

civil rights movement, Christian experience provides strong reasons for holding onto a particularly *Christian* understanding of God's infinite transcendence and distinction from creation. Is it necessary to demythologize *this* aspect of Christian faith in conversation with Buddhist nonduality, which may risk domesticating God from a Christian perspective? Or is there something of value in the Christian perspective of God that could add further nuance and complexity to the dialogue?

*Buddhist Nonduality, Paschal Paradox* pushes the Christian reader to become vulnerable to the force of wisdom on nonduality, which she can readily find in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and discover reverberating throughout the New Testament. It is a rare and important work in Christian theology that provides a serious engagement with an important Buddhist text based on the best available critical editions in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Japanese, and textual scholarship in Buddhist studies, combined with O'Leary's expertise in Christian thought. More than just a scholarly exercise, O'Leary's book is also a meditation on what is really at stake when one encounters both the New Testament and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*—namely, salvation. Reading them together heightens our awareness of the central importance of salvation as the fundamental purpose of these texts and the standard by which all religious and theological statements must be judged.

I have raised a few questions in this response with the intention to understand better O'Leary's commentary and its theological insights. I hope these questions can be helpful in elucidating how the illumination and friction one experiences in considering deeply the theme of nonduality between these two texts and traditions can lead to "a time when both traditions will meet in a shared vision of reality" (276; 280).

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### AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

"Don't touch it with a bargepole!" was the instinctive reaction of my brother John when I told him I'd been asked to write a Christian commentary on an ancient Buddhist sūtra. At first I imagined it would suffice to comment on Étienne Lamotte's classic translation of 1962, but inevitably the claims of the Sanskrit text recovered in the Potala Palace in Tibet in 1999 imposed themselves, obliging me to much troublesome *Buchstabierung*. Thorough mastery of the sūtra would require high competence in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese, and erudition like that of Paul Harrison, who had been working with the late Luis Gómez (1943–2017) on an English translation of

the recovered text. I feared that my theological ruminations would be a paltry sideshow or even a counterproductive distraction.

Reading the subtle and instructive contributions above, which show such remarkable theological engagement, I feel more confident that Catherine Cornille's wager in commissioning this exercise was not misplaced. Some spark of reciprocal illumination passed between the Buddhist text and the New Testament passages I drew on, such that both came into new focus in an unexpected way. My duty as a commentator was to understand the sūtra as best I could, drawing on the tools provided by the Christian source. I also treasured the ricochet effect of the interpreted on the interpreting text, the enlargement of theological awareness at points where familiar Christian words took on a Buddhist hue. I did not attempt a comparative exercise in the manner of Francis X. Clooney, where two texts are examined side by side, but remained closer to the model of John P. Keenan's commentaries on Mark, John, Philippians, Ephesians, and James, wherein one reads a single target text closely, drawing on a limited set of references from the other tradition. On the themes of wisdom and compassion, bodhisattva freedom and skill in means, samsaric bondage and nirvanic release, the nearest Christian analogues were near to hand, in the Gospels and the letters of Saint Paul. Nor did I need to look any farther for Christian affinities with the central theme of the sūtra, namely, nonduality, and its distinctive paradoxical style, though I did sprinkle some other Christian references here and there. For the Buddhist side I also looked backward and forward from the sūtra, but again only glancingly.

The intertextual reverberations between the Buddhist and Christian scriptures, as John Makransky notes, lit up the ways in which Christianity overcomes dualisms and discerns conjunctions between the eternal Word and the human, historical, fleshly realm. He suggests we need to explore "additional implications of nonduality for Christian thought that are highlighted by interreligious comparison." Nondual slogans such as Irenaeus's *gloria Dei vivens homo*, Luther's *simul iustus et peccator*, Blake's "Hold infinity in the palm of your hand," or Chesterton's "A saint only means a man who really knows he is a sinner" are very popular, but they are generally treated as marginal or merely decorative remarks. What if nonduality and paradox are inscribed so deeply in the texture of the Christian revelation that mastery of them is essential to understanding it? The full implications of this would demand that we go beyond the sūtras to the subtle philosophies built on them, and beyond the Scriptures to the thematization of Christian paradox in such thinkers as Eckhart, Cusanus, Luther, Kierkegaard, and Barth. A groundwork for dialogue here can be provided by a philosophical study of the conceptual equipment deployed in both traditions. I envisage a

