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## GospelDharma: The Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing

Paul Joseph Thoemke ObISB

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**GOSPELDHARMA: THE SEVEN-FOLD SACRAMENT OF GENEROUS INTERBEING**

by

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2538 Garfield Avenue South  
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,  
Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Monastic Studies.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
Saint John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota

20 June 2005

This Thesis was written under the direction of

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in this thesis.

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20 June 2005

## GOSPELDHARMA: THE SEVEN-FOLD SACRAMENT OF GENEROUS INTERBEING

### Description of the Project:

The Buddha's dharma of the interdependent co-arising of all phenomena (this is because that is) is the unifying concept between Christianity and Buddhism. The vast, incomprehensible interconnection of all aspects of the cosmos with every other aspect can be described as "interbeing." Furthermore, because each new manifestation depends completely on the passing away of every previous manifestation, we may also call this interbeing, this impermanence, "generosity."

The Buddha's dharma of interdependent co-arising reveals reality as it is; and it helps to reveal a sublime and profound unfolding of God's relationship with the world. In light of the dharma, the Christ-event can best be seen as the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing: Creation, Pentecost of Torah, Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost of Spirit.*

Every phase the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* reveals the divine imprint of generous interbeing. Without the unimaginable and astounding gift of Creation, Pentecost of Torah is neither possible nor necessary. Without the Pentecost of Torah, the Incarnation is neither possible nor necessary, etc. Creation, the entire cosmos, is of the nature of generous interbeing, and Creation is the stage upon which every other phase in the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* unfolds in history, so it is no surprise that the same divine imprint inheres in every other phase of the *Seven-fold Sacrament.*

Each successive aspect of the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* interdependently co-arises because of limitless causes, and in an especial way, each aspect is mutually caused by and is the mutual cause of each other aspect. When seen as a whole, the *Seven-fold Sacrament* reveals the divine imprint of generous interbeing on creation, and helps us to see the astonishing ways in which *God's* loving presence inheres in every manifestation of every created thing. In short, the sacramental moments of the *Seven-fold Sacrament* are the various aspects of salvation. And salvation is *the practice* of intentional, generous, selfless love, which is fulfilled in the extinction of suffering in the Kingdom of God.

Generosity takes two forms: pervasive, inescapable and involuntary generosity, which is the imprint of God on creation, and intentional generosity, which is the image of God in which humans are created.

Because of space considerations, my thesis will focus on just four of the phases of the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*: Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Pentecost of Spirit. These four have been chosen because of their vivid centrality to the Christian identity and salvation. These four are presented with the heretofore explicit understanding that if we were to make similar investigations into each of the other three aspects of the Seven-fold Sacrament, we would find similar harmony between Buddhist and Christian teachings because of the unifying concept of generous interbeing.

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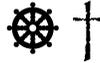
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## CHAPTER ONE: <sup>1</sup> GENEROUS INTERBEING

### Jesus the Christ

*But as for the seed that fell on rich soil, they are the ones who, when they have heard the word, embrace it with a generous and good heart, and bear fruit through perseverance.*

Luke 8:15

### Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha

*Why should that unbelieving, mean, miserly, cross-grained man arise in a happy heavenly realm? Much more chance, I think, that the other man, a believer, a generous donor, delighting in giving, would arise in a happy heavenly realm.*

Anguttara, VII, 54<sup>2</sup>



Many Western people today live their lives without sufficient meaningful access to their own spiritual heritage. They have been cut off from their spiritual roots—severed from the deep and transformative tradition which should be theirs. Without being grounded in the spiritual, life-giving wisdom which is rightfully their inheritance, “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1 Peter 1:4), many people in our world today are vulnerable to being blown away by the winds of vacant cultural values of hyper-individualism and consumption. Independence, as a supreme value, cuts each person off in harmful and destructive ways from their true nature which is interconnection, interdependence, “*interbeing*.”<sup>3</sup>

### ***Interbeing and Generosity***

Interbeing is a technical term coined by a Buddhist monk and teacher, the Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh, expressing the fact that “nothing can exist by itself alone.”<sup>4</sup> Interbeing is a term which tries to express the radical and infinitely complex interconnection and interrelatedness of everything in the cosmos. Every conditioned phenomenon at the same time mutually causes and is mutually caused by every other

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<sup>1</sup> Each major section of this paper shall begin with so-called ‘parallel sayings’ of Jesus and the Buddha. The New American Bible is the source for the Gospel quotes.

<sup>2</sup> *Buddhamind Website*, <http://www.buddhamind.info/leftside/lifesty-2/siha.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1995), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, (Berkeley, CA: Riverhead Books, 2002), 47.

conditioned phenomenon. This insight is the most fundamental content of the Buddha's enlightenment: *pratitya samutpada* (Skt), or the dependent co-arising of all phenomena.

In reality, interbeing is *generosity*. What does this mean? Let us take the example of the tree. The life form of the tree is utterly dependent on the selfless generosity of innumerable other elements. For example: if the cloud does not give itself up, give-way and die, sacrificing its "self" in cloud form, in order to become rain, the tree can never manifest. If the puddle on the forest floor does not give itself up, give-way and die in order to become mud, the tree can never manifest. If the seed in the mud does not give itself up, give-way and die in order to become a sprout, the tree can never manifest. If the sprout does not give itself up, give-way and die in order to become a seedling, the tree can never manifest. It is not difficult to apprehend with our intellect that this description could continue forward and backward and in every direction in space and infinitely in time. Brian Swimme, in his book, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, traces this unfolding of manifestations of our solar system back to a supernova:

Our own solar system emerged from an exploded supernova, creating the planets and their many elements. Minerals and life forms are created out of supernova explosions. Think about it! When you breathe, you breathe the creations of a star. All the life you live is possible because of the gifts of that star. Your life has been evoked through the work of the heavens, do you see? The air we breathe, the food we eat, the compounds out of which we are composed: all creations of the supernova.<sup>5</sup>

Each present manifestation exists only by virtue of the passing away, or the death of every previous manifestation of every previous thing. This is the imprint of God on creation: self-giving, abundant, sacrificial generosity. This is why we can say with confidence that interbeing *is* generosity. The potential for human tragedy and human greatness lies in the uniquely human capacity to resist the imprint of God on the cosmos,

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story*, (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, Inc., 1984), 57.

to resist full participation in generous sacrificial self-giving. In the world-dominating culture of the modern west, acquisition, retention and consumption reign supreme as cultural values in direct opposition of our creation with the imprint of divine generosity.

Generosity is the boundless unfolding of every new manifestation of every new thing which springs into being because of every previous manifestation of every previous thing. On the most fundamental level, all beings, including humans, participate in this inherent and involuntary generosity. What is unique about humanity is its dreadful capacity to resist generosity through the failure of our gratitude and the sin of greed. However, the reverse is also true: the stunning and glorious truth is that humans have a sublime and unique capacity to engage in mindful, intentional generosity as well! This ontological reality is the very source of our hope for salvation. We shall investigate this further in forthcoming sections.

### *Dharma<sup>6</sup> Seals*

The presence of the dharma seals are the guarantee that any teaching is authentic to the teaching of the Buddha. The three dharma seals are impermanence, no-self and nirvana. The truth of generous interbeing points to two truths which are two of the dharma seals<sup>7</sup>: impermanence and no-self.

First we shall examine impermanence. When we look deeply at the nature of composite phenomena, perhaps it is not difficult to apprehend with our intellect that nothing stays the same from instant to instant. On a molecular level this is true even of solid granite, which appears to be permanent from a narrow anthropocentric point of view. On a cosmic level, we can see that even something as solid as granite does not

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<sup>6</sup> “The way of understanding and love taught by the Buddha” *Dharma* literally means “the law”; quoted from Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 202.

<sup>7</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, 39.

remain unchanging by the simple fact that it has changed location (as the earth hurtles through space) and therefore its relation to the sun, the other planets, and every other element in the cosmos. There is no composite phenomenon that does not bear the mark of impermanence. Impermanence is not an absolute truth, but a helpful tool to help us overcome the illusion we have of permanence.

It will be helpful here to say a brief word about a popular sense of impermanence and the conditioned world in Buddhism. Many people believe that in the buddha's dharma it is precisely impermanence that is to be shunned. Impermanence is what we are striving to escape. However, if we look deeply, we can see that impermanence makes everything possible, even our striving! Apart from impermanence nothing is possible. There is a similar ambivalence about this physical life and the spiritual life in Christianity. When we think sacramentally, when we recognize the presence and evidence of God's loving presence in our very midst throughout creation, yet we strive for some extra-corporeal spiritual home (heaven, or the Kingdom of God) we as Christians encounter this same tension. Human beings are whole creatures: body and spirit both. So in spite of temptations to gnostically categorize the physical world as bad, to deem impermanence the enemy, Christians and their Buddhist siblings engage in a subtle and sublime dance that must reverently incorporate the physical and impermanent reality of things as they are along with our spiritual strivings. No human participation in the divine life is possible without the physical existence. No strivings toward buddhahood are possible apart from impermanence.

The Buddha says, “‘All conditioned things are impermanent.’ When you truly comprehend this, you will no longer be afflicted by suffering. This is the path of purity” (*Dhammapada* 20:5).<sup>8</sup>

No-self is also present in the truth of generous interbeing. When we talk about a self, we mean a separate existence. But because of readily observable facts, we can quickly discern that nothing actually has a separate existence, a separate self. No-self does not mean that we are not here. No-self does not mean that nothing around us is actually around us. All no-self means is that everything that manifests in any place in the cosmos, including human life, is composed of infinite non-self causes. The only thing we are empty of, therefore, is a *separate* self. This is what is meant by no-self and emptiness. The Buddha says, “‘All elements (of conditioned things) are self-less.’ When you truly comprehend this, you will no longer be afflicted by suffering. This is the path of purity.”(*Dhammapada* 20:7).<sup>9</sup>

The divine imprint on creation is the hospitable and generous sharing of each manifestation with every other manifestation, rising above selfishness out of illusions of self, rising above clingings to permanence in the liberation of impermanence. This selfless generosity that shows its face in the loving submission that births each new manifestation is the divine imprint of God on creation. Human beings are called to engage unreservedly in intentional generosity as we move toward more profound perfection in the image of God.

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<sup>8</sup> *Dhammapada*, 141.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

## *We Are Not What We Own*

As articulated by the words of Jonathan Larson in the Broadway musical, *Rent*: “When you're living in America at the end of the millennium you're what you own.”<sup>10</sup> Even in the new millennium, the virtual fact that Americans are what we own is clearly evident when in the course of any nightly news broadcast. *Consumer* is repeated and repeated as the new media euphemism for *person*. Thus, each separate and cut-off, each individual is defined by what each one consumes. Though we believe we as modern persons feel this urge especially, the Buddha warns us that our hunger can be insatiable: “Even a rain of gold could not satisfy your desires- for the smallest taste of enjoyment leads to the suffering of more desire” (*Dhammapada* 14:8).<sup>11</sup>

This pervasive cultural value of *individual consumption* threatens the inherent seed of divinity within each being (sacrificial generosity), threatens to crush it, and malnourish it while the seeds of greed and attachment are watered and nourished in its place. In this environment, we can live in forgetfulness; can forget that without exception every meeting ends in separation and every clinging ends in letting go. In this environment, we can fail to truly live in the only moment available to us: “the present moment.”<sup>12</sup> In this environment, we can fail to truly live according to our true awakened human nature (which is indeed the nature of all creation), which is to give intentionally and graciously.

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Larson, “What You Own,” *Rent, the Original Broadway Cast*, (New York, NY: Dreamworks SKG, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> *Dhammapada*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Our Appointment with Life: The Buddha's Teaching on Living in the Present*, (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1990), 25.

## *Spiritual Roots*

The healing balm for this situation is not far way. It is the spiritual inheritance which belongs to each person. Christians know Jesus Christ as the spiritual root who is the efficacious ground of salvation and spiritual life. For Buddhists, the Buddha has left his teachings (the dharma) as a skillful means to achieve enlightened and awakened mindful awareness, the seed of *nirvana*. *Nirvana* means the “extinction of notions and suffering; [or]... the ultimate dimension of reality.”<sup>13</sup> A hint about what nirvana means comes in the very word “buddha”: from the Sanskrit, *budh* means to awaken; *buddha* means the one who is awakened. “The Buddha” is a title reserved for the historical Buddha (*Shakyamuni*, that is *Sage of the Shakya tribe*): Gautama Siddhartha, the person who set the wheel of dharma in motion upon his enlightenment, or attainment of nirvana. It will become important for the present study that any being has the capacity to realize nirvana and become “a buddha” because everyone has the seed of buddha nature within oneself. This means that everyone has the capacity for awakening, for enlightenment.

In Christianity there is an echo of ‘becoming a buddha’ in what is often referred to an ‘Orthodox’ or ‘Eastern’ sensibility of divinization. Divinization may be expressing in a Christian vocabulary something roughly identical to this Buddhist understanding of our relationship to divine reality, our relationship with our ultimate dimension. Gregory of Nyssa, teaches that “the Word, in taking flesh, was mingled with humanity, and took our nature within himself, so that the human should be deified [i.e. divinized] by this mingling with God.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 204.

<sup>14</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Apollinarius*, quoted in: Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1993), 46.

But, where is the empowering and inspiring language about the transcendental potential of divinization in our Western Christian existence today? We are cut off from this and so much else of great value in our vast spiritual reservoir. It is easy to see the devastating results of people being cut off from their spiritual inheritance: apathy, hopelessness, fatalism, and greed permeate every corner of modern existence. The first rehabilitative step must be to assist spiritually devastated people in reclaiming their rightful inheritance. The first step is *not* to work to cut still more people off and insist that they appropriate a ‘new’ spiritual root to replace the old one. Causing more pain is not the answer.

### ***Dogma Blinds Intercommunication***

Dogmatic attitudes which exclude others from one’s hallowed and concretized ideas of salvation, or truth, or the ultimate dimension do not help. As Thích Nhất Hạnh rightly expresses, “If we think we monopolize the truth and we still organize [an interfaith] dialogue, it is not authentic.”<sup>15</sup> There is a danger of jeopardizing more precious souls by clinging violently to ideas and notions, even our wholesome and well-intentioned notions about God, or nirvana. We must never seek to contain God; never seek to contain the ultimate dimension in our ideas and notions. That said, *of course*, people *must* express their relationship with God! There is some valid analogy between the experience of the temporal and finite and the experience of the extra-temporal and infinite, or God. People of deep faith and people of dubious faith equally must seek ways in which to express this dimension of their lives. However, they must always make sure

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<sup>15</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 9.

this expression is in the spirit of generosity, humility and mindfulness.<sup>16</sup> It is humility and mindfulness which will guard against the idolatry of equating *ideas* about God with the *reality* of God. As Karl Rahner says, in *Foundations of Christian Faith*, “God is the primordial ground and abyss of all reality who always lies beyond everything which can be conceived.”<sup>17</sup> This is a modern echo of the medieval theologian, Saint Anselm of Canterbury’s so-called ontological proof of God’s existence which describes God as “*that than which nothing greater can be thought*.”<sup>18</sup> These “definitions” should offer fair warning that if we are attached to an idea about God, we better proceed with caution.

Thích Nhất Hạnh, shares a parable of the Buddha concerning ideas and notions:

A young tradesman came home and saw that his house had been robbed and burned by bandits. Right outside...there was a small, charred body. He thought the body belonged to his little boy. He did not know that his child was still alive;...[that] the bandits had taken the little boy with them...The tradesman believed the body he saw was his son...in grief...he began the cremation ceremony.

The man loved his little boy so much...he could not abandon the little boy’s ashes even for one moment. He made a velvet bag and put the ashes inside,...[and] was never separated from the bag of ashes. One night his son escaped from the robbers. He came to the new house built by his father. He knocked excitedly on the door at two o’clock in the morning. His father called out as he wept, still holding the bag of ashes. “Who is there?”

“It’s me, your son!” the boy answered through the door.

“You naughty person, you are not my boy. My child died three months ago. I have his ashes with me right here.” The little boy continued to beat the door and cried and cried. He begged over and over to come in, but his father continued to refuse him entry. The man held firm to the notion that his little boy was already dead and that this other child was some heartless person who had come to torment him. Finally, the boy left and the father lost his son forever.

The Buddha said that if you get caught in one idea and consider it to be “the truth,” then you miss the chance to know the truth. Even if the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will refuse to open your mind. So, if you are committed to an idea about the truth...be careful.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Mindfulness* is a technical term used by Buddhists to refer to awareness, to being able to be fully awake and open to the present moment, and to things as they really are (suchness), not ensnared in illusions about the past or the future, but instead being present here and now, which can be a source of healing and peace.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 139.

<sup>18</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 113.

<sup>19</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, 9-11.

The wise practice must be to remain faithfully open to truth and understanding no matter its source. The Roman Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965), has opened itself up to unprecedented inter-religious dialogue. Indeed, “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.”<sup>20</sup>

This project attempts to articulate a living Catholic Christian soteriology in the light of the teachings of the Buddha, mindful of the effects of other ‘enculturations’ of the Gospel. Indeed, it is the implications of a soteriology hijacked by the effects of Gnostic dualism, and the effects of a long-dead feudal worldview that give rise to a need for a ‘new’ soteriology. The seeds for renewal come both from inside the tradition through the likes of Peter Abelard and from outside the tradition through the Buddha’s dharma, especially the teaching of *pratitya samutpada* or dependent co-arising (interbeing).

### ***The Practice***

The light of the Buddha’s dharma exposes the abiding truth in Jesus Christ. The light of Christ exposes the truth of the dharma. Perhaps the greatest contribution Buddhism has to offer Christianity is the pre-eminence of *the practice*. There are two ways this word is used, though they are closely related. First, *the practice* refers to the way of prayer or meditation. Second, there is *the practice* of loving-kindness to all creatures. Christian liberation theologians use the Greek term *praxis* to emphasize, according to Francis Schussler Fiorenza, “an important distinction” between “practice

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<sup>20</sup> “*Nostra Aetate*” *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, Inc., 1996), 2.

(*poiesis*) as a technical skill, involved in making something, from practice (*praxis*) as a way of life.”<sup>21</sup> The practice in Buddhism is a lot like *praxis*; it is a way of life; it is how one lives. In Buddhism there is no imperative to accept any doctrine, any dogma (not even a Buddhist one like nirvana) which fails to prove itself true in the direct experience of *the practice*. The imperative truly is only to appropriate into one’s faith and life that which leads experientially to enlightenment, or in Christian terms: to sanctification, divinization, salvation, and the Kingdom of God. It is possible to imagine a Christianity instilled with this same fearless expectation that faith in Christ is meant to be put into true practice, and only real experience should be the basis for faith claims.

The points of commonality and convergence between Buddhism and Christianity are many, and the discussion here is meant only to represent a small sample of what is possible. Through a brief grounding in the stories of the lives of the Gautama the Buddha and Jesus the Christ, the reader will begin to acknowledge a sympathetic relationship between these two Great Beings. In considering the entire Christ-event, which in the light of the Buddha’s dharma we shall call the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*, it is hoped that new insights will emerge about the truth of salvation.

### ***The Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing***

The Buddha’s dharma of interdependent co-arising reveals reality as it is; and it helps to reveal a sublime and profound unfolding of God’s relationship with the world. In light of the dharma, the Christ-event can best be seen as the *Seven-fold Sacrament of*

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<sup>21</sup> Francis Schussler Fiorenza, “Systematic Theology: Task and Methods.” in Schussler Fiorenza, Francis and Galvin, John P. ed. in *Systematic Theology Volume I*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1991), 65.

*Generous Interbeing: Creation, Pentecost of Torah*<sup>22</sup>, *Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost of Spirit*. In this context, *sacrament* refers to the aforementioned particular and important moments in salvation history of God's in-breaking presence within creation.

Every phase the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* reveals the divine imprint of generous interbeing. Without the unimaginable and astounding gift of Creation, Pentecost of Torah is neither possible nor necessary. Without the Pentecost of Torah, the Incarnation is neither possible nor necessary. Without the Incarnation, the Crucifixion is neither possible nor necessary. Without the Crucifixion, the Resurrection is neither possible nor necessary. Without the Resurrection the Ascension is neither possible nor necessary. Without the Ascension, Pentecost is neither possible nor necessary. Creation, the entire cosmos, is of the nature of generous interbeing, and Creation is the stage upon which every other phase in the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* unfolds in history, so it is no surprise that the same divine imprint inheres in every other phase of the *Seven-fold Sacrament*.

Each successive aspect of the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* interdependently co-arises because of limitless causes, and in an especial way, each aspect is mutually caused by and is the mutual cause of each other aspect. When seen as a whole, the *Seven-fold Sacrament* reveals the divine imprint of generous interbeing on creation, and helps us to see the astonishing ways in which the ultimate dimension, that is to say, the ways in which *God's* loving presence, inheres in every manifestation of every

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<sup>22</sup> Christian and Buddhist readers may not be familiar with the Jewish festival of Pentecost. According to the *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*: "Since the close of Biblical times...: the Pentecost is held to commemorate the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, which, according to Exodus 19:1, took place on the fiftieth day after the departure from Egypt." *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia Website*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11661a.htm>

created thing. In short, the sacramental moments of the *Seven-fold Sacrament* are the various aspects of salvation. And salvation is *the practice* of intentional, generous, selfless love, which is fulfilled in the extinction of suffering in the Kingdom of God.

This essay will focus on just three of the phases of the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*: Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Pentecost of Spirit. These four have been chosen because of their vivid centrality to the Christian identity and salvation. These four are presented with the heretofore explicit understanding that if we were to make similar investigations into each of the other three aspects of the Seven-fold Sacrament, we would find similar harmony between Buddhist and Christian teachings because of the unifying concept of generous interbeing.

## CHAPTER TWO: CRUCIFIXION AND THE NEED FOR A NEW SOTERIOLOGY

### Jesus the Christ

*This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.*

Mark 4:26-29

### Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha

*The yeoman farmer gets his field well ploughed and harrowed. But that farmer has no magic power or authority to say: "Let my crops spring up today. Tomorrow let them ear. On the following day let them ripen." No! It is just the due season which makes them do this.*

Anguttara Nikaya 3.91<sup>23</sup>



### *The Crucifixion: Generosity as Sacrifice*

It is important to view the cross of Christ in its proper perspective. This can only be done when it is seen in its radical relation with the entire Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing. The Cross of Christ declares a stunningly selfless generosity which is the same generosity of Creation, Incarnation and Resurrection (etc.), but reveals generosity in its painful, confusing, and sacrificial dimensions in visceral ways not expressed by the other aspects of the Seven-fold Sacrament. Crucifixion, we could say, makes possible the manifestation of the subsequent aspects of the *Seven-fold Sacrament*. The Crucifixion demonstrates ("...the Son of Man be lifted up" [John 3:14]) an irrefutable dimension of generosity, and at the same time effects a transformation in us as the recipients of such generosity.

### *A New Soteriology?*

To look into the way in which our lives are saved, the way for human beings to touch true liberation, is to investigate the field of soteriology. The Buddha offers the dharma as a skillful means to transcend suffering and achieve salvation in full awakening.

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<sup>23</sup> Marcus Borg, 126-127.

Jesus Christ offers salvation too, but the question of just how is shrouded in ambiguity. This present chapter seeks to examine the popular Anselmian notion of salvation in light of a more Buddhist understanding. It is the contention of this essay that the soteriology of Anselm is insufficient, and a new soteriology needs to be articulated. Salvation which hinges foremost on the death of Jesus Christ on the cross emerges from one limited and dark enculturation of the Gospel, and it is time for Christianity to boldly seek to redefine and more profoundly understand what salvation really means for us today.

### ***The Lure of Gnostic Dualism in Christianity***

The First Crusade of Christendom takes place in the year 1096, shortly after *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man) is written by Saint Anselm. These events though not causally linked, do share the same world view. Whatever was in the air, in the water, and in the consciousness of the time served to feed these two phenomena: the First Crusade and Anselm's famous "satisfaction theory" of atonement. What was the element at work in both of these, if not a form of dualism? Between the time of Jesus Christ in his earthly life and mission, and the writing Anselm's seminal work, a Gnostic tendency toward radical dualism had long been at work (in varying degrees of success) reshaping Christianity, attempting to reshape the very nature of the understanding of the relationship between God and creation. This Gnostic tendency is to utterly condemn the material order, while utterly exalting the spiritual realm alone.

It is not from nowhere that this tendency toward dualism arises. In both Christian and Buddhist sensibilities, though there is a common goal to overcome *dualism*, and there is a firm and ready recognition of *duality*. Neither of these world religions suggests for a moment that there is not some real experience of duality: there is the physical, and there

is the spiritual—this is something Buddhists and Christians alike can freely assent to and agree upon. The danger is to allow this simple recognition of reality as it is (suchness) to become absolutized, and to be perverted into a system that demonizes or utterly disregards the physical world in order to glorify the spiritual one. What makes a Gnostic tendency so difficult to trace is that it often manifests itself in subtle and insidious fundamental assumptions about how the world works, how a spiritual life is to be led, and how religion ought to behave. When absolutist Gnosticism is obvious, it can be easily removed or otherwise dealt with, but when it creeps in unannounced, this is when it can be most dangerous. An insidious (and easy) dualism that confounds efforts to keep the immanence and transcendence of God in healthy tension pervades Christian theology: flesh<sup>24</sup> and spirit, body and soul; grace and sin; heaven and earth; God and humans. To be clear, healthy duality recognizes that there is a difference between God and creation, but it is when healthy dualist observation transforms into an absolutist dualism that it adversely affects everything in the Christian imagination, and philosophy. It is an aversion to the physical and the material implications of the Incarnation that spawns a degenerate form of absolutist Gnosticism that Hans Urs von Balthasar describes as “an enormous temptation in the early Church.”<sup>25</sup> The error of the Gnostics is to flee from the

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Brown: “The notion of an antithesis between *the spirit* and *the flesh* was a peculiarly fateful ‘theological abbreviation’ of Saint Paul’s thought (47-48). In fact, for Paul, “the human person, divided between *the spirit* and *the flesh*, was not primarily a being torn between body and soul. Rather, with Paul, we see human beings caught in a hurried instant, as they passed dramatically from a life lived *in the flesh*, tensed against the Law because subject to the tyranny of half-seen powers reared in rebellion to God, to a life of glorious freedom lived *in Christ, in the spirit*” (49). The Pauline sense of *flesh* as that which moves against the will of God has been telescoped into shorthand for the human body, or a Gnostic anti-materiality. Peter Brown, *Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), 47-49.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, ed., *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies*, (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 1.

conundrum of the “concrete absolute,”<sup>26</sup> the God radically and powerfully *other* and yet so generously loving as to be tenderly and intimately present *with us*.

