crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). Nonduality comes down to earth in these particular images of Pauline salvation.

One could go on from here and talk about the nonduality of wisdom and compassion. There is no question that compassion plays a role in the Vimalakīrti, as it does in the Mahāyāna more generally, but it is important not to sentimentalize it. In Aśvaghoṣa's *Life of the Buddha*, Siddhārtha grieves and feels pity for the worms and insects who are broken by farmers' plows, as he sits in his first meditation. This pity (*kṛpā*) is in direct contrast to the teaching of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, where Krishna tells Arjuna precisely that he should not feel pity. Vimalakīrti's compassion may be closer in tone to the detachment of Krishna than to the emotional engagement of Aśvaghoṣa's Siddhārtha. It is cooler, more intellectual, and more awake to the play of irony in the concept of emptiness. The stories told at the start of the text by Disciples and Bodhisattva to explain why they would prefer to avoid Vimalakīrti sound more like the stories of a harsh and demanding Zen master, than of somebody who is looking for ways to lay down his life for suffering beings. Certainly there are moments of great sympathy in the life of Jesus, even moments of tears, but he too has the power to slice through conventional categories in a way that his disciples find deeply challenging. Karl Potter once said that the attitude of liberation (*mokṣa*) involves "greater and greater concern with less and less attachment" (10, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*, [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963]). Vimalakīrti's "concern" has much more to do with posing cognitive conundrums than relieving pain.

Much more could be said about this rich and sophisticated book. I hope these comments will serve to pay homage to Joseph O'Leary's impressive addition to the continuing "colloquy" of the Buddhist and Christian traditions.

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II

Joseph O'Leary's book is a tour de force of scholarship, firmly focused on the transformative purpose behind this Mahāyāna scripture. He invites readers to let the theme of nonduality "lay claim on our minds in such a way that we are both haunted by its elusive resonances with what some in the Christian tradition have glimpsed and at the same time challenged by

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its constant friction with inherited Christian ways of thinking" (276). That process may enable one to "experience a new kind of nonduality, between the Buddhist and Christian quests in their deepest structure," in which Christian paradoxes "yield their full meaning when solicited in a nondualist direction" (280, 23).

O'Leary's nuanced commentary on the teachings of this text precludes simple transposition of Buddhist content into Christian forms, just as it precludes the homogenization of Buddhist views themselves. He enriches Christian theology by striking chords of consonance across difference. The best brief appreciation I can provide is to offer two responses. One is an inference I draw from his work, on the ironic importance of differences in nondualism. The second is an expansion on a specific instance of the theological enrichment his work encourages.[1]

O'Leary says, "Nonduality always begins from an apparent impossibility, and the overcoming of it can be a paschal breakthrough" (280). Nondualisms are different, odd as that sounds, depending on the apparent impossibilities they overcome. David Loy identifies three types or applications of nondualilty: the negation of dualistic thinking, the nonplurality of the world, and the nondifference of subject and object.[2] He identifies two other nondualities that he views as additional types, but that I would rather say crosscut and specify the others: the identity of phenomena with the absolute (characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism) and a mystical unity between God and humanity (characteristic of Christianity).

The initial, counterintuitive move of Christian wisdom or practice is the extension of the personal beyond its apparent relevant application, 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. The material and efficient causality in everything is somehow bound up in a relational story. The initial counterintuitive move of Buddhist wisdom or practice is the extension of nonpersonal causal analysis beyond its apparent relevant application, to interpret things like self-consciousness and morality in terms not of persons but of conditioned effects. The agents and identities apparently at the root of our experience of

[1] These ideas are developed more fully in a manuscript in process, tentatively entitled "Crucified Wisdom: The Bodhisattva Path and the Way of the Cross."

[2] David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 17.

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the world are in fact products of factors in which those subjective entities have no ground.[3]

These initial counterintuitives are the basis for subsequent, derivative counterintuitives in each case. The hyperextension of personal qualities yields conundrums formulated in those terms, questions of theodicy, justification, freedom. And the hyperextension of conditioned suchness yields conundrums formulated in those terms, questions regarding what constitutes the subject of transmigration or how the wisdom of emptiness may be married to compassion for beings. It is at these points that forms of nondualism come most strongly into play. This is evident in consideration of Christ and disciples on the Christian side, and in consideration of bodhisattvas, aspirant and realized, on the Buddhist side.