Nāgārjunian commentary on Hegel's *Ur-Phenomenology*, that is, the first five chapters of the *Phenomenology of Mind*, which is what Hegel originally intended to publish, before his last-minute decision to add the vast study of the collective historical, aesthetic, and religious dimensions of the march of mind. The categories and dialectical methods deployed in Nāgārjuna's *Stanzas of the Middle Way* provide a tidy Buddhist template for a commentary that would bring this well-known section of Hegel's oeuvre, billed as the "science of the experience of consciousness," into new perspective. Intersecting with Hegel on a score of themes, the Buddhist text can complement Hegel's dialectic to provide a wide shared basis for Buddhist-Western thought, which will also give a stable foundation to the theological dialogue. This sounds like *obscurum per obscurius*, but I think a set of manageable categories, theses, and procedures can be siphoned out from Nāgārjuna's text and used to bring Hegel's into focus.

Makransky himself explores one "additional implication," namely, "the communal nature of enlightenment as the foundational understanding that informs all the other teachings of the sūtra." Since something very similar can be said of the New Testament, a fuller attention to that would certainly greatly enhance the commentary and root it more in living Buddhism. My project of a Nāgārjunian commentary on Hegel would probably miss the communal dimension also, since it is not particularly present in the *Ur-Phenomenology* or the *MMK*, though richly developed in other works of the two thinkers. I did advert to how "bodhisattvas have unified their compassion for beings with their awareness of their emptiness" in some evocations of Saint Paul's bodhisattva existence, but a more explicit and consistent thematization of this dimension would be welcome, just as readings of Paul benefit hugely from bringing out the collective dimensions. My focus on "practical here-and-now salvation" as a hermeneutic key, might be narrow, like readings of Paul that focus on the individual's justification through faith. However, my image of here-and-now salvation has less to do with "the reductive materialism of modernist cultures" than with Johannine "realized eschatology."

Won-Jae Hur asks "whether using skillful means as a hermeneutic key for comparative theology does not set up comparative analysis to favor harmonizing differences from the outset." My efforts to smooth over the irreducibility of the Christ event by talking of "epochal breakthroughs in consciousness, a freeing up of minds and hearts so that they can access the divine life," which owe something to Rahner's meditations on Christology in evolutionary perspective, may not resolve the conflict between "Christian realism" and Buddhist concern with "the deepest nature of what is present in the here-and-now." Indeed it could well be that this tension can never be resolved.

Religions can grow together in mutual enrichment despite irreducible differences. These differences cannot be formulated as simple theses; they are more like the differences between entire systems of thought (such as alternative geometries) or between entire cultural worlds. I would agree that “the distinction between God and creation” does not “disappear at the level of a nondual ultimate in Christian theology”; rather God and the world are reconciled in the paradoxical nondual ultimacy of the paschal mystery. I do seek to locate divine transcendence “within the depth of the concrete,” as I believe Augustine (following Plotinus) did. “I wonder if reading accounts of Christian revelation only as breakthroughs in human consciousness of the divine could result in losing the significance that God’s saving power has in Christian life.” But I also speak of these breakthroughs as breakthroughs of the divine, of the Spirit, into our world, incarnationally. God’s Spirit is surely “actively at work in moving the world toward peace and justice,” “in persons, communities, and events,” but theologians should parse the modality of this action. Notions such as grace, divine presence, providence, prophetic insight and witness demand to be thought of in terms that are at the same level of spiritual penetration as Buddhist reflection on nonduality. This does not set any limit to divine action, but allows it to be properly perceived and received. Do we need to hold onto a “particularly *Christian* understanding of God’s infinite transcendence and distinction from creation”? It is good to do so, but we might also bear in mind Pope Francis’ remark that God is not a Christian or Catholic property; on divine transcendence alone we are in a learning position over against Judaism and Islam, and on the very notion of God we are challenged by Buddhism. “Is it necessary to demythologize *this* aspect of Christian faith in conversation with Buddhist nonduality, which may risk domesticating God from a Christian perspective?” But in actuality demythologization has been rumbling on for the past century, and religious pluralism has made us keenly aware of the contingent and conventional texture of all our religious representations. How this is compatible with faith in the objective reference of the Creed is the riddle I brood on in *Conventional and Ultimate Truth: A Key for Fundamental Theology*, published in Jeffrey Bloechl’s collection (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015). I made no attempt to correlate the book for Catherine and the book for Jeff (her husband), but there are surely interesting intertextual reverberations between them.

