

The Christian Exploration of Non-Christian Religions: Merton's Example and Where It Might Lead Us

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Merton was a bellwether for the Catholic Church. His thinking changed constantly throughout his life and with each change he was always slightly ahead of important movements in the reform of Catholic spirituality in the twentieth century. It was significant that he was only *slightly* ahead of his time. Had he been too far ahead of the church he might have been ignored or condemned but, somehow, he managed to be the first to express what was on the tips of the tongues of many Catholics. This, I believe, is the secret of his popularity, both during his life and now, so many years after his death.¹

I have suggested that he went through a number of stages, trailing, like the Pied Piper, the church (even, *mirabile dictu*, the Vatican itself) behind him, beginning, after his rejection of secularism, with what I have called Romantic Medievalism, marked by the publication of his best-selling *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1948). His next stage was Romantic Orientalism in which he became enamored of a variety of East Asian religious traditions, notably Philosophical Taoism (Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu) and Buddhism. At first, he learnt much of his Buddhism from his contact with D.T. Suzuki, an important but, as we are beginning to see, ambiguous figure in the dissemination of the Buddha Dharma to the West.²

1. For a detailed study of this issue see my 'Fire on the Seven Storey Mountain: Why Are Catholics Looking East?', *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey* (ed. M. Basil Pennington, OCSO; Cistercian Studies Series, 103; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988), pp. 204-21.

2. For a discussion of the uneven relationship between D.T. Suzuki and Thomas Merton, in which it appears that Merton honestly tried to learn about

Suzuki was regarded in the West as a Zen Master, and although he did not claim the title he did nothing to deny it. He was never authenticated as a Zen teacher, he may never have attained the *satori* (Zen awakening) to which his later writings allude, and in Japan he is known as an adherent of Shin, the form of Buddhism which advocates trust in and surrender to Amida Buddha over what it regards as the ineffectiveness of so-called 'miscellaneous practices' such as Zen sitting and *koan* practice.

Merton was able to recover from the unreliable information he received from D.T. Suzuki, which was not Buddhism as much as it was a triumphalist form of Sino-Japanese monism,³ during his travels in Asia, where he met Theravadin and Tibetan monks, including HH Dalai Lama XIV.⁴ His experience at Polunaruwa, Sri Lanka, which we might call a 'buddhophany', rings true to the essential teaching of all Buddhist lineages on the lack of inherent existence, the fundamental openness, of reality-as-it-is (called Selflessness [*anatta*] in Theravada and Emptiness [*shunyata*] in Mahayana).⁵ However, he did not stay long with this insight. His speech in Bangkok, which in the event became his final testament, revealed his growing interest in Marxism, and may have presaged a move, cut short by his untimely death, towards Liberation Theology, which was beginning to gain popularity in South and Central America. Since his time, Liberation Theology has undergone many changes, partly in response to Vatican attacks. Had Merton lived, he might have participated in these changes (as Novice Master he taught Ernesto Cardenal and was much influenced by him) or he might have moved on to something quite different.

We are still trying to follow, and catch up with, Merton. This essay will attempt to build on Merton's suggestions, focusing on his inter-

Buddhism from Suzuki but Suzuki was not interested in, and even despised, Christianity, see my 'In Search of a Context for the Merton-Suzuki Dialogue', *The Merton Annual* 6 (1993) pp. 76-91.

3. For discussions on the triumphalism of Zen missions to the west, and the 'other side' of D.T. Suzuki, see James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo (eds.) *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995).

4. A moving tribute to Merton by the Dalai Lama, who refers to himself as 'one of his Buddhist brothers', was delivered at the end of the July 1996 Buddhist-Christian retreat at Gethsemani Abbey. Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman OSB (eds.), *The Gethsemani Encounter* (New York: Continuum, 1998), pp. 260-61.

5. The account of the experience at Polunaruwa is in Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (ed. Naomi Burton et al.; New York: New Directions, 1973), pp. 233-36.

action with Buddhism, the non-Christian religion which interested him the most.⁶ I have already published my analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Merton's interactions with Buddhism, in the two articles mentioned above, and I respectfully refer the reader to them for a more detailed introduction. Here, I will propose where his insights might lead us.