It seems that perhaps this is the very case of a dualism which is the foundation of the atonement theology of Saint Anselm, as well as the foundation of the embarkation of the Crusades. A kind of dualism is at work in the hierarchical feudalistic culture that shapes Anselm’s understanding of God’s status as overlord in need of satisfaction, as the Saint absolutizes one particular and historical perspective about honor, shame, satisfaction and relationships. That concretization of one cultural expression of hierarchical life, when applied to God has had the effect of shaping the entire Christian soteriological conversation ever since. In order to understand our starting point better, we shall have to look more closely at Anselm’s theory, which, incidentally, has never been recognized as dogma by the Church, in spite of its powerful hold on Christian imagination to this day. Then, we shall review the circumstances surrounding Peter Abelard’s offering of an alternative view and how Anselm’s view was championed by Saint Bernard. We shall question the validity of that defense by noting the chilling parallel between a Crusade mentality and the satisfaction theory of atonement.<sup>27</sup> But, first, if Buddhism is to be a source of light for this discussion we must briefly examine the *prajna* (wisdom), of Buddhism. Indeed, the word *prajna* is etymologically linked to the Greek word *gnosis* and the English word *knowledge*.

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<sup>26</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations*, 137.

<sup>27</sup> I am indebted to James Carroll’s controversial work, *Constantine’s Sword*, for igniting my investigation into the potentially parallel mindsets of satisfaction atonement and a Crusade mentality. It is Carroll’s work that also brought me first to question the soteriology I had been taught all my life. I clearly come to a different conclusion than Carroll, since I find that the crucifixion has an important role in salvation insofar as it is a demonstration of God’s generosity, whereas Carroll seeks to disconnect salvation from the cross altogether because of the history of anti-Semitism in part engendered by images of the cross.

### ***Buddhism: An Agnostic and Democratic and Sacramental Gnosticism***

This fact cannot be passed over in silence: Buddhism may be regarded as a kind of *gnosis* (knowledge) or gnosticism. However, equally important is to recognize that if Buddhism really is a kind of gnosticism, it is inherently different than its distant “Christianized” cousin in at least three important and decisive (and redeeming) ways.

First, the Gnostic perversion of Christianity makes wild claims about the beginning of the world, about eternalism or annihilationism: for instance, the Marcionists taught a doctrine of two Gods, the Creator God of *Torah*, and the God of Jesus Christ who is the God of Love. In contrast, The Buddha offers no teaching about these types of absolute questions. In this way, we can characterize the so-called gnosis of the Buddha as ‘*agnostic*’ because it does not profess to attain to ultimate and absolute answers. Indeed, this very attitude of healthy agnosticism is clearly evident in this parable which the Buddha tells to the monk, Malunkyapatta, who is bedeviled by such questions as annihilationism and eternalism:

Suppose Malunkyapatta that a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison. And his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say, “I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble, or a Brahmin, or a merchant, or a worker.” And he would say, “I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me, until I know whether the man who wounded me was tall or short or of middle height; until I know whether the man who wounded me was dark or brown or golden-skinned; until I know whether the man who wounded me lives in such a village or town or city; until I know whether the bow that wounded me was a longbow or a crossbow: until I know whether the bowstring that wounded me was fiber, or reed, or sinew, or hemp or bark; until I know whether the shaft that wounded me was wild or cultivated; until I know with what kind of feathers the shaft that wounded me was fitted, whether those of a vulture, or a crow, or a hawk, or a peacock, or a stork; until I know with what type of sinew the shaft that wounded me was bound, whether that of an oz or a buffalo, or a lion, or a monkey; until I know what kind of an arrow it was that wounded me whether it was hoof-tipped, or curved, or barbed or

cal-toothed, or oleander. And all this would still not be known to that man, and meanwhile, he would die.<sup>28</sup>

Instead of propounding absolute dogma, the Buddha's teachings are to be thought of as helpful means, but the Buddha exhorts his disciples that if they encounter a better way to awakening, to nirvana, if they find a new dharma door, this is the one they should use. The experience of each practitioner is the true test of the truth of the dharma. Indeed, what is not sustained by experience, despite its location in the three "baskets" (*pitakas*) of scriptures, the *sutrapitaka*, the *abidharmapitaka*, or the *vinaya pitaka*<sup>29</sup> can be said not to be true.

Second, the Gnostic perversion of the Christian Gospel makes wild claims of exclusivity and secret knowledge. Certainly, the dharma does not declare that it is only by way of *secret* gnosis that someone may attain salvation. Instead, the Buddha teaches that the dharma is *accessible to all* of us. Awakening and enlightenment are available to all in the truest sense of democracy. The Buddha's gnosis (as it were) which he shares freely with all the world, is a way to be fully human, fully alive, fully awake. It is not some exclusivist and secret dogma that is incompatible with the Gospel.

Third, while the Buddha does teach that the spiritual realm is to be preferred (a healthy recognition of duality, as we mentioned above), Buddhism does not make the outrageous and dualist Gnostic claim that the material world is evil while only the spiritual realm is wholesome and meritorious. The cream of enlightenment understanding—the dharma—is this: dependent co-arising. This means the awakened

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<sup>28</sup> "The Arrow," *The Voice of The Buddha: The Dhammapada and Other Key Buddhist Teachings*, (Germany: Naxos Audio Books, 2004), CD #2, Track 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Sutrapitaka* means *sutra* basket; *sutra* is a word meaning *thread*, as in the thread onto which one would string precious stones or beads. *Abhidharmapitaka* means the basket of doctrine or dharma. *Vinaya pitaka* means the basket of discipline, and refers mainly to the discipline of monastic life.

understanding of the Buddha recognizes that “if one thing exists, another things comes into existence; from the appearance of one thing there follows the appearance of another; if a certain thing does not exist, another thing cannot come to be; from the cessation of one thing there derives the cessation of another.”<sup>30</sup> Put more succinctly, Thich Nhat Hanh’s understanding of the dharma, “*this is because that is*”<sup>31</sup> leads to a holy reverence for the intricacy, delicacy, and interbeing-nature of the whole of creation. Interbeing fosters, in Christian terms, a *sacramental* reverence for creation.

The precious occasion of a corporeal human life is an unimaginable gift, a treasured opportunity to become fully human, fully alive, and fully awake. Though it is a wondrous gift, the Buddha warns that, “it is difficult to obtain a human birth; it is difficult to live with the certainty of death; it is difficult to hear the holy Dharma; and the appearance of a Buddha is rarer still” (*Dhammapada* 14:4).<sup>32</sup> That said, human life *is* the doorway to nirvana. Thus, human life is the summit toward which all creation moves in the stunning complexity of interbeing. The Christian sacramentality which affirms that while all of creation bears the life of God, the Spirit of God, it is above all the human life that reflects the presence of God’s Holy Spirit in the world is a remarkably coherent recapitulation of the Buddhist sensibility. Elizabeth Johnson artfully expresses the Buddha’s dharma of dependent co-arising, or interbeing, in the midst of an article entitled “Saints and Mary”:

... the cosmos and human existence within it have an intercommunicative character. Biologically, psychologically, culturally, politically, economically, and socially, who one is and what one does are affected in essential respects by others. In turn, one’s own

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<sup>30</sup> Raimundo Pannikar, *The Silence of God: The Answers of the Buddha*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 57.

<sup>31</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1999), 23-24 (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> *Dhammapada*, 95.

person and deeds have inescapable impact on those nearest, and ultimately on all. No one is or can be a solitary player. For better or worse, everyone depends on everyone else.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, there is nothing “Gnostic,” in the foul and creation-loathing sense, about this kind of shared sacramental vision of interbeing. So, with these three key differences from the “Christian” Gnosticism, Buddhism emerges as an agnostic, democratic, and sacramental form of gnosticism that does not pose the same kind of potential existential threat as its Gnostic Christian cousin.

*No Separation, No Distance*

The Buddha dharma of interdependent co-arising (or interbeing) can help to clear the fog of dualism that engenders forms of “Christian” Gnosticism right up to the present day. Indeed, the perceived experience of absolutized dualism is so persuasive that many people simply accept it as irrefutable in a worldview that can diminish the corporeal by exalting the incorporeal. So, as it were, the body is characterized as bad and the spirit as good. The Buddha teaches that these categories and notions are not reality, and do not describe reality. Reality is no distance. Reality is no separation. Distance and separation are constructs of the mind that cause us to suffer intense pain.

To recognize that our true nature is *interbeing*, the fact that everything is integrally interdependent on every other thing, is to begin to touch the truth. Living in a way that honors the radical integrity of all being, the *perichoresis* (mutual interpenetration) of supposedly dichotomous categories, is living free from sin. Living free from sin is living a fully generous and awakened human life. Living Generosity is to manifest in ourselves the image and likeness of God which is our true created nature.

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<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Saints and Mary,” in Schussler Fiorenza, Francis and Galvin, John P. ed. *Systematic Theology Volume II*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1991), 165.

Everything about the Incarnation reflects and embodies the generosity which is the *imago dei*. Jesus' fully human life, that is to say his awakened life free from sin, signals the hope that our divinization, which is our maturation in our creation in the image and likeness of God, is not only possible, but that it is at hand.

### ***Saint Anselm of Canterbury's Satisfaction Theory of Atonement***

Saint Anselm of Canterbury provides the theological construct, which was long in the making, to provide for Jesus' juridical salvation of humanity. Anselm's thinking follows a line of reasoning based in a hierarchically feudal worldview, with God as a kind of overlord who has been infinitely dishonored by Original Sin<sup>34</sup> (and every human sin). Anselm writes *Cur Deus Homo* in the form of a dialogue. It may be helpful to reproduce here a key section upon which Saint Anselm's argument turns:

*Anselm.* ...it is necessary that he who can give God anything of his own which is more valuable than all things in the possession of God, must be greater than all else but God himself.

*Boso.* I cannot deny it.

*Anselm.* Therefore none but God can make this satisfaction.

*Boso.* So it appears.

*Anselm.* But none but man ought to do this, other wise man does not make satisfaction.

*Boso.* Nothing seems more just.

*Anselm.* If it be necessary, therefore, as it appears, that the heavenly kingdom be made up of men, and this cannot be effected unless the aforesaid satisfaction be made, which none but God can make and none but man ought make, it is necessary for the God-man to make it. (*Book Second, Chapter VI*)<sup>35</sup>

Since God is infinite and ultimately transcendent, the dishonor of original (actually *every*) sin is also infinite, so the one who makes satisfaction must be infinite (or divine), as well. But, since divinity did not dishonor God, but humanity did, divinity is not *required* to make satisfaction. Anselm says that, in the words of the historical

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<sup>34</sup> For more about *Original Sin*, please see Chapter 6 of this present essay.

<sup>35</sup> St. Anselm, *Basic Writings*. "Cur Deus Homo," (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1993), 258-259.

theologian, Alister McGrath, “satisfaction cannot be made unless there is someone who is able to pay to God for the sin of humanity.”<sup>36</sup> The famous resolution is that since “God only *can*, and only humanity *ought* to make this satisfaction, then it is necessary that someone must make it who is both God and a human being.”<sup>37</sup> As such, Jesus Christ, the “God-man” is the only being who is both *capable* and *obliged* to satisfy the debt owed to God.

The so-called great ‘satisfaction theory’ of Anselm is dependent upon the following elements: an absolute divide (i.e. **dualism**) between God and humanity; a vulnerable and angry God who demands satisfaction for a wounded honor by way of the expiatory death sacrifice of the God-man (Christ); and a whole Medieval cosmology of angels and the perfect number of rational creatures!<sup>38</sup> It seems clear that this view of God, while purporting to expound on God’s brilliant and fearsome greatness, instead reveals a fragile, rigid, and vulnerable God:

*Anselm.* Therefore God maintains nothing with more justice than the honor of his own dignity.

*Boso.* I must agree with you.

*Anselm.* Does it seem to you that he wholly preserves it, if he allows himself to be so defrauded of it that he should neither receive satisfaction nor punish the one defrauding him.

*Boso.* I dare not say so.

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<sup>36</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 341.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> According to Anselm, in God’s plan there had to have been from the outset a pre-known number of rational creatures. In Anselm’s cosmology, it is unthinkable that God does not have a “perfect” number of rational creatures planned, whose true home is heaven, but since only justified or saved rational beings can inhabit heaven, and it is impossible to save the fallen angels, the ranks need to be made up by saved human beings, thus: “*Anselm.* ...And hence it follows that there was not a perfect number of angels, even before a part fell; otherwise, of necessity some men or angels must fall, because it would be impossible that any should continue beyond the perfect number.” (Book First, Chapter XVIII). Accordingly, in Anselm’s worldview, it is not out of love that God saves humanity, but out of a compulsive desire to round out the ranks of justified rational beings in heaven. St Anselm, 229.

*Anselm*. Therefore the honor taken away must be repaid, or punishment must follow; otherwise either God will not be just to himself, or he will be weak in respect to both parties; and this is impious even to think of.” (Book First, Chapter XIII) <sup>39</sup>

What is revealed in this passage is a rigid and defensive God, with an honor that is fragile and easily wounded, but whose rehabilitation requires the most extreme measures.

I recall learning something of what it means to be an adult when I was working with homeless youth in Minneapolis. Especially when they first meet the case manager these youth will often lie and cheat and do whatever they think they need to do to meet their needs. The case managers that are so utterly devastated by being ‘duped,’ or by having the ‘wool pulled over their eyes’ that they would actually *retaliate* against the young clients with punishment or by withholding services were by far the *worst* case managers. These are people whose egos and self-esteems are so fragile and so easily bruised that they need to enforce their position of power over some of the least powerful and most vulnerable members of our society!

The true way of reversing the behavior of these suffering young people is to short-circuit their inclination to lie and cheat by helping them to see how much more effectively they can be empowered if they are honest. It means entering into real relationships of generous humility and extravagant hospitality with these young people, and teaching them to risk being themselves, which is the only authentic way for them to move into their futures. Punishing them just reinforces the negative power dynamic, and forces them to find new ways of lying and cheating that are even harder to detect. Modeling a generous and honest relationship, a *right relationship*, is the only authentic and loving way to handle this situation.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 220-221

It is hard to believe that God is not more like the case manager who forgives lavishly than the one reacts punitively and who is obsessed by a rigid view of satisfaction and so-called justice. Indeed it seems vastly more impious to imagine a God who can be so confounded, so damaged by human sinfulness.

The satisfaction soteriology of Anselm places Jesus' death by bloody crucifixion at the absolute epicenter of the work of salvation. The infinitely offended God needs to be infinitely satisfied by his Son's unjust death. *Everything hinges on this unjust death!* In surprising ways, the Incarnation of Jesus in his life, and teaching, and the (re-Incarnation) presence of the Resurrected Christ become secondary to the critical all-important expiatory execution. All of this ignores that fact that Jesus does not identify his death as the central truth in salvation, but rather, he teaches, "the *words* that I have spoken are spirit and life" (John 6:63 [emphasis added]).

### ***Peter Abelard***

The antidote for this ailment, this trap of dualism, this trap of infinite separation from God which can only be overcome by Jesus' unjust and brutal blood sacrifice—does not need to be found outside the Christian tradition. Peter Abelard responds to Anselm with the soothing balm that might have healed the dualistic divide with a less negative, less violent solution. It is a kind of exemplarism of love for which Abelard "seems to have been the chief advocate...the example Christ set was to be regarded, not only as of equal importance with the act of redemption, but as constituting the real reason why God became man instead of redeeming man by a direct exercise of naked power."<sup>40</sup> In this view, the *cross* does not have to *effect* salvation, but it does have an irrefutable place.

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<sup>40</sup> G. R. Evans, *The Mind of Bernard of Clairvaux*, (Oxford, Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1983), 154.

Because “God in Christ has united our human nature to himself, and by suffering in that same nature has demonstrated to us that supreme love...of which Christ himself speaks: ‘Greater love has no one than this’ (John 15:13),”<sup>41</sup> *the cross of Christ demonstrates the supreme, gratuitous, boundless, generous, selfless and sacrificial love of God.*

Peter Abelard, like Anselm, is pushing back against a view of atonement that gives the Devil ‘rights’ to humanity. For Abelard, “there can be no Devil’s rights in the matter,”<sup>42</sup> because it is against God that humanity has sinned, and the Devil simply does not have a legitimate stake in the equation. According to G.R. Evans,

the only reason Abelard can conceive why God became man and suffered as he did was to show man how to live as he ought. If he had come solely to be crucified, surely God would have had a greater reason to be angry with [humanity] for ever because [humanity] had so brutally crucified his Son, than because he had eaten a single apple while...in paradise.<sup>43</sup>

Abelard’s insight into the generous love of God is in harmony with the God known in salvation history, revealed in the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*, not the God infinitely separated from human history, but the utterly transcendent God whose love is so profound that God enters intimately into communion with creation. For Abelard, the Incarnation of Christ reveals that we are *already saved*. In this way of thinking, humanity is not saved by the *execution* of Jesus, but by the *prior and irrevocable love of God* made known to humanity by the tender compassionate love of the Incarnation. This view is partially correct: it is indeed God’s prior, present, perpetual and generous love of creation which is our salvation. God’s generous love made known to us in the dharma of interbeing and the *Seven-fold Sacrament* is our salvation. But, even Abelard would say that Jesus does effect our salvation, for “we are made more

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<sup>41</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 343.

<sup>42</sup> G. R. Evans, 155.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

righteous (*iustores*) by Christ's death than we were before, because of the example Christ set us, kindling in us by his grace and generosity a zeal to imitate him."<sup>44</sup> Christ, that is to say the entire Christ event from Creation to the Pentecost of Spirit (i.e. the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*) is the unsurpassable and supreme example of God's generous and self-sacrificing love, a love that when we graciously and gratefully accept can do nothing less than effect a total transformation of our humanity. This total transformation from being persons of fearful clinging and greed to being persons of lavish, generous giving fashions in us a fulfilled human existence which restores our image and likeness to God. Whatever diminishes in us our *imago dei* obstructs our salvation. Whatever nurtures in us the imprint of God, our *imago dei*, the generosity of interbeing, *is* the way and the truth that lead to liberated life, which is salvation.

### ***Bernard of Clairvaux: Satisfaction and the Second Crusade***

In order to properly understand the impact of the satisfaction theory of atonement, we must look at the historical context under which Anselm's view prevailed: St Bernard defends Anselm *and* launches the Second Crusade! This is the same mentality (identifying atonement with the blood sacrifice of Jesus) that makes Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* possible, by glorifying and obsessing on the suffering and death as *the* central component of salvation. Think about the intense scientific inquiry undertaken by the Nazi regime under Adolph Hitler. From a purely objective standpoint, the Nazis learned much about human physiology through their hideous, torturous scientific investigations.<sup>45</sup> The question is whether we have the right to use what we know about the *Shoah* to help us see the true nature of these discoveries, to see that they are evil. I

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<sup>44</sup> G. R. Evans, 155.

<sup>45</sup> *Remember Website*, <http://www.remember.org/educate/medexp.html>

think we can and must question the view of Anselm as championed by Bernard with the same critique: perhaps the same principle that makes the Crusades possible, the principle of glorifying Jesus' bloodshed and placing the cross at the epicenter of salvation, is the principle and mindset that causes Anselm's view to triumph over Abelard's. If this is the case, we have the right, rather, the *obligation* to re-evaluate and re-examine our focus on the cross with an enlightened spirit.

*Bernard the Crusader*

As is well documented, Bernard "had become , in fact, the official preacher and the guiding spirit of the Second Crusade"<sup>46</sup>, which was proclaimed by Eugene III ("a Cistercian monk and a disciple of the great and saintly Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux"<sup>47</sup>) in a papal bull on December 1, 1145:

We therefore beseech, admonish, and command all of you, and we enjoin it for the remission of sins, that those who are on God's side—and especially the more powerful and noble men—that they gird themselves manfully and attack the pagan multitudes...<sup>48</sup>

The cry for battle from Bernard's disciple, the reigning pope, draws a clear line of connection between death, suffering and the 'remission of sins,' much reminiscent of Anselm's satisfaction theory of atonement. Violence and bloodshed (attack) are linked with salvation.

Turning now to the rhetoric employed by Bernard himself, we find the source of the pope's dangerous words. The identifying moniker of the crusaders, "those who wore

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<sup>46</sup> James A. Brundage, *The Crusades: A Documentary Survey*, (Millwaukee, WI: The Marquette University Press, 1962), 91.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

the cross,”<sup>49</sup> hints at Bernard’s theology of the cross being linked to a kind of perpetual violence (rather than to a remembrance of the violence done to Jesus).

In a letter to garner English support for the Second Crusade, Bernard enjoins the English to take up “the cause of Christ” in defending the Latin East where “for our sins, the enemy of the cross has begun to lift his sacrilegious head there.”<sup>50</sup> He blames the sins of Christians for the problems in Jerusalem, which he refers to as the “arsenal of our redemption,”<sup>51</sup> and promises if they “take up the sign of the cross” they “will find indulgence for all the sins which [they] humbly confess.”<sup>52</sup>

Bernard does not keep his association among the cardinal points of crusading (sin remission, violence, and the cross) quite so oblique. Indeed, his dependency on Anselm’s satisfaction theory is made explicit:

Do not hesitate. God is good, and were he intent on your punishment he would not have asked of you this present service or indeed have accepted it even had you offered it. Again I say, consider the Almighty’s goodness and pay heed to his plans of mercy. He puts himself under obligation to you, or rather feigns to do so, that he can help you to satisfy your obligations toward himself.<sup>53</sup>

Human satisfaction of the obligations toward God swirls around a nexus of blood and violence for those who ‘take up the sign of the cross’. In a bloody and macho appeal to Scripture, Bernard quotes 2 Thess 1:6: “Gird yourselves therefore like men and take up arms with joy and with zeal for your Christian name, in order to ‘take vengeance on the heathen and curb the nations.’”<sup>54</sup>

*Which View Perverts the Gospel?*

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

It is, therefore, legitimate to suggest that a Crusade mentality is evidence of a warped understanding of Christ, and a dangerously misguided understanding of violence, a dangerously misguided understanding of Christ's suffering and death. *Of course* Bernard has to humiliate and crush Abelard. If he doesn't, if Abelard's position gains ascendancy over Anselm's position, then the bloody rhetoric of the Crusader of the Cross is patently vacant, is rendered void. Bernard's championing of Anselm's juridical soteriology, necessary for Bernard's own agenda of upholding the Second Crusade, lends a macabre irony to the Saint's attack on Abelard's appeal to the loving *example* of Christ. The Crusader, waging *war in the name of the gospel*, says of the writings of Abelard: "a new gospel is being forged...a new faith...everything is put perversely."<sup>55</sup>

### ***The Example of Love***

To this very day, a Christian soteriology, which is conditioned to its very core in the dualism of Anselm's feudal worldview<sup>56</sup> is immediately scandalized by the suggestion that the cross plays the role of *exemplifying* the unimaginable love and generosity of God! That Jesus' execution is the ultimate exhibition of the extent of God's love is invariably diminished and articulated as '*merely*' example, while juridical

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<sup>55</sup> Bruno Scott James, *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, (New York : AMS Press, 1980), 318.

<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the suggestion would be here that the Catholic world has moved past Anselm's exclusivist crucifixion-based satisfaction theory of atonement. EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network) is a prominent Catholic media outlet which stridently promoted the film *The Passion of the Christ*. (For example: "13-January-2004 -- EWTN News Feature... EWTN Global Catholic Network will air News Director Raymond Arroyo's second exclusive interview, with Academy Award winning actor and director, Mel Gibson,... EWTN News Director, Raymond Arroyo was on set, in Italy during the filming of "The Passion of the Christ" last year, and is the only broadcast journalist to conduct an extended interview with Mel Gibson about the project." *EWTN Website*: <http://www.ewtn.com/vnews/getstory.asp?number=42801>). Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, exemplifies Anselm's satisfaction theory with its laser-focused agenda on tying salvation precisely to the brutal suffering of Christ. Indeed, Mel Gibson's movie is the wildly lucrative and popular, modern articulation of Anselm's satisfaction theory. Outside of Catholic Christianity, in more literalist (fundamentalist) Christianity it is easy to find the satisfaction language of Anselm: for example, "As our substitute he paid the penalty for our sins." *DigiTracts Website*, [http://www.digitracts.com/view\\_digitract.asp?id=3](http://www.digitracts.com/view_digitract.asp?id=3).

categories of dishonor and satisfaction perdure. Karl Rahner has no trouble characterizing Jesus' *relationship* with the Father as 'exemplary.' In *Foundations of Christian Faith*, this Catholic theologian says, "Jesus experiences a relationship to God which he experienced as new and unique in comparison with other men, but which he nevertheless considered to be exemplary for other men in their relationship to God."<sup>57</sup> To say that Jesus, even with regard to the crucifixion, is the example we must follow does not need to imply an inferior "degree" Christology which supposes that Jesus is different from the rest of humanity only in degree, while not in kind. Why do people insist on drawing this conclusion?

*The Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*

People draw this conclusion because they are insufficiently impressed by the astonishing kenosis (self-emptying) of the Incarnation and insufficiently moved by the gifts of Resurrection and the Spirit. People draw this conclusion because they fail to see the *divine imprint of generosity which inheres in the Christ event as a Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing: Creation, Pentecost of Torah, Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost of Spirit*. In every aspect, this divine kenosis is the ultimate expression of interbeing, the ultimate expression of generous love.

It does not have to be so: we *can* learn to be grateful for the astonishing kenotic generosity of this entire *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* of God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit! Jesus, the unique, divine, and loving Son of the Living God makes manifest God's love in concrete and shocking ways. God does not *begin* to love creation with the Crucifixion. God does not *begin* the work of Salvation

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<sup>57</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations*, 254.

with the Incarnation! From an eschatological perspective, salvation is already accomplished, humanity is already saved from before creation. When we fail to recognize our true nature, our Salvation nature, our Resurrection nature, our interbeing/generosity nature we fail to recognize the presence of God undimmed in us despite our best (worst) efforts to banish the Spirit of love from our being through our ungrateful disobedience and sinful failure to sacrifice our self in utter generosity. Our vocation is to realize our true nature, our Buddha nature; is to be divinized by a life overflowing with the Spirit, overflowing with every gift of God.

It is through Christ's example that we come to know the truth of what it means to be fully human. Jesus is fully divine because he is one in being with the Father, but he is also fully *human* because he does not diminish by sin his true human nature. Christ does not diminish his humanity by withholding anything whatsoever, but instead gives all in self-sacrificial generosity. In knowing Christ's unbounded and generous love, we are elevated out of our ignorance. The knowledge creates in us a transformed existence. Knowledge is transformative—that is, understanding that unbounded generosity and self-sacrifice is what makes Jesus' humanity fulfilled and fully awake, creates in us a new reality. We call this transformation baptism. For Christians, this transformation does not take place, apart from Christ. This new existence is a new development in the evolution of ever-maturing human dignity. Salvation is the Kingdom of God, and Christ in the *Seven-fold Sacrament* of the Kingdom of God, is the visible manifestation of Salvation.

