vipassana* practice daily. I could see more clearly when I was advancing a persona and when I was simply allowing my more authentic self to engage the moment.

In 1992, I was off to Berkeley for my Ph.D. in Christian Spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union. The department, while trying to be pluralistic and ecumenical, was dominated by a Roman Catholic perspective. By now, the Catholic Church, in practice and theology, had taken *Nostra Aetate* and what followed to full heart. Religious others did not merely represent a presence to tolerate or to respect from a distance. In Berkeley, they were imagined important for one's Christian spiritual horizon. In fact, an interreligious component was a necessary part of the Ph.D. program. I chose Theravāda Buddhism, and this paved the way for my dissertation, which compared the Spiritualities of St. John of the Cross and Buddhaghosa, one of Buddhism's most revered figures. The purpose of the comparison was to see if Buddhist spiritual practices could legitimately be incorporated into a Christian spirituality without that spirituality being compromised. That initial retreat in 1989 had laid the seeds for my dissertation.

No academic work ought to be autobiographical, and indeed the forum for scholarly research is data available for all to scrutinize. Nonetheless, it is widely believed in the field that the best scholarship comes from those who have personal, analogous experience with the subject they research. Such experience hones one's intuitions. Thus, while I had already taken graduate courses on Theravāda Buddhism, I went on a three-month silent Buddhist retreat, where we were essentially meditating ten or more hours a day.

Not only was this retreat a personal gift for my spiritual life, but it also taught me two important lessons. The first was that Buddhist meditation is very different from Christian contemplation. It is not unusual to read these two as aligned with the only difference being that one addresses God personally and the other addresses God impersonally. Such an alignment is off in many respects, from how these are understood in each religion to how they are practiced to how they are experienced to what their respective aims are. Such clarity, of course, did not undermine Buddhist meditation for me. On the contrary, it confirmed that Buddhism really was a religious other; a different path with its own unique experiences.

The second thing I realized was when I totally immersed myself in this spirituality, then what Buddhists taught my religious experience would look like was exactly what it did look like. For example, Buddhism is famous for deconstructing the self. *Vipassana*, the meditation I was devoted to during these three months, instructed us to look at ourselves in various ways to see impermanence and no-self. And it worked. When I looked at myself the way Buddhist practice taught, that's what I found: no-self. Of course, when I look at myself in Christian prayer I experience things very differently and indeed seem to very clearly experience a self, loving, and being loved by God. Could I be both a self and a no-self?

#### ENTERING A BUDDHIST WORLD AND SEEING CHRISTIANITY WITH FRESH EYES

##### *Hearing Jesus Better*

As I have invested myself rather deeply into Buddhist thinking and practices, it has actually helped me engage my own faith more deeply. For example, Buddhism

teaches that until we are fully liberated; the mind is filled with toxins that create suffering. Thus, the quality of the mind is of foremost concern. The famous Buddhist text, the *Dhammapada*, begins with a couplet: “All phenomena are preceded by the mind, created by the mind, and have the mind as their master. If one speaks or acts from a corrupted mind, suffering follows as a cart wheel follows the ox’s foot” (dpa, 1); and “All phenomena are preceded by the mind, created by the mind, and have the mind as their master. If one speaks or acts from a pure mind, happiness follows as a never-departing shadow” (dpa, 2).<sup>6</sup> Buddhism hammers this collective insight home as a cornerstone of practice and thought. Given this, let us consider a famous parable by Jesus (Luke 18:10-14):

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

It is obvious that Jesus contrasts here the posture of pride with that of humility and challenges his hearers to the latter. A Buddhist sensibility, however, invites an additional analysis, that is, the Pharisee is suffering. Not only will his ego-inflated pride condition a wretched afterlife, it also creates suffering at the moment. Of course, the Pharisee does not realize his situation, and his delusion makes him all the more tragic. “Whatever an enemy would do to an enemy, a hater to one hated, worse still, the harm a wrongly-directed mind can do to itself” (dpa:42).