Exclusivism and Inclusivism

It is sometimes said that Christians have no business conversing with other religious traditions: Christianity is the truth from God, other religions are false or are the deceptions of the devil, and non-Christians are damned to hell. On the other hand, it is claimed that, since God is the God of all and wills the salvation of all, no-one is outside the love of God. These two views, of exclusivism and inclusivism, are found in the Bible, and they have existed side by side throughout Christian history. In the early church, inclusivism was the more popular view—the Fathers generally maintained that God's salvific grace was brought to fulfillment in Jesus but that it had been at work before his appearance. The classic statement is that of Justin Martyr. Basing himself on Jn 1.1-18, Justin said 'And those who live according to Principle (Logos) are Christians, even though accounted atheist'.⁷ During the Middle Ages, inclusivism lost ground and the statement *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est* ('outside the church there is no salvation') based upon St Augustine's theology of universal sin, became popular.⁸ At the Reformation, this was picked up by John Calvin, who claimed that works done out of Christ are worthless, and it dominated Tridentine Catholic missiology. St Francis Xavier, for example, lamented that there were so many heathens in India to be baptized (who would otherwise go to hell) that he did not have time to eat, sleep, or pray.⁹

6. See, for example, such remarkably prescient books as Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967) and *idem, Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

7. καὶ οἱ μετὰ λόγου βιώσαντες, Χριστιανοὶ εἰσι, κἄν ἄθεου ἐνομαθῆσαν. Justin, *1 Apol.*, 46 (Patrologia Graeca, v. 6, col. 397).

8. The interpretation of this apparently clear dictum has never been straightforward. See Francis A. Sullivan, SJ, *Salvation outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992). I am indebted to Professor Terrence Tilley of the University of Dayton for this reference.

9. 'When I go into those villages, the children do not give me the leisure (*no dexavan*) to recite my Office, to eat or to sleep, until I have taught them some

Recently, the Catholic Church has revived the inclusivist position and given it official recognition, beginning with the Second Vatican Council which proclaimed that 'the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions' and that they 'often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men'.¹⁰ On the basis of this, Pope Paul VI set up the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions in 1964. In 1989 it was reorganized, and given permanent status, as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). The PCID is now the principal actor in an ongoing commitment by the Vatican to dialogue, rather than confrontation, with those who do not explicitly own to faith in Christ. Stimulated by the PCID, Catholic monks and nuns have engaged in profound and fruitful exchanges with Buddhist monks and nuns under the auspices of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) program.¹¹

However, these recent developments at the official level have not resolved, but rather intensified, the theological tension between exclusivism and inclusivism. Raising dialogue to prominence by giving it a permanent Vatican office has put the exclusivists on the alert. Too much dialogue, they fear, dilutes the claim that Jesus (the personal, individual Jesus, not the universal Logos) is the one and only Savior. Several Vatican documents now propose some version of inclusivism (under the rubric of 'dialogue') and exclusivism (variously called 'mission', 'proclamation' or 'announcement') simultaneously, insisting that they must be balanced, but not explaining how to effect this balance. For example, *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990) baldly states 'salvation comes from Christ...dialogue does not dispense from evangelization', leaving it up to us to decide what that means in practice.¹² Most recently, *Ecclesia in Asia* (6 November 1999),

prayers'. *Epistolae Sancti Francisci Xaverii aliaque eius scripta* (ed. G. Schurhammer, SI and I. Wicki, SI; Rome: 1944), vol. I, p. 148, lines 21-23.

10. *Nostra aetate*. Section 2. *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)* (ed. Francesco Gioia; Boston: Paulist Books and Media, 1994), p. 38.

11. In Europe, the exchange has been largely between Benedictines and Japanese Buddhists, whereas in the USA the Tibetan Buddhists have been more prominent with, once again, Benedictines on the Christian side. For the European dialogue, see Mitchiko Ishigami-Iagolnitzer, *Dialogue interreligieux monastique Boudhistes-Chrétiens au Japon et en Europe* (Paris: Sciences et Lettres, 1992). The exchange in the USA remains largely unstudied and information on it must be gleaned from the *Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, published at Gethsemani Abbey.

12. English text printed in Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 102. See also the extended discussion on the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions document 'The

the papal response to the Synod for Asia held in April 1998, has deepened the mystery. Father Michael Amaldoss, SJ of Vidyajyoti College of Theology, New Delhi, shrewdly notes that 'one can pick up encouraging quotes [from *Ecclesia in Asia*] to support any activity in which the church is engaged'.¹³

Merton, already in his day ahead of the church, was definitely on the side of universalism. His legacy is encapsulated in his remark that 'by openness to Buddhism...we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions'.¹⁴ We can now enter into his legacy and ask how we can move beyond it, considering how the church can be as open as possible to the fullness of Buddhism (dialogue) without compromising the fullness of the Christian message (proclamation).

Beyond Merton's Legacy

In the Christian exploration of Buddhism there are, as I see it, three levels in the movement from contact with to full dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. At the most basic level, Christianity can learn from Buddhism, and Buddhism can in turn learn from Christianity; secondly, Christianity and Buddhism can renew themselves on the basis of their mutual education; and finally, Buddhism and Christianity, thus renewed, can participate in a global spiritual renewal.