## *The Cross*

The issue here is the role of the cross, which as one aspect of the *Seven-fold Sacrament*, is the boundless example of God's generous and self-sacrificing love. It is through the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* that salvation is effected. The cross is above all the selfless sacrifice, the selfless giving away of every gift. This is the contribution of the crucifixion to the *Seven-fold Sacrament*. What in the horror of the crucifixion appears to be a tragic loss of self (a tragic loss of everything), through boundless giving is actually not tragedy at all but triumph; not abandonment but salvation revealed to us in the sharpest possible relief. In reality there is no incongruity between Jesus' every earthly action of generous kenosis and what happens in his crucifixion. The gratuitous generous self-communication of God inheres in every aspect of the *Seven-fold Sacrament*. Each aspect is full giving, yet each reveals some distinctive aspect of that selfless giving. The cross in particular reveals the sacrificial selflessness nature of boundless generosity. And even though this appears to be the most senseless of the aspects, the fulfillment of the *Seven-fold Sacrament* utterly depends on this dimension of generosity being fully realized, just as what the crucifixion teaches us about generosity depends absolutely upon each previous dimension's full realization.

### *Dualistic Juridical Salvation and the Slaughter of the Innocents*

What is dangerous, is positing some kind of juridical salvation in Christ's sacrifice. If the mere fact of the execution-death of the innocent One, Jesus Christ accomplishes salvation, then we could argue that the infant Jesus killed by Herod in the slaughter of the innocents would have accomplished salvation for the world. But who would have known!?! In the mindset of the juridical salvation theology, a slaughtered

baby Jesus would have effected salvation, making King Herod, not the cross (would we wear images of Herod on chains around our necks?) the occasion for our salvation! This absurd hypothetical situation demonstrates the weakness of this brand of soteriology: without Jesus' *teachings, deeds* and *followers* the world would have been unknowingly saved and unable to access that salvation for lack of knowledge—for lack of the ethical programme which Jesus reveals in his life.

Sadly, Christianity *has* been trapped by notions of absolutist dualism and utter separation. Sadly, therefore Abelard is denounced by Bernard. Abelard is formally condemned for this view of God with too abundant and too generous an attitude of love.

In the post-conciliar years, we have experienced a period of unprecedented inter-religious dialogue in the Church. If this so-called *exemplary* Christology can be embraced without fear, Christianity can gain access to the light of renewal with its Buddhist neighbors. As Thomas Merton says in *Mystics and Zen Master*, the goal, the ultimate “aim of Buddhism... [is] the ultimate emancipation from duality.”<sup>58</sup> The Buddha teaches a complete integration of the physical and the spiritual—therefore the goal is to expel dualism. The lure of dualism plagues us, and prevents us from experiencing the integration of life's spiritual and physical dimensions. It seems safe to assume that if we could poll Christians to get a sense of what they think of as ‘heaven’ and the afterlife, we would hear about a patently un-corporeal Spirit place—a complete separation of the body from the equation, an utter corporeal obliteration.

### ***A New Soteriology? Yes.***

Alluring as the black and white categories of Gnostic dualism may be, the salvation that such a worldview presupposes is anything but the genuine hope of

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*. New York, NY: The Noonday Press, 1967, 282.

Christians and Buddhists. Appealing to a healthy duality that describes but does not absolutize the physical and spiritual aspects of reality as it is, Buddhism and Christianity, to the degree that they can evade absolutist impulses, need to be able uncover a new to soteriological articulation. As we have seen, Buddhism can provide a safe place for Christianity to breathe in a healthy duality, since Buddhism is an “agnostic, democratic and sacramental Gnosticism.”

Saint Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement traps our collective Christian imagination by absolutizing feudal hierarchical categories and embedding them in the mind of God, and defining the crucifixion as the absolute nexus of salvation. The exemplarist soteriology imagined by Peter Abelard as an alternative to Anselm’s is deemed to be heretical by St. Bernard of Clairvaux whose Crusading mentality absolutely depends upon the triumph of satisfaction soteriology.

*Exemplarism*, that is to say, thinking of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross as an *example* of divine love, or even *the* example of divine love, is a stumbling block to the imagination mired in Anselm’s absolutized hierarchal categories of honor and satisfaction. This present essay finds that we need not be hemmed in by such thinking. Indeed, just because the Crucifixion is the *example* of divine loving generosity does not mean that it is not divine loving generosity. Does this sound like nonsense? Perhaps it would apart from beliefs that automatically diminish with qualifiers such as “merely” or “only” that which is regarded as example.

The *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* is at once *unique* and at the same time is utterly *reflective of* the nature of creation’s web of intra-relationship and creation’s relationship with the ultimate dimension, God. *Yes* the Crucifixion is unique

and unrepeatable and irreversible as the occasion of God’s generous, selfless love—but so is Creation, Pentecost of Torah, Incarnation, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost of Spirit. Yes, the Crucifixion is unique, but it is also exemplary. It is unique, but so is every novel unfolding of every new manifestation of generous interbeing!

The Holy Spirit, permeating the whole of creation, vivifying and purifying and inviting us into utter participation in the divine life is ever-empowering the unfolding of generous interbeing. The Buddha’s insight of dependent co-arising of all phenomena casts light that exposes the utter generosity of the cosmos, and reveals the same imprint of God available to Christians in the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*. Our salvation is to abandon all recourse to illusory securities, to abandon our self in utter generosity, which is the divine life, and which is therefore revealed as the shining example of generosity and is nowhere more evident than in the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*. Would that we never again experience the impiety of suggesting this is “merely” an example to follow.

Since the divine life is utterly evident in *every* aspect of the Christ-event, the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*, we shall examine just three more of its aspects (Incarnation, Resurrection and Pentecost of Spirit), to help us to demonstrate and articulate an expansive and hospitable soteriology that breathes in the life of Gospel, and Dharma both.

## CHAPTER THREE: INCARNATION

### Jesus the Christ

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. This took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son."

Matthew 1:18 & 22-23

### Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha

When the Bodhisattva<sup>59</sup> had descended into his mother's womb, no sensual thought arose in her concerning men, and she was inaccessible to any man having a lustful mind.

Majjhima Nikaya 123.10<sup>60</sup>



### ***Incarnation: Generosity as Kenosis***

The Christian contention that Jesus Christ is the second person of the holy Trinity of divine persons, in short, that Jesus Christ is God with us, *Emmanuel*, (Mt 1:23) is the singular and irreducible claim that God's generous love is boundless. God, who has no need of anything, has a love so profound that God is willing to enter into the world of *samsara* (birth and death and suffering) out of absolutely gratuitous love.

Most fundamentally, this promise of life in the Incarnation, the promise that Creation is brilliantly dignified, and worthwhile in the eyes of God, is boundless gift from God. As part of the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*, the Incarnation reveals the abundant love of God that showers creation with every conceivable gift, and every gift beyond human conception. In the Incarnation, Christ demonstrates our true nature, our fully human nature, freeing us from our bondage to sin by freeing us from our bondage to selfishness, greed, inhospitality, attachment and clinging. Freed from this sin in *imitatio Christi*, we have the love to manifest the *imago dei*, which is the imprint of God of boundless and selfless giving in interbeing.

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<sup>59</sup> From the Sanskrit: "literally 'enlightenment-being'; one on the path to awakening who vows to forego complete enlightenment until he or she helps all other beings attain enlightenment"; quoted in Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 201.

<sup>60</sup> Marcus Borg, 214-215.

To one who knows the God of the Old Testament, this giving and care and love should not come as a surprise. This is the God of the covenant, abiding in faithful love in spite of every human failing; abiding in presence and *Torah* and Spirit; abiding in the Spirit of Wisdom.

***The Incarnation: Sophia Christ***

*Wisdom (Sophia)*

This chapter, entitled *Incarnation* begins with the unlikely section: “Wisdom.” From a bird’s eye perspective, it is perhaps with only minimal reflection that we can easily see the two religions being held up here for mutual sharing, Buddhism and Christianity, are wisdom religions. That is not to say that they are “only” or “merely” wisdom religions, but to recognize that for each, wisdom plays some central role. True wisdom in both religions shows itself in right (proper) ways of living, and in right (proper) relationships of every kind.

A fair next question, as we flutter down for closer inspection, is to ask what we mean by *wisdom*. It is impossible to begin speaking about wisdom without making at least the briefest mention of Greek *philosophia*, that is, the Greek love (*philos*) of wisdom (*Sophia*). Indeed, anything that resembles a sufficient treatment and discovery of Greek philosophy is far beyond the bounds of this present study. That said, it is the Greek *philosophia* that comes to be the vowels and punctuation and grammar of the religious language of Christianity, of Christendom, and its theologies of Christ and God. The sixth Century BCE was also the home of Siddhartha Gautama’s “search for true wisdom.”<sup>61</sup> According to the Chief Abbot of the Japanese Agon sect of Buddhism (which above all is

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<sup>61</sup> Seiyu Kiriya, *21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Age of Sophia: The Wisdom of Greek Philosophy and the Wisdom of the Buddha*, (Tokyo, Japan: Hirakawa Shuppan, Inc.), 16.

devoted to wisdom), “there are two forms of wisdom that represent the highest achievements of the human race. One is the wisdom of philosophy”<sup>62</sup> that is the “Western (Judeo-Christian) ...scientific ... materialistic civilization.”<sup>63</sup> “The other is the wisdom of Gotama Buddha”<sup>64</sup> that is the “Eastern (Indic-Buddhist)...spiritual...non-materialistic civilization.”<sup>65</sup> From this view, then, wisdom of one brand or another is at the very beating heart of both Eastern and Western civilizations and is likewise inexorably linked with the respective religious experiences and expressions.

*Jewish Wisdom and Sophia Christ*

As the root of Christianity and the religious and cultural home of Jesus, it is fitting that to the Jewish tradition of wisdom that we now turn. Wisdom in Hebrew is “*Hokmah*,” a word that is “grammatically feminine,” and a biblical personification which “is also consistently female.”<sup>66</sup> What is absolutely striking is that it is to the Wisdom tradition that the early Christian community turns in order to make sense out of their experience of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord:

What Judaism said of personified wisdom (*Hokmah*), Christian writers came to say of Christ: the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15); the radiant light of God’s glory (Heb 1:3); the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15); the one through whom God created the world (Heb 1:2).<sup>67</sup>

Because the word *Sophia* reflects the personification of this divine power in a way that *wisdom* cannot, and because Christ is a person, not a concept, the term *Sophia* is preferred to express this truth.

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>66</sup> Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *In Search of Christ-Sophia: An Inclusive Christology for Liberating Christians* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third [XXIII] Publications, 1995), 9.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Before the moment of the Incarnation there was the moment of Creation. Jann Aldredge-Clanton highlights the parallelism between the opening of Genesis and that of John's Gospel in the shared words, "*In the beginning...*" (Gen 1:1; John 1:1). This brilliant device proclaims that in the Christ proclaimed in the Fourth Gospel abides an earlier *pre-existence Christology* and "the idea of pre-existence is Sophia christology."<sup>68</sup>

John the Evangelist opens his Gospel thus:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.

Sophia is the creative power of God, and in Christian revelation in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, becomes identified as the Second Person of the Trinity: Sophia Christ, Son of God. James M. Robinson effectively demonstrates how Matthew's gospel exemplifies this identification. Though they are numerous, one example shall suffice for illustration:

The Q saying that began (Luke 11:49): "Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send the prophets and apostles,'" is edited by Matthew (23:34): "Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes..."<sup>69</sup>

Robinson rightly asserts this is not a case of Matthew dropping the Sophia reference, but,

Rather one must recognize that he identifies Sophia with Jesus, by attributing to Jesus not only a saying previously attributed to Sophia, but by attributing to Jesus the content of the saying, namely Sophia's role as the heavenly personage who throughout history has sent the prophets and other spokes[persons].<sup>70</sup>

As I say, the Sophia Christology abounds with credible evidence, but primarily because of John the Evangelist's use of the term *Logos* (Word) as an identification and because of

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>69</sup> James M. Robinson, "Jesus as Sophos and Sophia: Wisdom Tradition and the Gospels," in *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 11.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

its masculine and therefore more socially comfortable tones and images, the impulse to appeal to the fertile image of Sophia, Wisdom herself personified, is eclipsed by a terminological shift. This is a tragedy. Unlike Sophia's personalism, "Word" is not a person. But, Sophia (*Hokmah*) is a person with a rich tradition of being the creative generativity, power and the wisdom of God:

...but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:23-24).

The Johanne tradition is both the source for *logos* Christology but also is a source for Wisdom identification in the description of pre-existence: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God," (John 1:1-2), and creation: "All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be" (John 1:3). Furthermore, the Johanne Sophia Christ formulation, "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6) can be found as a description of Wisdom in Proverbs 4:11; 20;22:

11 On the **way of wisdom** I direct you, I lead you on straightforward paths.  
20 My son, **to my words be attentive**, to my sayings incline your ear;  
22 **For they are life** to those who find them, to man's whole being they are health.  
(emphasis added)

It is with all this in mind that one can prayerfully join nascent Christianity's impulse, that since the Lord Jesus Christ is divine, and since he is present before creation, and is the power of creation that the Son of God is to be identified as none other than Sophia Incarnate.

#### *Jesus Sophia and Sophos*

But, because of his teachings which come to us in the gospel stories of his words and deeds (for truly Jesus' actions, every bit as much as his utterances, are his teachings),

not only is Jesus Sophia Incarnate, but Jesus is also a Great Sage, a great revealer of wisdom for human ears and hearts. Jesus is Sophia and sophos.<sup>71</sup> At one and the same time, Jesus *is* the way, *is* the truth and *is* the life, and he *reveals* the way, *reveals* truth and *reveals* life. A sublime example of how within Jesus there is a mutual inherence in both his identity as sophos and his identity as Sophia in his teaching as sophos that: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” (Jn 15:13), and his manifestation in deed and being of this teaching as Sophia Incarnate: “There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus in the middle... he said, ‘It is finished.’ And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit” (Jn 19:18; 30). Here, as elsewhere, Jesus *is* what he teaches.

*Gautama the Buddha Wisdom Seeker and Sophos*

The fact that the dharma is composed of subtle and insightful wisdom attained by the Buddha in his enlightenment (for he is *Tathagatha*, the one who has thus attained), wisdom that is borne out as truth in the direct experience of the many practitioners of the practice of the dharma is unassailable. The Agon sect of Buddhism, which leans with especial emphasis on the Buddha as a wisdom teacher, that is, as sophos, describes the Buddha's leaving of the householder life for his religious quest in this way:

...in the sutra, The Noble Search, found in the Majhima Nikaya, the Buddha says: ‘I went forth from the home into homelessness to seek the birthless, unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, and undefiled security from bondage, Nibbana.’<sup>72</sup> In other words, he went to search for the wisdom that would lead him to nirvana.<sup>73</sup>

It is often said that the Buddha and Buddhism do not propose a God, or that they deny God. This is only partially correct. While ultimate notions of (anything, including) a

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> “Nibbana” is the Pali equivalent of the more familiar (to Western ears) Sanskrit word, nirvana.

<sup>73</sup> Seiyu Kiriya, 72.

personal God are untreated by the Buddha, it may well be impossible for Theists (of any variety, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu...) not to identify the Buddha's words, "birthless, unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, and undefiled security from bondage," with God. This reflex points to a profound sharing of the sacred, a profound sharing of wisdom personified as *Hokmah*, Sophia. But, because of the Buddha's mindful omission (in his spirit of fostering a healthily agnostic gnosticism) of a personal identification of nirvana with God (i.e. the Holy Spirit or Sophia) we can respectfully call the Buddha a *wisdom seeker*. And to the degree that he achieved a fulfilled humanity in a life inundated and overflowing with the Spirit of Wisdom, we recognize the Buddha as a fully human being, awake and alive with a divine generosity of interbeing which we may call the imprint of God on creation. Wisdom truly manifests herself in the person of the Buddha and becomes the Great Sage of the Shakya tribe, *Shakyamuni* Buddha, the sophos who sets the wheel of the dharma in motion, sharing the depthless fruits of wisdom with all beings.

#### *The Wisdom of Jesus and Siddhartha Guatama*

Jesus, who is Sophia Incarnate, and sophos, that is unreservedly generous sharer of Sophia herself and Sophia his teaching is truly the spiritual brother of the Buddha who lives a life of wisdom as the sophos, as sharer of the dharma. Christ Sophia and the Buddha's dharma lead humanity toward the true home of fulfilled human personhood in the selfless participation in the cosmic unfolding of generous giving, which is the imprint of God—the *imago dei*— for which we are created.

Jesus calls us to participation in the divine life which is Christ's Holy Spirit of Divine Sophia, and calls us to live up to our potential as selflessly sacrificing images of

the divine face. The Buddha calls us to live up to our full potential as selflessly sacrificing, unattached and loving participants in cosmic generosity.

So, the Incarnation of divine Sophia in Jesus Christ is the loving brother of the Buddha and every lover of wisdom, for who can love wisdom without loving Sophia, without loving Sophia Christ?

### ***Incarnation(!): Life Stories***

The study of Christology is no small undertaking, to be sure. From the Christian perspective everything depends upon Christology, that is: upon the study of the life of the person, Jesus Christ, Son of God; upon the ‘work’ of Jesus Christ, Son of God. This so-called ‘work’ is the saving action of Jesus, the study of which is known as *soteriology*. Soteriological concerns are inextricable from questions about the person and meaning of Christ. The radical and virtually unimaginable realization of Jesus’ earliest followers is that he is not just some great teacher (though he is that), but that he is so much more! He is the divine Son of God, *Emmanuel*, God with us, The Deity of Love and Creation Incarnate, God in loving solidarity with humanity! It is lamentable that the exclamation point is even necessary, but it is. Through a process of pervasive enculturation, the stunning overflowing delight of God’s loving action in the Incarnation has become the trite expression of oft-repeated rhetoric. But it is precisely because the Incarnation needs to be retrieved in its fullness that this project includes a section about the life of Jesus, who lived and breathed and taught and healed the sick, and shared social-boundary-obliterating-table-fellowship with sinners. We must be mindful that the Incarnation is possible only because, as is articulated in the Bible passage at the beginning of this

chapter, Mary “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:18). The Holy Spirit makes the Incarnation possible.

For the purposes of this investigation, we add to this brief survey of Christ’s life an equally brief investigation into the person and meaning of the Buddha, in what is known *Buddhology*. The supposition from the outset is that Buddhism can be a source for new insights and may be an occasion for deepening awareness of the infinitely unfolding, infinitely mysterious reality of the Incarnation. So, it is to the life stories of Siddhartha Gautama<sup>74</sup> and Jesus that we turn. What shall emerge is two lives marked by remarkable consistency and perhaps a seemingly shared religious experience of the ultimate dimension: God.

#### *Early Lives*

Some of the legends and stories surrounding the lives of these two Great beings are strikingly similar. The pre-natal, and infancy narratives provide some of these likenesses. In the *sutras*<sup>75</sup>, “the Buddha’s birth...is attended by *devas*<sup>76</sup> who say to [his mother] ‘Rejoice, a mighty son has been born to you.’”<sup>77</sup> Christians know the stories from Luke’s Gospel of the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary the coming birth of a child “who will be called the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32), and later the angels that announce his birth to the Shepherds (Luke 1:8-20). The infancy narratives are filled with corresponding experiences of these two figures though “separated by five hundred years,

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<sup>74</sup> This is the name of the ‘historical’ Buddha.

<sup>75</sup> The holy scriptural stories of Buddhism are known as *sutras*. This comes from the word meaning *thread*, as in the thread onto which one would string precious stones or beads.

<sup>76</sup> Hindu Myth: “A god; a deity; a divine being; an idol; a king.; quoted from *Dictionary.com Website*, <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=deva>

<sup>77</sup> Marcus Borg, 3.

three thousand miles, and two drastically different cultures.”<sup>78</sup> Both stories describe the births which take place while each mother is on a journey, take place with heralds announcing the event with words of “the child’s glorious future,”<sup>79</sup> and “neither birth takes place in a house.”<sup>80</sup>

### *Public Spiritual Journeys*

What is perhaps more striking, and, to be sure, more meaningful to this present discussion is the similarity in the adult lives of Gautama and Jesus. The beginning of Jesus’ public life happens when he is about thirty years old, roughly the age of Gautama Siddhartha’s embarking on his own spiritual journey. While the Buddha “flout[s] social convention by consorting with thieves and murderers,”<sup>81</sup> Jesus is known to be “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt, 11:19). Both Christ and the Buddha attack the cult worship of Temple and the “Brahmanical rituals,” respectively.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, they each “created religions that minimized class distinctions and eliminated animal sacrifice.”<sup>83</sup>

Buddhology reveals a pattern evident in Christology: the move from *implicit to explicit*. This means that there are implicit things about the Gautama and his teachings during his life on earth that slowly comes to be understood and expressed in explicit terms, after his death. The same is of course true of Jesus. Clearly, the path is different: Buddha is not a kind of God, whereas Jesus *is* the divine Son of God, second person of the Trinitarian One God. Despite this, one example will suffice. The Buddha “always

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

referred to himself as ‘the *Tathagata*’ which means, the one who has thus attained.”<sup>84</sup> In his life, Gautama did not refer to himself as the awakened one, the Buddha. Indeed this title is not applied to him until some time after his death. With Christ, the definitive formulations about the relationship of his humanity and divinity do not come until the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era.

Jesus Christ and the Buddha are the Spiritual ancestors of many people today. In the stories of their lives are familiar patterns which provide a sense of security and assurance that truth may lie in the experience and teaching of each. For the faithful of each religion, these stories contain, as it were, something to hold onto for the other tradition. The value of the similarities is that they may act as an introduction, ‘way in’ to Buddhism for Christians; a ‘way in’ to Christianity for Buddhists.

### ***The Buddha: A Social Prophet?***

#### *No-self*

Marcus Borg has suggested that a “major difference” between Jesus and the Buddha is that Jesus is a “social prophet,” whereas the Buddha is merely a wisdom teacher.<sup>85</sup> However, this appraisal fails to understand the Buddha’s teachings. Many Christians are frightened or confused by the Buddha’s teaching on *anatta* (no-self). At first hearing, this sounds like the annihilation of the self. However, the Buddha teaches that there is no annihilation. He gives the teaching of no-self as a way to respond to the suffering he witnesses all around him. The Buddha connects the suffering with the idea of *atman* (self), which results in the caste system wherein some people are ranked as the lowest, as *Untouchables*, their entire lives. Untouchables are always treated poorly, and

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<sup>84</sup> Dwight Goddard, *Was Jesus Influenced by Buddhism? A Comparative Study of the lives and thoughts of Gautama and Jesus*, (Escondido, CA: The Book Tree, 2000 [1927]), 32.

<sup>85</sup> Marcus Borg, xi.

must please all those above them in social rank, or fear for their lives.<sup>86</sup> It is obvious that “the Buddha did not believe in the caste system.”<sup>87</sup> The Buddha sees this suffering and speaks revolutionary words: he gives the teaching of non-self as a way to overcome the suffering caused by the idea of a permanent self. The loss of the idea of a separate self, frees one up, since one is no longer ensnared in suffering, to be a source of liberation for other people. The Buddha’s call is a call for social change! If everyone converts to this way of being—then there would be a massive social change! Just as the Christian primarily has impact on those closest to her, so too with the Buddhist. Social change is brought about by the loving action of individuals with other individuals. Thích Nhất Hanh says that “if you practice love and compassion correctly, sooner or later you will apply them to social action...your work is an authentic Dharma talk.”<sup>88</sup> There are further difficulties for the Christian reader here with the idea of *non-self*, but they will be addressed in a subsequent section.

#### *Mahayana Bodhisattva Ideal*

In *Mahayana* (the Greater Vehicle) Buddhism there is the strong and ancient tradition of the *Bodhisattva*. *Bodhisattvas* are great beings who, despite having attained the right for nirvana, forego Enlightenment so they may return again and again to assist every living being on the path toward Enlightenment. According to Patrick Henry, “the Bodhisattva vow is a Buddhist’s commitment to practice for full enlightenment through being available to air the enlightenment of others.”<sup>89</sup> True compassion arises in two

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<sup>86</sup> Thích Nhất Hanh, *No Death, No Fear*, 110.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Thích Nhất Hanh, *Stepping into Freedom: An Introduction to Buddhist Monastic Training*, (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1997), 116.

<sup>89</sup> Patrick Henry, ed., *Benedict’s Dharma: Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict*, (New York, New York: Riverhead Books, 2002), 16.

ways: through action and through insight and understanding. Thích Nhất Hạnh describes one of these Bodhisattvas:

In Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese temples, there is a bodhisattva with one thousand arms – it takes that many arms to help others – and in the palm of each hand there is an eye. The hand represents action, and the eye represents insight and understanding.<sup>90</sup>

The selfless and compassionate *Bodhisattva* ideal permeates the entire *Mahayana* tradition.

#### *Novice Precepts*

What might help this discussion even more is to look at a few of the ten novice precepts of *Mahayana* Buddhist monasticism. Some of them are primarily about being mindful of what we do and what we do not do precisely because our actions can cause suffering for others. Four of these precepts are paraphrased here:

- The monk (or nun) lives chastely, because he knows what intense suffering is caused if a monk violates this. (The third precept.)<sup>91</sup>
- Mindful Speech and deep listening; because unmindful speech and failure to listen cause deep suffering in others. (The fourth precept).<sup>92</sup>
- A monk or nun is committed not to consume toxins, including violent and sexually degrading film and music because we recognize how much suffering these elements can bring in our world—and if we support them we are an indirect cause of someone else’s suffering. Abstinence from alcohol and other drugs is a way to witness to the world that experiences untold amounts of pain and suffering because of intoxicants (alcoholism, abuse, child neglect, domestic violence, etc.). (The fifth precept).<sup>93</sup>
- Vegetarianism is a way to reduce the suffering in the world; suffering of animals and of people who are denied their basic sustenance because an animal which is slaughtered consumes the grain or corn which could be available for a person were it not for people who eat meat. (The ninth precept).<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy and Liberation* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 1998), 82.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 30

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35

### *Theravada Monastic Social Engagement*

This necessary social orientation of Buddhist practitioners, and especially monastics, is not confined to the *Mahayana* school of Buddhism. In the Theravada (that is, the school which “claimed to be orthodox and conservative”<sup>95</sup>) Buddhism, which does not share the tradition of the *Bodhisattva* ideal, the monastic tradition is far stronger. This is the form of Buddhism in Thailand. A key source for Thai Buddhist social engagement is the saying of the Buddha: “Go forth, monks, for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, the benefit, and bliss or gods and men.”<sup>96</sup> This is the explicit sending of the Buddha’s disciples to compassionately bring happiness to the world. In my own experience with Thai Buddhists, it is absolutely clear that the beautiful shining Temple, often hypocritically and ignorantly criticized by Westerners as a disgraceful concentration of wealth in a poor population, at the center of each community is none other than *the* center of social welfare. It is here that I witnessed the disabled being tended to, and here where the elderly find care. As Sunthorn Plamintr says, “the social contributions made by the Sangha are, indeed, of inestimable value” and take many forms as “poor villagers often turn to monks to mediate land disputes, family problems, and differences among neighbors. The characterization of Buddhism as a road of quietism is unfair (especially when it is sharply contrasted with the social good done by Christians) when the reality is that Buddhist “monks take initiative in various social projects...such as construction of schools and hospitals, roads and small reservoirs,” even taking “leadership in raising

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<sup>95</sup> Sunthorn Plamintr, PhD, *Getting to Know Buddhism*, (Bangkok, Thailand: Bhuddadhamma Foundation, 1998), 17.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

funds for such projects.”<sup>97</sup> This is just a small sample of the multivalent social-welfare activities of good Thai Buddhist monks, and none of this comes from nowhere. It comes from the teachings of the Buddha who says, “Go forth, monks, for the welfare of the many.”