Buddhist cultivation of awareness of the burden of a toxic mind does not stop here. Without deep self-awareness, such that Buddhism fosters, the reader can easily and unwittingly take on the very mental state of the Pharisee, judging the judger. One can proudly imagine oneself superior for not being like that judgmental Pharisee, whom one is of course now judging. Theravādin wisdom constantly brings us back to the quality of our own minds and the relationship we have with our experiences. What is our mental state as we appropriate the insights of the parable?

One could go further here. Buddhism insists that our thoughts, like everything else, are ultimately empty of any permanent substance. One might be tempted to see one’s own judgmentalism as something to condemn oneself with: I’m just like the Pharisee! Given Buddhism’s regular practice of mindfulness, however, we realize that we do not have to identify with those thoughts. They arise and dissipate on their own. Thus, we realize we do not have to judge either the Pharisee or ourselves. Rather, we find an invitation to embrace the parable most fully and to cultivate compassion toward all who suffer delusion—the Pharisee, ourselves, everyone. In short, Buddhism does not hinder our understanding of the parable, but lets us appropriate its message more thoroughly.

*Sin as Ignorance*

A simple comparison on the nature of immorality between Buddhists and Christians seems to suggest real differences. Christians see the human condition as deeply affected by sin. There is something about the human condition that is in rebellion with God. Christian teaching places this quality of antagonism with our first parents, who were deceived by the serpent, whom the New Testament identifies as Satan, and who continues to deceive.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Buddhism has no supernatural order of deception, and the origins and practice of immorality are due to ignorance. Buddhists, in fact, never use the word *sin* and typically call immorality “unskillful behavior.” These appear to be real differences, but are they?

The greatest articulator of *original sin* and the first great spiritual psychologist was St. Augustine. In his book *Confessions*, he wrestles with the origins of evil and the nature of sin.<sup>8</sup> Augustine concluded that when we do wrong, we do so with our free choice: “When I willed or did not will something, I was utterly certain that none other than myself was willing or not willing . . . . Who put this power in me and implanted in me this seed of bitterness when all of me was created by my very kind God? If the devil was responsible, where did the devil himself come from? . . . How does the evil will by which he became devil originate in him?”<sup>9</sup> Further, if God created everything, Augustine argued, and since God created only good things, then what is sin? His conclusions were that sin itself is not a *thing*, that it had no substance. Sin represents a disorder of the good. The deception of sin is that we do not recognize whether or how a given good is aimed to the ultimate good, which is union with God, or that we misuse a good. Food, for example, is a good. But gluttony, the disordered use of food is a sin. Physical desires are good, but lust represents their disorder.

Ultimately, Augustine believed that only God’s grace could free one from the prison of one’s disorders. And this is certainly not aligned with Buddhist notions of self-reliance to free oneself. The Buddha emphasized: “You should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge . . . .”<sup>10</sup> Given this decidedly important distinction, I believe that the Buddhist understanding of immoral behavior could give Christians an additional resource or emphasis that would assist the Christian path.

Often sin is accompanied by a sense of personal shame: I’m bad, and there is something really evil about me. One student I have been counseling through his striving to eradicate his pornography addiction thinks of himself as “a creep.” I am finding that his very self-loathing actually contributes to his addiction and is getting in the way of his recovery. Buddhist insight into the nature of the mind and how attachments work can free him from this shame. Both his strong desire to watch pornography and his self-assessment are just thoughts arising, nothing more and nothing less. Buddhist insight practice allows one to see their arising early, recognize that they are unsubstantial, and even watch how ignorance of one’s condition gives way to those thoughts. He does not have to conclude he’s a “creep” or really anything about himself. Like Augustine, he can see that sin is not a *thing* to fight as much as a

deceptive disorder of the good. Additionally, Buddhism insists: look at the quality of your mind; focus on the way thoughts work; and see the dynamics of ignorance and delusion in them. You do not have to give them sway, they are just thoughts arising and dissipating. And without clinging to them, they dissipate on their own; they have no substance.