The first level is open to all Christians who come into contact with Buddhism from an inclusivist perspective, and it happens more or less automatically. True dialogue differs from monologue in that both parties strive to listen to each other, to learn from each other, and to allow themselves to be challenged and changed. It is a mark of a living system that it changes, and it is a sign of maturity in a person, or system, that there is no fear of change in and of itself. From a theological perspective, the renewal of the church is a work of the Holy Spirit

Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientation on Dialogue and Mission (May 10, 1984)', Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, pp. 566-80, which reads as if it had been written by at least two different people (and, given what one knows about how Vatican documents are produced, that may indeed be the case). The analytical index of *Interreligious Dialogue* rewards careful study.

13. 'Proclamation vs. Dialogue: Mixed Reactions to Pope's Call for Conversion of Asia', *National Catholic Reporter*, 3 December 1999.

14. Merton, *Asian Journal*, p. 343.

that it would be sinful to quash. In this essay I will restrict myself to suggesting some ways in which Christianity can learn from Buddhism and postpone to a later date suggestions on how Buddhism can learn from Christianity.

Having learnt from each other, and begun to change because of what they have learnt, Christianity and Buddhism can renew themselves to the point that they will cease to exist as we know them at present. This is not as radical as it might sound—it has already happened many times. It is a truism that even the most radically reformist Christians never imagine that they are literally, in every respect, down to the language and customs, restoring the church, or churches, as it was or they were in the days of St Paul. In a real sense, the church of the Apostles, the church of the Middle Ages, and so forth, have ceased to exist so that the church of today could come into being. We seem to be at another point in history where the church will undergo such a change that, were we to be able to see the future, we might say that the church had disappeared.

These two levels of dialogue are like the warm-up band that prepares the audience for the featured artists. Having gone through the mutual learning and renewal process, the transformed traditions will be able to assist, provoke, and participate in, the spiritual renewal of the entire planet.

In what follows I will expand and build upon some of my earlier suggestions about renewal, to which I again respectfully refer the reader who is unfamiliar with my work.¹⁵ I will arrange my suggestions broadly in accordance with the three ascending levels of dialogue, but since the levels are interdependent, and their categories somewhat porous, I will not rigidly tie any one suggestion to a particular level of dialogue. The reader should, however, notice a movement upwards (or inwards) towards an ever richer sense of communion between Christianity and Buddhism.

15. In addition to the articles already mentioned, see my 'A Christian Perspective on Buddhist Liberation', in Claude Geffré and Mariasusai Dhavamony (eds.), *Buddhism and Christianity* (Concilium, 116; New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 74-87. I build upon and modify this early work in 'Some Buddhist Contributions to Catholic Theology', a paper read at the conference on *The Future of the American Church: From Dream to Reality to Vision: 25 Years after Vatican II*, held in Washington, DC, September 1990. This paper remains at the moment unpublished.

Anonymous Dualism

Officially, Christianity is not dualistic. Indeed, it stigmatizes dualists as Gnostics, Bogomils, Cathars, and so forth, and has in the past tried to exterminate them, proclaiming the incarnation of the God-Man as the definitive answer to such heresies. In practice, Christianity is often very dualistic, but it is not in the habit of admitting or even recognizing it. Paul Knitter has called this 'anonymous dualism' and has suggested that an examination of Merton's dialogue with Buddhism might help to cure the church of its unofficial schizophrenia.¹⁶ I agree, but I enter a caveat.

Much of the dialogue (especially in Europe, as noted above) has been between Benedictines and Japanese Zen Buddhists. This seems to work well at first, since everyone gets along so famously. Benedictines, with their motto of *Pax*, do not wish to offend, and the Zen Buddhists, being Japanese, are culturally conditioned to be courteous. But these social strengths are also theological weaknesses, since no one is ready for the cut-and-thrust of lively doctrinal debate. Worse still, Zen Buddhists have a tendency to de-emphasize doctrine in favor of aestheticism, lapsing into a version of the uncritical Sino-Japanese monism which bedeviled the books of D.T. Suzuki. It is fairly soon obvious that this does not go anywhere.¹⁷ The formalities of introduction completed, we need to bring on the theologians and dharmologists.¹⁸ When Jesuits are true to their heritage (and a surprising number of them have fallen victim to Sino-Japanese esthetic monism) they like to debate, and they are good at it. Their worthy adversaries in debate are not the Zen Buddhists but the Tibetans, the T'ien-t'ai (Tendai) Buddhists of East Asia, and the Theravadin specialists in Abhidhamma.

The Tibetan Buddhists, especially those of the Gelugpa lineage (the

16. Paul K. Knitter, "Thomas Merton's Eastern Remedy for Christianity's 'Anonymous Dualism'", *Cross Currents* 31.3 (Fall 1981), pp. 285-95.

