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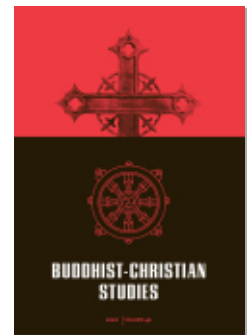
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Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mystery of the Naked Heart

Mark Unno

Nobody sees anybody truly but all through the flaws of their own egos. That is the way we all see . . . each other in life. Vanity, fear, desire, competition—all such distortions within our own egos—condition our vision of those in relation to us. Add to those distortions to our own egos the corresponding distortions in the egos of others, and you see how cloudy the glass must become through which we look at each other. That's how it is in all living relationships except when there is that rare case of two people who love intensely enough to burn through all those layers of opacity and see each other's naked hearts. —Tennessee Williams (2004: 94–95)¹

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a relational view of interreligious dialogue, in which the mutual learning and engagement between dialogue participants take precedence over objective findings, collaboration, and friendship over, but not to the exclusion of, debate and scholarship. The contextual, dialogical, and interrelational nature of this model is presented in light of two genealogies, interreligious and religious studies. In interreligious dialogue, genealogical stages of development covered include: “theological,” “contemplative,” and “socially and environmentally engaged.” In terms of the background of religious studies, borrowing from the work of Sumner Twiss, stages of development include “Early Modern Theological,” “Transitional Ethnocentric,” “Late Modern Critical-Scientific,” and “Post Modern Hermeneutical.” Beyond theory and method, concrete episodes of interreligious encounter and relational dialogue are used to illustrate key points.

KEYWORDS: theology, contemplative, activism, friendship, Catholic, Nostra Aetate, Shin Buddhism, World Parliament, John Oesterreicher

INTRODUCTION

The work of interreligious scholarship is *objective*, examining religious history, society, and religious thought with the purpose of mutual illumination across religious traditions and phenomena. However, the *significance* of interreligious dialogue

is arguably *intersubjective*, with the hope and aspiration that dialogue will mutually illuminate the *lives* of the participants—individuals, communities, and institutions. The *living* project of mutual illumination in interreligious dialogue requires that participants not only contribute to one another's intellectual understanding then, but that we allow each other's deeply held commitments and assumptions to be examined in such a way that we can reflect on them and ourselves, the task of critical self-reflexivity that is easier said than done.²

One of the most vivid illustrations of this point can be seen in the process of creation of the *Nostra Aetate*, composed in 1965 on the occasion of Vatican II, as the declaration by Pope Paul VI on the significance of interreligious exchange and understanding. It is hard to believe that over half a century has passed since Vatican II, and this occasion serves as an ideal moment to look back upon the last fifty years of interreligious dialogue. *Nostra Aetate*, which means *In Our Time*, reminds us that the work of interreligious dialogue is ongoing, and that it is timely to revisit the question of the significance of this work for our time. Buddhism and Christianity, along with Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism, are among the largest missionary religions in world history; as such, Buddhist-Christian dialogue carries a particular significance. Arguably, Pope Francis and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, are two of the most widely recognized religious leaders of our time, one Catholic, the other Buddhist; in fact, they are among the most highly regarded people internationally. This is a time of celebration in interreligious dialogue. At the same time, we face many challenges in the world today, we all need to work together, and that includes interreligious co-operation.

There is a long history to the interaction between Buddhism and Christianity that goes back centuries in time, but for the purposes of the present, what is most significant is what has occurred over roughly the past century and a quarter. The first World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, inaugurated a new era of dialogue and exchange that superseded what had been a more conflicted, competitive relationship among many religions. Since then, there have been innumerable moments of Buddhist-Christian interreligious encounter, large and small. There have been conferences, symposia, and meetings of religious leaders, where the primary interaction has been the exchange of ideas. There has been the sharing of religious experiences, with Buddhists visiting Christian institutions including Catholic abbeys and monasteries and Christians visiting Buddhist temples and monasteries. There have been individual encounters, such as the relationship developed between the Dalai Lama and Father Laurence Freeman, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton and Zen Buddhist thinker D. T. Suzuki, and the many friendships that have developed out of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, which has also published the journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. Out of the process of this dialogue, there have emerged those who have been so transformed that it would be hard to say that they were exclusively Buddhist or Christian, having incorporated ideas and practices from the religion they initially encountered as Other. On the Catholic side, such was the case with Thomas Merton, and on the Buddhist side, the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, author of *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, has found deep resonances with Christian themes. As well, Buddhists and Christians have worked side by side or even joined together

in supporting various causes: fighting poverty, supporting hospice, environmental activism, and the like.

There is no space here to recount the entire modern history of Buddhist-Christian dialogue and interaction. Instead, a few representative moments are highlighted here with an eye to present and future significance. How have Buddhists viewed the ongoing dialogue, and what potential is there looking to the future? What has this dialogue meant to Buddhists and Christians, and how might it change as it continues to evolve? What challenges do we all face, and what is the place of Buddhist-Christian relations in meeting these challenges?

Before delving into these topics, however, here is a story that might be instructive for our purposes. In 2009, at the University of Oregon, I joined the search committee for an Assistant Director for our newly founded Center for Intercultural Dialogue, headed by Dr. Steven Shankman. We had several outstanding candidates who came in for an interview, and the one that remains in my mind is actually not the person we hired.