*Imitating Christ in the Bodhisattva Vow*

One of the most impressive features in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition is that of the bodhisattva vow. A bodhisattva is a highly enlightened being (human or otherwise) who vows to become a Buddha for the sole purpose of serving all sentient beings to Nirvana. Until every being is released, they remain in service. Part of the bodhisattva path includes taking on the negative karma that others have created in order to save them from suffering painful rebirths. The following expresses the spirit of the bodhisattva vow:

A bodhisattva resolves: I take upon myself the burden of all suffering . . . . At all costs I must bear the burdens of all living beings . . . . All beings I must set free . . . . I must not cheat all beings out of my store of merit [karma] . . . . It is better that I alone should be in pain than that all these beings should fall into the states of woe . . . and with this my own body I must experience, for the sake of all beings, the whole mass of all painful feelings . . . . In reward for all this righteousness that I have won by my works . . . May I be balm to the sick, their healer and servitor . . . . May I be in the famine of the ages' end their drink and their meat . . . an unfailing store for the poor . . . . I have given them my body, why shall I care? . . . My foes . . . dwell in my spirit.<sup>11</sup>

One cannot help but to be impressed with the overwhelming power and generosity of this vow. A bodhisattva vows not only to serve others virtually eternally and to share the fruits of his or her own good karma, but also to absorb the bad karma of others, thus taking on innumerable undeserved pains and trials. In Buddhism, particularly in the Zen community, many lay people also take on this vow, even though they are far from being a bodhisattva. Today, many thousands of Buddhists have personally vowed to be reborn countless times to live out an existence for the service and redemption for others.

One sees in this vow a profoundly Christian vow even as it is a profoundly Buddhist one. It is impossible not to see this as aligned to what Christ did in offering his life for the sins of the world in order to achieve the salvation for the world.<sup>12</sup> It is all too easy to imagine the Christian message as one of merely thanking Jesus for saving us and striving to live out a good life. It certainly does include this. Still, we can easily forget that Jesus's gospel is one of imitation of the master: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me . . . . [W]hoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt 16:24, 20:27-28). St. Paul's message is the same: Christians are to have the

mind and heart of Christ who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (Phil 2:5ff). The bodhisattva vow not only teaches Christians that Buddhists can express extraordinary love, compassion, and generosity, even to unimaginable lengths, it also quite frankly represents what Christ expects of discipleship. Here Buddhists show us the heart of our own gospel.

### *Buddhist Meditation for a Christian*

There are two streams of Buddhist meditation, insight and absorption, and neither of them is exactly like Christian prayer. Insight practice, or *vipassana*, is the most important as it ultimately leads to Nirvana. Using various strategies, the meditator deconstructs the self to see that there is nothing to identify with and nothing to be attached to. Imagining a permanent self leads to an identity that literally creates the conditions for rebirth to more lifetimes.

We might ask, What is the *self* that discovers it is *no-self*, so as to become liberated and attain Nirvana, the *self's* ultimate refuge? Are Buddhist's materialists and nihilists who then think that Nirvana is little more than annihilation? The Buddha denied this. Are they then eternalists who believe in some "super-secret self" that cannot be objectified or otherwise known? The Buddha denied this. In several of his most famous teachings he was asked philosophical questions and why he often avoided them. One would-be follower asked him such questions as whether the world was eternal or not eternal, whether the world was finite or infinite, whether the soul was the same as the body or different from the body, and whether after the death of a fully enlightened person one existed in some manner. All options were offered: After death does that person exist, not exist, both exist and not exist, or neither exist nor not exist? The Buddha said that he was silent about these, "Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life . . . to enlightenment, to Nirvana."<sup>13</sup> In another place, when asked by a close disciple what would happen to the Buddha after death (final-Nirvana), he said in reply: "The term *reappears* does not apply, the term *does not reappear* does not apply, the term *both reappears and does not reappear* does not apply, the term *neither reappears nor does not reappear* does not apply."<sup>14</sup>

The Buddha's strategy was to find a sure way to attain Nirvana, nothing more and nothing less. Think and act *this way*, he instructed, and you will attain it. Thus, doctrines, including those insisting on no-self and impermanence, are meant to bring one to liberation. Nothing more, nothing less. Once liberated, all bets are off.