17. For a critique of this situation and suggestions of how to move beyond it, see my 'Sense and Nonsense in Buddhist-Christian Intermonastic Dialogue', *Monastic Studies* 19 = *Buddhist and Christian Monasticism* (1991), pp. 11-22.

18. The neologism 'dharmologist' is suggested as the Buddhist counterpart of 'theologian', but some scholars are comfortable with the phrase 'Buddhist theology' despite the absence in Buddhism of a God as recognized by Christianity. See the articles in Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky (eds.), *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* (Curzon Critical Studies in Buddhism; Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 2000), including my 'Hermeneutics and Dharmology: Finding an American Buddhist Voice', pp. 95-107.

lineage to which the Dalai Lama belongs) are trained in debate as an important part of their monastic formation. They are in principle opposed to the formless (imageless or aniconic) sitting practices of Zen, regarding them as dangerous temptations to grasp on to Emptiness as a concept or idea, thus becoming, as Nagarjuna said, incurable:

Emptiness has been declared by the Conquerors (i.e., the Buddhas) as the purgative of all viewpoints; whoever regards Emptiness itself as a viewpoint is declared incurable.¹⁹

In order to use Emptiness as a medicine the Gelugpas engage in spirited, noisy, but precisely regulated, debate. The aim is not to destroy the opponent but to sharpen the insight of both the protagonist and the antagonist. The goal is wisdom, the motivation is compassion—since, without wisdom, unskillful actions will continue to produce suffering. Buddhist-Christian debate could learn much from this approach. Upon the successful conclusion of such a debate there would be no aesthetically pleasing but intellectually mushy monism or unrecognized dualism, there would be greater insight. Particularly, the subtlety and strength of the positions on each side would be brought out. It would help to reassure both Buddhists and Christians that indifferentism is not the goal of dialogue, but rather mutual understanding. A major point of mutual understanding concerns the presence or absence of God in the two systems. There are Christians who assume that, whatever a Buddhist might say, there is a belief in God hidden somewhere in the Dharma. Most Buddhists are too polite to object that this view is quite erroneous, and it took a Gelugpa teacher to call it like it is.²⁰

The T'ien-t'ai Buddhists of China belong to a lineage which was formed to contain all the doctrines and practices of all the varieties of Buddhism known to the founder, Chih-i (531–597), and to balance study and meditation. Ch'an Buddhism is a fragment which broke out of the grand synthesis of T'ien-t'ai, and Zen, the Japanese derivative of Ch'an, developed into a lineage with a more or less exclusive concentration on one or two practices (*zazen* and *koan*), rendering it unsuitable for extended dialogue with more comprehensive traditions such as Catholic Christianity. It has to be realized that the Japanese Buddhist traditions, particularly as they regrouped during the Kamakura Shogunate (a grouping that largely survives to the present

19. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 13.8 (my translation).

20. Thubten Losel, 'Buddhist-Christian Dialogue—a Prolegomena [sic]', in M. Darrol Bryant and Frank Flinn (eds.), *Interreligious Dialogue: Voices from a New Frontier* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), pp. 191–97.

day), which have up to now dominated the dialogue between East Asian Buddhists and Catholics, are unusual precisely in respect of their separation into exclusivist lineages. Other forms of East Asian Buddhism have remained more inclusive, or eclectic. The appropriate balance between doctrine and practice, for example, is a central concern of Korean Buddhism, and the right relationship between Zen style meditation and the more devotional style of meditation found in Pure Land Buddhism (forms which are split into separate lineages in Japan) is important to Vietnamese Buddhism. Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese Buddhist traditions are, on the whole, better prepared than most Japanese Buddhist traditions to enter into dialogue with the full range of Catholic doctrine and practice.

Theravada, the Buddhism of South Asia, has a single 'philosophy' or explanatory system, Abhidhamma (a word that we might translate as 'advanced teaching'). Specialists in Abhidhamma are a match for Christian theologians in a way that virtuous but unscholarly monks, or random teachers of Insight Meditation, the abbreviated form of Theravada meditation practice popular in the West, are not. For example, an honest debate between Theravadin and Christian scholars could illuminate the vexed question of why systems which attribute the causes of events respectively to a Creator God and to interdependent arising (*paticca-samuppada*) are apparently incompatible, or at least irrelevant to each other.