Indeed, even the example of his life demonstrates this ideal in two ways. First, upon his enlightenment, the Buddha could have, as all the previous buddhas had done, failed to share the dharma, but he does not, and instead sets the wheel of dharma in motion, devoting almost fifty years of his life to compassionate sharing. Second, the Buddha’s life of renunciation exemplifies a kind of *kenosis*, (self-emptying) or “*sunyata*”<sup>98</sup> (emptiness) in that he renounces the privileges afforded him by his high social class. The deeply rooted humility (in a tradition that does not make *humility* an explicit theme or doctrine) that comes from an awakened awareness of interbeing, which is the absolute necessity of generosity, can do nothing short of practicing selfless compassion. Suffice it to say that it is a grave misunderstanding not to see the Buddha as teaching a social message.

### ***What Jesus Said and What Jesus Did MATTERS.***

The danger created by a juridically effected salvation by the nature of the sacrifice of Christ is that such a formulation can divorce salvation from an ethical program and can alienate salvation from the life lived-out in practice. The fundamentalist sensibility in a way resurrects a quasi-Gnostic tendency to locate salvation in the realm of knowledge, in an intellectual assent of faith. Words like these, on a website entitled “Are You Sure Your [sic] Saved?” are easy to find all over the internet:

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 36.

*What is required to be saved? There is only one possible way for anyone to achieve eternal salvation. And that one and only way is by having complete and total faith in Jesus Christ.*<sup>99</sup>

When faith in Jesus is absolutely all that is required, because it is he alone who bridges the otherwise unbridgeable chasm between humanity and God, it begins not to matter what Jesus said and did. Consequently, it begins not to matter what we say or do either! Jesus preaches repentance, that is an insistence that we change our ways, for the forgiveness of sins.

I ask the reader to recall the aforementioned absurd appeal for a juridical salvation that would have been effected by Jesus even if he had been killed by Herod as an infant. Jesus did not attract followers in his earthly mission due to the fact of his being the Son of God. Followers of Jesus came to him by virtue of his words and deeds. They came to him in order to learn the way to live in this life on earth so as to be in communion with God the Father.

### ***Lack of Historical Evidence***

A difficulty in comparing these two lives is the sheer lack of evidence about Jesus' life between his birth and the beginning of his public career around the age of thirty. Aside from the infancy narratives and one event at the age of twelve where Jesus "remained behind in Jerusalem" (Luke 2:43) and after three days of searching, his parents find him in his "Father's house" (Luke 2:49) (the Holy Temple of God in Jerusalem, which was at the very heart of the Jewish national cult), we have no record of his young life.

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<sup>99</sup> *Are You Sure Your Saved? Website*, <http://members.tripod.com/~robertwells/areyousaved.html>

This lack of canonical evidence for Jesus' early life is in distinct contrast with records we have of Siddhartha Gautama, of whose early life much is known and written. Among other differences, while Jesus never married, Siddhartha Gautama is "married at sixteen to his beautiful cousin Yasodhara, whom he loved after his restrained manner."<sup>100</sup> Not only is Gautama married, but he has a son, on the day of whose birth Gautama laments, "Alas, another bond has come to hinder me."<sup>101</sup> Jesus has a similar statement: "Who are my mother and (my) brothers?" [Mark 3:33]. Siddhartha Gautama abandons his young family to pursue the spiritual quest.<sup>102</sup> This 'difference' between them points to another similarity: Jesus teaches that discipleship comes at great cost. Indeed, "whoever loves son or daughter more than" Jesus is not worthy to follow him (Matt 10:37)! Jesus' disciples *do* leave their families (e.g. Simon Peter is married [Luke 4:38]) to follow Jesus. Also, Jesus has the same intense expectation for the spiritual life as did Siddhartha Gautama, 500 years before him. For both, the spiritual life requires a total commitment and unthinkably generous self-sacrifice, a generous *giving up of the self*.

*Jesus in India? Buddhism in Palestine?*

The lack of textual evidence to account for Jesus' whereabouts and activity in the so-called 'hidden years' has given rise to many conjectures. For instance, some have suggested that perhaps Jesus traveled to India and received "spiritual instruction from Buddhist monks."<sup>103</sup> If this were so, one would expect to hear from Jesus explicit

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<sup>100</sup> Dwight Goddard, 25.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>102</sup> This is not a ruthless and devastating abandonment. Because of the wealth of Siddhartha Gautama, and his family, his leaving does not imperil the lives of his wife and child.

<sup>103</sup> Marcus Borg, 9.

Buddhist *Dharma* (teaching) such as the *Noble Eightfold Path*<sup>104</sup> or the *Four Noble Truths*,<sup>105</sup> which are not in precise evidence. Among the hidden-years theories, one is of particular interest to this survey. As scholars have increasingly awakened to the many striking similarities not just in the lives (as has been hinted at above) but also in the teachings (as shall be shown below) of Jesus the Christ and Gautama the Buddha, the inevitable question has arisen whether Jesus in some way has contact with the Buddha's teachings in some form.<sup>106</sup> Theories range from the possibility of Buddhism being transmitted along "the ancient Silk Route"<sup>107</sup> (in which Galilee is located), or perhaps the Essenes<sup>108</sup> are the recipients of some form of Buddhism which is integrated into their unique Jewish cultic practice.<sup>109</sup>

The latter of these hypotheses presumes that Jesus becomes a member of the Essenes and this is where he develops his message, and his awakened sense of his public mission. Chief among the proponents of a theory that Jesus' contact with Buddhism comes through the movement of the Essenes is Dwight Goddard (editor of the widely popular Western introduction to Buddhism, *A Buddhist Bible*) in his book, *Was Jesus Influenced by Buddhism?*. Goddard painstakingly outlines many (he finds *forty one!*)

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<sup>104</sup> The Noble Eight-fold Path is the way the Buddha taught from his very first Dharma talk, onward. The Noble Eight-fold Path consists of the following eight elements: Right View, Right Thinking, Right Mindfulness, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Diligence, Right Concentration, and Right Livelihood. [From: Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 51-118.].

<sup>105</sup> The Four Noble Truths is one of the ways the Buddha contains the teaching of the way to enlightenment. The Four Noble Truths are: Suffering, Arising of Suffering, Cessation of Suffering, and The Way of stopping action that leads to suffering. [From Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 9-11.]

<sup>106</sup> As has been said, since there is no unaltered transmission of the *Dharma* through Jesus, the supposition is that perhaps the *Dharma* had been enculturated in various ways and transmitted in transformed manners, and it is these altered forms of Buddhism that may have been an influence on Christ. Of course this is all highly speculative, and well beyond the scope of this present project.

<sup>107</sup> Marcus Borg, 8.

<sup>108</sup> The Essenes were a semi-monastic brotherhood of Jews who lived apart from the national cultic practices, and carried on their own purity and community traditions.

<sup>109</sup> Marcus Borg, 8.

“outstanding differences” between the Essenes and the national cult of Judaism, “almost all of which have resemblances to Buddhist practices.”<sup>110</sup> Most notable among this impressive list are the following few examples: “preservation of a middle path between excessive asceticism and free indulgence...no distinctions of rich and poor, master and servant...no recourse to violence[,] even in self defense.”<sup>111</sup> While to be so bold as to say that Jesus’ words and deeds were *in fact* influenced by many of these “semi-Buddhist Essene” distinctions is an exaggeration of existing evidence, *at least*, it can be claimed that Jesus’ words and deeds are visible manifestations of these same principles.

However attractive these investigations might be, the evidence is remarkably sparse, especially for questions of Jesus’ hidden years. So, it is important to approach historicity with the proper perspective. The discipline of history is in many ways insufficient to the task of producing some kind of definitive biography about Jesus apart from claims of faith. Fortunately, in the words of the Catholic theologian, Luke Timothy Johnson, the real Jesus is not primarily some historically reconstructible figure; “the *real Jesus* for Christian faith is not simply a figure of the past but very much and above all a figure of the present, a figure, indeed, who defines believers’ present by his presence.”<sup>112</sup> Marcus Borg agrees: “it is spiritual truth, not historical fact that matters” most.<sup>113</sup>

### ***The Ultimate Dimension Looks You in the Eyes***

People in this modern day often lament not having the opportunity to hear with their own ears Jesus relating a parable; to touch their fingers to his wounded hands; or to

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<sup>110</sup> Dwight Goddard, 108.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109.

<sup>112</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 142.

<sup>113</sup> Marcus Borg, 9.

see the Buddha sitting in meditation or offering a *wai*<sup>114</sup> of respect and dignity, his hands in the shape of a lotus. The temptation is to assume that ‘if I were actually there, then I would know for sure; *then* I would believe.’ We should not be so certain. There were many people (*most* people!) who saw Jesus, yet still failed to believe. Even more shocking is the fact that, *actually seeing Jesus* brought out the *worst* in Judas Iscariot, some Romans, and some Jewish leaders! Historicity is enticing but elusive, the “enchanting houri”<sup>115</sup> (described by poet Kahlil Gibran), that tempts and beckons but always evades.

The problem of the unbeliever who looked directly into Jesus’ eyes is not a problem with Jesus: Jesus did not cease to be the divine Son of God in the presence of that person; and it is not a problem with the Buddha, either: the Buddha did not cease to be the *Tathagatha*, the “one who has thus attained”<sup>116</sup> enlightenment when this or that unbeliever came around. As a person who many times has looked into the eyes of Jesus, Judas still does not believe. The criminal dying on the cross alongside Jesus who knew very little, indeed, is still able to believe. It is a matter of the “subject who does the looking.”<sup>117</sup> In reality, people today can still look directly into the eyes of Jesus or the Buddha. Yet even after thousands of years, and even though billions of people *say* they are followers of Jesus and the Buddha, many of these followers persist in their blindness. Here is a familiar story from the Buddha to illustrate this: Many people would come from far away in hopes of seeing...

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<sup>114</sup> The word used by Thai (and other) Buddhists for the familiar greeting of a bow, with hands in the shape of a lotus.

<sup>115</sup> Kahlil Gibran, “The Enchanting Houri” *Secrets of the Heart* (New York, NY: Citadel Trade, 1992), 171.

<sup>116</sup> Dwight Goddard, 32.

<sup>117</sup> Daniel Berrigan and Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Raft is Not the Shore*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 113.

...the Buddha. But they could not see the Buddha because of the way they reacted to things they had seen on the way. One such man met a woman who needed help, but he was in such a hurry to see the Buddha that he neglected the child of a helpless widow. Of course he could not see the Buddha.<sup>118</sup>

Jesus also has a powerful teaching on this very matter, paraphrased here by Daniel

Berrigan:

“One thinks of the shattering scene of judgment at the end of Matthew’s Gospel when the Lord says, “So long” to some people because they didn’t feed Him and clothe Him and visit Him in prison. They all say, “How come?” and he says, “You didn’t do it to my brothers. Too bad. So Long.”<sup>119</sup>

The Jesus and the Buddha teach the same lesson. Søren Kierkegaard, sounds a bell of mindfulness when he writes that “knowing all the historical facts with the trustworthiness of an eyewitness—by no means makes the eyewitness a follower...because such knowledge means nothing more to him than the historical.”<sup>120</sup> The historical presence of Jesus in his particularity as a first century “Mediterranean Jewish peasant”<sup>121</sup> who suffers dies and rises from the dead is important, because outside of the truth of this reality, there is no Christian religion. Ultimately, however, it is *living* this reality in faith that matters most. The real challenge to overcome is *not* an inability to see Christ or the Buddha *in the past*. The real challenge to overcome is our inability to see Christ or the Buddha *right now*.

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/ Johannes Climacus*, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 59.

<sup>121</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1991), title.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESURRECTION

### Jesus the Christ

*In a little while the world will no longer be able to see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.*

John 14:19

### Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha

*And the Lord said: "It may be that you will think: 'The Teacher's instruction has ceased, now we will have no teacher!' It should not be seen like this, for what I have taught and explained to you will, at my passing, be your teacher."*

Digha Nikaya 16.6.1<sup>122</sup>



### ***Resurrection: Generosity as No Death***

No discussion of the life and work of Jesus Christ would be meaningful if it were to ignore the Resurrection. In fact, the Resurrection of Christ is the absolutely essential element to understanding anything whatsoever in Christology. If the story of Jesus had terminated when he “breathed his last” (Mark 15:37) and “handed over the Spirit” (John 20:30) as he is executed on the cross, then “faith is vain” (1 Cor 15:17). Christ’s Resurrection from the dead, as part of the Christ-event (the entire *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*), provides much fertile ground for the interpenetration of Buddhism and Christianity. Especially cogent to this discussion is the Christian teaching, for which there is very early canonical testimony (c. 56 CE in 1 Cor.), of the “resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor 15:13). This is the bodily resurrection of those who have died.

Most fundamentally, this promise of life in the Resurrection, the promise that death is no longer the final say, is boundless gift from God. As part of the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*, the Resurrection reveals the abundant love of God that showers creation with every conceivable gift, and every gift beyond human conception. In the Resurrection, Christ demonstrates our true nature, our resurrection

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<sup>122</sup> Marcus Borg, 142-143.

nature, freeing us from our bondage to death, and freeing us from our bondage to ideas of the permanence of death, and the finality of death. The Resurrection is the generous gift given to us, and it is the generous gift we must live out and offer to others.

### ***The Kingdom of God and the Cessation of Suffering***

Jesus Christ's Resurrection and Ascension, seen together as one action, is the aspect of the Christ-event that we identify in time and space with the elimination of the barriers of time and space. Put another way, death (and the shackles of time and space) is irrevocably overcome in the entire *Seven-fold Sacrament*, but this is particularly clear in its Resurrection and Ascension dimensions. The human, Jesus ceases to be bound by the cycle of becoming (that is to say, in Jesus of Nazareth's life and ministry on earth, he was bound by the same procession of the unfolding of becoming as is any human being) by transcending becoming, and by undoing what has been heretofore perceived to be the end of an individual's physical existence. In the Resurrection and Ascension, there is no end to Jesus Christ's physical existence; there is no end to his humanity—but it is his nature of becoming, of being conditioned, that ceases. In the Resurrection/ Ascension Jesus Christ passes into and makes manifest the Kingdom of God which is the extinguishing of suffering in the Love of God. Similarly, when the Buddha passes into *nirvana* he ceases to be subject to the cycle of birth and death (samsara). In the Buddha there is no resurrection, but the *nirvana* into which he passes is the cessation of suffering. The Resurrection/Ascension makes it possible for the rest of humanity to enter into the Kingdom as Christ engenders the *bodhisattva* ideal: he *comes back*, making it possible for the rest of us to step into the Kingdom as well.

## *Impermanence*

At first it may seem that there is little common ground in this discussion: Christians believe in a permanent self, which endures beyond death; the Buddha teaches that there is no permanent self. It is important to understand *impermanence*. Looking deeply, one can see that “nothing remains the same for even two consecutive moments.”<sup>123</sup> There is a funny story in the *Sutras*, which demonstrates this reality, related by Thích Nhất Hạnh:

A woman left a saucepan of milk with her neighbor, saying: “Please keep it for me; I shall come back in two or three days.” There was no refrigeration, so the milk curdled and became a kind of cheese. When the woman came back she said: “Where’s my milk? I left milk behind, not cheese, so this is not my milk here.” The Buddha said that this person had not understood impermanence.<sup>124</sup>

It may be frightening to imagine for the first time that there may be no permanent self. But looking deeply at the nature of things as they are (*suchness*), it is easy to see that nothing (that is, no *created* and composite thing) remains the same even in two consecutive moments. Consciousness, thoughts, feelings and perceptions are constantly changing. The human body is also constantly changing: every moment many cells die and others are born. What element can it be said remains the “same” in a person from day to day, minute to minute, moment to moment? There is nothing like that. So, the person who gets out of bed in the morning is not the “same” person who goes to bed that very evening. But since the person of the evening is only possible because of the person of the morning, it can also be said that although they are not the same person, they are “also not different either.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, 39.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

It is important to note here that the salient issue is not about the definition of person, rather it is about our definition of *same* and *different*. I agree that there are innumerable things one can point to that help to recognize the person of the evening as the continuation of the person from the morning, but nothing of real substance is literally the “same.” In fact, the most important parts of the person: her thoughts, feelings, understandings, experiences, perceptions, etc. have all changed in the course of just one day. Furthermore, she is older, closer to death, further from birth, and even her physical body has changed: many millions of cells have died and many more millions have been born. What part of the person is the same from day to day? Nothing (i.e. no created or composite thing) is like that.

It may be helpful to examine one’s ideas about a person who is lost because of death. Do I imagine that my grandmother in a disembodied spirit world, as the spirit of a little old lady, the way she was on the day of her death? Does she stay like that? Do I imagine her as perhaps she wants to be remembered, as a spry child full of life and potential? Would this 16-year-old person know me? Does she continue to change? Our minds are clouded by many notions about a permanent self; so many that we may fail to see the ways the person we think we have lost is actually manifesting here and now. If I look deeply, I can see that my grandmother has a continuation body very close to me: it is my body. My grandmother is alive in me. We do not have to think in supernatural terms to find the person who has died.

Impermanence is not something to be feared. It is because of impermanence that life is possible, that everything is possible. It is only because of impermanence that resurrection is possible. If things were not impermanent, nothing would be possible.<sup>126</sup>

### ***Rebirth, No-self and Continuation***

The Christian with only a cursory understanding of Buddhism may find confusion in learning the Buddhist teaching of no permanent self, since the teaching which is often called “reincarnation” is popularly known. This requires some exploration.

*Rebirth* is a much better word than reincarnation. It is closer to the truth. This can be understood in more than one way. First, since nothing is unchanging, it is possible to speak in terms of birth and death as constant and continuous experiences. Each new moment is a new manifestation of a being. For this new manifestation to emerge, the previous manifestation must have “passed away,” or “died.” But since the new manifestation is so dependent on the previous, the new may be thought of as a kind of “rebirth.”

A second way to understand rebirth is through the insight of interbeing. The Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh often uses the example of a flower to illustrate this. By observing the flower with awakened understanding, it becomes clear that “the flower is made entirely of non-flower elements.”<sup>127</sup> Within the flower are “clouds, sunshine, minerals, time, the earth”<sup>128</sup> and innumerable other causes.<sup>129</sup> Actually the entire cosmos of causes has come together to manifest the flower. One can say that “the flower is full

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<sup>126</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 20.

<sup>127</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 11.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> NB: Every cause is also effect.

of everything except one thing: a separate self, a separate identity.”<sup>130</sup> If we remove any single element from the flower, it “will fly apart.”<sup>131</sup> Interbeing is the truth that everything depends on everything else. The Buddha teaches, “This is because that is.”<sup>132</sup> Rebirth is an element of interbeing. When the cloud becomes rain and is no longer a cloud, the cloud is not annihilated. The cloud is reborn first as rain, then as a puddle of water on the soil, then as a flower. One rebirth of the cloud is the flower; so the flower *inter-is* with the cloud. The flower is actually the rebirth of innumerable elements and causes, not only the cloud. Indeed even “rebirth is not such a good word. A better word is *continuation*.”<sup>133</sup> Both of these kinds of continuation do not depend on permanence; they depend on impermanence. There is no life possible without impermanence. If Christians could see with the eyes of Jesus, they would know this to be true. Jesus illustrates this very paradox, that the necessity of life is always death:

Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. (John 12:24-25)

This is a teaching with which the Buddha would agree. Death is not something to be feared since death is not annihilation. In an essay on eschatology, Monika K. Hellwig expresses this well, saying “It is only when the focus has always been on self that death is the destruction of everything....The New Testament is full of allusions to Jesus’ having saved us from death.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, 48.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>132</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 4.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24 (emphasis added).

<sup>134</sup> Monika K. Hellwig, “Eschatology,” in *Systematic Theology Volume II*, 364.

Admittedly, it is difficult at first to see what can possibly be meant by saying that Jesus saves us from death. The stark and unavoidable reality is that we do really die. The question is twofold: what is the nature of this death, and what is the nature of the one who dies. If death means annihilation, or utter cessation of being, then it is obvious that this is not the case. Modern scientific inquiry confirms what the Buddha intuited and taught: something cannot become nothing. We all know that Jesus knew this as well since he taught that “everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16). He did not mean that our historical bodies would not perish. He meant we will not be annihilated, which is the perennial human fear.

Here we come to the question of the nature of the one who dies. Since we are not of the nature to have a permanent self, a separate self, what we see as death is really just one more death in a continuous stream of innumerable deaths and births. An awakened understanding of no-self allows us to see that no-self is no-death. Jesus saves us from death because there is no permanent self which has to die in the first place. No-self equals no-death; no-death equals no-self. So, impermanence is not something to be feared, but rather it is something to be cherished.

The Buddha in no way denies the possibility of preserving life. According to the Buddha and according to Christ, we are all “destined for eternal life” (Acts 13:48). Like Jesus, the Buddha teaches that there is no annihilation. The difference is here: preservation of one’s life does not need to be equated with the persistence after death of a separate and permanent self. Since there is no separate self to begin with, where would this separate self come from at the moment of death?

### *Born of Water and Spirit*

I have a friend who is a born-again  
Found his savior's grace  
I was born before my father  
And my children before me  
We are born and born again  
Like the waves of the sea  
That's the way it's always been  
And that's how I want it to be  
-Paul Simon<sup>135</sup>

Human beings are not unlike flowers. It is not difficult to begin to see the ways in which a person is reborn. One does not even have to die to be reborn. This is not only a Buddhist statement. Baptism is a shining moment of rebirth in the life of a Christian. Jesus said, “no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (John 3:5). This rebirth is an efficacious reality, a Sacrament, which is a sign of God’s effective power breaking into the world to transform it. There are still more ways any person can see their own rebirth, their own continuation. Physically one is reborn: since one’s skin cells fall to the earth every day, those cells may be manifested anew as a blade of grass, or a flower. In this way a blade of grass or the flower can be one of a person’s continuation bodies.<sup>136</sup> Psychologically one is reborn: since the words one speaks, and the facial expressions one manifests will enter into the consciousnesses of other people and affect their thoughts and feelings and actions, one person’s words may be manifested anew in the loving thought of another person. Again, “nothing can exist

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<sup>135</sup> Paul Simon, “Senorita with a Necklace of Tears,” *You’re the One* (compact disc lyrics insert), (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Records, Inc.), 7.

<sup>136</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, 127.

by itself alone.”<sup>137</sup> There is no “isolated form,”<sup>138</sup> to use the phrase of Thomas Merton, or no “separate self”<sup>139</sup> in the words of Thích Nhất Hạnh.

The Christian experience of being *born again*<sup>140</sup> is just as real and just as immediate as this other way of thinking of rebirth. The rebirth of baptism is described as dying to an old life, and rising into a new life: it is not only a kind of rebirth. It is a kind of *resurrection* by the water and the Spirit. The biblical idea of Spirit is closely linked with life itself. The Hebrew word for Spirit (*ruwach*)<sup>141</sup> is the same as the word for breath. God breathes the Spirit of life into Adam in Genesis. What happens if we are to follow our own breath? Besides my own life what might this breath be? The water vapor in my breath goes into the air and may become a part of a cloud, which will rain down onto a field of grass, which will feed the cow, which will produce the milk, which a small child in South Africa drinks with her meal. The cloud, the rain, the grass, the cow, the milk and the child are all the continuation body of my breath, my life, of me. This is not just a theory. This is reality.

### ***Resurrection is Not Just an Idea***

We must be careful if we reduce the Christian conception of resurrection and rebirth to mere metaphor. Rebirth is a physical and literal reality not only in supernatural ways, but in mundane and easily overlooked ways. We inter-are (we are patently

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>138</sup> Thomas Merton, 29.

<sup>139</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 19.

<sup>140</sup> The phrase “born again” has been co-opted by the fundamentalist Christian movement to denote a person who has accepted Jesus Christ as his or her personal Lord and Savior. The connotation that it is an individual who is saved, and that salvation is not a matter of communal significance, along with the inevitable referents to a literal interpretation of Scripture without regard to the historical-critical approach, all combine to make this term problematic. I have included the term “born again” here in an attempt to reclaim it, an attempt to express a deep reality which is present in the Christian tradition, and which may offer fertile ground for Buddhist-Christian dialogue and understanding.

<sup>141</sup> “from 'ruwach'; wind; by resemblance breath” quoted in *Sacred Name Bible Website*, <http://www.sacrednamebible.com/kjvstrongs/FRMSTRHEB73.htm>

interconnected) with everything else on this planet. Thus, I am the continuation body of people and plants and minerals and a star that came before what I think of as me. My body is not “mine.” My body is the living body of all the generations of my ancestors. In me they are now alive. What I might think of as “my” hand is really the living manifestation, the living hand of all the previous generations. There is no mine. When we are blind to this truth, we can persist in our attachments; or we persist in the illusion of our being a separate and permanent self.

Jesus’ teaching about loving our neighbor as ourselves is a powerful way to say that this reality, love, is only genuine when there is no distinction, because there is no distinction. Love is only real love when it extends to all without discrimination; real love is rooted in pure selflessness.

### ***Resurrection of the Dead***

Saint Paul teaches about the resurrection of the dead in the First Letter to the Corinthians. He describes the resurrection as something we will experience, but of what kind of body we will have upon resurrection he says, “God gives...a body he chooses” (1 Cor 15:38). The physical body of this life is a mere seed, “sown corruptible, it is raised incorruptible” (1 Cor 15:42). The new life, the rebirth in Christ, the continuation or resurrection body for the faithful is something only hinted at in this life. This reality in its fullness is beyond mere ideas.

### ***Jesus’ Resurrection Body***

Even the concretely experienced resurrection of Christ, known as the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20) is not possible to contain in words, ideas

and notions. Indeed, the Gospel accounts of the resurrected Christ portray a reality beyond expression, a reality of a resurrected body which is both physical and incorporeal.

From the Gospel accounts of Christ resurrected, the experience is clearly not that of *merely* a resuscitated corpse. There is some magnificent transformation, which has taken place. Consider the walk to Emmaus in Luke's Gospel, (Luke 24:13-25) which describes an unrecognizable (even to his grieved and beloved followers!) Jesus, a Jesus who once they do recognize him in the breaking of the bread "vanishe[s] from their sight." This sounds like a new kind of body. Later, in Luke's Gospel Jesus is described as having a body being "taken up into heaven," (Luke 24:51) which is his ascension. Next we turn to John's Gospel and find a despondent Mary Magdalene failing to recognize her beloved teacher, Jesus, (until he addresses her by name) who commands her "stop holding onto me" (John 20:16-17). Something about his body is not familiar, and not to be held. Again in John's account, Jesus has a resurrection body different enough from a typical human body that he passes through a locked door (John 20:19), but sensible enough that it bears scars sufficient to cure Thomas' doubt (John 20:26-28). So, we have a mixed report insisting on flesh, as in Luke 24:39, "Look at my hands and feet...because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have," yet there is also something absolutely *beyond* flesh at one and the same time. From this survey we might conclude that in resurrection we do not completely cease to be who we are—or at least Christ does not. Yet, at the same time, the transformation is profound, and in some way, indeed "complete!"