How could a Christian possibly utilize a method of meditation that is intended to deconstruct one's very self? How, if one were convinced one had an eternal soul, could one profit from losing track of it? It turns out, many Christian mystical texts aim at something similar. John of the Cross used the image of climbing Mount Carmel as a metaphor for spiritual progress; the peak represents perfect union with God. In his sketch of the way to the summit, he identified imperfect ways that do not reach the summit. These include the desire for the goods of heaven or earth, glory, joy, knowledge, consolation, and rest. Pursuit of these fails to get them in an absolute way and stalls progress. Ironically, letting go of the ego's desire for them turns out to be the

way to find them: "Now that I least desire them, I have them all without desire." What then is the way to the summit: "nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the Mount nothing."<sup>15</sup> Here the soul renounces itself for the sake of God. St. John's spiritual foundation is twofold. First, as Christian theology has widely asserted, God transcends all conceptuality that humans might have. So, to pursue the God that we can imagine is to pursue something other than God as God really is. The second foundation is that all human beings are essentially self-regarding. On some level we are all narcissists. So we have to renounce every self-interest to reach the summit. There is a big difference between loving the God of good things and loving merely the good things of God. If we remain stuck pursuing the latter, then God becomes a kind of resource for our own self-interest.

St. John also has a deconstruction project. Like Buddhism, one is to renounce the kinds of activities that create attachments to the created world. Of course, one can enjoy the created world and have warm, loving relationships with others. These become attachments when they are loved for their own sake and not for God, the ultimate source and reference for all that is good. The next part of his deconstruction project is to renounce our image of both ourselves and God. One enters into a holy emptiness before God. Union with God, then becomes a kind of perpetual emptiness, where there is only the absolute mystery of God. The soul even seems to find its identity with, in, and through God. It is an experience whereby one is highly exalted; the soul's existence becomes as though God's. He writes that "although the substance of this soul is not the substance of God . . . it has become God through participation in God, being united to and absorbed in him."<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the soul has no separate self-identity.<sup>17</sup>

Other Christian mystics attest to the same dynamic of radically losing oneself. Meister Eckhart and Jan Van Ruusbroec referred to it as the "annihilation of oneself."<sup>18</sup> One even loses the God one imagines conceptually. This renunciation is for the sake of full union. Eckhart writes:

Men's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God. St. Paul took leave of God for God's sake and gave up all that he might get from God . . . . In parting from these, he parted with God for God's sake and yet God remained in him as God is in his own nature . . . but more as an "is-ness," as God really is. Then he neither gave to God nor received anything from him, for he and God were a unit, that is, pure unity.<sup>19</sup>

Ruusbroec writes about Christian contemplatives who do not attain union:

They choose clinging to God in love as the best and the very highest they can or they want to reach. And that is why they cannot pass through themselves or their works in an imageless bareness, for they are caught up with themselves and their works in the manner of images and intermediaries . . . . And even if they feel themselves raised up to God in a strong fire of love, they always keep their own self and they are neither consumed nor burnt to nothing in the unity of love . . . . They do not want to die in God to all self-consciousness of their spirit and live the life that is his.<sup>20</sup>

I am not suggesting that Buddhist Nirvana is the same as Christian union with God, or even that these deconstruction projects are exactly the same. Rather, I am suggesting two things. First, Buddhist insight practice could decidedly help Christians in their own unique pursuit of letting go of any form of a clinging, attached self. Buddhists' interest in this regard is the exact same interest one finds in Christian mysticism. Second, the no-self in Buddhism has a crucial corollary in Christianity, particularly in our mystical tradition. In both cases, the Absolute is discovered beyond conceptuality in an existence of pure freedom and compassion. Here there is no clinging and indeed nothing to cling to.