The direction in which such sophisticated dialogue between intellectual equals might go is indicated by John Keenan, whose *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahāyāna Theology*²¹ is a fine example of what can happen when Buddhist, rather than Greco-Roman, philosophical ideas are allowed to interact with and inform the Christian message. Keenan's book goes a long way towards healing anonymous dualism in Christianity.²²

Default Idolatry

Officially, once again, Christianity is bitterly opposed to idolatry, but in practice it gets stuck on images of God. We all know that 'really' God is not an old man in the sky, yet we speak of God as *Him* and blithely attribute human thoughts, emotions, and actions to 'him'. Perhaps we think that if we do not speak of God as *him* then the only

21. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

22. I have made some suggestions myself in 'Can Buddhism Validate the Truth of God Incarnate?' *Modern Theology* 3.4 (July 1987), pp. 333-43.

other option would be to speak of God as *It*. All but the most radically feminist Christians display an immediate distaste for the image of God as female. It seems to bring up fears of paganism, perhaps because the Hebrew Bible generally reserves female imagery for the deities of 'the nations', although there are a few passages in which female imagery is used for the God of Israel.²³ Buddhism can help us find a middle way by showing us how to assert the *existence* of an object or being while denying its *inherent existence*.

The Madhyamika explanatory system (or philosophy) of Mahayana Buddhism asserts the existence of a thing at the level of conventional truth. It then asks us to point out where *precisely* that object is. We find that although we can point to the object in general we cannot point to its essence, and the more specific we try to get in regard to the existence of the thing in space and time the less precise we can be. We are thus forced to assert that, in the ultimate sense, the thing does not exist. But this is not the end of the matter. Clearly there is something there, and what we have shown is not its non-existence but the absence of *inherent* existence, the emptiness (*shunyata*) or, as I prefer to translate, the transparency of the thing's existence. We are forced to return to the statement that the thing exists, but with the realization that it simultaneously does not exist. This is called the Middle Truth and is the final teaching on Emptiness or Transparency as the nature of reality.

This insight can be applied to Christian notions of God by transforming the epistemological statements of Madhyamika into ontological statements suitable to Christian theology. The movement is from cataphatic to apophatic and back again.²⁴ First, we assert the existence of God, listing all his qualities according to standard cataphatic theology. Then we try to be as precise as possible about God's existence, locating God exactly in space and time. We find that the exercise is impossible, that the more precise we try to be the more absurd our

23. The Hebrew Bible commonly uses the mythologem of the Sky Father for the transcendent God of Israel and the mythologem of the Earth Mother for the gods (goddesses) of the nations. When these mythologems are taken literally they remove the Biblical God from creation and produce another form of anonymous dualism. Christian mysticism is more this-worldly and can provide a corrective to the acosmicism of the theologians. See my 'The Christian Mystic as *paganus rede-vivus*: A Hermeneutical Suggestion', *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990), pp. 203-16.

24. For a more extended discussion of this movement see my 'Idolatry and Inherent Existence: The Golden Calf and the Wooden Buddha', in David Loy (ed.), *Healing Deconstruction: Postmodern Thought in Buddhism and Christianity* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1996), pp. 11-31.

search becomes, and we are forced to conclude that ultimately God does not exist. This is the position of negative or apophatic theology. But, again, this is not the end of the matter, for the Christian God is not merely an abstraction, a Cosmic Mind, but is incarnate as Jesus Christ, who is (or was while on earth) locatable in space and time. We thus return to the statement that God exists, but with the realization that God simultaneously does not exist. This is standard Nicene Christology, that the divinity and the humanity are simultaneously present in Christ in the mode of co-inherence (Greek: *perichoresis*; Latin: *circumincessio*).²⁵ When we view God in this way we assert his existence but not as a solid or reified 'thing' or idol.

The feminist reader will have noticed that I have used the masculine pronoun for God. This was deliberate, but not because I wish to claim that God is male. Apophatically, God is supra-personal and so without gender, but cataphatically God is a person and must manifest gender or be relegated to a sub-personal object. Having liberated ourselves, by contact with Buddhism, from default idolatry in regard to the Christian God, we can allow God to have a fluid personality and a shifting or multidimensional gender. It is not a Buddhist, but a very Christian mystic, who is our guide here—Mother Julian of Norwich (c. 1347–c. 1420). In different passages of her *Showings or Revelation of Love* she calls God by male and female titles, and sometimes she unhesitatingly combines these antinomies in a single sentence: 'And thus I saw God enioyeth that he is our fader, God enioyeth that he is our moder, and God enioyeth that he is our very spouse, and our soule is his lovid wife'.²⁶

Mother Julian was, I am sure she would be amused to discover, very postmodern. Or, we could say, she realized that God definitely exists but not inherently. God's existence is empty, it does not have, as the schoolmen mistakenly thought, *aseitas* or *quidditas*. Realizing this, we can be free to address God differently in different contexts. As sovereign of the universe, he is Lord. As revealed in what the Fathers called the Second Bible, the Book of Nature, she is Mother. As devoted lover, he is male or she is female depending on the sex and the sexual preference of the devotee. As source of all, God is supra-

25. Christology has come to prefer the term 'hypostatic union' to 'co-inherence', but that term strongly suggests only an ontological structure. I use the more neutral term co-inherence since it can relate to the ontology of Christology as well as to the epistemology of Madhyamika. Co-inherence can also be a translation of *communicatio idiomatum*, which likewise resonates with Dharmological structures.