The mystical union of human and divine is the solution to first-order conundrums, the basis for the amazing qualities of the incarnate Christ and those who belong to the same body. It is because reality is this way that God can heal human sin and infirmity, and humans can share divine life and power in community. This Christian nondualism is an overflowing of persons, a blurring of the boundaries between them and between God and creation. The very attachment to these distinctions depends closely on the ability to soften and suspend them in crucial respects.

The identification of nirvana and samsara is the solution to first-order conundrums, the basis for the amazing qualities of bodhisattvas. It is because reality is this way that the bodhisattva can paradoxically care for the suffering of beings that do not exist. This Buddhist nondualism is an emptying of misperceived solidities, an insight into the coincidence of emptiness and dependent co-arising. Understanding or implementation of this nondualism seems to depend closely on the continuing distinction between conventional and ultimate truth.[4] O'Leary notes that neither Buddhist or Christian teaching is primarily a cognitive matter. In both cases the question is resolved not with a philosophical conclusion, but with a deeper vision (Buddhism) or a concrete event (Christianity) in which dualism need not arise (25). If defined by the gaps they are filling, these nondualities are not the same.

[3] This initial move is common to Theravada and Mahāyāna traditions, and only in Yogacara or "mind only" traditions might it seem to be revoked in favor of a more primordial "idealism."

[4] I draw here on Gadjin Nagao, *The Foundational Standpoint of Mahyamika Philosophy*, ed. Kenneth Inada, trans. John P. Keenan, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

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Let us consider a simple, transient moment of spiritual awe, experienced by a person under a night sky on the ocean.[5] This phenomenal experience has different aspects. On the one hand, it expresses heightened difference: I am so small, the universe is so vast. On the other hand, the experience is shot through with blurred boundaries, a literally "oceanic" sense of silenced egoism or unity with the entire universe.

Neither Christian nor Buddhist will leave that moment of experience undisturbed as a sufficient instantiation of enlightenment or salvation. It stands in need of further interrogation, teaching, or deconstruction. Buddhists tend to regard the strong sense of contrast in the first aspect under the heading of conventional appearance, and the second unitive dimension as something more like a glimpse into reality. Christians tend to regard the first aspect as insight into the character of creatures, and the second as a taste of a possible communion with God. Of course, in the experience itself conscious distinction between the two dimensions may be missing, the absence being what gives this experience its peculiar character and power. My point is simply that the experiencer comes from and returns to a certain field of interpretation for the phenomenon, and there seems to be some way of apprehending whether it was a true ultimate or some experiential facsimile or precursor. That is the moral of Vimalakīrti's crowning silence. It may end debate, but "it was that debate that enabled us to hear the silence" (236).

Nonduality for Buddhism is a teaching, actively advanced and applied, to lead one to the right kind of silence. It is also a perspective on teaching, with a kind of self-canceling effect, to avoid intruding on or substituting for that true silence, once achieved. It is, in sum, a skillful exercise. O'Leary shows that Christian attention to Buddhist teaching invites the development or recognition of comparable exercises on specifically Christian themes, such as the nonduality of love of God and love of neighbor (233). I would like to focus on one example: human beings as creatures.

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. Buddhists try to avoid substantialist language in speaking of the self, and Christians tend to readily employ it. The self, sought within a mind in essentialist terms, is empty in the Buddhist sense. The person, found among others in relational terms, is real in the Christian sense. The self denied in *anatta* is above all an individual self, and the place that self is preeminently not

[5] For the purposes of this argument, this could as well be a state of penultimate meditative attainment or a modest mystical religious experience.

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found is within individual consciousness. The self or person that Christians affirm as real is above all a social self, and the place it is found is among as well as within. The two perspectives can largely agree descriptively about the substrates involved, the mental events, and conditioned factors.