### *Embracing Buddhism, Embracing Christian Faith*

One of the seemingly oddest things in meeting members of Zen temples or Dharma centers is that many of them not only come from Christian traditions, but they also claim they never left. That is, they diligently practice Zen while at the same time continue to claim the Christian faith. Really, this is nothing new. Fifty years ago some respected Christian theologians, such as Jesuit fathers William Johnston, Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle, and Heinrich Dumoulin, were commending Zen insights and meditational practices for Christians. More recently, other priests, Protestant ministers, and lay Christians, such as Robert Kennedy, Willigis Jäger, Gundula Meyer, and Rubin Habito, have been officially designated as *Roshis* (Zen Masters) by respected Zen lineages. They argue that a successful kind of unity can be made between Zen and Christianity. Such a unity is controversial and not without its critics in both Christian and Zen circles. But they also have many supporters in both communities as well. These Christians see possibilities of a kind of amalgamation of spiritualities that they believe complement and complete each other with no violation of their Christian faith. Father Kennedy Roshi writes:

I have never thought of myself as anything but Catholic and I certainly never thought of myself as a Buddhist . . . . What I looked for in Zen was not a new faith, but a new way of being Catholic . . . . Yamada Roshi [his master] told me several times that he did not want to make me a Buddhist but rather he wanted to empty me in imitation of "Christ your Lord" who emptied himself, poured himself out, and clung to nothing. Whenever Yamada Roshi instructed me in this way, I thought that this Buddhist would made a Christian of me yet!<sup>21</sup>

### THE CHURCH GOING FORWARD

#### *Since Vatican II*

Following Vatican II, the Vatican set up the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PDIC) as the Church's most formal and official center for meeting the religious other. Following the 1986 Assisi Day of Prayer for Peace, another Day of Prayer for Peace was held at Mount Hiei in Japan, which included many Japanese religious believers from Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity, along with twenty-four

representatives from other countries and religions. The Mount Hiei Day of Prayer has become an annual event.

The first Buddhist-Christian Colloquium was held in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, in 1995. This was organized to address tensions that came from Pope John Paul's *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, a book that caused some consternation among Buddhists and those Christians involved in dialogue with them. Given John Paul's general openness to the religious other, his take on Buddhism betrayed a lack of knowledge of the deep structures of the religion. John Paul had characterized Buddhism as a doctrine of salvation utterly opposed to that of Christianity, one that had what he called an "almost exclusively *negative soteriology*," that is negative understanding of salvation.<sup>22</sup> John Paul understood Buddhism to teach that the world was evil and "to liberate oneself from this evil, one must free oneself from this world [and] . . . become indifferent to what is in the world."<sup>23</sup>

As we have briefly seen above, the problem for Buddhism is not the world, but one's attachments to the world, that is, one's disordered relationship to it and to one's experience. Further, compassion for the suffering in the world is perhaps the central hallmark within Buddhism. John Paul's assessment was simply too superficial. Happily, this unfortunate characterization of Buddhism led to a formal colloquium comparing the nature of salvation for both communities and a deeper appreciation by the Vatican for Buddhist views. The success of this first colloquium led to two more. The second was in Bangalore, India, in 1988, with the theme of Religion and Science. John Paul had also charged Buddhism with facilitating an antiscientific Asian culture,<sup>24</sup> and Buddhists wanted to address this. The third was in Tokyo, Japan, in 2002, comparing understandings of religious community.<sup>25</sup> In all three colloquia, Buddhists and Christians met with great respect and left with greater appreciation of each other.