S. Mark Heim treasures “the ironic importance of differences in nondualism.” The Bible seeks “to interpret things like the origin of the universe, the meaning of the natural order, the existence of evil, and the nature of human history in terms of persons and intentions,” while Buddhism takes the opposite, impersonalizing tack. This difference in fundamental accent

ensures that the two religions will remain locked in “loving strife about the matter” for millennia. The characteristic “conundrums” arising in the two traditions I would see as clues to the conventional texture of both. In both traditions the solution is sought in a nondual way of thinking that is better attuned to the ultimately real. But this produces two irreducibly different brands of nonduality: on one side, “the mystical union of human and divine” founding “the amazing qualities of the incarnate Christ,” and on the other, “the identification of nirvana and samsara” founding “the amazing qualities of bodhisattvas.” This contrast at the deepest, most nondual level of each tradition proves that conventionality goes all the way down, as does pluralism. *Am farbigen Abglanz haben wir das Leben*, says Goethe’s Faust; “It is in the many-hued refulgence that we have life.”

In their skillful exercises in nondual thought, “Buddhists find selves to have no intrinsic inner source of existence, and Christians find themselves grounded in a divine interpersonal source. This is an enduring difference but not a direct contradiction.” Each of the traditions has set itself an infinite task of thought, to which they have already devoted millennia. Their encounter launches both on a new adventure, which will entail learning to live with greater complexity, deeper conundrums, but will also bring moments of recognition, simplification, shared vision. Professor Heim builds on these when he notes, for example, that “Buddhist wisdom of no-self can be taken as a radical phenomenology of creatureliness.” We must hope that theologians will secure a solid fund of interreligious insights as these hunches are pursued with ever greater historical and systematic sophistication.

Malcolm David Eckel emphasizes the literary aspects of the sūtra and my commentary, which are intrinsic to the mode of communication going on and even to the mode of being of the truths communicated. As a longtime professor of English literature I am proud that literary critics have sparked a revolution in biblical studies and are influencing the reception of texts from other traditions as well. Theology has a long way to go in registering the full implications of the literary nature of its founding texts. For theologians have been wooden-minded Śāriputras, while literary truth is more like the goddess scattering her elusive flowers of emptiness. One topic on which theological literalism gets stuck is “miracles,” whether in spirited defense of them or rationalistic demythologization. Vimalakīrti’s feats are linked with *samādhi* and “may be less ‘miracles,’ in our sense of the word, than expressions of the Mahāyāna imagination” that turns reality upside down. What of the gospel miracles? Well, whatever their historical basis, they too are imaginative subversions, to be perceived and received as such. We need not so much bolster our faith as stretch our imagination, and exposure to the fantasy of India is an aid to this.

Rather than a doctrine of nonduality, Bhāviveka speaks about a *naya* or “approach,” conveying “mobility of thought and action.” This “offers a much more fluid understanding of formulas like the ‘nonduality of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*’” as “an ‘approach’ in which one is not fixed in either *saṃsāra* or *nirvāṇa*.” Might we not say the same of the divinity and humanity of Christ? This would justify the fluidity of New Testament language, which theologians itch to sort out in terms of later dogma. More generally, do not all the dualities of Christian thought invite a step back from doctrine to “approach,” and from theological utterance modeled on Greek or German philosophical systems to a more poetic and narrative apprehension of the “divine milieu”?

Rereading these essays today, I feel still deeper gratitude to their authors, who have enlarged the “colloquy” going on within my own head to a warm and impassioned conversation between real human beings, all admirably committed to their spiritual journeys. What delightful fields of inquiry open up here, so different from the straitened paths to which so many theologians confine themselves! Renewed thanks also to Catherine Cornille for her inspired initiative in getting theologians to address non-Christian sacred texts, and thus to learn how little they know and how much there is to know.

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