26. The opening sentence of Ch. 51. Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, (ed. Marion Glascoe; Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), p. 81.

personal Light. (At the end of Chapter 83, Mother Julian calls God 'our endless day'.) What effect would it have on Catholic spirituality if the English liturgy were to be rewritten in this consciousness of God's multidimensionality?²⁷

Universal Compassion

Christian compassion (*caritas*) is limited in a way that Buddhist compassion (*karuna*) is not. Although Christianity occasionally, especially in the Celtic tradition, reverences non-human life, it focuses almost exclusively on humans as creatures of God and the sole objects of God's love. Occasionally it has even sanctioned the destruction of non-human life on the basis of the argument that only humans have souls which can be redeemed. It is a straight line from this myopic view to the practice of factory farming and the lack of concern for, and the destruction of, the biosphere.²⁸

Buddhism cannot make sense of this limitation. Any being which manifestly seeks pleasure and avoids pain is a *sattva*, a sentient being which can and, in time will, be reborn as any other sentient being, and which has, finally, the potential for attaining Buddhahood. Buddhist ethical conduct even extends to insentient things, since the emphasis is on the intention of the actor as much as on the effect on the recipient of the action. If I slam a door without thinking about it, or, if I do think about it, say to myself 'It's only a door, it can't feel anything' I am practicing callousness. Since the door is insentient it is not affected one way or the other, but the next time I meet a sentient being I may find that I act in a callous manner, since I have built up a habit of callousness. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh impressed Thomas Merton when he told him that his training had included many years learning how to close a door.

Were Christians to learn from Buddhists to respect all sentient life and act towards inanimate objects as they would towards sentient

27. For a more extended discussion see my 'The Androgynous Mysticism of Julian of Norwich', *Magistra* 1.1 (Summer 1995), pp. 55-71.

28. For the opposite view see the essays in Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay McDaniel (eds.), *Liberating life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990) and in Albert J. LaChance and John E. Carroll (eds.), *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994). In 1999 the US and Canadian bishops issued a draft of an ecologically sensitive pastoral letter on the Columbia River and its resources. The final text is expected in 2000. *National Catholic Reporter* (4 June 1999), 'Restoring the Sacred in Nature'.

beings, vexed questions such as abortion would be handled with greater wisdom, compassion, and sophistication. It would be realized that human abortion cannot be considered apart from the routine abortion of animals in factory farming, nor can it be separated from broader ecological or ecosophical²⁹ concerns of how we treat the environment as a whole.

Meditation

Perhaps the most obvious and immediate result of Christian dialogue with Buddhism is the revival of Christian meditation techniques. Christians are struck that Buddhists, at least those Buddhists who teach in the West, place so much emphasis on meditation. Most often, this dialogue could be described, in tennis terms, as 'Advantage: Buddhism'. The Christians capitulate and start sitting on *zafus* and ringing bells, imagining themselves to be Zen Buddhists. Some Christians are more aware of their own tradition and they are stimulated to look into their past and dust off their meditation manuals, coming up with quasi-Buddhist techniques such as Centering Prayer (once again, on a *zafu*, if you please).

The haphazard nature of this interchange should be brought to order. The variety of Christian and Buddhist meditation techniques should be classified according to content and goal, and they should then be matched, as far as possible, with each other. It will take some discussion to decide what are the main forms of meditation in each tradition, especially in Buddhism, where pan-Buddhist meditation practice is unusual. Theravadin, Tibetan (both Sutrayana and Vajrayana), T'ien-t'ai, Zen, and Pure Land seem to be the main candidates in Buddhism, and Benedictine, Dominican, Franciscan, Jesuit, and Sulpician the chief methods in Catholicism. It then could be that, for example, Soto Zen 'just sitting' (*shikantaza*) and Sulpician 'just looking' (*contemplatio*) might form a fruitful dyad, as also perhaps Tibetan liturgies involving chanting and visualization (*sadhana*) and Benedictine psalmody and the celebration of Mass (*opus dei*). All this needs much more careful thought than I can give it here. And, be it noted, if it turns out that matched dyads are difficult to identify, this will teach us something important about the difference between Buddhist and Christian meditation.