One of the questions we asked of all of the candidates was, "For working in an intercultural context, what skill do you consider to be the most important?" Our candidate replied, "Drop the story."

At first, I was not sure if what I heard was correct, so I asked her to repeat her answer, and again she said, "Drop the story."

"What do you mean by that? Can you explain?"

"In my previous work, whenever I was sent abroad, I would do prior research on the people and their culture. Yet, I eventually learned that, once having arrived *in situ*, I had to drop whatever story had formed in my mind about who I thought these people were or should be according to my expectations. Only by 'dropping the story' I had formed of them, could I actually encounter who they were as living human beings. It's not that the research I had done prior to my visit was useless, but I could not let my book learning *lead* my expectations for the visit. Rather, I could make use of that knowledge as supporting and informing the more immediate experience of meeting people in the moment of encounter."

Whatever any of the other candidates said that day, including the person we hired, I have long forgotten, but I will never forget that one phrase used by this candidate, "Drop the story." The point is dramatic, instructive, and fairly simple, at least at first glance. Yet, there is potentially much more than meets the eye. How conscious are we of the deep assumptions we bring to any human encounter, especially religious assumptions? To what extent are we really capable of "dropping the story"? What does it really mean to "encounter the other," to engage in dialogue, to form relationships: interreligious, intercultural, interhuman?

In Japanese, there is an expression, "*Sode fure au mo tashō no en nari.*" Roughly translated, this means, "Even kimono sleeves brushing past each other is the result of innumerable karmic factors coalescing in the moment." When we consider that every

encounter, however brief, affects us, changes us, and has the potential to transform us, it behooves us to not only look closely, to see who we encounter, but also to learn more about who each of us may be, reflected in the eyes of the other, and to continue this journey, each as a person of religion, but perhaps just as or more significant, each as a human being.

NOSTRA AETATE, CHURCH DOCUMENTS, AND BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Although I have been engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue for the better part of thirty years, I had never heard of the *Nostra Aetate*. My knowledge is quite limited, so I may very well have missed key references that have been made in the literature. Part of this lack of reference to church documents is no doubt due to the fact that the main references have been to primary scriptural sources such as the New Testament and Buddhist sutras, as well as the work of theologians and Buddhist thinkers rather than institutional proclamations. The fact that, on the Christian side, there has been greater representation by Protestant thinkers may also have played a part. Regardless, I decided to look a little more into the background of the *Nostra Aetate*, and what I found was fascinating.

There are at least three points that stand out. First, the declaration, while brief, and not without limitations, attempts to describe the diversity of perspectives represented by the views of various religions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. That is, each is recognized as quite different from the others, valid on its own terms, and contributing to the larger, religiously pluralistic world.

Second, and this stands in contrast to the first point, the *Nostra Aetate* nevertheless regards basic Christian beliefs as universally valid, as what sociologist of religion Peter Berger would describe as the “sacred canopy” under which all other religions could belong. This is evident in the opening statement, in the second paragraph, which purports to define what all people share:

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men, until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light. (Vatican 1965)

On the one hand, from our perspective in 2020, or at least from my own Buddhist perspective, this may seem a bit far-reaching. Yet, I also need to ask myself: When I interact with members of other religions, am I able to go outside of my own religious worldview? Am I free of attempts to reduce the terms of the religious Other to those that are familiar? For, this is the challenge: How far can I stretch or move beyond the boundaries of my pre-existing worldview to recognize, see, and truly encounter the other as Other? This, of course, is not limited to religious encounter. To give a rather mundane example from my own life, I have been fortunate to be married to my wife

for—is it really already?—over thirty-two years. She is still quite the mystery to me. Early on, I learned that in my previous twenty-eight unmarried years, I had been folding socks out of the laundry in a completely wrong manner. I continue to discover that there are many things yet to learn, and the reason or the basis often remains quite mysterious. I have come to respect that mystery, however, as a source of delight and adventure, and occasional frustration. So, in encountering the religious Other, I need to try to “drop the story” so that I can see the Other. At the same time, recognizing that I may not be able to drop *my* story entirely, I can recognize that I may never have full knowledge, that there may always be some element of mystery.³ If a Catholic cannot go entirely outside her story, and I cannot entirely go outside my story, then we can still find some middle ground where we may meet, knowing that, to one extent or another, we remain a mystery to one another.

The third point concerns the background of the *Nostra Aetate*. In doing a little research, I learned that the *Nostra Aetate* has its origins in Catholic–Jewish relations and that the Monsignor John Oesterreicher was instrumental in the early development of the declaration (Baumann 2015). The Monsignor was born to Jewish parents in Moravia or the present-day Czech Republic. Having converted to Catholicism at the age of twenty in 1924, he witnessed the horrors of the rise of Nazism and immigrated to the United States. On the one hand, he was a vocal opponent of racial anti-Semitism. On the other, early on, he believed that Jews needed to convert to Christianity, for them to be saved, but also for the larger global vision of Christian salvation. He was charged with drafting the *Nostra Aetate* as a document of Catholic–Jewish relations, but apparently, the more he delved into the matter, the more he found the problem of interreligious relations to be complex. In the end, he came to the conclusion that God’s will was inscrutable as far as the treatment of the Jews was concerned: The Jews have their own Divine covenant and ought be respected as such. Jews and Christians share the same God, and Oesterreicher looked forward to the day when their faith would be united, but it was not up to human beings to discern *for others* how that should come about. Each person’s and each people’s relation to God must be respected as their own.