To be a creature is, by definition, to lack the *svabhāva* or self-existence that is the key element Buddhist analysis finds missing. Athanasius wrote that it was "seeing that by the principle of its own coming into being it would not be able to endure eternally," God granted humanity a share of the divine image (52).[6] Karl Barth states it no less emphatically. Humans are not to be regarded as "self-grounded, self-based, self-constituted and self-maintained."[7] Humanity without God "is not an object of knowledge."[8] Creatures are conditioned on a set of proximate causes and materials that are themselves impermanent. This looks like chapter and verse from the Buddhist teaching of dependent co-origination. Human creatures are thus suspended between an intrinsic emptiness and a sharing (a not-twoness) with God.[9]

In the practice of momentary awareness of our own minds, Buddhism tells us we will find sensation, succession, distraction, emotion—but no permanent thing doing the experiencing. I see no Christian reason that a creature contemplating itself as a creature would find anything else as the content of immediate awareness. In this sense, Buddhist wisdom of no-self can be taken as a radical phenomenology of creatureliness.

Christianity and Buddhism find ready agreement on the negative implications of assumptions of autonomy. Failure to accept our own impermanence is a cause of much suffering and evil. Christian theology has particularly considered this in terms of epistemological humility. In this sense no-self is about the insubstantiality and untrustworthiness of all supposed truths that lie at the

[6] Athanasius and John Behr, *On the Incarnation*, Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011).

[7] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley, trans. Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 3, pt. 2 (London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 345.

[8] Ibid. Indeed, it is this very note in Barth that encouraged Thomas Merton on his path into dialogue with Buddhism. Merton wrote in his journal, "The great joke is this: having a self that is to be taken seriously, that is to be proved, free, right, logical, consistent, beautiful, successful and in a word 'not absurd.'" Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 247–48.

[9] God appears an obvious instance of *svabhāva* existence. There is no space here to explore the ways in which a Trinitarian God, a coinherent communion, can also be understood as resistant to that characterization. This is yet another of the kind of comparative exercises that O'Leary explores, one already begun, for instance, in Roger Corless and Paul F. Knitter, *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity: Essays and Explorations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).

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end of a process conducted by such a supposed self.[10] Christianity and Buddhism affirm practices that disrupt the false objectivity of our projected identities, whether the disruption comes through confession and repentance or mental analysis. This is one role of meditative practice.

Christians incline to view the spiritual function of our inner mind space as primarily a setting for communicative sending/receiving. From this perspective, time out from filling our minds with our own limited projections is "time in" to receive balancing input from others, and particularly the indwelling of God's spirit. It is a greater stretch in the Christian exercise to attend to the positive value of creaturely emptiness than to recognize the negative effects of its evasion. To consider creatures "alone" threatens to inflate selves to the status of jealous deities or reduce them to a despairing meaninglessness. But there is an original blessedness in bare creatureliness in which Buddhism instructs us. It is part of the goodness of creation, whose emptiness preserves it against Christian theological suspicions of self-sufficient nature. Given the difficulty in accessing this luminous absence of autonomous existence, a difficulty attested so soberly by Buddhist teaching, we may not be wrong to see grace required. But if any element of creation "on its own" retains its intrinsic character of blessing, such creatureliness may be the best candidate, since to be itself it need only, but fully, to be empty.

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III

Joseph O'Leary's book *Buddhist Nonduality, Paschal Paradox* demonstrates how richly a comparative theological study can inform fundamental understandings of one religious tradition in light of another.

O'Leary quotes many passages from the Vimalakīrti Sūtra that express various, related Mahāyāna Buddhist meanings of "nonduality" (*advayatvam*): the nonduality of phenomena and their emptiness, of conventional and ultimate truth, of samsāra and nirvāṇa; and nonduality as the negation of dualistic thought. He draws on these Buddhist understandings to illuminate ways nonduality of God and creation or God and humanity are asserted at the core

[10] We can see why the Dalai Lama frequently suggests that the most difficult lesson to learn, particularly in *Madhyamaka,* is the true significance of conventional truth. Once one has a vivid sense of no-self, one may be tempted not to credit the deliverances of such a self on any level.

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