29. The neologism *ecosophy* has been suggested by Raimundo Panikkar.

Monastic Interchange

The lifestyle of the Buddhist *bhikshu* and *bhikshuni* is sufficiently close to that of the Christian monk and nun that we have become accustomed to translating the two Buddhist terms by the two Christian terms, as if they were identical. There are, in fact, important differences, at the same time as there are remarkable similarities and resonances. In Buddhism, for instance, the Christian coenobium presided over by an abbot has not developed, but something clubby enough to be mistaken for it allows dialogue between *communitas* and *sangha* (the Buddhist monastic community) to take place. Again, by no means all those who are called, in English, Buddhist monks, are vowed to celibacy, yet their meditative traditions are sufficiently similar to that of Christian monks for this difference to be ignored in practice, as long as the value of celibacy itself is not the topic of discussion.

It was at the level of monastic exchange that Thomas Merton made perhaps his greatest contribution to interfaith dialogue. He felt most at ease with Buddhists when they were monastics. Although the differences in doctrine (especially, the belief or disbelief in the existence of God) are so extreme that the other's viewpoint may be unintelligible, monks and *bhikshus*, nuns and *bhikshunis*, recognize that, somehow, they are in the same line of business.

The dialogue between Buddhist and Christian monastics is now, as stated above, a prominent feature of Catholic interfaith activity, and I do not have to do much more here than applaud it and wish it long life and continued growth. I would like, however, to repeat my call for the setting up of a double Buddhist-Christian monastery which would, over the long term, nurture the monastic interfaith dialogue at its most profound level, that of daily practice of the different traditions in the full consciousness of each other's presence.³⁰ This could support the intelligent, prayerful and meditative renewal of such key texts as the *Regula monachorum* and the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the basic Buddhist monastic regulations).

The insights gained from this renewal of the life of traditional monastics under vows could then be applied to wider questions of community. Monastic communities are pre-eminently 'families of choice', and their experience and accumulated wisdom could be of great benefit to the formation and health of the many non-monastic

30. See my 'The Dialogue of Silence: A Comparison of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism with a Practical Suggestion', in G.W. Houston (ed.), *The Cross and the Lotus: Christianity and Buddhism in Dialogue* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1985), pp. 81-107.

families of choice that are gaining in popularity just as (strident voices to the contrary notwithstanding) biological families are becoming increasingly irrelevant.

Co-Inherent Consciousness

And now, our feature presentation...the transformation of the cosmos! A big task, but nothing less than this is implied in the Christian vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and the Buddhist goal of the end of all suffering for ever.

Because nirvana is expressed in negative terms, as the end of suffering, or the emptying of *samsara* (cyclic existence) it is often mistaken for nihilism. Nihilism (called *ucchedavada* in Buddhism, the view that nothing at all exists), however, is only the other side of eternalism (*nityavada*, the view that permanent entities exist) or essentialism (*svabhavavada*, the view that there are self-existing entities isolated from the matrix of interdependent arising). Nihilism is still within the purview of dualistic mind, and is not, said the Buddha, the end of all suffering for ever. Nirvana can also be described as bliss (*sukha*) but it is unalloyed bliss, never-ending and untainted by any suffering (*dukkha*) and it cannot be imagined as merely an absence of pain. In Mahayana Buddhism, nirvana is taught as coterminous with *samsara*—not as identical with it, but co-inherent with it. Vajrayana (Tantric Buddhism) gleefully calls nirvana Great Bliss (*mahasukha*) or the Diamond Realm (*Vajradhatu*), visualizing the co-inherence of *samsara* and nirvana as a glittering palace mandala.³¹

The transformed cosmos in Revelation 21 is called a city, but it is a very curious one. It is a cube, twelve thousand furlongs in length, breadth, and height. Its walls are diamond and the city is made 'of pure gold, like clear glass' (v. 18)—perhaps it is a kind of translucent gold that shines from within. The foundations are layers of twelve different kinds of gems and its twelve gates are each made from a single pearl. It is lit eternally from inside and 'nothing unclean may come

31. In Buddhism, *mandala* has three basic meanings: (1) the space in which the Buddha sat to gain enlightenment (Sanskrit: *bodhimandala*; Japanese: *dojo*), and, by extension, any place of meditative practice; (2) the world seen as an ordered cosmos of beautiful things, offered to one's lama and all the Buddhas, Dharma Teachers, and so forth, of the past, the present, and the future; (3) the palace of a deity. The last meaning is the one in question here. It is the commonest use of the word in English, but it is also the most commonly misunderstood. It is not merely a symmetrical diagram, as C.G. Jung thought: the diagram is the two-dimensional blueprint of the three-dimensional reality of the mandala.

into it' (v. 27). Curious, perhaps, but strangely familiar. It is a mandala, the Palace of the Triune God, protected from the impurities of the temporal world by its *vajra* fence.