This shows the delicate balance between seeking common ground and respecting the otherness of the Other. Now, in relation to other faiths that may not subscribe to the one God, or the one Dharma, it is necessary to render a new balance between seeking common ground and respecting the mutual mystery of a religiously Other that does not share faith in the Divine or practice of the Buddha Dharma. What Oesterreicher’s story, and thus the story of the *Nostra Aetate*, shows is that interreligious dialogue and understanding are a *process*, one that evolves the understanding, and that it is a *journey*, to be undertaken in mutual respect, friendship, and collaboration. As Paul Ingram, former president of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, states in *The Process of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, “As our own experiences of giving and receiving love allows us to apprehend and appreciate love experienced by other human beings, so our own religious experiences, critically understood, allow us to enter into the ideas and experiences of persons participating in religious traditions other than our own . . . Dialogue is a quest for truth where ‘truth’ is understood as relational in structure” (Ingram 2009: x)

BACKGROUND OF BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

The World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, marked a key moment in the development of interreligious interaction among religions from around the world.⁴ While freedom of religion in democratic nations had legally guaranteed the protection of religious institutions and their members, in interacting with one another, religions had often been competitive, seeking to establish their institutional, social, and economic bases over against one another, and not infrequently seeking converts as the primary intent of interaction, especially on the part of the dominant religion in any given locality or circumstance. The World Parliament of Religions represented a departure in this regard, as the explicit agenda was one of the equal exchange of ideas, and the potential for collaborative dialogue. At the same time, it is essential to keep in mind that the Parliament was a first effort, a moment in the transition from a more competitive, missionary attitude among many of the world's religions, toward a more dialogical, collaborative modality. Thus, when one reviews the proceedings from the Parliament, there is still a prominent element of missionizing and evangelizing the views of each religion, often adjusted to modern sensibilities, with each claiming to be variously: the most scientific, most egalitarian and/or democratic, most logical and systematic, and the like. Here is just one example from the Buddhist side, represented by the Zen Master Shaku Sōyen. Of the scientific nature of Buddhism, he declares:

According to the different sects of Buddhism more or less different views are entertained in regard to the law of causality, but so far they agree in regarding it as the law of nature, independent of the will of Buddha, and still more of the will of human beings. The law exists for eternity, without beginning, without end. Things grow and decay, and this is caused not by an external power but by an internal force which is in things themselves as an innate aptitude. This internal law acts in accordance with the law of cause and effect, and thus appear immense phenomena of the universe

As I have already explained to you, our sacred Buddha is not the creator of this law of nature, but he is the first discoverer of the law who led thus his followers to the height of moral perfection. Who shall utter a word against him who discovered the first truth of the universe, who has saved and will save by his noble teaching, the millions and millions of the falling human beings? Indeed, too much approbation could not be uttered to honor his sacred name! (Shaku 1894: 390)

Since then, interreligious dialogue has come a long way. This can easily be seen in the proceedings of the second World Parliament of Religions held in the same locale, Chicago, a century later, in 1993. The representatives of each religion are much more self-critically aware, placing their own faith, commitments, and practices within a larger framework of secularity, social and environmental consciousness, and understanding of religious conflict. Nevertheless, close examination of the many of the proceedings still shows a “we are the best solution” self-first attitude. The tone is usually

more inclusive but still hierarchical: Many religions have something to contribute, but we have the best solutions, and so forth.

One place where we can gain some sense of the evolution in thinking about others' religion is in the undergraduate curriculum at colleges and universities in the United States. Sumner Twiss has given a useful account with Brown University as a case study, and based on other available studies, he presents the following four phases: Early Modern Theological (roughly 1800–1900), Transitional Ethnocentric (roughly 1900–1950), Late Modern Critical-Scientific (roughly 1950–1975), and Post Modern Hermeneutical (roughly 1975–onward) (Twiss 1995).

The first phase, Early Modern Theological, represents the primarily Christian, faith-based approach to studying religion, whereby mostly young men from Protestant backgrounds were provided with a theologically based education in the Bible (both the New Testament and what Christians have called the Old Testament), along with other subject matter, in preparation for leading a predominantly Christian nation in all of its different aspects such as commerce, politics, and cultural production. The second phase, Transitional Ethnocentric, is marked by the recognition of diversity in American society but with a predominant majority assumed as providing the norms and setting standards of achievement, with the elevation of the pursuit of technical knowledge over moral and religious nurture, and the beginning of the displacement of theological education by such social sciences as sociology and psychology. While religious identity is not as front and center as in the Early Modern Theological phase, in this Transitional Ethnocentric phase, religious assumptions are still quite strong in the dominant majority, who are Christian. The third phase, Late Modern Critical-Scientific, marks the growing recognition that each religion is first and foremost a historical entity, such that no religion has priority over others as the universal, eternal truth. There is an even greater emphasis on scientific-technical knowledge, and a secular, egalitarian, democratic society as providing the core worldview, what sociologist Robert Bellah has called American "Civil Religion" (Bellah 1967). The fourth phase, Post Modern Hermeneutical, moves beyond the idea that there is one story for humanity, one correct historical accounting. There are many stories, within the larger web of global interdependence, and the complexity and relative character of all of these stories make it impossible to weave them together to make one coherent narrative. The stories contributed by various religions constitute only a subset of the narrative strands in this complex tapestry of society, nature, and the universe in which there is no single center or complete story but rather intertwining threads and patterns in a radically diverse cultural landscape.