Besides the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, there have been many other forums for dialogue. This *Journal of Buddhist-Christian Studies* is a prime example for the academic advancement of mutual learning. But there are other ventures as well, most notably the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) centered at St. John's Monastery in Collegeville, Minnesota. Along with yearly gatherings, the MID has helped to sponsor four *Gethsemani Encounters*. These encounters are five-day-long dialogues with leading Buddhist and Christian figures throughout the world. The first included such notable figures as the Dalai Lama.

One of the most interesting things about Buddhist-Christian dialogue is that virtually all of it is Christian initiated. Buddhism widely believes that its Noble Eight Fold Path is necessary to attain Nirvana. But it also believes that virtually no one will attain Nirvana during one's current lifetime. Nirvana is considered a liberation attained only after millions of lifetimes of skillful spiritual work. The vast majority of that work can be done through spiritual practice in virtually any religion. Given this, Buddhists find themselves rather accepting of many different religions. If there is a downside to such a broad acceptance of the religious other, it is that they tend to be rather uninterested in other traditions. At the first Gethsemani Encounter, which I attended, I was surprised that they also showed little interest in each other. There were representatives

from the Theravāda, Vajrayāna, Pure Land, and Zen traditions. It appeared as though none of these world-class representatives knew much about their Buddhist compatriots or had any experience with their various traditions. Dialogue with each other was, for them, new. Since 1996, my study has continued to confirm that experience. In this sense, Christian initiatives for dialogue have opened their eyes to the possibilities of talking to Christians as well as talking among themselves.

### *The Future of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*

The Church has moved tremendously in the past few centuries. It has gone from blanket dismissal of a graced life outside of the institutional boundaries of the Church to recognizing God moving souls outside of the Church. From there, it has gone from an uneasy acceptance that some non-Christians could be saved by God's grace to seeing God's grace working in and through the very religions that were previously dismissed. But there is more: Since Vatican II, the Church has reflected on how dialogue should be approached. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, describes authentic dialogue in *Dominus Iesus* as follows: "Inter-religious dialogue . . . requires an attitude of understanding and a relationship of mutual knowledge and reciprocal enrichment" (#3). Cardinal Ratzinger, in this important and controversial document, insists that religious relativism cannot be a Christian posture. Further, "The theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which would be complementary to what is found in other religions is contrary to the Church's faith" (#22). There is a certain tension between these two claims. If the presumption that the complete and full revelation of God has already been given in Jesus, then how would dialogue facilitate *reciprocal enrichment*? What, for example, does Buddhism offer if the Church has everything?

Here, seeing the religious other as indeed other (in some respects) allows for the celebration of a different kind of complementarity, one that sees engagement as an opportunity to consider one's own faith with new eyes and a fresh imagination. For example, in their book *I Am/No Self*, James and Linda Keenan show that there is always an outside philosophy used to interpret the faith. The Greek and Latin fathers drew on Plato. Aquinas utilized Aristotle among others. They argue further:

In modern times, theologian Paul Tillich adopted and adapted the existentialism of Martin Heidegger. Liberation theologians affirmed the social analysis of Marxist thinkers . . . . To cling to the thought of structures of bygone ages preserves a certain elegance, but it is the elegance of an antique shop . . . . Thus there need be no obstacle to employing the Mahāyāna philosophy of the Heart Sūtra as a model for reading [the Gospel of] John . . . . Mahāyāna anthropology in its wisdom discourse discloses the beatific awakening of incarnational living in our very bodies.<sup>26</sup>

Do the Keenans think such a project ought to be a complete absorption of Mahāyāna Buddhism? Assuredly not: "When Christian thinkers have adopted philosophies from

other sources, however, they have not taken them up wholesale. Always there is the need to adapt.”<sup>27</sup> This kind of theological and spiritual adaption is the future of Buddhist-Christian engagement.

## NOTES

1 *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World), #16. Here and henceforth I will be using *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, revised edition, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975).

2 *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Liberty), #1.

3 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, #55. Herein, with the exception of Vatican II documents, I will be relying on the Vatican website archives when quoting magisterial teachings.