The New Jerusalem does not stay in heaven, it 'com[es] down out of heaven from God' (Rev. 21.2) to replace the old earth, which 'had disappeared' (v. 1). If the Christian heaven is located elsewhere than earth, anonymous dualism has returned to our vision; but if the Christian heaven is identified with the earth as it is now, the Work of Christ is rendered vain. The new heaven and the new earth must be, as Charles Williams realized, simultaneously present, that is, co-inherent.³² And this, of course, is precisely how Nagarjuna understands the relationship between samsara and nirvana: 'Nirvana's limit is the limit of samsara; not even the subtlest something is observed between them'.³³

I have argued that co-inherence is the natural state of the evolved consciousness in both Christianity and Buddhism, and that in this consciousness, or super-consciousness, the dichotomy between absolute and relative is sublated, that is, contained and superseded, yet without being abolished. In this consciousness, the dualities between samsara and nirvana are sublated, without admixture or the dominance of one over the other; and again, the opposites of the divine and human natures in Christ, as understood by the Council of Nicea, are sublated, without admixture or the dominance of one over the other.³⁴

Now, I wish to go further and claim that, as the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity becomes richer and more fruitful it will propel many Buddhists and Christians into this co-inherent consciousness. Christians and Buddhists would, then, no longer feel the need to identify themselves as Christians or Buddhists (or both or neither) for they would each severally live in both and both would live in them. More and more people are reporting multiple loyalties to different traditions, and Merton (slightly ahead of us as usual) may have been moving in this direction when, leaving for his fateful Asian journey, he told Brother David Steindl-Rast that he intended to become as

32. Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980 [1939]).

33. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 25.20 (my translation).

34. I advanced this view in a major position article on which much of my later work has been based: 'The Mutual Fulfillment of Buddhism and Christianity in Co-Inherent Superconsciousness', in Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng (eds.), *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), pp. 115-36.

good a Buddhist as he could.³⁵ If this occurs, the traditions will become co-inherent, sublating each other without admixture or the dominance of one over the other. The full co-inherence of Buddhism and Christianity might then become a model for the co-inherence of other, perhaps of all, religious traditions.³⁶ In that case, the dilemma of choosing between the contradictory activities of dialogue and proclamation will be solved, not by a collapse into indifferentism or a triumphalist victory of one tradition over another, but by a sublation into co-inherence, in which each tradition subsists fully in itself, without confusion with another tradition, as Christians say is the case for the divine and human natures in Christ and Mahayana Buddhists say is the case for nirvana and samsara.

This consciousness, in which many absolutes co-inhere, in which we live in many absolutes and many absolutes live in us, may be the structure of the consciousness of certain major religious figures. Buddhists are as reluctant to speak of how a Buddha's mind works as Christians are reticent about the mind of Christ, but it may be that the *structure* of their minds (the *content* of their minds may indeed be forever beyond our understanding) was (is) co-inherent.³⁷ If the noosphere (as Teilhard de Chardin called the planetary environment of ideas) evolves such that co-inherence becomes the norm rather than the rare attainment of a few great minds, it will, to all intents and purposes, be new, and it will need a new name. I suggest calling it a *polyverse of symperichoretic multiple absolutes*. It would be a *polyverse* because it is a meta-system of an indefinite number of universes, and it would contain *multiple*, or an indefinite number of, *absolutes* in the mode of *symperichoresis* or full co-inherence.³⁸ A cumbersome term, I fear, and, if co-inherent consciousness comes about, we may not need it, for the condition will be normal and obvious. If that state of con-

35. This phenomenon is beginning to be studied. Catherine Cornille of Leuven is preparing a collection of essays by a baker's dozen of scholars with the working title *The Challenges of Multiple Religious Belonging*.

36. See my 'The Coming of the Dialogian: A Transpersonal Approach to Interreligious Dialogue', *Dialogue and Alliance: A Journal of the International Religious Foundation* 7.2 (Fall/Winter 1993), pp. 3-17.

37. There is not the space to demonstrate this here, but I have so often come across co-inherence in the description of spiritual or mystical experiences that I suspect that it is this structure, rather than a presumed common content, that is the long-sought universal feature of such states of consciousness.

38. I intend to discuss this more fully in 'Many Selves, Many Realities: The Implications of Heteronymy and the Plurality of Worlds Theory for Multiple Religious Belonging', submitted to *The Challenges of Multiple Religious Belonging*.

sciousness is genuinely new, we cannot at the moment imagine what it would be like, but if it becomes the norm, we will marvel mightily about our ancestors who, we will tell our wide-eyed children, believed, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that there was only one universe and one absolute and that 'absolute' and 'relative' were eternally opposed fundamental givens of reality. We will then awaken to a greater spiritual richness and, I would hope, to a nobler humanity.