Of course, we have to take these categorizations with a grain of salt. Nothing is ever so straightforward as to follow a linear development as these four phases describe; there are always many more twists and turns in history, as the Post Modern Hermeneutical mindset itself suggests. But, these four phases are useful in a heuristic sense, in giving us a sense of some of the changes we have undergone in our views of religions generally, as well as their interreligious interaction. As a professor of religion, I myself have noticed some of these changes. Whereas twenty years ago (has it been that long already?), if I asked a group of students in a large introductory lecture course on Asian religions, "Tell me, what is the first thing that comes to your mind when

you hear the word, ‘religion?’”, a sizable number of responses would have been along the lines of “God,” “a higher power,” “divine spirit,” and other terms that are often associated with theistic religions. Now, however, when I ask the same question two decades later, responses are more along the lines of the following: “rituals and ceremonies,” “symbols and myths,” “a set of beliefs about the world.” In a word, students are now socialized to be much more multiculturally aware, including in their consciousness of religion, through their schooling, as well as through our media culture and upbringing.

We can see this in our religious leaders as well. Pope Francis caused some waves when he visited a Buddhist temple in Colombo, Sri Lanka, making him only the second pontiff ever to enter a Buddhist institution. Perhaps even more significant was what he had to say in conjunction with his visit. On the one hand, he emphasized the necessity of respecting difference, finding common ground, and sharing friendship:

Dialogue . . . is essential if we are to know, understand and respect one another. But, as experience has shown, for such dialogue and encounter to be effective, it must be grounded in a full and forthright presentation of our respective convictions. Certainly, such dialogue will accentuate how varied our beliefs, traditions and practices are. But if we are honest in presenting our convictions, we will be able to see more clearly what we hold in common. New avenues will be opened for mutual esteem, cooperation and indeed friendship. (Francis 2015)

On the other hand, there can also be the crossing of boundaries, the sharing of experiences: People of different religious backgrounds can pray in the same Catholic church; Pope Francis can enter and acknowledge the sacredness of the Buddhist temple:

Yesterday at Madhu I saw something which I would never have expected: not everyone there was Catholic, not even the majority! There were Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and each one came to pray; they go and they say they receive graces there. There is in the people—and the people are never wrong—they sense that there is something there that unites them. And if they are so naturally united in going together to pray at that shrine—which is Christian but not only Christian, because all want [to go there], then why shouldn’t I go to a Buddhist temple to greet them? What happened yesterday at Madhu is very important. It helps us to understand the meaning of the interreligious experience in Sri Lanka: there is respect for one another. (Francis 2015)

Among Buddhists, the Dalai Lama is well known to emphasize interreligious understanding, which he considers as one of the three commitments of his overall work in this world:

His Holiness’ second commitment is the promotion of religious harmony and understanding among the world’s major religious traditions. Despite

philosophical differences, all major world religions have the same potential to create good human beings. It is therefore important for all religious traditions to respect one another and recognize the value of each other's respective traditions. As far as one truth, one religion is concerned, this is relevant on an individual level. However, for the community at large, several truths, several religions are necessary. (Gyatso)

In his view, one must respect that each person can espouse one true faith or religion *for him or herself*. However, one can see that, socially speaking, many religions can contribute to society without exclusive or even hierarchical arrangement. I teach one large introductory course, REL 101 World Religions: Asian Traditions. During the first week of class, I often say to students: "Isn't it interesting that such a large percentage of people are so fortunate to have been born into the one true faith or religion?" The reaction is often one of laughter with some degree of nervousness detectable.

A few weeks later, one of the students said to me, "You know, when you said that, it really made me think in a way I never had to before. I was born into a Catholic family, and I had always been taught that my Catholic faith was the true faith, assuming that it was the best overall. It's not that I don't think that anymore, but there's an important difference now. The way I've come to understand it is that my faith is the best overall *for me*." Yet, I also sensed something more than this, that resonates with the statements made by Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama. It is not simply the case that everyone recognizes the suitability of their own faith for themselves and goes their separate ways. Rather, with the foundation of one's life in one's own religious orientation, one is able to open one's mind and heart to others in order to find common ground, while respecting difference, so that bridges to mutual understanding may be built.

It is apparent that Pope Francis, the Dalai Lama, and this student, each, in their own way, has effected a kind of Copernican revolution in their thinking. While maintaining the integrity of their own personal religious commitments, they have also relativized their worldviews within the larger world of religious pluralism, making room for other religions without assuming the superiority of their own faith *for other people*. Here, there seems to be the possibility for genuine encounter and exchange. Yet, this seems to be right in line with the spirit of Monsignor John Oesterreicher, who, in helping to formulate the *Nostra Aetate*, learned that he needed to respect the profound faith of the followers of Judaism.

HISTORICAL MOMENTS IN BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

There is no room here to recount the entire history of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. For the purposes of the present, selected moments in Buddhist-Christian dialogue are examined, especially in relation to Japanese Buddhism, with which I am most familiar. Of the many types of dialogue that have taken place, three in particular are notable: theological interreligious dialogue, contemplative encounter, and mutual social and environmental engagement. The first of these emphasizes the exchange of ideas;

the second shared experience, especially of something ineffable; the third, addressing urgent needs in society and the environment.

