

multitudes of other beings, and that this reality must be worked out relationally in countless concrete actions of compassionate responsiveness and confrontation, which are then depicted in numerous dialogues and encounters in the rest of the sūtra.

JOHN MAKRANSKY
Boston College

IV

It is a great privilege and honor to offer a response to Joseph O'Leary's immensely learned and profound work, *Buddhist Nonduality, Paschal Paradox: A Christian Commentary on The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)*. In this work, O'Leary uncovers salient insights into the theme of nonduality in the New Testament and *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* through a rich and rigorous comparative reading and examines their implications for Christian self-understanding with eloquence and prophetic force. He states that the primary aim of his work is "to enlarge Christian understanding by discovering what the sūtra has to teach us" (274). This process entails both discovering wisdom on nonduality through the help of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Sūtra and subjecting problematic aspects of Christian thought and practice to correction in light of this wisdom.

One example of such wisdom is O'Leary's exposition on "skillful means." He suggests seeing religious traditions as "skillful means (*upāya*)," referring to the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine that holds that since all phenomena are empty or lack any substantial, independent existence in their true nature, all things can potentially function to awaken us to this ultimate nature of reality (72-4). He states that understanding religions as skillful means can loosen their "entrenched identity-fixations and make them flexible and communicative positions within an open dialogue" (77). This approach also gives us a self-critical tool for identifying and correcting distorting reifications of our religious tradition, which prevent the tradition from fulfilling its own salvific purpose. O'Leary proceeds to ask, "How widely can we apply the notion of skillful means in Christian theology?" He wants to avoid applying it in a reductive sense, which entails viewing other religions as containing partial truths that are truly fulfilled only in one's home tradition. Instead, he argues for applying skillful means in the strong sense "as consubstantial with the truths they express," which makes possible recognizing in other religions "a validity equal to our own."

I find particularly illuminating and valuable how O'Leary's examination of skillful means highlights the integral relationship between doctrinal content and means of communication (teachings, discourses, practices, etc.), which has suffered an intellectually and spiritually damaging rupture in modern, Western Christian tradition. His skillful comparative reading across the New Testament and *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* turns our attention again to the primacy of the liberating, salvific function of religious doctrines and theological propositions.

One question that his argument raises, however, is whether using skillful means as a hermeneutic key for comparative theology does not set up comparative analysis to favor harmonizing differences from the outset. Could this create a subtle pressure to take differences less seriously than warranted when we are learning from another religious tradition, and build into our methodology a potential bias?

Continuing his argument, O'Leary raises the issue of whether speaking "of the Christian economy as skillful means seems however to open the door wide open to docetism," because the concrete, historical events in which God reveals Godself lose their singular status and become functional (78). In contrast to the Buddhist view of the buddhas and bodhisattvas as disclosing the deeper nature of what is already present, "Christian realism" regards revelations such as the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection as singular, new events that are situated within concrete history and transform the nature of human relationship with God. In his response to this, O'Leary suggests that we read Christian revelation as "breakthroughs or thresholds in human awareness of the divine ... as signifying epochal breakthroughs in consciousness, a freeing up of minds and hearts so that they can access the divine life. The singularity of the Christ-event need not prevent it from being rethought along these lines, in a Buddhist streamlining of Christology" (78–9).

This complementary view of Buddhist and Christian perspectives on revelation is compelling. Yet, I am not certain whether this resolves in a clear way the conflict between Christian realism (i.e., singularity and the historical character of Christian revelation and how it changes the relationship between world and God) and the Buddhist view of buddhas' and bodhisattvas' activities as pointing to the deepest nature of what is present in the here and now. There seems to be a lingering tension within O'Leary's text between, on the one hand, the Christian conception of revelation and divine action in the world as entailing God's infinite transcendence and fundamental distinction from creation; and on the other hand, the Buddhist view of buddhas' and bodhisattvas' activity as disclosing the true nature of reality, which is veiled by conventional, dualistic perception of phenomena. I do not know if it is possible for the distinction between God and creation to disappear at the level of

a nondual ultimate in Christian theology. I am not sure whether O'Leary's complementary framing of the two traditions' views on revelation and buddha activity adequately addresses this critical difference between them.

In raising this issue, my concern stems from the sense that forgoing God's infinite transcendence and freedom in action would eliminate a critical Christian insight into the nature of ultimate reality. O'Leary locates transcendence within the depth of the concrete, highlighting the importance of understanding transcendence in terms of immanence. Accordingly, he demythologizes the miraculous and fantastic descriptions of preternatural power in both Buddhist and Christian narratives as figurative expressions of the power of the Buddhist virtues of wisdom and compassion, or linguistic expressions that point to, yet fail to capture completely, the "inconceivable ground of being" (184). He does this in order to turn our attention again to the heart of the matter, namely, the truth of nonduality.

My question is directed not at this interpretation of the Christian notion of divine transcendence, but rather at the *specific content* of that transcendence. In the biblical texts, the infinite freedom of God expresses itself in loving and liberating action, as in the Exodus and paschal narratives. 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.

To illustrate my point, I would like to turn briefly to the case of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement in America. King articulated his vision for America in terms of the "Beloved Community."¹⁵ His message of the Beloved Community was based on an eschatological vision that affirmed the hope that God was actively at work in moving the world toward peace and justice.¹⁶ Although King rejected a simplistic understanding of God as a supernatural deity intervening from outside creation, he repeatedly affirmed that God's power manifested itself in mysterious yet forceful ways in historical events that ultimately led to large-scale sociopolitical transformation.¹⁷ It seems to me that it was in part the conviction that such transcendent freedom and power were at work in persons, communities, and events that nourished his hope and persistent effort to seek racial and economic justice under American apartheid. This raises the question for me whether in the context of oppression, such as in the case of King and the

¹⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., "Stride toward Freedom," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (New York, HarperCollins, 1991), 487.

¹⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 83–4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 141–2.

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).

WON-JAE HUR
Boston College

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