So, there are many ways to talk about resurrection, rebirth, and continuation. Yet they are all different views of the same reality. One may speak of the organic,

inescapable experience of rebirth happening in every moment. One can also speak about a future continuation, a future resurrection of the faithful believer. Finally, we have seen how difficult it is even to express who the Jesus of the Resurrection is, even by evangelists of great faith. These have yet to exhaust the depth of the teaching on resurrection. Both Christ and the Buddha foresee the passing of their most easily recognizable manifestation, but see that they will endure in new and surprising ways. We do not need to fear not being able to “see” the one we think we have lost. We need only to look more closely to see the new manifestations. Buddhists know that they can see present manifestations of the Buddha even today. Since resurrection is a kind of continuation, or a kind of rebirth, and rebirth can take more than one form, then there are many ways Christians can witness the resurrection of Christ. A faithful Christian does not need to lament not being a contemporary of the “historical Jesus” in first Century Palestine; does not even have to wait for Easter Sunday.

We do not have to go anywhere to find the Resurrected Jesus Christ. The resurrected Jesus Christ is available to us here and now. What is reality for Jesus Christ, namely his Resurrection, is ontologically unavoidable for all of humanity. As Gregory of Nyssa explains:

*In our body the activity of any one of our senses communicates sensation to the whole organism joined to that member. It is the same for humanity as a whole, which forms, so to speak, a single living being: the resurrection of one member extends to all, and that of a part to the whole, by virtue of the cohesion and unity of human nature.*<sup>142</sup>

The Resurrection of one, or shall we say *the one*, is the Resurrection of all. In the above citation, Gregory of Nyssa articulates a remarkable sense for the phenomenon of

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<sup>142</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Orations*, quoted in: Olivier Clement, 76.

interbeing which ties the entire human corpus irrevocably into the Resurrection activity of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. In this way, Resurrection divinizes humanity.

### ***Body of Teachings***

#### *Dharmakaya*

One of the “many present bodies” of the Buddha is “*Dharmakaya*,”<sup>143</sup> or dharma-body. As has been said, dharma is the teaching of the Buddha, but it is not “a set of laws and practices, or a stack of Sutras, or videotapes or cassettes.”<sup>144</sup> The Dharma is the “practice of loving-kindness as expressed by life.”<sup>145</sup> In simpler terms, the Dharma-body of the Buddha is the teachings, which can be found in the Sutras, and in the practice of Buddhist practitioners. It is here that people continue to manifest the Buddha’s Dharma-body, continue to live out awakened understanding of interbeing, non-self, and impermanence. The body of the Buddha’s teaching has changed between the day he was last alive and today, because “the love and devotion to him became so great that the idea of *Dharmakaya* changed...to the glorious, eternal Buddha, who is always expounding the Dharma.”<sup>146</sup>

#### *Proclaimed Bible*

Jesus, the Resurrected One, is present to Christians and a light to the world in his Word, the Holy Scriptures, known as the Bible. The Catholic Church acknowledges that Christ “is present in many ways, including in his word.”<sup>147</sup> Jesus himself tells his disciples, “the words I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). And

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<sup>143</sup> Dwight Goddard, 60.

<sup>144</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 31.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 51.

<sup>147</sup> “Part Two: The Celebration of the Christian Mystery” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ed. United States Catholic Conference, Inc.. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 1373.

Christians also have the testimony of Saint Peter who says to his Lord Jesus, “You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). That Jesus is present in the proclaimed Word of God is evidenced by the liturgical practice of the church: all liturgies manifest the presence of Christ in the proclamation of inspired sacred Scripture. Indeed, according to the Vatican II document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Christ “is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church.”<sup>148</sup>

### ***Body of Discipleship***

#### *Sangha*

The Buddha continues to be present in the community of practice, known as the *Sangha*. There are four *Sanghas*: “*Sangha* of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.”<sup>149</sup> This recognizes the multiplicity of paths, the multiplicity of gifts, and allows a place for everyone to practice. No one needs to be excluded. The *Sangha*, the community of practice, is the support for practitioners in their following of the way of enlightenment, the way of the Buddha.<sup>150</sup> It is also the presence of the Buddha in the world. Thích Nhất Hạnh says bluntly that “without the *Sangha*, we cannot help living things.”<sup>151</sup> Indeed, the practice of loving-kindness is the very heart of Buddhist life—and is rendered meaningless if it is ever reduced to mere ideas, worthless notions. The *Sangha* is the continuation body of the Buddha’s loving-kindness.

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<sup>148</sup> “*Sacrosanctum Concilium*” *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, Inc., 1996), 2.

<sup>149</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 115.

<sup>150</sup> Actually there are 84,000 Dharma doors, leading to enlightenment! “It would not be very Buddhist to say yours is the only door.” from Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha Living Christ*, 39.

<sup>151</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 115.

## *Church*

Christ, the Incarnate divine Son of God, does not cease to be present to the world upon his ascension into heaven. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, article 7, says “Christ is always present in his Church,”<sup>152</sup> that is, in the community of faith and practice. The second person of the Trinity, which is One God in three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), Christ promised his followers “another Advocate to be with [them] always, the Spirit of truth” (John 15:16-17). This Spirit, the third person of the One Triune God comes to the Apostles on the day of Pentecost and animates and vivifies the church. From the beginning, “they devoted themselves...to the communal life,” and divided their possessions “among all according to each one’s need.” In other words, the Apostolic *ekklesia* (gathering: church) from the outset acts in the very Spirit of love and generosity and charity that is the efficacious presence of Christ in the world.

Saint Paul gives the powerful imagery of the body of Christ, or the “mystical body of Jesus Christ”<sup>153</sup> as a touchstone of truth for how to understand the church. The Apostle describes this in First Corinthians:

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jew or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.  
(1 Cor 12:12-13)

This is an image that recognizes and celebrates diversity of gifts; rejoices in differences in the spirit of radical equality. The body Paul describes is the resurrected Christ’s presence in the world, as a light for the world. Jesus assures his presence in the church, saying, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of

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<sup>152</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*” 7.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

them” (Matt 18:20). The church is Christ’s loving charity in action to the least among us, for the Catholic Church teaches that “in the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned” Jesus is present.<sup>154</sup> The church is a continuation body of the resurrected Christ.

### ***Eucharistic Body***

A third continuation body of the risen and living Christ is the holy Eucharist. According to the the Vatican II document, “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” Christ “is present in the sacrifice of the Mass both through the ministry of the priests...and *most of all in the eucharistic species.*”<sup>155</sup> Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is a holy transformation of the bread and wine to become the very present reality of the risen Christ’s body and blood. But the Eucharist should never be reified (never become just a ‘holy thing’) apart from the practice of worship and integration into people’s lives. This is what makes the Eucharist so dynamic (so *powerful*): the faithful actually consume what they want to become: resurrection people. The faithful take Christ into their very being—eating and drinking (and listening to the Scripture with the ‘ear of their hearts’<sup>156</sup>). Jesus’ words, “This is My body. This is My blood. Drink it, eat it, and you will have life eternal,”<sup>157</sup> are meant to shock listeners into awakened awareness. So many people live in forgetfulness, explains *Nhât Hanh*, and the “practice of Eucharist is to help resurrect these people so they can touch the Kingdom” of God.

When the words of Jesus and the truth of the Eucharist are seen in the light of the Buddha’s teachings a new dimension becomes available to further confirm the truth Christians already know. The key is in interbeing, and the lack of a separate self. There,

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<sup>154</sup> “Part Two: The Celebration of the Christian Mystery” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1373.

<sup>155</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*”, 7 (emphasis added).

<sup>156</sup> *Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1980), Prologue, 1.

<sup>157</sup> *Thích Nhât Hanh, Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 30.

bread is the source of life, is the body of Christ, because there is nothing in the cosmos which is not also the bread. The bread contains everything (except a separate self), and in “eating it deeply we touch the sun, the clouds, the earth, and everything in the cosmos.”<sup>158</sup> David N. Power, describes something similar, saying that the bread wine and table (altar)...

represent humanity’s communion with the whole of creation and with its cycles of production and reproduction. The breaking of bread and sharing of a common cup are ritual actions brought into many a human situation to express both a necessary mutual dependency and a common hope.”<sup>159</sup>

“Mutual dependency and common hope” and “communion with the whole of creation” are elegant examples of Eucharistic language that express the insight of interbeing.

This kind of awareness, this kind of being in contact with our ultimate dimension, with the Kingdom of God is always available to us. The Christian vocation is to live in a perpetual state of anamnesis—a perpetual anamnestic resurrection, made possible by Christ’s presence in Word, church and Eucharist. *Eucharist* means “thanksgiving.” Jesus is able to speak words of *thanksgiving* (not words of fear or regret, as we might expect) at table with his friends on the night before his execution. We pass too often over this brilliant reality: Jesus is *grateful* on the night before his execution, he give *thanks* because he knows God’s abundant generosity. We need to allow the depth of this truth to penetrate into our hearts, if we can ever hope to be truly Eucharistic people. This is expressed brilliantly in the preface of Eucharistic Prayer II:

Father, it is our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks through your beloved Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. When Thích Nhất Hạnh “asked Cardinal Jean Daniélou if the Eucharist can be described in this way he said yes.”

<sup>159</sup> David N. Power, “Eucharist.” In *Systematic Theology Volume II*, p. 283

<sup>160</sup> *Claretian Communications, Philippines, Website*, “Eucharistic Prayer II Preface.” <http://www.bible.claret.org/liturgy/ordermass/ordermass.htm>

Because the divine generosity extends everywhere and always, so too our gratitude must extend everywhere and always.

### ***Being Resurrection***

Christians are called to be reborn as the Living Christ every moment of every day, and in this way to touch the Kingdom of God. The insight and language of the Buddha help Christians witness in new ways the truth of resurrection, the truth of resurrection consciousness, the truth of *being resurrection*. Too many people fail to live the resurrection. Drowned by the demands of modern life, people worry about tomorrow and regret yesterday—pulled into the future and dragged into the past, they cannot be alive now, today. If they are not able to be alive in the here and now, they will only be creating a new past to regret, and more reasons to fear the future. Because they have failed to tend to the present moment, they will continue to live “like dead people.”<sup>161</sup> In the words of the Buddha, these people who are “heedless are already dead.”<sup>162</sup> Karl Rahner, in *Foundations of Christian Faith*, describes something like this in the human person who fails to touch her transcendentality. Rahner describes “the possibility of evading the experience of Transcendence” and how she can “devote [herself] to [her] concrete world, [one’s] work, [one’s] activity in the categorical realm of time and space, to the service of [her] system at certain points which are the focal points of reality for [her].”<sup>163</sup> This is the precise opposite of being awake (*buddh*); the opposite of being fully human, as Christ was fully human.

Saint Benedict reminds his monks of Jesus’ words “Run while you have the light of life that the darkness of death may not overtake you (John 12:35)” (RB, Prologue, 13).

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<sup>161</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, 98.

<sup>162</sup> *Dhammapada*, 13.

<sup>163</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations*, 32.

When the Christian world can again touch the astonishing nature of Jesus' declaration, "This is my body," and live in the awakened consciousness that Christians become the body of Christ they consume, there will be a new dawn for this weary world. Each new day, each new moment, is a chance to live the resurrection; to be the resurrected body of Christ; the resurrected human heart alive in the light of awareness and love.

Living the resurrection means being the grateful recipients of life, and depends completely upon our entering fully into giving all, into dying, which is the requisite for resurrection.

## CHAPTER FIVE: PENTECOST OF THE SAVING AND DIVINIZING HOLY SPIRIT

### Jesus the Christ

*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you.*

John 14:16-17

### Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha

*The followers of Gautama's teachings are always awake—always well awake. Day and night they are mindful, always mindful of the Buddha.*

Dhammapada 21.7<sup>164</sup>



### ***Pentecost of Spirit: Generosity as Buddhata***

What else is Pentecost of Spirit if not evidence of divine generosity, bursting forth throughout creation? This dramatic event is described in Acts of the Apostles, and takes place during the Jewish celebration of Pentecost in Jerusalem:

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit... (Acts 2:1-4)

What the risen Christ promises is realized. The Spirit of Truth is present as abundant and unimaginable gift. The generous gift of Spirit declares that we are not left alone.

### ***Spirit and Full Humanity***

The purpose of this chapter is to focus attention on a brilliantly multivalent and richly fertile field of Buddhist-Christian inter-relationship on the road to salvation. Admittedly, however, this fertile ground is difficult to name and so requires careful attention with the assured reward for such diligence being a more vibrant understanding of what it means to be fully human, fully alive, and fully in contact with the source of all giving. Indeed, this movement into fuller humanity is the very pattern sanctification in

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<sup>164</sup> *Dhammapada*, 149.

Christian life. According to Gustavo Gutierrez, “the Christian life is a Passover, a transition from sin to grace, from death to life, from the subhuman to the human.”<sup>165</sup>

To recognize this movement, first, it will be important to establish the generosity of God as the source of all gifts and as the utterly self-giving presence within creation. Second, this chapter shall endeavor to illuminate the cloud of mystery in the language used to express God’s potent presence in the Holy Spirit: as “Paraclete (Greek for ‘the comforter’”<sup>166</sup> as *Sophia* (Wisdom), as Spirit of Christ (or the Holy Spirit of Christ), or as in the quotation from the Fourth Gospel that opens this chapter, as *Advocate*. Third, out of a careful discussion of Christian divinization (*theopoiesis*) and Buddhist arahantship or buddhahood (*buddhata*) will emerge a rich and powerful complementarity of these two realities that seek to express one truth.

The question will be whether divinization and buddhata (buddhahood) are in fact the same reality. On initial reflection the significant *difference* that emerges is the way Christians insist that Jesus is a separate, discrete self. However, interestingly, a significant *similarity* is the way we Christians recognize the Spirit of the Risen Christ *within* one another, the way we talk about we as the community being *Christ’s presence* on earth! Individually we are called to *be Christ for one another*. As a corporate reality, we have the capacity *to become Christ*—indeed, our experience of Church demonstrates that this is not relegated to some future occurrence: it is something we have been experiencing from the beginning of our life as Christians! *We are members of the Body*

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<sup>165</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *Teología de la Liberación: Perspectivas*, (Lima, Peru: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1991 [1971]), 283. “Es por eso que la vida cristiana es una pascua, un tránsito del pecado a la gracia, de la muerte a la vida, de la injusticia a la justicia, de lo infrahumano a lo humano.” (My translation)

<sup>166</sup> Chas S. Clifton, *Encyclopedia of Heresies and Heretics*, (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Books, 1992), 3.

*of Christ from the moment of our baptism.* Christian language and our experience are in tender dalliance with the same sensibility that makes it possible for a Buddhist to say that we all have the buddha nature.

### ***Room to Breathe***

Right away one may notice that the burden for proof of openness and for proof of the fundamental capacity to engage in this kind of discourse falls squarely on Christian shoulders. In Christian history there is a strong tendency toward absolutist and dogmatic thinking that can often erect barriers and be the source of enmity among peoples. Many wars have been fought, many lives have been ended because of ideas about Christ and differing opinions. The result of such terrible conflict, whether physically violent or not, tends to solidify ideas about us and them which is good for establishing group cohesion and a positive identity, but bad for inter-religious conversation. With such hard-fought doctrines and definitions, it can be perplexing and confounding for a Christian to hear a Buddhist exclaim in wholehearted assent that Jesus Christ is indeed really present in the Holy Eucharist, or that Jesus is the Son of God.

The more expansive breathing room in the Buddhist religion is traceable to the Buddha himself who set down no commandments, and never required anyone to take any doctrine or words of the Dharma as absolute truth. In Buddhism, even nirvana, what must appear to a Christian to be a core Buddhist ‘dogma’ is vaguely defined. The Buddha says of nirvana what he says of all the teachings: with the dharma “you can cross the stream of transmigration as on a raft, which you use but do not keep.”<sup>167</sup> We ought

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<sup>167</sup> Raimundo Pannikar, 59.

not to become confused in thinking that the raft (the dharma) *is* the shore, or we are lost.<sup>168</sup>

So, the task here is to uncover in the Christian tradition the places where there is room to breathe and muse and create a future with our Buddhist sisters and brothers. Consequently, this task may be reflected in a more strident appeal to Christian thought and tradition than to the Buddhist ones, the latter of which may be presumed to occupy already a more hospitable and spacious outlook.

### ***Generosity***

There is a kind of fundamental fear in humanity, and in all creatures, a fear of being snuffed out, of ceasing to exist. It is the fear of annihilation. This fear grows out of an ignorance of the fact that, according to the Buddha (and to modern physics) there is no annihilation since something can never become nothing;<sup>169</sup> what exists can never be reduced to non-existence. This fear impels us to cling to what we think we need to sustain our existence, impels us to grasp for things and ideas and people we believe will ensure our security or will ensure our salvation. This fear of annihilation lays bare a painful sense that there will not be enough, that no matter the wonder of creation or the rhetoric we expound about God being love, that somehow this is a stingy and selfish love for which we must fight and struggle and grasp. Thoughts of this kind and the accompanying behavior result in creatures incapable of participating in the divine life

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<sup>168</sup> Of course Jesus *does* identify himself as both the way and the truth (and the life). Similarly in the Buddha's dharma, the way and the truth inhere in the four noble truths, with the fourth, the golden eight-fold path as the 'way.'

<sup>169</sup> Does a Christian fear the extinguishing of one's own particular self-consciousness? When we think cosmically, when we think on the scale of the divine, how can we possibly hope to fathom the eventual inconceivably vast potential future manifestations of what we think of as our self-consciousness? Is it possible that what appears to be the extinguishing or annihilation of our particular self-consciousness might instead be a glorious step toward our true home, and may be no annihilation at all? Please see the discussion below (page 81) discussion about the 'self-sacrifice' of the star.

because the essence of all that exists is *abundant, superfluous, gratuitous generosity*. Selfish grasping and fearful withholding of the gifts we have been given are the very antithesis of the unimaginable generosity which characterizes everything we know about God.

It defies reason in a most impious way to imagine our God to be as fearful and miserly as human beings can often be. As Karl Rahner brilliantly states, “theology has been too long and too often bedeviled by the unavowed supposition that grace would no longer be grace if it were too generously distributed by the love of God!”<sup>170</sup> The truth is that God’s love and grace are borne in every blessed respiration of every blessed creature. The truth is that God’s love and grace are imprinted on all of creation, from every human life to the most humble blade of grass in the remotest virgin forest. Walt Whitman touches this truth in his sublime words from “Song of Myself” in *Leaves of Grass*:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars,  
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,  
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,  
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,  
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,  
And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses any statue,  
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.<sup>171</sup>

“A mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.” Indeed. Everything that is, and every new unfolding of each new manifestation is a miraculous and undeserved gift from the abundant storehouse of God’s miraculous and gratuitous generosity. The imprint of divine generosity is the absolute substance of the cosmos. Everything that manifests in this moment is the irrefutable gift of every other thing which came before

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<sup>170</sup> Karl Rahner, “Nature and Grace,” *Theological Investigations IV*, (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 180; quoted in Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace*, (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1979), 129.

<sup>171</sup> Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass: Authoritative Texts*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), 59.

and had to give way, had to *die* in order for what is new to reveal itself. The supernova, which appears to be the horrible and tragic end of the star is anything but! The star going supernova can be a model of pure, selfless giving:

It gives utterly everything to its task—after its stupendous creativity, its life as a star is over in one vast explosion. But—through the bestowal of its gifts—elephants, rivers, eagles, ice jams, root beer floats, zebras, Elizabethan dramas, and the whole living Earth becomes possible.<sup>172</sup>

Everything we know, even the words printed on this page, and even the genesis of the thought of the idea of these words is the gift of the supposed horrible and tragic “end” of the star.

The implications of this thinking are staggering, indeed. The human fear of annihilation, of not continuing as a discrete and identifiable self after death, when applied to the existence of the star is an opportunity for us to think more expansively about what our future unfolding just might be! What I call *me* and what I call *mine* is really the further continuation and further unfolding of the star. Is this a cause for terror and mourning, that the star is difficult to recognize in laces of my shoes, or the sound of gum snapping in my mouth. Or is the perfectly unimaginable diversity of future manifestations of the star instead a source for hopeful expectation for the future of each of us?

### *Sin*

Any human tendency to hoard and cling or to arrest the development of relationships or to refuse to grow is a fundamental act of hubris against God whose revelation consists in only giving. Ignorance about our true nature, and ignorance about what it means to be fully alive, fully human, gives rise to fear which in turn gives rise to

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<sup>172</sup> Brian Swimme, 58.

clinging, consuming, owning and stockpiling things and to enslaving the people we say we love. We enslave them by our attachment not to who they really are, but to who they used to be, or who we wish them to become. Ignorance and clinging are the first two links in the chain of the dependent co-arising, (*pratitya samutpada* [Sanskrit]; *paticca samuppada* [Pali])<sup>173</sup>, or “interdependent co-arising”<sup>174</sup> of suffering. In Christian terms, we can say we suffer insofar as we separate ourselves from God by our sin. If God’s essence is generous giving, then the way to separate ourselves from God is to live selfishly, clinging and consuming everything around us, afraid to give from what we fail to see is the abundant store of goodness granted to the entire cosmos. Failure to participate fully in the generosity of God is the essence of sinfulness.

### *Ingratitude*

This sin of greed, of our inability to give as we ought, springs out of a prior failure: the failure of our gratitude. In our infidelity, we see the mouse as mundane and ordinary and are out of touch with its miraculous nature. Not recognizing or comprehending the miracle of every successive moment, we fail to discern the magnitude of the gifts bestowed upon us. In the book, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, Brian Swimme presents an imaginary dialogue between the teacher, Thomas, and the student, Youth which reflects this failure of the modern mind:

*Youth:* Oceans seem so ordinary.

*Thomas:* Yes, they do, but that only reflects the ordinariness of our minds.<sup>175</sup>

We fail to respond in gratitude to that which strikes us as non-eventful. But what around us is not truly magnificent?

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<sup>173</sup> Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 26.

<sup>174</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 235.

<sup>175</sup> Brian Swimme, 31.

Walter Kasper, in his book, *Jesus the Christ*, points out this same deficiency (or evolution?) in the modern mind as he discusses the stark contrast between the ancient paradigm shared by the original audience of Jesus' agricultural parables compared to the paradigm of a modern reader of the same words:

The modern reader or hearer of these parables immediately thinks of organic growth, but the idea of natural development was alien to the people of the ancient world. Between seed and fruit they saw, not continuous development, but contrast, and recognized a divine miracle.<sup>176</sup>

Gratitude is shackled by a reductionist worldview that measures phenomena by the sum of their parts, as if isolating and describing two hydrogen atoms, and then doing the same with an oxygen atom can tell us anything *meaningful* about the water we drink, or the water in which we are baptized!

There *is* hope for us. When we recognize the veritable statistical impossibility of each moment of becoming, we ought to be, *and can be*, astounded, not crushed by insipid boredom. Brian Swimme says that we have a clue about when we do not live up to our calling to be fully human: “ you will know when you fail...for failure is punished with boredom.”<sup>177</sup>

Thích Nhất Hạnh often tells the story about two astronauts who have landed on the moon. When they arrive, they see there is a serious malfunction and their supply of oxygen will last only one more day. There is no time for a rescue mission, and they are sure to die. At that moment, what would the astronauts want; what would make them happy? For what would they be most grateful? All it would take for them to exclaim their thanksgiving would be for them to touch the Earth. They wouldn't want anything else. Walking on the gift of this Earth and breathing the gift of this air which sustains the

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<sup>176</sup> Walter Kasper. *Jesus the Christ*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1977), 76.

<sup>177</sup> Brian Swimme, 95.

gift of this life—these are miracles of miracles. Yet, we live in forgetfulness, or minds of ordinariness. Thích Nhất Hạnh quotes Zen Master Lin Chi: “The miracle is not to walk on water but to walk on the Earth.”<sup>178</sup> Only the revival of our gratitude, a resurrection of our thankful hearts we had when we were children, can lead us to accept all good gifts and wastefully give them away.

### *Interbeing*

To speak in terms of the selfless generosity of the cosmos, or of the Ultimate Dimension or of God is to invoke the reality of *pratitya samutpada* (dependent co-arising), or interbeing. It is not only a Buddhist insight to recognize this radical and incomprehensible web of interrelation wherein every cause is at the same time effect, and wherein there are infinite causes for each manifestation. It is a Christian insight as well.

Irenaeus of Lyons marvels at the diversity of creation:

Created things, in their great number and diversity, fit beautifully and harmoniously into the creation as a whole. And yet, when viewed individually, they appear discordant and opposed to each other, just as the sound of the lute makes a single harmonious melody out of many and opposite notes by means of the intervals between them.<sup>179</sup>

Arising in a treatise against Gnostic heretics, the language of music and the surprising beauty of chords is an eloquent example in a Christian context of the notion of interbeing, *pratitya samutpada*, which also permeates all authentic Buddhist dharma.

Walter Kasper suggests that “we define our existence by what others are; our existence is essentially co-existence.”<sup>180</sup> The co-existentialism of our reality is a way of saying interbeing. Similarly, in a treatise on eschatology, Monika K. Hellwig describes interbeing in the general resurrection at the end of time as “the essential interrelatedness

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<sup>178</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, 102.

<sup>179</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, ed., 41.

<sup>180</sup> Walter Kasper, 202.

and community of destiny of all human persons at all times and places.”<sup>181</sup> These are just a small scant sample of a burgeoning sensitivity to the web of interrelation. Indeed, it seems scarcely possible to embark on any branch of theology (or science) without acknowledging the growing awareness of interbeing, yet the term still does not appear in dictionaries.

The awakened insight of interbeing is really the awakened insight of generosity and sacrifice. The Buddha teaches:

imasmim sati idam hoti  
imassupādā idam uppajjati  
imasmim asati idam na hoti  
imassa nirodhā idam nirujjati<sup>182</sup>

When this exists, that comes to be,  
with the arising of this, that arises.  
When this does not exist, that does not come to be,  
with the cessation of this, that ceases.<sup>183</sup>

Interbeing is generous giving because in the constant flow of change and becoming, each new manifestation of each element of creation is utterly dependent upon all that came before it, and likewise depends on the sacrificial self-abandonment of that previous manifestation in order to make room for the new. I call this the imprint of God on creation.

*God's Presence and Other Gifts in Wonderful Becoming*

It is nothing new to view the world and God in this perpetual two-fold giving: the gift of every created thing and the especial gift of God's pervasive, inescapable (“Where can I hide from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee?” Psalm 139:7) presence in the Spirit. The Hebrew creation myths describe God breaking into the

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<sup>181</sup> Monkia K. Hellwig, 363.

<sup>182</sup> Joanna Macy, 39.