Theological Interreligious Dialogue

Although there are many historical strands in the development of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, one of the more notable involves Japanese Buddhist thinkers in dialogue with Christian thinkers from Europe and the United States. Much of Japanese Buddhism belongs to one of the two major streams of Asian Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, or Buddhism of the “Great Vehicle.” This stands in contrast to Early Buddhism, sometimes referred to as Nikaya Buddhism, named after the earliest layer of Buddhist scripture purported to record the teachings of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, of which the main surviving form today is Theravada Buddhism.

On the Buddhist side, some of the most prominent representatives have been associated with what has come to be known as the Kyoto School of Philosophy,⁵ so-called because the main thinkers, beginning with Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945), Hajime Tanabe (1885–1962), and Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990), either held the position of Professor of Philosophy or received their graduate training in the Department of Philosophy, Kyoto University. Another member of the Kyoto School, Masao Abe (1915–2006), a long-time Zen practitioner, became among the most well known in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, as he held a series of visiting appointments at such institutions as Claremont Graduate School and Columbia University. Also closely associated with the Kyoto School was Zen thinker D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), who is touched on later in this essay. One of the notions at the core of the Kyoto School was *zettai mu*, or absolute nothingness, which was contrasted with Western notions of being, in particular Divine Being, or God.

This notion of absolute nothingness is derived from the Mahayana Buddhist notion of emptiness, or in Sanskrit, *śūnyatā*. First fully articulated by Nāgārjuna, the first philosopher of Mahayana Buddhism, the way in which this term is most familiar to us in the west is as *śūnya*, “empty,” which is “zero,” closely related to the “empty set,” in mathematics. Without it, we would not have modern mathematics and everything associated with it.

Emptiness is part of what Nāgārjuna came to the call the twofold truth, of conventional truth and highest truth, often expressed as “form” and “emptiness.” “Form” refers to the world of appearances defined in terms of words, concepts, and language; “emptiness,” to the world and mind emptied of human conceptual constructions. When the mind is emptied of words and concepts, then the usual divisions and separations also dissolve and disappear, such that there is a realization of an oneness beyond words, emptied of categorical distinctions. This does not mean the negation of language; rather, it means one is able to see things just as they are, in their “thatness” or “suchness” (Skt. *tathatā*). For example, how many of us have had the experience of being so lost in our own thoughts that we fail to appreciate the beauty of nature, or even bump into things because we aren’t paying attention? When we are able to let go of trying to pigeonhole reality according to our prejudices and

expectations, our field of vision, both literal and metaphorical, opens up so that we can see and appreciate the dynamic unfolding of reality, moment by moment. Each blade of grass, each wildflower by the roadside, becomes more vivid in our awareness, as we move and live in sync with the world around us, unfolding in a dynamic web of interdependence (Skt. *pratītya-samudpāda*). Thus, it is said, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." Language as such is not the problem; only when we become attached to our preconceptions about reality do we become narrow and dogmatic, bringing harm to others and to ourselves. Nagarjuna famously stated that one must not become attached even to the concept of emptiness, that one should realize the emptiness of "emptiness," *śūnyatā-śūnyatā*. Thus, there are a series of synonymous expressions for this aspect of the twofold truth, such as "highest truth," "thatness," "oneness," "dharma body," but no one concept that is truly representative, not even "emptiness." One can begin to see how such a view differs from one in which the concept of "God" plays such a central role, and wherein God as "Word (*Logos*) became flesh" (John 1:14).

Thus, a significant part of the theological debate between these Japanese Buddhist and Western Christian thinkers took place concerning the former's Absolute Nothingness (closely associated with emptiness) and the latter's Divine Being. Where attempts have been made to bridge these differences: absolute nothingness and Divine Being, emptiness and God, each has tended to emphasize one side over the other. On the side of Japanese Zen Buddhism, Masao Abe is well known for emphasizing what he sees as the emptiness of God, what he calls the *kenotic* God:

From my student days I was deeply moved by the following passage from the Epistle to the Philippians:

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, count not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of man, and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross.

In this passage the self-emptying, that is kenosis of the Christ, the Son of God, is impressively stated. While I was deeply moved by this image of the kenotic Christ, I also had a long-standing question, that is, when the Son of God emptied himself did God the Father just remain God without emptying Himself? In my view, if God is all loving, God the Father must have emptied himself. In other words, without the self-emptying of God the Father, the self-emptying of the Son of God is inconceivable. (Abe 1995: 55)

In contrast, Christian theologian John Cobb identifies what he sees as a deep resonance between Christ and Amida Buddha, the cosmic, personalized expression of Mahayana emptiness as found in Pure Land Buddhism, in his essay, "Amida and Christ: Buddhism and Christianity," which begins, "Amida is Christ, and Christ is Amida." Cobb lays the groundwork for this idea by first addressing the

level of emptiness and its correlate, interdependent co-origination, *pratītya-samud-pada*. Drawing on the work of process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, Cobb states,

The occasion of experience only comes into being as others coalesce into it. In short, there is no substance with attributes. There are only relationships merging into unified experience. The ongoing process in which this occurs, always and everywhere, Whitehead calls “creativity”.