4 See James Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 77–85. Here Fredericks argues that Buddhist emptiness is less a philosophical claim and more like a spiritual strategy much like Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of divine incomprehensibility.

5 Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 112.

6 Translations of the Dhammapada are mine.

7 See John 8:44–45; 2 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 4:14; 1 Timothy 4:1–4; 2 Timothy 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 2:10; Revelation 12:8.

8 See Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

9 *Ibid.*, 113–114.

10 *Digba Nikaya* 16.2.26. Translation by Maurice Walshe in *Thus I Have Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 245.

11 E. A. Burtt, ed. *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha: Early Discourses, the Dhammapada, and Later Basic Writings* (New York: New American Library, 2000), 108–118.

12 See Matthew 26:26ff; Mark 14:22ff; John 6:51, 11:51–52; Romans 3:25; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15; Ephesians 2:13; 1 Timothy 2:6.

13 *Majjhima Nikaya*, 63.2; *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 533.

14 *Majjhima Nikaya*, 72.20; *Ibid.*, 594.

15 See *Sketch of Mount Carmel* in *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 111.

16 See *The Living Flame of Love* 2.34; *The Complete Works*, p. 671.

17 *Ibid.*

18 For Eckhart and his contemporary German mystics, it was *vernibten sin selbes*, while the Flemish mystics equivalently called it *vernieten sijns selfs*—“annihilating oneself.” See Paul Mommaers and Jan Van Bragt, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 66.

19 Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. Raymond Blakney (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957), 204.

20 Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals*, as cited in Moammers and Bragt, 67–68.

21 Robert Kennedy, *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit: The Place of Zen in Christian Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 13–14.

- 22 Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, trans. Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 85.
- 23 Ibid., 85–86.
- 24 Ibid., 88.
- 25 See the brief descriptions of these in Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 233.
- 26 James Keenan and Linda Keenan, *I Am/No Self: A Christian Commentary on the Heart Sūtra* (Louvain: Peeters, 2011), 76–77.
- 27 Ibid., 77.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balthasar Hans Urs von. 1988. "Buddhism: An Approach to Dialogue." *Communio: International Catholic Review* 15 (4): 403–410.
- . 1979. "Christianity and Non-Christian Meditation." *Word and Spirit* 1: 147–166.
- Cassidy Edward Idris. 2005. *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Clooney Francis X. 2010. *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Feldmeier Peter. 2008. "Is the Theology of Religions an Exhausted Project?" *Horizons* 35 (2): 253–270.
- Fredericks James. 2004. *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Habito Rubin. 2006. *Healing Breath: Zen for Christians and Buddhists in a Wounded World*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- . 2004. *Living Zen, Loving God*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- John of the Cross. 1991. *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross*. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications.
- John Paul II. 1994. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Translated by Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee. Edited by Vittorio Messori. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- . 1987. "The Meaning of the Assisi Day of Prayer." *Origins* 16 (31): 561–563.
- Keenan John, and Linda Keenan. 2011. *I Am/No Self: A Christian Commentary on the Heart Sūtra*. Louvain: Peeters.
- Kennedy Robert. 2004. *Zen Gifts to Christians*. New York: Continuum.
- . 2004. *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit: The Place of Zen in Christian Life*. New York: Continuum.
- Lao Tzu [Laozi]. 1972. *Tao Te Ching. Translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English*. New York: Vintage.
- Lefebvre Leo. 1993. *The Buddha and the Christ: Explorations in Buddhist, Christian Dialogue*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- . 2014. *True and Holy: Christian Scripture and Other Religions*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Lefebvre Leo, and Peter Feldmeier. 2011. *The Path of Wisdom: A Christian Commentary on the Dhammapadam*. Leuven: Peeters.
- Mommaers Paul, and Jan Van Bragt. 1995. *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec*. New York: Crossroad.
- Pope Stephen, and Charles Hefling, editors. 2002. *Sic et Non: Encountering Dominus Iesus*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, revised edition, edited by Austin Flannery. New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975.