<sup>183</sup> Seiyu Kiriyaama, 103.

abysmal chaos, infusing it with the undeserved and wholly gratuitous energy of order and form with the character of “wonderful becoming.”<sup>184</sup> God’s very life of generous giving sets in motion and sustains a creation that ever unfolds and within which there is ever a new manifestation which is born from the death of the old. We learn in the opening verses of the book of Genesis that this imprint of God brought *goodness* to the wasteland. To call this story vividly to mind, Genesis 1:1-10 is excerpted here:

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." Thus evening came, and morning followed--the first day. Then God said, "Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, to separate one body of water from the other." And so it happened: God made the dome, and it separated the water above the dome from the water below it. God called the dome "the sky." Evening came, and morning followed--the second day. Then God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered into a single basin, so that the dry land may appear." And so it happened: the water under the sky was gathered into its basin, and the dry land appeared. God called the dry land "the earth," and the basin of the water he called "the sea." God saw how good it was (Genesis 1:1-10 NAB).

The gift of all that was and is and continues to unfold is one aspect of God’s generosity. Another aspect is closely related. It is God’s gift of God’s very self, and is known by the name of grace, or as the “love of God [which] has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). This grace or love which is both God’s self-communication with us and God’s very presence in our midst and within us is yet a deeper unfolding of this unimaginable generosity.

Would that “*Generosity*” were a proper name for God! Indeed, this is not far from the truth. The Old Testament describes God’s revealing God’s name to Moses and the name is this: YHWH. According to Catherine Mowry LaCugna: “The name is often translated as ‘I Am Who Am’ or ‘He Who Is,’ but it may also be translated as ‘I will be

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<sup>184</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, ed., 36.

with you there as Who I Am will I be with you.”<sup>185</sup> The breathtaking generosity of God *with us, Emmanuel, YHWH, is the name of God.* And we must not forget what Jesus tells the disciples about the Holy Spirit:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be *with you always*, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because *it remains with you, and will be in you* (Jn 14:16-17; emphasis added).

Karl Rahner agrees that the only God we can know is *God with us*:

God himself as the abiding and holy mystery, as the incomprehensible ground of man’s transcendent existence is not only the God of infinite distance, but also wants to be the God of absolute closeness in a true self-communication, and he is present in this way in the spiritual depths of our existence as well as in the concreteness of our corporeal history.<sup>186</sup>

The divine transcendent generosity of YHWH God absolutely, immanently with us and apart from us is the ground of who we are and who we are meant to become: willing and loving and generous co-creators. Indeed, this is the destiny of the entire proceeding cosmos in its unfathomable immensity. Brian Swimme describes the massive scale of the universe in this way: “galaxies were created by the hundred billion, each with its hundred billion stars. And all of it dances, the stars swirling about each other, exploding, creating new stars.”<sup>187</sup> Remember: the death of the star makes all subsequent manifestations possible. Without the *self-sacrifice* of the star in its star-form, none of the subsequent manifestations are possible. So, if even insentient stars bear the divine task of generous self-giving, self-sacrifice and self-giving-away for the benefit of what next is to come, then how much more this must be true for humanity, through which the cosmos

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<sup>185</sup>Catherine Mowry LaCugna. “The Trinitarian Mystery of God,” in *Systematic Theology Volume I*, 156.

<sup>186</sup>Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 137.

<sup>187</sup>Brian Swimme, 29.

“as a whole awakens through self-reflexive mind.”<sup>188</sup> All the cosmos has come together in the miraculous becoming of human persons in whom the universe finally comes to behold its magnificence. This is the uncommon existential *raison d'être* of all human persons: to be the self-reflexive consciousness of the cosmos. This task is the supreme gift, is the sum total of every gift God has given to the cosmos.

Can we be so reductionistic as to think that the task of bearing God's generous love, of generously sharing God's presence and very self falls *only* to Christians, or *only* to Jews, or *only* to Buddhists? If we think we can, we had better be careful, for we risk missing something wonderful, something marvelous in God's abundance of gifts and presence. This unique and astounding task of bearing the love, grace, mind and Spirit of God for the cosmos is the work of every human person. This principle is beautifully articulated by Catherine Mowry LaCugna in an article about the Trinity:

Our 'personhood' is to become what God's personal reality already is: boundless self-giving, love poured out for the sake of life, and that which creates inclusive communion among persons. The 'deified' human being is the totally free human being, one who can embrace the enemy and help bring about the kingdom of God.<sup>189</sup>

The vocation of bearing the imprint of divine, generous love falls to each and every human person, without exception.

### ***The Holy Spirit Before and After the Incarnation***

An early sense in patristic Christianity, of the omni-presence of God's Spirit emerges in the apologetics of Justin martyr in a theology of *logos spermatikos*. This theology seeks to locate the presence of the Spirit of Christ, who is the Word (*logos*) of

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>189</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, 189.

God, and also the Wisdom (*Sophia*<sup>190</sup>) of God at creation but from before creation, within the lives of the best of humanity before the Incarnation. In harmony with this teaching, Irenaeus of Lyons can declare in his treatise, *Against Heresies*, that:

The Son of God has been sown<sup>191</sup> everywhere throughout the Scriptures [of Moses]. Sometimes He speaks with Abraham, sometimes with Noah, giving him the measurements of the ark; He looks for Adam, brings judgment on the Sodomites. There are times when He is actually seen guiding Jacob on his way, speaking with Moses from the Bush.<sup>192</sup>

The work of Justin and other apologists goes further, finding the seed of the Spirit of God in the *philosophia* (love of wisdom) of the Greeks. In fact, the creative Word of God in the Old Testament, is personified as Sophia (wisdom), the creative force of God. Anne Clifford rightly reminds us that

In the wisdom literature God is viewed primarily as creator.... The ability to perceive this order and the discernment of how to live in harmony with it are what constitute wisdom.... Sometimes wisdom is a divine quality or entity, not distinct from God, but not totally identified with God either. In other instances, particularly in texts focused on creation, such as Proverbs 8, Sirach 24, and Wisdom of Solomon 7, the figure of Wisdom appears to have taken on the status of a second divine person.<sup>193</sup>

Sophia-God is the source of *logos* language, applied to Jesus Christ whether in the Incarnation or in the more general Justinian way of *logos spermatikos*. The Holy Spirit of God's self-communication (grace) and self-gift resides in all of creation, but in a special way in the hearts of all humanity. God's gracious, generous giving, which is the imprint of all creation, demands only one thing from us: we must, in the poignant words of Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, learn to "*love wastefully*,"<sup>194</sup> for this is how God loves us. Divine generosity only knows one way to love: lavishly! The God who gives

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<sup>190</sup> Justin martyr says in *Dialogue 100.4* that Jesus Christ "is also called Sophia... in the words of the prophets." quoted in: James M. Robinson, 12.

<sup>191</sup> "sown" as seeds, that is *spermatikos*, are sown.

<sup>192</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, ed., 50.

<sup>193</sup> Anne M. Clifford. "Creation," *Systematic Theology Volume I*, 204-205.

<sup>194</sup> John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying & How a New Faith Is Being Born*, (San Francisco : HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

all, *gives to all* without discrimination, even to pagans and heathens and infidels and people of every other dehumanizing label we can muster. Justin Martyr touches the seed of this truth as he seeks to harmonize Hellenist *philosophia* with the Revelation of the Incarnate Wisdom and Word (*Sophia* and *Logos*) of God and finds the harmony he seeks.

What is presumed here is that the one God of generous self-giving and generous self-communication speaks in Old Testament theophany regardless of what we call this God. Irenaeus calls the theophanistic God “the Son of God,”<sup>195</sup> and Karl Rahner identifies the presence of God as, “The Presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit.” This generous presence of God is known also as wisdom, since “the title ‘Holy Spirit’ is feminine in Semitic languages, and at times is interchangeable with *Sophia*.”<sup>196</sup> This constellation of names, *Son of God*, *Christ in the Holy Spirit*, *Spirit of Christ*, *Spirit of Wisdom*, *Holy Spirit* presses forward in hopes of expressing and understanding the meaning of what this unthinkable generous, transcendent and immanent God can possibly be all about.

#### *The Universal Salvific Will*

The God who overflows with abundant gifts is not contained in any one place, in any one people, in any one religion. A God of such love could never be summed up by such humanly concocted limitations. It is, according to Karl Rahner, “a universal and supernatural salvific will of God which is really operative in the world.”<sup>197</sup> To the fearful and reductionist religionist whose view of God reeks of scarcity, not abundance, stinginess, not generosity, the idea of God’s universal salvific will seems abhorrent. A

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<sup>195</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, ed., 50.

<sup>196</sup> Jann Aldredge-Clanton, 26.

<sup>197</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 313.

fuller, more realistic view of what Christians know as God is unyielding to such a diminishing view. Rahner continues, in the strongest terms:

Christ is present and operative in non-Christian believers and hence in non-Christian religions in and through his *Spirit*. This proposition is to be taken for granted in dogmatic theology. ...it is to be taken for granted that this faith is made possible and is based upon the supernatural grace of the Spirit. And this is the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, so that as the Spirit of the eternal Logos he can and must be called at least in this sense the Spirit of Christ, the divine Word who has become man.<sup>198</sup>

In Rahner's view, the universal and supernatural salvific will is not a matter for debate; it is a matter of dogma. The Lord of the Universe is the Lord of all, but is also the tender and merciful companion of all, beckoning all to their true home which is union with God.

*Nostra Aetate*

The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic church "examines more carefully its relations with non-Christian religions" because "humanity forms but one community" and makes a bold statement toward reconciliation and love in the document *Nostra Aetate* ("Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions"):

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.<sup>199</sup>

What else can the "ray of truth that enlightens humanity" be if not the Holy Spirit, which is the creative light of divine wisdom? Since this is surely the case, we...

...can observe and describe and analyze the phenomena in the history of non-Christian religions without reservation, and interpret them with regard to their ultimate intentions. If he sees the God of the Old and New Testament revelation also at work there, however primitive they might be or however depraved, and these things of course do exist in the history of religion, he is in no way prejudicing Christianity's absolute claims.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>199</sup> "*Nostra Aetate*," 569-571.

<sup>200</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 156-157.

When seen within a hospitable view of creation in the warm embrace of the Holy Spirit, this long history of ‘seeing the God of the Old and New Testament revelation’ at work outside the Jewish and Christian communities poses no threat at all. However, when seen through the lens of triumphalism and absolutism, this kind of language about the omnipresence of the Jewish and Christian God can become a force of pain and suffering. We must be careful of this crescendo of rhetoric about the pervasive presence of God in the Holy Spirit through every human endeavor (indeed, throughout the entire cosmos), and in every human person runs that terrible risk of obliterating the nuance and particularity of gifts which have manifested and continue to unfold with sublime and devastating grace outside the Christian and Jewish milieu.

The phenomenon of appropriation or supersessionism acquires a potentially dangerous capacity with the emergence of terms like the Rahnerian “anonymous Christian.” I must emphasize that this language makes sense only within the borders of Christianity with a spirit of generosity and hospitality which seeks to identify the blessing and love and grace we feel in Christian life with the blessing and love and grace surely felt in other religions. It is only with open hands and hearts that we can achieve a seamless exchange of life and love between and among religions. It is only a Christian attitude that fearlessly and without reservation can ‘handle’ being named *anonymous Buddhist, anonymous Hindu, anonymous Jew, anonymous Muslim* (each from within the other traditions, and with the same intention of hospitable openness) that a Christian can apply to non-Christians the title ‘anonymous Christian.’ Please be clear that it is only in this very spirit that the present essay assents to and participates in the traditions of *universal salvific will, logos spermatikos, and anonymous Christian.*

Making blanket assertions about the presence of the Holy Spirit in all of humanity leaves us with the question of *how* this presence is felt, known, and experienced.

Therefore, the topic we now shall address brings into sharper relief the essence of the Christian life, and the essence of Buddhist striving.

### ***Divinization and Buddhahood***

#### *The Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Mindfulness*

In his best-selling book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thích Nhất Hạnh (also known as *Thầy*, which means, *teacher*) seeks to encounter bridges between the Buddhist and Christian traditions, and it is in the Holy Spirit that he finds much hope for mutual sharing and mutual understanding.

Upon hearing from a Catholic priest that “the Holy Spirit is the energy sent from God,”<sup>201</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh’s intuition is affirmed that for Buddhists the “safest way to approach the Trinity is through the door of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>202</sup> The ever-present theme of mindfulness emerges here as evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit. Recall that *mindfulness* is a technical term used by Buddhists to refer to awareness, to being able to be fully awake and open to the present moment, and to things as they really are (suchness), not ensnared in illusions about the past or the future, but instead being present here and now, which can be a source of healing and peace. Though the Holy Spirit and mindfulness are not *identical*,<sup>203</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh says that “to me, mindfulness is very much like the Holy Spirit. Both are agents of healing.”<sup>204</sup> Compassion for another person presupposes that one is fully present to that person, which is to say compassion can only emerge as a

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<sup>201</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 13.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>203</sup> The Holy Spirit is the source of the disposition of the Spirit of Mindfulness in us, but the Spirit of Mindfulness is not identical to the Holy Spirit.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

product of mindful and loving attention to the one who needs our help. When we are dragged away into a past we regret or into a future we fear, we cannot be agents of love, compassion, understanding, and healing. We may be reminded of the oft-cited statistic that 20% of the gospel stories center upon Jesus' healings. In reality, because Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit, his every action, word and thought reveals his solidity and his firm presence in the moment, in the *real presence* of the people afflicted with all manner of suffering. Like the Buddha, who "was called the King of Healers,"<sup>205</sup> by virtue of his perpetual mindfulness, Jesus Christ accomplishes true healing by virtue of his solidity in the Holy Spirit. Looking deeply, we could say that 100% of the Gospel stories center on Jesus' healing power, because healing is a sign of the Kingdom and Jesus is the very occasion of the in-breaking of the Kingdom.

Thích Nhất Hạnh makes the beautiful observation that "when John the Baptist helped Jesus touch the Holy Spirit, the Heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and entered the person of Jesus. He went to the wilderness and practiced for forty days to strengthen the Spirit in Himself."<sup>206</sup> This is an eloquently Buddhist reading of the Gospel text that assumes all that is lovely and life-giving of a Buddhist experience can and must be shared by Jesus Christ who, of course, "went to the wilderness and *practiced*."<sup>207</sup> The true wisdom in this view, the Buddhist perspective is that not only Jesus touches the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is every person who can touch and be touched by the healing power of the Holy Spirit. This is a matter of coming into contact with God not in "concept but as a living reality."<sup>208</sup> The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the

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<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 (emphasis added).

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

*Trinity*, is not something containable and controllable by a book or revealed only in the past. The only place and time we can touch our ultimate dimension and come into contact with God is right now, right here. In this moment, in this place is where I must in gratitude accept the generous gifts of God and, at the same time, in generosity give them all away. Thây describes this seamless exchange saying, “we need only to bring our body and mind into the present moment, and we will touch what is refreshing, healing, and wondrous.”<sup>209</sup> The Holy Spirit awaits and longs for us to accept the present invitation to the abundant participation in the divine life “without keeping a single thing for” (*Rule of St. Benedict* [hereafter: RB] 58:24) ourselves, in the words of Saint Benedict, from his *Rule* for monasteries. Like the monk who is accepting the invitation to live according to God’s will, we must accept the invitation of the Spirit, and in one and the same motion “be stripped of everything” (RB 58:26) and be “provide[d] all things necessary” (RB 55:18). Appealing to the *Rule* underscores the “daily transl[ation] into action,” (RB Prol. 35) that is, the *practice* of participation in the divine life with its two-fold aspect of gratitude and generosity. When we are mired in the past or our future or consumed by worries and abstractions we are mindless, not mindful, and we are simply removing ourselves from the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the words of the Buddha, in the *Dhammapada*, “Vigilance is the way of immortality; heedlessness the abode of death. Those who are vigilant will not die, but the heedless are already dead.”<sup>210</sup> The way to life is to respond here and now (always!) to the call of the Holy Spirit who is the source of life. This is the call to be fully awake and fully human—the call to be divinized by intimate contact with divine reality.

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<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>210</sup> *Dhammapada*, 13.

*The Five Roots or Powers*

Mindfulness is one of the Five Faculties or basic capabilities which make possible human collusion and participation with the Holy Spirit. The Five Faculties<sup>211</sup> are: faith, concentration, mindfulness, insight and diligence.<sup>212</sup>

Faith means faith in something solid like the Triple Gem (the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha) or the Holy Trinity. Concentrated meditation is the ability to focus, which gives rise to mindfulness, which is one's presence in the here and now. With these energies at work, insightful wisdom arises. Seiyu Kiriya explains the Socratic idea of how wisdom is what we do, since "if one does not act like a virtuous person, one does not know virtue. This is very similar to the Confucian Wang Yang-ming's doctrine of the 'unity of knowledge and action.'"<sup>213</sup> In this way, wisdom and our diligent energetic striving, which is our participation in the divine, give rise to one another. This inherence of knowing and acting is deeply embedded in Buddhist thought (and bears resemblance to the *praxis* orientation of Liberation Theologians) emerging in the Buddha's very first discourse which is the Four Noble Truths: impermanence and conditioned existence is suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the *practice that brings about the cessation of suffering*. The Fourth Noble truth is the Eight-Fold (or Golden) Path; or one could say the truth is the way, which echoes Jesus' statement in the *Fourth Gospel* that he is the "way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). Jesus teaches that the truth and the way are one in his person and that following the way and knowing the truth is how to touch real life.

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<sup>211</sup> The classical order of the Five Faculties is: faith, diligence, mindfulness, concentration and insight. I have elected this alternate order to demonstrate one way of seeing how they give rise to one another, and interpenetrate one another.

<sup>212</sup> Seiyu Kiriya, 185.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

When these capabilities are fostered and engaged we are fully present in mind and heart and body and word and deed to be collaborators with the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, often the case is that we are instead obstructionists who in ignorance block the action of the Spirit in our lives. Some Western Christians, notably the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, can get nervous when we use language that implies human effort can have a place alongside divine grace in moving toward our salvation. In the book, *One with God*, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen highlights this collaboration between humans and the divine presence, noting that “Eastern theologians do not shy away from speaking of divine-human *synergy*, the cooperation of the person with God.”<sup>214</sup> Such a view elicits a positive anthropology that recognizes that though we are burdened by sin, we are nonetheless products of the creation of our good and loving God, and therefore have some share in that goodness and love. But, we may ask, just what is the result of this collaborative synergy between the Spirit and humans?

#### Theopoesis

In Christian terms, this contact with the Holy Spirit and participation in the divine life is called many things, alternately: divinization (*theopoeisis*), deification (*theosis*), indwelling of the Spirit, but also “transformation, union, participation, partaking, intermingling, elevation, interpenetration, transmutation, commingling, assimilation, reintegration, adoption, recreation.”<sup>215</sup> These images and metaphors all reach for the same elusive reality: the human being is changed by the intimate presence of the transcendent and uncreated Spirit when we welcome the Spirit. The Spirit is always

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<sup>214</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 31.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

present as the open-handed, all-giving, all-loving God at once transcending all human striving while immediately present and available to the softened receptive heart.

In Buddhist terms, one can say that within every being resides the seed of Buddha nature. This means that everyone has the capacity present to them for awakening, for enlightenment, to become an *arahant*, a *brahmin*,<sup>216</sup> that is to achieve buddhahood (*bhuddata*). The fine distinction between divinization and becoming a buddha erodes in awakened understanding: the perpetual presence of the Holy Spirit available and awaiting human collaboration and the perpetual presence of the seed of the buddha nature awaiting the human who engages the five faculties both point to a profoundly parallel experience. The Holy Spirit and the buddha nature within us need only one more thing in order to manifest their presence: human participation in unbounded generous lovingkindness. Whether we say that the capacities (five faculties) are a part of human nature available for us to employ in our own awakening, or we say it is God's action alone in the Holy Spirit that permits us to be able to respond to the presence of the Spirit, the result is the same. A Christian afraid of a Pelagian sense that we "accomplish" our salvation can rest free from fear in the understanding that God's action in the Holy Spirit is part of the storehouse of gifts we can never exhaust (when divinized, we become fully *human*, we do not become gods). The Buddhist who is daunted by personalistic views of God can rest free from fear by the sure probation of practice and direct experience of the five faculties at work in the emergence of awakened awareness.

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<sup>216</sup> The words *arahant* (or *arahat*) and *brahmin* (or *brahmana*) are all roughly equivalent to saying 'a buddha.' Recall 'the Buddha' is the title reserved for Siddhartha Gautama.

In his *Mystagogical Catechesis*, Cyril of Jerusalem declares that “whatever the Holy Spirit has touched is hallowed and changed.”<sup>217</sup> Humans have the capacity either to resist this touch or to reach out to greet the sweet touch of the Holy Spirit and become a new creation. We can persist in our heedlessness, our mindlessness, or we can water the seed of nirvana which is always present to us.

*Participate and Share in the Divine Life*

In the Second Letter of Peter, we read:

Through these, he has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to *participate* [“share” NAB] *in the divine nature, after escaping from the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire.*  
(2 Peter 1:4, NIV, emphasis added)

This passage from the New Testament is perhaps the most often cited in reference to what divinization means. The New International Version, which uses the word “participate,” emphasizes human potency in being a partner in salvation, while the “share” of the New American Bible allows the accent to fall on the more tender relationship that emerges between God and the human subject. This statement from 2 Peter is not far from the words of the Buddha found in the *Dhammapada* in exhortations about who is to be considered a Brahmin:

If you have abandoned wickedness, you are a brahmin. (26:6)<sup>218</sup>

Whoever has cut every tie, whoever is totally fearless, whoever is unfettered and truly unhindered, this one I call a brahmin. (26:15)<sup>219</sup>

The one whose wisdom is profound, who knows the right path from the wrong, who has obtained the most excellent aim, this one I call a brahmin. (26:21)<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Regis A. Duffy, “Sacraments in General,” in *Systematic Theology Volume II*, 188.

<sup>218</sup> *Dhammapada*, 191.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

Extinguishing evil desires and replacing them with a growing relationship with the Spirit whereby we actively participate in and tenderly share in the divine nature is the only way for us to rise to our full human potential.

### *The Image of God*

To participate in the divine nature is for a human the movement and evolution back to a more perfect *imago dei* which is the core of our creation. To participate in the divine nature means to become more fully human because it means to become more in the likeness (*homoiousios*) of God, in whose image we are created. By the sin of our ignorant and fearful greed we become less human and our likeness to the image of God is distorted. However, through our gradual re-creation by the in-dwelling of the Spirit and our diligent, energetic striving, fully empowered by the same Spirit, we awaken to our true human nature which is the imprint of God: deep gratitude and abundant generosity. We become fully alive and take our place in the cosmos as the indispensable occasion of the universe knowing itself, of creation shuddering in the awe of self-awareness which is the image of God in which we are made, and is precisely the gift we must wastefully bestow on the universe. This means that when our lives are dulled by indifference and boredom and our imagination is eviscerated by television and our spirit is crushed by consumption we fail to give the gift of ourselves, and our humanity diminishes.

To be a buddha is to be awake to this awesome reality of our ultimate dimension. To be divinized is to be fully human without holding anything back, because in the Spirit the fog of confusion and darkness and stinginess is burned away and our awakened nature is unfettered, as we “escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

*Jesus Christ a buddha, the Buddha a saint.*

To be divinized is to be fully alive. To be a buddha is to be fully alive. To be divinized is to be fully awake. To be a buddha is to be fully awake. To be divinized is to be fully human. To be a buddha is to be fully human.

Because Jesus Christ is an awakened, fully alive and divinized human being, we say that he, that is to say *Jesus of Nazareth*, is fully human. Because the Buddha is an awakened, fully alive and divinized human being, we say that he is fully human. We can also say that although none of these words exhaust the full reality of Jesus, they do say something about him. Indeed, we can say, without fear, therefore that Jesus is a buddha (an awakened person). We can likewise say that the Buddha is a saint (a divinized person).

Before proceeding, it may be important to pause here because of a kind of legitimate anxiety that arises in Christians who are afraid of any way in which Christ may be characterized in what they perceive to be reductionist terms. Especially in the mutual sharing of two religions, this sensitivity to maintain absolute claims about Jesus Christ, the only Son of God can tend to be defensively maintained. I offer as words of consolation the assurance that there need be no hint whatsoever of diminishment or reductionism in a declaration that Jesus is a buddha. We cannot forget that although the Lord Jesus Christ is in truth divine, “one in being with the Father”<sup>221</sup> and the Spirit, Jesus is also utterly and irreversibly a human person. If for a human person to be “fully” human she must be divinized, which is another way of saying she must be fully awake (*buddh*) then it is with only the most profound reverence that one can identify Jesus as a buddha. This anxiety may give rise to yet another question: but if both the Christ and the

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<sup>221</sup> From the Nicene Creed.

Buddha are buddhas, does this mean, since Christ is divine that *both* are divine? The answer is unequivocally, no. The Buddha was very explicit and clear about this. He is not a god. This is a story from the sutras:

It is said that soon after his enlightenment the **Buddha** passed a man on the road who was struck by the Buddha's extraordinary radiance and peaceful presence. The man stopped and asked, "My friend, what are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?" "No," said the Buddha. "Well, then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?" Again the Buddha answered, "No." "Are you a man?" "No." "Well, my friend, then what are you?" The Buddha replied, "I am awake."<sup>222</sup>

There is no cause for concern or confusion on this point. Calling Jesus a buddha is a way of saying that his humanity was perfected, a way of saying that Jesus' humanity was that of the highest and most holy saint. Calling Jesus a buddha does not mean that this word sums up all we can know about Jesus.

What then of calling the Buddha a 'saint'? It may surprise Christian readers that there is something of a rich history wherein the Buddha has been recognized as a saint by the Catholic church, albeit not on purpose. The story being referenced here is that of the lives of Saints Barlaam and Joasaph. Until Saint Francis of Assisi captured the popular pious imagination of the people of the church, "there seems to have been no other saint whose life had such a strong moral hold over saint and sinner."<sup>223</sup> Aloysius Pieris describes how "Marco Polo was perhaps the first to bring back news from Europe that the life of the Buddha, as narrated in Sri Lanka (which he visited in 1293), was very similar in all its details to the story of Joasaph in the *Vitae Patrum*. Through the accident of history and translation, the story that began as *Bhagavan*<sup>224</sup> and *Bodhisattva* came to be Christianized and to be known as *Saints Barlaam and Joasaph*. Pieris points out that

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<sup>222</sup> *Teachings of the Buddha Website*, [http://www.teachingsofthebuddha.com/i\\_am\\_aware.htm](http://www.teachingsofthebuddha.com/i_am_aware.htm).

<sup>223</sup> Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 25.

<sup>224</sup> *Bhagavan* means 'lord'; *Ibid.*

“Jesuit historians have documented the embarrassing fact that St. Joasaph, venerated as a saint in the medieval church, was none other than the Buddha himself.”<sup>225</sup> With the arrival of Francis, one renunciant displaced another in popular Christian piety.