Whitehead was aware of points of contact between his thought and Buddhism. The similarity has become more and more apparent in the years since he wrote. Indeed, his account of creativity and some Buddhist accounts of *pratītya samutpada* are so similar that I judge them to be alternative accounts of the same feature of the totality. In other words, creativity is *pratītya samutpada* and *pratītya samutpada* is creativity. (Cobb 1997)

On the one hand, Amida Buddha is the self-expression of this emptiness/interdependent co-origination in Pure Land Buddhism, and for Cobb, on the other, God is the highest expression and enabler of the Whiteheadian process of innumerable influences, interrelated, coalescing together, in intelligent creativity. For Cobb, Buddhist interdependent co-origination and his own process theology express a sense of positive unity, an expression of cosmic love and wisdom:

As Amida constitutes the Wisdom and Compassion that work everywhere in all things; so Christ is known by Christians as the Wisdom and Love of God working in the world creatively and transformatively . . . To say that Amida is Christ and Christ is Amida is to say that there really are a Wisdom and Compassion present everywhere and always that seek our transformation and redemption. (Cobb 1997)

There is no space here to do justice to either Abe or Cobb on the ways they take theological differences into account, how the thinking of each has been affected and transformed by the other and the larger process of interreligious dialogue. There are also Buddhists and Christians who have disagreed with various views presented by these thinkers and ideas that need to be worked out more fully. However, even this brief glimpse shows how Buddhist and Christian thinkers have sought to bridge differences in theological viewpoints, each based on their own basic self-understandings.

A different dimension reveals itself when the focus of interreligious interaction shifts from the world of theological ideas to personal encounter and shared contemplative practices.

Contemplative Encounter

In 1998, I had occasion to attend a conference held at the University of San Francisco, entitled, “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Promises and Pitfalls,” organized by Mark

Berkson. Although there were many excellent presenters, there is one in particular that I recall, made by Sister Mary Margaret Funk, at that time executive director of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue and a Benedictine prioress. She said something to the effect of, “Theologians tend to get caught up in debates about differences in doctrine; contemplatives find common ground in the shared experience of that which lies beyond words.” Indeed, Buddhist and Christian contemplatives have often found common ground through partaking of each other’s religious practices, sharing them in the context of each other’s sacred spaces.

From the late 1970s through the 1990s, a series of East-West Spiritual Exchanges were carried out between Japanese and Christian monastics in various Japanese and European monasteries, with Catholic monks even going as far as donning Zen monks’ robes. While the record of their exchanges included great respect for mutual differences, recognition of the need for open, thorough communication, and following one another’s ritual forms and liturgy while visiting each other’s precincts, the main point of emphasis is clear, as reflected in the report provided by Father Jan van Bragt:

“‘Encounter’—to be broadened oneself so that one can admit others and through others obtain a new look at oneself; and to be enabled to ask oneself a whole host of new questions” (J.W.) . . .

More testimonies could be added, but the core of the answer is undoubtedly this: the encounter brought the participants the astonishing experience and living proof that, for all the cultural and doctrinal differences, they share a common ideal and that, notwithstanding all language barriers and other obstacles, they understood one another amazingly well. “I felt in truly fraternal communion with the *unsui* (Zen monks)” (J.B.). “The most beautiful thing in this living together was that we were able to meet people who, with full commitment, openness, and good spirits, are striving for purity of heart and encounter with ultimate reality. We could recognize one another as companions on the way” (T.T.). (van Bragt 1984: 22–23)

It is natural that in deep friendship, there is much more than an exchange of words and ideas, or even material gifts, but an opening of hearts such that both parties are profoundly affected by the relationship, and there is mutual transformation. Why would this be any different in interreligious friendship?

One of the more famous such friendships developed between the lay Zen practitioner and thinker D. T. Suzuki and Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton. Merton is well known through his many works, from his early memoir *The Seven Storey Mountain* through his later writings such as *Zen and Birds of Appetite*. Born in France, the earlier work recounts his many adventures as a young man including his days as a student at Cambridge University in England, Columbia University in the United States and his self-described bouts of debauchery. He eventually became a Catholic monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky. *The Seven Storey Mountain* reflects a period in which Merton honed his intense Catholic faith to the exclusion of all else. By the time we come to *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton

is hardly the same person, insofar as he becomes so open to dialogue and incorporation of the inspiration of many sources and traditions. There comes a point at which Merton's Catholic faith and Zen influence seemingly become inextricable: "Here we can fruitfully reflect on the deep meaning of Jesus' saying: 'Judge not, and you will not be judged.'" Beyond its moral implications, familiar to all, there is a Zen dimension to this word of the Gospel. Only when this Zen dimension [of emptiness] is grasped will the moral bearing of it be fully clear!" (Merton 1968: 6–7).

Suzuki also becomes influenced by Christian theology, although to some extent he seems to remain more within his own Zen interpretive framework: "As I interpret [Meister] Eckhart, [the Catholic monk and theologian], God is at once the place where he works and the work itself. The place is zero or 'Emptiness as Being,' whereas the work which is carried on in the zero-place is infinity or 'Emptiness as Becoming.'" (Merton: 110).

Each speaks from within his own religion, respecting differences and maintaining his own perspective. There are also ways that their views, experiences of each other, and their mutual paths profoundly influenced their religious lives. In fact, both Merton and Suzuki have been accused of losing the "purity" of their respective faiths and paths and perhaps rightly so. But they also pose, through their work, lives, and mutual friendship, significant questions: Are there absolute boundaries around which one can draw the lines of faith and religious paths? Who decides? And how? Is there a way in which any faith, if too dogmatically closed, fails in its own mission?

In fact, Jesuit scholar James Fredericks proposes that "interreligious friendship" represents a "new theological virtue" necessary for our times and for religious persons to fully flourish:

Interreligious friendship is a human excellence, a virtue, because such friendships embody what [David] Tracy has called a "form of resistance." Such friendships help us to resist the multiple strategies we have for domesticating demanding truths [of other religions] or inoculating ourselves from their transformative power. Tracy holds that, in every act of resistance, some unnameable hope begins to show itself. In interreligious friendships, this unnameable hope becomes discernible in the face of the Other, the friend. (Fredericks: 172)

Fredericks' approach to the religiously "other" through "interreligious friendship" forms a striking contrast with the historical origins of the *Nostra Aetate*, where John Oesterreicher initially conceived of the document as a platform for converting the "other" to his own faith.

Engaged Social and Environmental Activism

In early-to-mid twentieth-century theological encounters between Christian and Buddhist thinkers, Christian theologians at times criticized Buddhists for not sufficiently engaging problems of social concern, of taking too passive an attitude in general. Buddhists fired back that Christians tended to be too aggressive in their invasive historical engagements and of failing to be sufficiently attentive to nature

and environmental concerns. As Sallie King and others have since pointed out, it can safely be said that such generalizations have been overdone. Both Buddhism and Christianity have long and complex histories in which they have variously attended to social needs and shown care and concern for the nonhuman animal world and the environment (King 1999). Furthermore, both Buddhism and Christianity have often fallen short of their own goals of social and environmental engagement. Since there is no space for an in-depth examination of these issues here, and there are substantial scholarly resources available elsewhere, a few anecdotal remarks will have to suffice.

In traditional Asian Buddhist cultures, social services were often provided organically within families and communities. Temples were often extensions of families and villages, and they often served as sources of social, financial, and medical support as well as places of religious practice. Some temples had specific associations. For example, the area around the temple of Daiunji in northern Kyoto, Japan, with the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Skt. Avalokitesvara) as its main deity, came to be known for its care of *kichigai*, people with “different spirits,” or in contemporary parlance, mental illness. Families in the area were known to take in and care for such people well into the late nineteenth century (Suzuki 2011: 213; Hashimoto 2012). Families and priests also provided for end-of-life care. Families attended to the dying, bathed their bodies, and prepared them for the funeral. Priests provided pastoral care. Even cremation had a multifaceted spiritual function. When a grandparent died, the youngest grandchild was tasked with picking up the “throat buddha” (*nodo botoke*) together with a parent and depositing it into the urn; this was supposedly the larynx, which, through careful temperature control, was preserved intact and had a somewhat “buddha”-like shape (*Osōshiki manaa jiten*). This served to initiate even the very young into the recognition of death, the awareness of impermanence, and respect for the spirit of the deceased.

With modernization and Westernization in Japan and elsewhere in Buddhist Asia, there was increased social mobility, technological convenience, advancements in medical care, and economic prosperity. At the same time, there were the rapid fragmentation of extended families, increasingly isolated experiences of illness and death, and the need for Western-style institutions and social structures to cover what had been previously provided for organically. Thus, there arose the need for government and religiously sponsored social programs including housing and hunger assistance, hospice care, and counseling and therapy services. It is in this context that Asian Buddhists have found Western secular as well as religious ideas and practices helpful for formulating their own.

In Japan, in the Shin tradition of Pure Land Buddhism, Vihara Care (Nabeshima 2006: 232–252), a Buddhist version of hospice, was initiated, providing not only care for the terminal ill but also integrating grief counseling, an innovation that led some of its Western counterparts. This incorporation of Western practices can be seen in North American Buddhism as well, with many Buddhist programs involving social services, political activism, and end-of-life care. Nipponzan Myōhōji, a Buddhist sect based on the *Lotus Sutra*, has led peace marches around the world

(Kisala 1999: 43–53); Palo Alto Buddhist Temple has been part of the Ecumenical Hunger Program in the Bay Area of California for over two decades (Ecumenical Hunger Program); Zen monk Issan Dorsey established the Maitri Hospice service at the Hartford Street Zen Center in San Francisco (Schneider 2000). Although there is no space to enter into a more detailed discussion, these kinds of adaptations, innovations, and co-operative efforts are indicative of the fruits of interreligious and intercultural interaction between Buddhists and Christians, Asian traditions and Western practices.

CONCLUSION

In lieu of a conclusion, I would like to end with a story, one that has to do with hospice or end-of-life care. Over the past thirty years, providing hospice service has become integral to the practice of medicine in North America and in many other parts of the world. A major impetus for its practice and acceptance was provided by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who outlined the six stages of grief in the end-of-life trajectory as a *human* concern rather than a *physiological* one, even though the knowledge of medical conditions has become integral to the process of providing hospice care (Ross 1970). Prior to the integration of hospice into medical care, there was often an uneasy marriage between the medical profession and spiritually caring for those with terminal conditions, such that medical doctors dealt with the condition of the body, and hospital chaplains the care of the soul, which not infrequently were artificially limited to the administration of last rites. Thus, Kübler-Ross's work provided the needed secular yet human concern and expertise that have come to define much of what is provided through hospice.

The historical origins of hospice can be traced much farther back, however, to the Order of the Knights of Saint John, or the Knights Hospitaller, a Catholic group that provided for the needs of sick and impoverished pilgrims in the area around Jerusalem a millennium ago, and this included tending to those who were dying. Although the Knights Hospitaller would go on to change and take on many different functions in the ensuing decades and centuries, its Catholic origins remain relevant today (Nicholson 2001).