Though this issue of the buddhahood of Jesus and the sainthood of the Buddha can be the subjects of fruitful study and inquiry, the preceding cursory treatment shall have to suffice for this present study. For our purposes here it is enough to take gentle note that these two clearly divinized religious geniuses<sup>226</sup> whose lives have impacted literally billions of human beings, bringing countless persons closer to their true home, share a common humanity and a common love.

The good news of the Gospel is only Good News for us if the life of Jesus means something for us. If his full humanity is something unattainable by regular people, then how can this be a real humanity? The good news is that our awakening as fully human is very possible, seen either from the Christian way of encountering the Spirit in collaborative synergy or from the Buddhist way of watering the seed of awakening (nirvana) within us.

#### *Divinization (“Sanctification”) and Vatican II*

A recognition for the need for divinization, or sanctification, by all people is reflected in the Second Vatican Council’s declaration in *Lumen Gentium*:

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<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> ‘Religious genius’ is another term which arouses anxiety and fearfulness in Christians who often say things like ‘Jesus was not merely a religious genius’ and then assume a stance of defensiveness. I propose that it is perfectly safe to contend that they are right. Indeed, Jesus was not merely a religious genius. However, cannot we also say that he actually was a religious genius? I think we can. We have room to breathe when we can not insist that every statement needs to contain every element of faith. This is really the human way to approach divine matters: with humility and self-honesty about the limits of our ability to express the inherently inexpressible.

...all in the church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the apostle's saying: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification (1 Th 4:3; see Eph 1:4)."<sup>227</sup>

The church also draws a clear connection between this sanctification and what it means to be fully human, saying "holiness is conducive to a more human way of living."<sup>228</sup> This essay further agrees with the Council in its effort to locate in the divine person of the Holy Spirit the presence and power to vivify this new life of holiness, as preached by the Lord Jesus:

For he sent the holy Spirit to all to move them interiorly to love God with their whole heart, their whole soul, with their whole understanding and with their whole strength (see Mk 12:30), and to love one another as Christ loved them (see Jn 13:34; 15:12).

The universal call to holiness is a universal call to be moved by the Holy Spirit to lives of abundant love; to be sanctified in all we give and do; and to live more fully human lives. All of these statements come together to describe the vocation of us all, which is an awakened and divinized life.

#### *Divinization and Salvation*

For the Eastern Fathers, divinization holds pride of place in any discussion of salvation. In the aforementioned little book, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification*, Kärkkäinen refers to Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) as "the greatest individual theologian of the Christian East" and outlines Palamas'...

...teaching on deification on these three premises: (1) the creation of the human being 'in the image and after the likeness of God'; (2) the incarnation of the Logos of God; and (3) the strength of the human being's communion with God in the Holy Spirit.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> "Lumen Gentium," *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P., (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, Inc., 1996), 58.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>229</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 28.

The second of these three issues, the Incarnation, rests on the definitive immanence of God in human history in the person of Jesus Christ and the patristic contention of especially Gregory of Nazianzus that “what is not assumed is not healed, and what is united to God is saved.”<sup>230</sup> The outpouring of God’s kenotic love in the Incarnation has a cosmic significance since through the Incarnation God assumes humanity which is one with creation. This means that God, who has always been lovingly and intimately related with creation engages the created order in a whole new dimension of love, thus ensuring the worth and dignity of every being. Indeed, it is the Resurrection of the Incarnation that wipes away our ultimate and final suffering. God overcomes death by becoming Incarnate, experiencing death and banishing its heretofore ultimate power over us.

The first of Palamas’ premises of salvation enumerated above, the created *imago dei* of humanity, is linked inexorably with the third, since our ‘communion with the Holy Spirit’ effectively perfects our *imago dei* by purifying us with the fire of divine love, which perfects and restores our true nature, which has been distorted by sinfulness. Taken together, these premises of salvation form a unified whole. God’s generosity is revealed in every way: in the erasing of death through the Resurrection of our Incarnate Lord; and in the intimate in-dwelling presence of the Spirit who restores our human *homoiousious* to God which is our intended and true created nature.

#### *Giving as the Path to the Other Shore*

*Mahayana* Buddhism (Greater Vehicle Buddhism) bears the teaching of the Six *Paramitas*. A *paramita* is a kind of perfection and can refer to our “crossing over to the other shore.”<sup>231</sup> The motif of the two shores is employed frequently in Buddhist

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<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>231</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 192.

Scriptures. The near shore is the life consumed with day to day struggle and suffering, while the farther shore refers to the life of “peace, non-fear, and liberation.”<sup>232</sup> If sin is indeed the distortion, disruption, and destruction of all our relationships (with one another, the planet, our ultimate dimension, God) by our ignorant and fearful clinging, consuming, and grasping, then it is no surprise that the first perfection (way of crossing over this divide) has to do with reversing the course of this sin by generosity. The *dana*<sup>233</sup> *paramita* is “the perfection of giving,”<sup>234</sup> and *dana* really means generosity. Thích Nhất Hạnh describes the *dana paramita* thus: “There is a plant, well-known in Asia—it is a member of the onion family...that grows back in less than twenty-four hours every time you cut it. And the more you cut it, the bigger and stronger it grows. This plant represents the *dana paramita*.”<sup>235</sup> Saint Benedict quotes the *Acts of the Apostles* (4:32, 35), saying, “no one presumes to call anything his own” (RB 33:6) because the way of our generous God is that “distribution [is] made to each one as” (RB 34:1) needed. Like the Asian onion, God’s real and unreserved generosity reveals the inexhaustible abundance, which sadly remains obscured in our minds which are so often afflicted with notions of scarcity and shortage.

To become the agents of giving that our true nature calls us to become, that is, to be divinized or to become a buddha and fully human requires us to act. Kärkkäinen explains that “the view of the human being in the Christian East is based upon the notion of ‘participation’ in God [see 2 Peter 1:4]...This...however, is not a static givenness; rather it is a challenge, and the human being is called to grow in divine life. Divine life is

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<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> *Dana* is a Pali word for generosity.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

a gift, but also a task which is to be accomplished by a free human effort.”<sup>236</sup> The Buddha agrees with this assessment, instructing his disciples, “ Don’t just hope for the other shore to come to you. If you want to cross over to the other shore, the shore of safety, well-being, non-fear, and non-anger, you have to swim or row across. You have to make an effort.”<sup>237</sup> Our exertion and our fully human potential move us into participation in the heart of God, which is generosity. So for us to move toward the other shore, to move toward our intended *imago dei*, our vocation is to *be generosity*.

The first step in the effort described by the Christian scholar, Kärkkäinen, and the Buddha is perhaps the hardest because it means exposing ourselves by giving away our security blankets to those who need shelter from the cold. It means opening ourselves in profound hospitality to be a source, rather than a consumer of life and love. It means admitting our weakness and vulnerability (instead of foolishly trying to prop ourselves up and in pride trying to hide our fundamental defenselessness) which can never be ultimately erased by the things we cling to. It means, with unreserved faith, hope and love, diving into the water that is at once the power to overwhelm us, yet at the same time is the path to the other shore.

Every one of us has the power to hold something back—and most of us always will keep something back to allay our fears and insecurities. But, if we think this shortsighted miserliness is the *best* way, we need only recall that God does not hold anything back. God is not ‘required’ to create and sustain the cosmos, yet here we are! Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Logos and Sophia of God holds nothing back when he lays down his life for his friends (Jn 15:13). The Holy Spirit holds nothing back in the ever-

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<sup>236</sup> Kärkkäinen, 20.

<sup>237</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 192.

present invitation and challenge for us to partake in the divine life. The Buddha holds nothing back when under the bodhi tree upon his enlightenment he commits himself to setting the dharma wheel in motion, thus sharing his awakening with every living being. The bodhisattva holds nothing back, even though she “has obtained enlightenment and [the] right to Nirvana, but who because of [her] deep and loving compassion, is determined to forego that privilege until [she] can bring all animate life with [her]”<sup>238</sup> Thus, the example set by the persons of the Blessed trinity, and the imprint of God’s loving generosity reflected most perfectly in Great Beings is that *the way, the truth and the life* is to hold nothing back. By degrees and by increments our gradual divinization is identified with our own participation in the divine life of unreserved, unbounded, loving generosity.

#### *Divinization as Awakening*

The awakening to our true nature and our free participation in the interbeing of all creation is our Buddha nature, our divinized nature, our humanity fulfilled. It is what makes us one with Christ in whose Spirit we are brought into union with God. The enlightened person, who is a buddha is one who is said to be awake, as we have seen. According to the Buddha, “Vigilant among the heedless, and awake among the sleeping, the wise are like fine horses, leaving the nags behind” (*Dhammapada* 2:9).<sup>239</sup> Also in the *Dhammapada* the Buddha teaches, “he is the hero, the leader, the Great Sage, and the Conqueror, unwavering and purified, the awakened one— this one I call a Brahmin” (26:40).<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Dwight Goddard, 232.

<sup>239</sup> *Dhammapada*, 15.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

But, what does *Jesus* teach about awakening? In reality, he is remarkably silent on the subject. That said, it is of interest to this present study to note that although awakening or wakefulness is not the thematic core of Jesus' explicit teaching the way it is for the Buddha, it is nonetheless linked by Jesus to what is indeed his central message, the Kingdom or Reign of God. The parable of the vigilant servants in Matthew (24:36-51) and Luke (12:35-48) puts these words in Jesus' mouth: "Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come" (Mt 24:42). He is saying that, upon the dawning of the Kingdom, the true disciple will be awake, which is to say, alive with the Spirit, doing the will of the Lord, and growing in participation with the divine life. Indeed, we can even say that it is this awakened discipleship which constitutes the Kingdom, though in imperfect form here in history as a foretaste of the ultimate fulfillment of the Kingdom for which we wait in wakeful vigilance. The other time Jesus exhorts his disciples to be awake is in his grief in the Garden of Gethsemane before his execution (see Mk 14:37-42 and parallels). Although the NAB translation uses the words "keep watch" (Mk 14:37) they are juxtaposed with the word "asleep" (14:37). It is doubtless that *keep watch* means *stay awake*. So, when Jesus says *keep watch*, he means that his closest disciples must stay awake and keep vigilant with their Lord even in his suffering, just as they had witnessed his power and glory (i.e. 5:37, "the raising to life of the daughter of Jairus," and 9:2, Jesus' transfiguration<sup>241</sup>).

A crucial observation of this meager Gospel evidence for the teaching on being "awake" is that in both the case of the parable of the servants, and the case of Jesus' disciples at Gethsemane, *vigilant wakefulness is tied to an unexpected and unpredictable*

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<sup>241</sup> This observation about the disciples' witness of both Jesus' glory and his suffering comes from the *New American Bible, The Catholic Bible: Personal Study Edition* footnote to this section of Mark's gospel, on page 91 of the New Testament.

*event that ushers in the Kingdom:* the Master's return (i.e. Jesus' return in glory) and the kenotic suffering of the "Master," respectively. This kind of awakening and vigilance necessary to usher in the Kingdom has much in common with Buddhist mindfulness and concentration, two of the five faculties or powers which are the seeds of nirvana. The eschatological fulfillment of the Kingdom of God and the attainment of nirvana are two ways of describing the simple but elusive reality of salvation: the ultimate and eternal *extinction of suffering*.

A Brahmin or a Buddha, described as an *awakened one* is also the one in her "final birth"<sup>242</sup> which can also be translated as one "who wears his last body."<sup>243</sup> A Christian worldview would immediately identify this present life and this body as the one and only life and body, not the "final" one in a succession, but the outcome for a buddha and Christian is the same: they are in their final body. For the Buddha, this stepping out of *samsara* (the conditioned world of birth and death and suffering) and achieving the state of nirvana occurs as an awakening that takes place in a *final death*. It is fundamental to Christian faith that for Jesus Christ, his stepping out of *samsara* is not finalized in a final death.

In his book, *Jesus the Christ*, Walter Kasper identifies one more absolutely crucial transformative teaching about awakening in Jesus Christ.

Scripture uses two terms in particular to describe Jesus' Resurrection: the transitive *egeirein*, to awaken from the dead, in the active and passive sense, and the transitive and intransitive *anastanai*, to arise or to make arise. In both cases it is a question of a metaphorical figure of speech, of a comparison with being woken up; that is, an awakening from sleep.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> *Dhammapada*, 195.

<sup>243</sup> "The Brahmana," *The Voice of The Buddha: The Dhammapada*, , CD #2, Track 14.

<sup>244</sup> Walter Kasper, 144.

Because Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, we can speak of how Jesus is both the teacher and the content of what is taught. His life, his nature and his very being are efficacious realities of God's immanent involvement within creation. So, for the Buddha, actually every buddha, every divinized human being, stepping out of samsara has been a final death. For Jesus Christ, his stepping out of samsara (into which he in humble, kenosis chose to participate) is not a final death, but is instead a final birth, a final awakening in the Resurrection that never ends in death again. In this sense, one might say that it was wrong for us to say, as was stated above, that "awakening or wakefulness is not the thematic core of Jesus' explicit teaching the way it is for the Buddha." Because Jesus is both the teacher and the teaching and his story ends with the Resurrection, this proposition needs to be re-evaluated. In this sense, the fundamental teaching of Jesus Christ is the death-transcending awakening of the Resurrection. Awakening is precisely the central teaching of Jesus Christ. Jesus awakens in the Resurrection and the Resurrection is the way, the truth and the life. Therefore, as we have also seen, Resurrection must be our true practice.

The Buddha was right that we all have the seed of nirvana as our essential core, and his enlightenment set the dharma wheel in motion five hundred years before the explicit sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. This anachronism does not confound a Christian sensibility informed by a deep understanding of the universal salvific will, and a recollection of God's presence in the Spirit throughout history, not only beginning at Christian Pentecost. So, to be fully human means to be divinized, to be a buddha, to be a fulfilled participant in the cosmic and the metacosmic generosity which is the imprint of divinity: the image of God. The good news is that our human awakening, which still

leads to death, in the end will find its final completion not in that death, but in our final, eschatological awakening in the extinction of suffering which we call Salvation in the Kingdom of God.

*Living the Pentecost of Spirit*

Our divinization is our participation in the divine life. Our divinization is the eternally extended invitation by the Holy Spirit into a transformed life. The eternally extended means of accepting that invitation is also the Holy Spirit. The only life we humans can know is a life more or less fully human, and it is the profound gift of the capacity to be a buddha, to be divinized that is our realization of our full humanity. The utter surrender of self in selfless sacrificial generosity is our true destination and our true purpose and is our only way to fully manifest our creation in the image and likeness of God. This full humanity is an awakened humanity with the power to heal and to transform creation by our participation in the imprint of God on creation, by our lavishly wasteful loving generosity. We live Pentecost only when we have lived Resurrection, when we have lived Ascension; when we make our true practice, our true home the image of God who is awakens, who is aliveness, who is boundless generosity even to the point of being *God with us*.

## Chapter Six: Salvation

### Jesus the Christ

*You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*

John 8:32

### Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha

*One who acts on truth is happy in this world and beyond.*

Dhammapada 13.2<sup>245</sup>



### *Salvation is Generosity*

When human beings exercise their tragic potential to resist the imprint of God on creation, resist growing into the *imago dei* by fearfully clinging and hoarding the goods of creation they are enslaved. Our ingratitude for the magnificently emerging wonder of life leads to an enslaving drive characterized by clinging and grasping. This enslavement seeks to ensnare things and even other people into the illusion of static attachment. Welling up from a deep sense of insecurity and from a profound fear of an ever changing world, we can tend to cling to absolutist ideas about ultimate realities, desperately seeking to construct stability. It is easy to see that attachment to ideas about our absolute rightness about God can lead to fanaticism, intolerance and violence. In fear, we can tend to become attached to our lover or friends as they were in the past, instead of allowing them to continue to grow and unfold and become who they are meant to become. The singer, Paul Simon, tenderly describes this ubiquitous tragedy:

Nature gives us shapeless shapes  
Clouds and waves and flame  
But human expectation  
Is that love remains the same  
And when it doesn't  
We point our fingers  
and blame blame blame.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Marcus Borg, 112-113.

<sup>246</sup> Paul Simon, "You're the One," 4.

We can mindlessly consume the goods of the earth in the mistaken assumption that these things will bring stability and security. This mindless consumption is resulting in the mass extinction of species and may eventually deaden the creative power of this planet. In the meantime our failure to give slowly deadens others' capacity to give as well. In all cases, when we resist the lavish giving away of all gifts, and resist sharing and intercommunion with the marvels of the cosmos in every form, God, other people, water, minerals, animals, plants, time, creativity, love, the result is diminishment in our humanness. The result is blind enslavement of ourselves, and the perpetration of inhumane violence against every gift around and in us.

### *Saved*

We must always ask the question: *from what do we wish to be saved?* The answer is simple: we must be saved from anything that separates us from our true human nature of utter *interbeing* which demands utter generosity. We must be saved from anything that separates us from a relationship with God; saved from anything that diminishes our capacity to reflect the divine imprint of God on creation. In the Christian tradition this kind of selfish separation is called sin. Sin is often defined as a ruptured relationship with God, but if we look closely, we can see that because of God's relationship with the cosmos, sin is *any* ruptured relationship (separation), not just with God, but also with other people, and with the resources of the cosmos, and especially this planet. As long as people mistakenly believe that an independent existence is possible, there will continue to be a perpetuation of this separation. As Thích Nhất Hạnh has wisely said, "We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness."<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> *Sentient Times Website*, [http://www.sentienttimes.com/03/apr\\_may\\_03/footstepsT.html](http://www.sentienttimes.com/03/apr_may_03/footstepsT.html)

### *Interbeing and Original Sin*

Salvation is revealed in every aspect of the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*. As such, Jesus' incarnate life is a "bell of mindfulness"<sup>248</sup> awakening humanity to its true relationship with God. God loves humanity in unspeakably profound and impenetrable ways, and longs for our salvation, our liberation from sin. Because this is so, it must be possible for Christianity to reevaluate its understanding of the status of humanity; it must be possible even to reexamine the meaning of the doctrine of Original Sin.<sup>249</sup>

Original Sin is one Christian way of expressing the insight of interbeing: sin has a communal dimension; it is a corporate reality. Our incomprehensible interrelation with one another renders a disconnected idea of sin, where sin is utterly individualized, as indefensible. Karl Rahner describes Original Sin, declaring that "there are no islands for the individual person whose nature does not already bear the stamp of the guilt of others, directly or indirectly, from close or afar."<sup>250</sup> A similar sentiment is expressed by Roger Haight, SJ, in an essay entitled, "Sin and Grace":

The final demonstration of social sin and guilt is experiential, and it stems from the ontology of human solidarity. All are part of the concrete human condition. One cannot regard a social tragedy with indifference by saying, 'it does not concern me.' The strongest testimony to social sin and guilt is conscience, which is at the same time a consciousness of solidarity with others and implicitly a standing before God.<sup>251</sup>

His term, "ontology of human solidarity" comes close to the Buddha's teaching of *pratitya samutpada* (dependent co-arising, or interbeing), in spite of its anthropocentric bias. A better term would be: *ontology of creation solidarity*.

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<sup>248</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 30.

<sup>249</sup> For instance, in the Jewish tradition, which is in every life-giving way the spiritual root of Christianity, alternative readings of Genesis are possible which do not posit an "original sin."

<sup>250</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 109.

<sup>251</sup> Roger Haight, "Sin and Grace." in *Systematic Theology Volume II*, 106.

In liberation theology, there can be no doubt that sin is not simply an individualistic phenomenon. According to Gustavo Gutierrez...

...we in the liberation perspective don't treat sin as an individual reality, private and intimate, affirmed *just* sufficiently to necessitate a "spiritual" redemption that does not question the system we live in. We treat sin as socially and historically constructed, as the absence of fraternity, of love in human relations, a rupture of the friendship between God and humanity, consequently an internal and personal division. These things thus considered, help us to rediscover the collective dimension of sin, the biblical notion that J.M. Gonzalez Ruiz calls "hamartiósfera," the sphere of sin: "a kind of boundary or structure that objectively conditions the very procession of human history."<sup>252</sup>

In addition to seeing the interbeing quality of Original Sin, crucial also is the understanding that the Biblical basis for the doctrine must not be understood in literal terms: we do not have to believe that there is a literal scientifically verifiable first couple from which all humans descend, and from whom has been transmitted the first (original) sin against God.<sup>253</sup> The literalization of symbols and signs is to the detriment of the human imagination and is a definitive characteristic of modern thinking, but it has a deep history. Indeed, it seems in the doctrine of Original Sin<sup>254</sup> that Augustine is guilty of just this brand of literalization of the biblical symbols of the first couple of whom we are created from "one lump of perdition (*massa perditionis*)."<sup>255</sup> Augustine goes on to say in the same paragraph that this lump "had already perished" and that the stuff of which we

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<sup>252</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, 282. "Pero no se trata, en la perspectiva liberadora, del pecado como realidad individual, privada e intimista, afirmada justo lo necesario para necesitar una redención "espiritual", que no cuestiona el orden en que vivimos. Se trata del pecado como hecho social, histórico, ausencia de fraternidad, de amor en las relaciones entre los hombres, ruptura de amistad con Dios y con los hombres y, como consecuencia, escisión interior, personal. Las cosas así consideradas se redescubre las dimensiones colectivas del pecado, la noción bíblica de lo que J.M. González Ruiz llama la "hamartiósfera", la esfera del pecado: "una especie de ámbito o estructura que condiciona objetivamente la misma marcha de la historia humana". (My translation)

<sup>253</sup> For an excellent introductory discussion of the image of Original Sin see: Margaret Nutting Ralph, *Plain Words About Biblical Images: Growing into Our Faith Through the Scriptures*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1989), 146-172.

<sup>254</sup> *New Advent Website*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02091a.htm#II>

<sup>255</sup> Augustine, *Sermo* 26, xii, 13; in J.P. Migne *Patrologia Latina* 38:177A-B; quoted in Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology Reader*, 396.

are made suffers an “already assured” and “just damnation.”<sup>256</sup> What is hopeful, though, is that Augustine recognizes the gratuity of God’s gift of grace, and even despite his dark anthropology, in the following excerpt from *de natura et gratia*, calls attention to the etymological parity of the Latin words for free (i.e. gratuity) and grace (*gratis gratia*):

All the good things, which it has by its conception, life, senses, and mind, it has from God, its creator and maker. But the weakness which darkens and disables these good natural qualities, as a result of which that nature needs enlightenment and healing, did not come from the blameless maker but from original sin (*ex originali peccato*), which was committed by free will (*liberum arbitrium*). For this reason our guilty nature is liable to a just penalty. For if we are now a new creature in Christ, we were still children of wrath by nature, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, on account of the great love with which He loved us, even we were dead through our sins, raised us up to life with Christ, by whose grace we are saved. But this grace of Christ, without which neither infants nor grown persons can be saved, is not bestowed as a reward for merits but is given freely (*gratis*), which is why it is called grace (*gratia*).<sup>257</sup>

So, though humans are created good, the result of sin is utter corruption. The good news, from Augustine’s view (for “the saved” at least), is that God freely gives away grace.

Although Augustine’s vision falls short of recognizing the ontological abundance of God’s *gratis gratia* in astonishing generosity, he does begin to touch the gratuity of God’s love. With a vision of God who rations grace in this way, one might even be led to ask whether humans, with this diminished free will are still in the ‘image of God’ (Gen 1:27).

In his book, *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit*, Robert E. Kennedy refers to the eighteenth century Zen Buddhist master Hakuin (d. 1769) who is dealing with just such a negative anthropology—but in the Buddhist East—which held that “human physical, moral, and spiritual capacities were...corrupted.”<sup>258</sup> Hakuin observes that the situation is

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<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> Augustine, *de natura et gratia* iii, 3-iv, 4 in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum*; quoted in *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>258</sup> Robert E. Kennedy, *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit: the Place of Zen in Christian Life*, (New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 24.

so extreme “that [these] pessimistic theories [make] it too easy for us not to take responsibility for our own lives.”<sup>259</sup> Of course, the church has also consistently rejected this self-absolution through invincible corruption, as well: we still have to make the effort. Herein lies the danger of the Christian experience. Alternately, people may in good faith (so to speak) surrender to the whims of sin since the human is ‘too corrupt’ and too weak to live gracefully, or conversely they may imagine that somehow apart from God humans have the capacity to rise to salvation. This latter view expects nothing short of perfection from humans, unaided by God, since God would not demand from Creation that of which Creation is incapable... This Pelagian view is unacceptable. But, so is the view that humans have no part whatsoever in effecting their own Salvation. There must be a middle way.

Thomas Merton taps the Christian mystical tradition for answers. Human failure to properly understand the relationship with God, and failure to understand its own dignified free will is the very source of separation from God. Merton explains:

The tragedy is that our consciousness is totally alienated from this inmost ground of our identity. And in Christian mystical tradition, this inner split and alienation is the real meaning of original sin.<sup>260</sup>

Our separation from God, our separation from our true source and our true destination is Original Sin.

For Thích Nhất Hạnh, Original Sin is like the negative ‘seeds’ which are in all people. Seeds of lust, anger, hatred, greed, clinging, attachment to permanence, etc., are all sources of relational separation. These negative seeds “can be transformed when one

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<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, (New York, NY: New Directions, 1968), 12; quoted in Robert E. Kennedy, 36.

is in touch with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>261</sup> Our continued watering and nourishment of negative seeds of separation is the source of much suffering. We must ask ourselves every day what seeds in us do we nourish, water, and nurture? Our persistence in fostering the negative inclinations within us of greed, hoarding, and fear instead of limitless giving. Our persistence in this state of separation from God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit has become our *perpetual sin*. The miracle of the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* is the occasion for the eradication of this perpetual sin. How can a person who experiences the Living Christ (Creator, Torah-giver, Incarnate God, Selfless-Sacrificer, Death-Eraser, Limit-Transcender, and Perpetual Vivifying Presence) ever again deny the dignity of humanity? What is the surest sign that this separation has been overcome? Jesus teaches, “This is how all will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). This is not some kind of hidden ‘feeling inside,’ which Jesus describes here. This love is visible, experiential, and nameable because generosity can be touched, seen and known. Genuine generosity is not something abstract: *it is how the world will know*.

Since “God is love” [1 Jn 4:8], the *practice* of generous love heals the division between the person who loves and that person’s ‘ground of identity,’<sup>262</sup> or true home, which is God. Love is the source, the substance, and the result of the healing of the separation between humans and God.

### ***Salvation is Incarnation***

Christians must know by their experience of God that what each Christian *does* actually *matters* in the ultimate dimension, which means that it matters to God. The

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<sup>261</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 44.

<sup>262</sup> Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 12; quoted in Robert E. Kennedy, 36.

proof that this world, that the way life is conducted in this flesh, matters is the Incarnation. The person of Jesus Christ, fully divine and fully human, shines a light of truth and reveals the dignity and splendor of creation. The Incarnate God reveals the inherent worthiness of the human condition.