This past November 24, 2014, my father was hospitalized at Sacred Heart Hospital in Riverbend, located in the Eugene-Springfield area of Oregon. My father, Taitetsu Unno, had been gradually slowing down due to congestive heart failure, and as his heart went into tachycardia, he was taken by ambulance to Riverbend. As the name indicates, Sacred Heart has a Catholic affiliation. During his two-week stay, our family was deeply impressed with the total experience: the quality of the facilities, even more so the quality of care, with doctors and nurses arriving on average every twenty minutes for almost the whole time my father was there. Although not all of the staff at Riverbend are Catholic, there was a certain attentiveness and spiritual tone to the care that bore the stamp of the hospital's Catholic affiliation. When he was ready to be discharged, we were given a careful explanation that he qualified for hospice, but that there were other options as well.

It was clear to us as a family, and my father made it clear, that he was ready for and wanted hospice. Over the past twenty to thirty years, our entire medical system has greatly evolved concerning end-of-life care, and we were the grateful recipients of the fruits of this evolution, including the Medicare Hospice Benefit that covered various costs including provisions for all necessary at-home equipment and staffing, such as a hospital bed, oxygen equipment, and hospice nurses and staffing.

My father was an ordained Buddhist priest in the Shin Buddhist tradition, as well as a scholar of Buddhism. He was the thirteenth generation ordained in his family, and following in his footsteps, I am the fourteenth generation ordained and also a scholar in the field of Buddhist studies. The hospice workers attentively and compassionately explained the care available to us, including medical care, various conditions that might arise as the end neared, and available medications. We were fortunate that my father was at home, without pain, and fully alert, just thanking us and thanking everyone who came to visit. We explained that my father did not need morphine for palliative care, or Lorazepam, a relaxant that can be administered for mental anxiety and to relax the body. He was ready, and we were ready. The hospice workers were very careful to offer the menu of services, medication, and equipment but not to try to dictate the process or intrude. Most of all, they were just very caring, letting us know that they were there for us if we needed them, but that they wanted to let my father and us make the decisions we felt were best. As I write this, I can still recall just how compassionate they were.

I do not know, and it certainly did not occur to us, whether any or all of the hospice staff were Catholic. Yet, in hindsight, I think I can safely say that the total experience, between the time that my father was admitted at Riverbend and the completion of his life journey on December 13, 2014, took place in a Catholic-affiliated context, and we were recipients of the best of the influence of Catholic virtues. On our part, as my father neared his final days and hours, my father and I, and other family members, exchanged many moving moments of mutual appreciation and thanks. We frequently did Buddhist chanting together, and I could see how much my father relaxed into and took joy in the chanting. When my father could no longer chant or speak, he would simply put his palms together, and his faint but evident smile expressed his deep emotions.

Between the hospital and hospice staff, on the one hand, and us as a Buddhist family, on the other, I sensed a connection that was deeply human and even spiritual. They treated us with great respect, and we deeply appreciated everything they did for us. We did not think about this as an interreligious encounter. Looking back now, however, it can certainly be seen in that light. Without exchanging any explicit terms of interreligious dialogue, I think we were deeply in such a dialogue, each profoundly shaped by religious influences in their background. These religious influences, different as they may be, enabled a sense of connection, in Catholic terms, that might be said to have been touched by the force of *agape*, divine love, and in Shin Buddhist terms, boundless compassion.

Although there is sadness, the completion of my father's life journey was filled with such a profound sense of gratitude that I do not have any words to describe

it. A day and a half before his passing, I was in meetings at the university all day long. After each one hour meeting, I called my mother to check in. Before the very last meeting of the afternoon, when I called her, I could hear her becoming emotional as she told me that my father was trying to tell me something and was motioning with his hands. She told me that she thought he would be all right until I finished at work, but I immediately left to go to my parents' home. When I arrived and went to his bedside, he began gesturing with his hands and tried to speak, but he was unable to form the words he intended. I grasped his right hand in mine and said, "Dad, just relax." For the next five minutes or so, I told him what I thought he was trying to say to me. When I was finished, I said, "Dad, is there anything else?" He simply shook his head, indicated there was nothing left unsaid, nothing left undone. In that moment, it was as if our hearts were one, embraced in boundless compassion.

In a spiritual sense, the heart-to-heart caring that took place between the staff of Sacred Heart Hospital and our Buddhist family and that helped to provide the space in which my father and I shared our hearts as one, it seems to me, are well reflected in Tennessee Williams words, "That's how it is in all living relationships except when there is that rare case of two people who love intensely enough to burn through all those layers of opacity and see each other's naked hearts." This certainly seemed to apply to the relationship between my father and me at that time, but it also seemed to be reflected in the unspoken intimacy between the hospice workers and our family.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Katherine Rand for bringing this Tennessee Williams passage to my attention.
2. This paper was originally delivered at the University of St. Thomas, October 12, 2015, on the occasion of a conference on the *Nostra Aetate* organized by Dr. John Merkle. I am indebted to him for providing such an opportunity and for permission to publish my work here.
3. Two thinkers relevant to encountering the Other are Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber although I do not reference them here. See, for example, Levinas (2005) and Buber (2010).
4. While representatives from many of the world's religions were included, there were notable exclusions as well, such as Sikhs, Native Americans, and others.
5. See, Bret Davis, "The Kyoto School," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kyoto-school/>, accessed October 1, 2015.

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