The second Vatican Council affirms this for Roman Catholics when it teaches, “Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed” by Jesus Christ in the Incarnation, “has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare.”<sup>263</sup> At first impression, this passage seems to speak more of “making worthy” than of “revealing worthiness.” However, we must be mindful that worthiness is both a revealed and an emergent reality—emergent in our relationship with the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, it is imperative to insist that, as Irenaeus describes, we are worthy from the beginning. It is just a different kind of worthiness, however, since it is immature.

In the last times, when our Lord summed up all things in himself, he came to us not as he could have come, but as we were capable of seeing him. He could, in fact, have come to us in inexpressible glory, but we were not able to bear it. Accordingly, as to children, the perfect Bread of the Father gave himself to us under the form of milk – his coming as man – in order that we should be fed so to speak at the breast by his incarnation and by this diet of milk be accustomed to eat and drink the Word of God. In this way we might be enabled to keep within us the Bread of Immortality which is the Spirit of the Father.<sup>264</sup>

We are still (even after Christ!) in the evolutionary process of becoming more and more fully human. The emergence of Liberation Theology in the last century is a prime example of our ever-advancing in maturity as people of God, our ever-advancing worthiness of God’s love by virtue of our inspiration, by virtue of the in-dwelling of the

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<sup>263</sup> “*Gaudium et Spes*” *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, Inc., 1996), 22.

<sup>264</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV, quoted in: Olivier Clement, 89.

Spirit in the Body of Christ. This is the evolution of all of humanity, which, in the words of Basil the great “has received the vocation to become God.”<sup>265</sup>

God does not create an unworthy creation. Creation is the intermingling of God and chaos. Therefore, chaos ceases to be unworthy in the moment of creation, as the maturational process of becoming worthy is set in motion. We speak of being a “new creation” in Christ because of the significant and unprecedented intermingling of God and creation in the Incarnation (just as God’s ordering presence in chaos at the moment of creation was significant and unprecedented). This is a more mature, more advanced stage of worthiness, and is made known to us through the life and being of Christ.

Apart from the scandal of the Incarnation, which for all time must erase the tragic illusion of an unworthy and broken creation, human ‘wisdom’ has always misunderstood the dignity of creation. Salvation in Christ means re-ordering the understanding of the world’s ways. Salvation in Christ means reordering the very being of the world.

Knowing is just the first step to assist us in the action we must take. Knowing is not the end; the Word is the birth of the new reality. If it remains merely knowledge then this is a tragedy. Knowing must extend into the real *action* of the Christian, the community, otherwise it is an impotent word, an impotent knowledge. The Incarnation of the Word in Christ is remarkable because the Word comes into the world and *does*... God does not just continue in stone-writing, in theophany, and in pleading through the prophets. God decides to *become the action in the world*. And this is precisely the Christian call: to become the action of God in the world, to make incarnate the Word in the world today.

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<sup>265</sup> Basil of Caesarea, quoted by Gregory of Nazianzen, *Eulogy of Basil the Great*, quoted in: Olivier Clement, 76.

Being people of the Kingdom of God, people of Salvation, means re-ordering the way we think about power, and the way we enact power. The order of the world taught by Jesus is a paradox, or what might sound like a Buddhist *koan*.<sup>266</sup> Judith Simmer-Brown, in *Benedict's Dharma* points out that in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches the servant "Christian paradox":<sup>267</sup> "the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest" (Luke 9:48). Furthermore, the world's ideas about power and the way to salvation are turned utterly on their heads by Jesus' words, by his deeds and by his very being. The scandal of the Incarnation is absolutely amplified to absurdity (in strictly human terms) in Jesus' execution by crucifixion. The greatest of all suffers the lowliest humiliation. When it comes to understanding true human dignity and the true nature of power, the world (even the Christian world, despite Jesus' teachings!) continues to get it wrong.

### ***Salvation is the Active Practice of Generous Love***

This active practice of generous love is Salvation. Christians know that salvation is in fulfilling Torah Law, as Jesus says, "I have not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Matt 5:17) Torah. This means that generous love is the fulfillment of Torah, since Torah is part of the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing*! One who loves will have fulfilled the spirit of what is required in Torah without adhering to the letter of it, because to live according to the generosity of Torah is to live life in the image of God. The Incarnate Lord teaches that the entire Torah may be summed up in a word:

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<sup>266</sup> A *koan* is a kind of paradoxical riddle used in the Zen Buddhist tradition to dispel notions and ideas, to nourish meditation and practice toward one's ultimate extinction of ideas which is *nirvana*.

<sup>267</sup> Patrick Henry, ed., 94-95.

Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord Alone!<sup>268</sup> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength... You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Mark 12:31)

Jesus goes on to tell the scribe who assents to the truth of this teaching that he is “not far from the kingdom of God” [Mark 12:34]. Knowing the truth with one’s mind is insufficient. It is necessary for salvation to live this out, put it into practice, to enact generous love, in order to manifest the Kingdom of God.

### ***Giving Love is the Divine Imprint on Creation***

Jesus the Christ and Gautama the Buddha are in complete harmony that “Love [is] the essence of the Divine Nature and Love [is] the all-pervading Law and Spirit of...Creation.”<sup>269</sup> This love is the very heart of Salvation. And it is not easy. Love would be easy if the call were merely to reciprocate the love of other people. Jesus says, “even sinners love those who love them,” and continues with words emphasizing the *practice*, “and if you *do good* to those who do good to you what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same” (Luke 6:32-33 [emphasis added]). Christ and the Buddha agree that this is patently insufficient. Both extend the command. Both Great Beings teach as Jesus commands his followers: “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44). These are words that are intended to impassion a response! Sadly, they have come to be heard as mere rhetoric; come to be explained away or dismissed by Christians as ‘unreasonable.’ Many Christians undervalue the transformative power of love and resort to violence to eradicate their enemies, even in the *name of Christ*... How can this be? If any words of Jesus are ambiguous, it is not these. Jesus’ words on loving one’s enemies are unequivocal. Yet they are not followed.

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<sup>268</sup> *Shema Yisrael.*

<sup>269</sup> Dwight Goddard, 221.

Perhaps this is because, what is missing from the records we have of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels is the means by which we might accomplish this difficult mission. Jesus concludes his remarks saying, "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." Loving one's enemies is the path to *perfection*, the path to Salvation. But how do we accomplish what seems impossible?

*The Way to Fulfill the Command to Love the Enemy*

The Buddha provides the skillful means by which Jesus' (and the Buddha's) teaching on love of enemies may be put into *praxis*. For the Buddhist, "understanding is the ground of love."<sup>270</sup> What genuine love is there which lacks understanding? A person who causes suffering is said to be one's enemy. The practice is to "begin to see the suffering in the other person," the enemy!<sup>271</sup> The practice is to look deeply upon the enemy to come to understand that not only I suffer, but that the one who causes my suffering also suffers a lot. In this moment of true seeing, "compassion is born" and the person can no longer be considered the enemy.<sup>272</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh concludes that "the moment you realize that your so-called enemy suffers and you want him to stop suffering, he ceases to be your enemy."<sup>273</sup>

From this arising of understanding, compassion, and love must grow loving action which embodies these awakenings: the truth and the path are inseparable. This is the nature of loving one's enemy. The terrorists who suffer so intensely that they feel they must inflict pain and suffering on innocent people need this kind of compassionate response. If the Christian nations which feel besieged by their enemies (the terrorists)

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<sup>270</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 34.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

could enter into the words of life, the words of Salvation of Jesus, the world would be healed. Decisive action in the form of gratuitous and undeserved generosity (the imprint of God revealed in the *Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* ) which arises from understanding and compassion to relieve the suffering of so-called potential terrorists will do more to prevent so-called future “terrorist attacks”<sup>274</sup> than will inflicting even greater suffering and re-igniting the cycle of violence. The way of Jesus is the key and the helpful means of the Buddha is the hand that can turn the key and open the door of Salvation.

In this light we can see Jesus’ words, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 19:19), in a new way. The dharma of dependent co-arising, of interbeing, can help me to realize that with awakened understanding I can see the entire cosmos has come together not only to help me to manifest in this moment, but also to help my neighbor (even my “enemy”) to be here with me. Even in our novelty and distinction my enemy (neighbor) and I are equal wonders of the creative genius of God through the unfathomably generous and loving unfolding of the mystery of interbeing. Therefore, there is no separation and no distance between us in our ultimate dimension, in the light of love, in the Kingdom of God.

### ***God’s Practice of Generosity and Our Practice of Generosity***

If Jesus’ actions and words are the model for Christians to follow in order to experience Salvation, then the insight of *practice*, of *experience*, from the Buddha can help to renew the Christian world for a new century. What can be more completely transformative than the person who integrates an intimate understanding of how absolutely stunning Jesus’ kenosis really is? Our living God becoming a servant, the

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<sup>274</sup> *Homeland Security Website*, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland/>

lowliest among humanity, and then dying by brutal execution, the lowliest death,<sup>275</sup> for the sake of generous love: this is the very source of salvation only when the believer is utterly transformed into a new being, a new creation, who *lives out* this loving generosity. A true Patrological-Christological-Pneumatological soteriology must realize that the transformation the Trinity brings about by way of the Incarnation that utterly dignifies humanity and the Resurrection that frees humanity from the bonds of death, and the sending of the Spirit is only effective in human lives that reflect in action these ultimate realities.

Because intrinsically the divine life is active generosity, our participation in the divine life is only possible by our active engagement in the practice of that generosity. The inner logic of participation in the divine life insists upon our striving and exertion in generous love. When people live the life of Christ in the Spirit, daily translating into action as they should the Lord's commands (*Rule of Saint Benedict* [hereafter, RB], Prologue 35), this transformation is present. This is how one can speak of the salvation of Christ as an efficacious reality: when a person integrates Jesus' life and teaching into his or her own life in community, only then is salvation in Christ effected. It is not difficult to see that it takes little sophistication to be able to parrot out the familiar formulations of the propositional faith. Though we must know the story and the truth in order to live it, merely knowing is not enough. Merely knowing and merely assenting to the truth is not

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<sup>275</sup> I must reiterate that there *is* absolutely a place for the cross in understanding Salvation. The important aspect of this argument is to realize that the cross is not the lone determining factor. It may be helpful to think of the Irenaean view of the Incarnation (that it would have occurred with or without the sin of Adam and Eve, the Fall) and Crucifixion. The Crucifixion of Jesus is an opportunity for humanity to know a new depth of God's abiding love. That love has always been present, but because of the sad and sinful state of affairs, God's loving mercy is given a new opportunity to shine through. The cross makes real and tangible the irrefutable selflessness which the imprint of divine generosity requires of us.

salvation. We only know how we should be by knowing God, and God's life is generosity. Therefore to *become* generosity, we must do as God does, for what we do is who we are.

### ***Praxis and Interbeing***

#### *Liberation Soteriology*

Leonardo Boff, in *Jesus Christ, Liberator*, understands very well the importance of *praxis*. Recall that *praxis* is “a way of life.”<sup>276</sup> Boff explains that:

The specific quality of Jesus lies in the fact that he does not proclaim the Kingdom will come in the future. Instead, he proclaims that it is at hand (Mark 1:15), that it is here in our midst (Luke 17:21) by virtue of his presence and activity! Thus the fundamental project of Jesus is to proclaim and be the instrument of the concrete realization of the absolute meaning of the world: i.e. liberation *from* every stigma (including suffering, division, sin and death) and liberation *for* real life, for open-ended communication of love, grace and plenitude of God.<sup>277</sup>

Salvation, or as Boff says, “Liberation,” is living the Kingdom now, in the world as we encounter it. The Kingdom is *here*. But, at the same time, the Kingdom is also *not here*. The degree to which the Kingdom is manifest depends on the degree to which Christ's presence in the gift of the Spirit is manifested in us. Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, does not teach a hope of an extra-corporeal existence. Gustavo Gutierrez, in his seminal work, *Teología de la Liberación (Theology of Liberation)*, teaches that although we do not have the ability to bring about the Kingdom, we do have the task of building it up as we are able in this life. Indeed...

...we can say that in political, historical and liberational deeds the kingdom is growing, and that salvific things are happening, but they are not *the* arrival of the Kingdom, nor all of salvation. It is a historical realization of the Kingdom and because it is, it is also the announcement of fulfillment.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Francis Schussler Fiorenza, 65.

<sup>277</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ, Liberator*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1978), 280-281.

<sup>278</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, 285. “*Es más, puede decirse que el hecho histórico, político, liberador es crecimiento del Reino, es acontecer salvífico, pero no es la llega del reino, ni toda la salvación. Es realización histórica del Reino y porque lo es, es también anuncio de plenitude.*” (My translation.)

The actions of humanity are not irrelevant; what we do matters both here in this present situation and in the eschatological future fulfillment of the Kingdom. Certainly, liberation theology does not “speak of a disembodied spirituality.”<sup>279</sup>

Indeed, it is only when Gnostic dualism shapes Christian theology that the idea of the disembodied soul achieves pride of place as the content of religious expectation, soteriological hope. The hope of Jesus (of the Incarnation), which is the biblical hope is based saving the person as a whole: both body and spirit are saved. The work of Christian life is to strive every day to make the Kingdom of God incarnate in word and deed. The vocation to which Jesus, God Incarnate, beckons us is to an active faith that is a life that builds the Kingdom of God (through acts of love and charity and peace-building), which is the hope of the world. And we know how to do this through the loving example of Jesus our God and brother.

### *The Practice*

Mahatma Gandhi teaches that one “must be the change” one wants “to see in the world.”<sup>280</sup> He is wise in that he does not say that one must *know*, but rather that one must *be*. Being is the only route to authentic spiritual awakening. The practice, the doing, the incarnation of the faith in real lives is the way of Jesus Christ. Jesus is very clear about this issue:

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<sup>279</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, 282. “Es más, el pecado no aparece como añadido, algo de lo que no se puede dejar de hablar para no alejarse de la tradición or para no presentar el flanco a fáciles ataques; no se trata tampoco de una evasión hacia un espiritualismo desencarnado.” (My translation: Moreover, sin does not appear as an addition, something about which one can quit speaking in order not to distance oneself from the tradition or in order not to leave oneself open to easy attacks; nor does liberation theology speak of a disembodied spirituality.)

<sup>280</sup> *Inspiration Peak Website*, <http://www.inspirationpeak.com/framers/bethechange.pdf>

What is your opinion? A man had two sons. He came to the first and said, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.' He said in reply, 'I will not,' but afterwards he changed his mind and went. The man came to the other son and gave the same order. He said in reply, 'Yes, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did his father's will?" They answered, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. (Matthew 21:28-32)

In the end, words and propositions (even all the 'right' ones!) are of little consequence. It is finally only the actions that determine a person's place in the Kingdom of God.

Indeed, hypocritical self-righteous words that are empty of action put someone in a worse position than someone who is congruent in his or her words and deeds (even if that person is a sinner!).

Again, when the man runs up to Jesus, kneels before him and asks "Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?"(Mark 10:17-18) he already understands much. He asks what he must *do*, which is a way of asking how he must *be* in the world.<sup>281</sup> Jesus' response to this man who has kept perfectly Torah (which is very much concerned with how one *is* in relation with God and creation, and how one *acts* to order creation to be in right relationship with God) is a powerful statement about who the man must *be*. Jesus tells him, "Go, sell what you have, and give to [the] poor...then come, follow me"(Mark 10:21). Note that Jesus does not say, for instance (setting aside the obvious intellectual anachronism), that the man must properly articulate *Theotokos*<sup>282</sup> in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus describes the path the man must walk to *become* a true disciple. Jesus would agree with the Epistle of James which states clearly that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

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<sup>281</sup> Note that he does not ask what he must *learn* or what he must *know*.

<sup>282</sup> ...*God bearer, (gr.)* (in reference to Mary, the Mother of God)...

*The Practice of Direct Experience*

Aristotle says, “We become just by performing just actions, temperate by performing temperate actions, brave by performing brave actions,” which is to say, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”<sup>283</sup> Likewise, who we have become, who we are, impacts our ability to know, impacts what we will be able to become in the future. The same is true of faith. Too many Christians are taught an intellectual and propositional faith without being encouraged to dwell in that faith, to test the truth of that faith against their own experience. The faith of childhood, so pure and perfect for a child, can become a flat and lifeless faith of adulthood. Like anything that has no nourishment and is not allowed to grow, faith can wither against the pressure of problems and suffering. To prevent this atrophy, faith must be “nourished by... true understanding, not by the intellect but by... experience.”<sup>284</sup> The teaching of the Buddha about the practice can help awaken Christian faith, which needs to be a living faith, a living relationship with Christ. Thích Nhất Hạnh says of the practice: “To practice means to use our intelligence and our skills to make nourishment and transformation possible in our self, engendering nourishment and transformation in the people around us.”<sup>285</sup> This is absolutely crucial. Relationships, like people, must remain dynamic and in growth if they are to remain authentic and alive. One’s relationship with Christ cannot be any different! A real relationship with Christ is not some intellectual head-trip. Living, relational faith must be manifest in the experience of each Christian. The blind faith of

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<sup>283</sup> Aristotle, *Ariga Frosties Website*, <http://www.ariga.com/frosties/aristotle.shtml>

<sup>284</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 64-65.

<sup>285</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, 117.

childhood must blossom into a true faith “made of a substance called insight or direct experience.”<sup>286</sup>

The Buddha teaches that practitioners must free themselves from clinging and attachment to all notions or ideas about reality. Things as they truly are (*suchness*<sup>287</sup>) transcend all notions. Think for instance of something as simple as the “notion of above and below, [which] always means to be above” or “below *something*.”<sup>288</sup> What appears to be categorized as *up* for a person in North America, might be categorized as *down* for the person in Asia. These ideas “cannot be applied to the reality of the cosmos.”<sup>289</sup> These are notions to help us navigate through and understand our environment, but they are not absolute. “Reality is free of all concepts and ideas.”<sup>290</sup> This means that reality is not contained, not shackled, not imprisoned (it is *free*) by our ideas and notions.

Reality is beyond even our ideas about love. One could say that love is the ultimate reality, or that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) but the danger is becoming caught in merely human notion about love. The danger is forgetting that our language about love and especially about God is always analogical. Thomas Aquinas treats this with characteristic brilliance in his *Summa Theologiae*. The Doctor of the church uses the example of speaking of God’s wisdom:

When the word “wise” is used in relation to a human being, it so to speak delimits and embraces the aspect of humanity that it signifies (*quodammodo circumscibit et comprehendit rem significatum*). This, however, is not the case when it is used of God; what it signifies in God is not limited to our meaning of the word, but goes beyond it.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 72.

<sup>287</sup> This is a technical term in Buddhism meaning something like: **reality as it is**

<sup>288</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, 9.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>291</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia q.13 a. 5, quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 22.

Aquinas goes on to say in the same section, “words are used of God and creatures according to an analogy, that is a certain proportion between them.”<sup>292</sup> The reason any of this is even possible is because “whatever is said both of God and creatures is said in virtue of a certain order that creatures have in relation to God (*ordo creaturae ad Deum*) as their source and cause.”<sup>293</sup>

Without a doubt, what we know of God points us in the direction of something that is beyond expressibility: God is only real to us in the experience of God’s loving generosity. This principle of analogical speech applies in some degree to other ultimate realities, like love, as well. Without a doubt, what we can *say* about love points us in the direction of something that is beyond words: real love is only real love in the experience. Apart from direct experience these are only ideas.

We must take comfort that our ideas do not tell us *nothing*. Our ideas do have usefulness. When we are caught in ideas of permanence, we use the idea of impermanence to help us let go of the idea of permanence. But, if we get trapped in thinking that impermanence is the answer then that is not good for us either. Whatever idea or notion we have is like a finger pointing to the moon. We should not confuse the finger with the moon. It is because of the finger that we can see the moon. “*The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon.*”<sup>294</sup> Likewise, the notion of love is not *love* itself, but it can help us to understand and experience and become love ourselves.

In reality, direct experience is the only way. Irenaeus of Lyons, in his treatise, *Against Heresies*, instructs that “first-hand experience is more certain and reliable than conjecture. The tongue experiences sweet and bitter by taste, the eye distinguishes black

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<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>294</sup> *The Seaox Website*, <http://www.seaox.com/thich.html>, Thich Nhât Hanh.

from white by sight, and the ear perceives different sounds by hearing.”<sup>295</sup> An example will help to illustrate this. For a person who has never smelled the delicious aroma of baking bread<sup>296</sup> there is no way to convey this reality in words. Despite many world languages, poetry, philosophy, the internet, theology and untold millions of words and ideas there is no way to convey this reality through any of these media. There is just one way to know the aroma of baking bread: direct, or as Irenaeus says, *first-hand*, experience. Now, the words do communicate *something*, but only as a function of our direct experience. Even the most conceptual framework is grounded in direct experience. No matter how much I try to explain love to someone who has never been loved by anyone love will be a meaningless notion. Care is not the same thing. Concern is not the same thing. Affection is not the same thing. Trust is not the same thing. Fidelity is not the same thing. However, each of these notions does express some component of love. Significantly, though, each of these ideas in turn will only have meaning that arises out of direct experience. Faith and authentic relationship with Jesus Christ is like that. “However much [a] person loves you and wants to help you understand,” the words and images will fail – and, in the end, the only way will be to have a direct experience.<sup>297</sup>

When faith is not firmly rooted in this kind of direct experience, there is risk of faith being blown away by a storm of doubt or suffering. Take the example of a tree in a storm: “you see the top of the tree is very unstable and vulnerable. The wind can break the small branches at any time. But when you look down to the trunk of the tree [near the

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<sup>295</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, ed., 68-69.

<sup>296</sup> The example of the flavor of durian fruits and tangerines is offered often by Thich Naht Hanh.

<sup>297</sup> Even if Gautama, the historical Buddha, had never lived, because Buddhists have their own direct experience, and “see for themselves,” they “would not be shaken” (Robert E. Kennedy, 123). A Christian sense of Jesus is very different: the experience of the Incarnation of the Living God in the person of Jesus is everything.

roots] you have a different impression. You see that the tree is very solid.”<sup>298</sup> The faith relationship with Christ is the same way, if it is rooted in direct experience. Faith like this which is grounded in the life and practice of the person, of the community, is a living faith capable of growing, capable of transcending static notions. *Nirvana* means “the extinction of ideas” or notions.<sup>299</sup> Dwelling in faith sustained by direct experience is dwelling in the Kingdom of God. Christians who live as a resurrection people, who live the resurrection with every in and out breath, manifest the presence of Christ, the *autobasilea*<sup>300</sup>: Christ is the Kingdom of God.

### ***Salvation is Love Free from Attachment***

The kind of generous love that is our salvation can be possible when it springs from the insight of interbeing. If Christians can come to the conclusion that they are not separate from others, their neighbors, but that in fact they *inter-are* with their neighbors, then this type of “*lovingkindness*”<sup>301</sup> will be manifested. What is necessary is a kind of ‘non-attachment.’ It is well known that selfish attachment to ideas or to wealth causes suffering throughout the world. Non-attachment is the skillful means, taught by the Buddha and by Christ to overcome this suffering. Recall an earlier example: Jesus teaches non-attachment to the rich young man. Jesus tells him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor... Then come follow me” (Matt 19:21). The rich young man goes “away sad, for he [has] many possessions” (Matt 19:22). In response, Jesus tells a brief parable illuminating “the risk that freedom will be

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<sup>298</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*, (Berkeley, CA: Riverhead Books, 2001), 181.

<sup>299</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 204.

<sup>300</sup> The kingdom is personified in Jesus Christ.

<sup>301</sup> Thomas Merton, 40-41.

compromised by entanglements.”<sup>302</sup> Jesus says that “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God” (Matt 19:24). Jesus is likely saying that it is easier for a rich person to be selfish, to be attached, so it may be “especially difficult for a rich person to be generous.”<sup>303</sup> Indeed, “we cannot enter the Kingdom of God as long as we are *attached* to possessions, and a rich person is more likely to be attached than the person who has few possessions.”<sup>304</sup> The message is that prosperity in material goods can seriously hinder our capacity for generosity, for being fully human, for maturing in the *imago dei*.

*A Note on Terminology: love, attachment, and interbeing*

The reader should not begin to confuse attachment with love, or attachment with interbeing. The Buddhist sensibility is clear that we are absolutely dependent on one another. But this system of which we are all a part is radically impermanent (though impermanence does not exactly describe it). As people, much of the suffering we endure is by making this paradoxical move of denying our interconnectedness, asserting our independent and separate self (an illusion that causes pain and suffering) and then becoming attached to the mega-illusion of a created order populated by separate selves. We cling to these shadows and lies, and when change does come (as it always will) we suffer even more! In the meantime, we inflict suffering on others by denying their connectedness with us, and insisting on their fitting our past idea of who we say they are.

Attachment is very different from love and interbeing. Loving is free from clinging and free from attachment. Love is dynamic and ever-changing. Attachment is static and reductive and caught in illusions of permanence. So, attachment is the *opposite*

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<sup>302</sup> Patrick Henry, 21.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

of loving since we can only be “attached” to an unchanging notion of something. In real love, we care completely, but without attachment.

Attachment has to do with becoming trapped by the illusion of (or the desire for) permanence: we are attached to the past manifestation of this or that thing, and fail to see that that thing to which we are attached exists no more. It has moved on and become a new creation while we are imprisoned by the notion of what it was. This happens all the time, even in loving relationships. This can also happen with our idea of God. It is not necessarily God that has changed, but it is the way in which God is in relationship with the world and with each individual that has changed. If we are imprisoned by and clinging to these extinct realities we cannot be fully present to each new manifestation of the person we love, or the relationship we have with God. Loving our children is absolutely essential, but being attached to them in this sense of clinging and grasping is absolutely detrimental.

Interbeing is the truth that none of us has what can be called a separate self. This is true physically, since we are composite beings; we are composed entirely of non-self things. This is also true psychically, spiritually, and psychologically, since all our mental states are also conditioned and composite. Attachment arises from the illusion that we are separate selves, that we have a separate existence apart from others, and that they have a separate existence apart from us. Knowing the lie of permanence, knowing the lie of separateness is a tool to help us escape from attachment, a tool to help us live according to the true nature of reality: impermanence and interbeing. So, far from being something like attachment, interbeing is the *opposite* of attachment!

The kind of generous love that will transform the world is the natural expression of the insight of interbeing. This generous love bathed in the light of interbeing is the *praxis* of love, the love that embodies social justice. As the 1971 Synod of Roman Catholic Bishops said in its declaration, *Proclaiming Justice and Peace*:

*Action* on behalf of justice and *participation* in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension...of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.<sup>305</sup>

Redemption, liberation and salvation are all realized in the loving action of followers of Christ. In this statement the Bishops are making an unambiguous claim that enacting (not *knowing*) the faith is the true test of discipleship, the true test of love.

The Catholic Church is making progress in articulating a doctrine of interbeing, or interconnectedness in other social documents, as well. Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* uses the language of

human and supernatural brotherhood of man, and present a three-fold obligation:  
1) mutual solidarity—the aid that the richer nations must give to developing nations;  
2) social justice—the rectification of trade relations between strong and weak nations;  
3) universal charity—the effort to build a more humane world community, where all can give and receive, and where the progress of some is not bought at the expense of others.  
The matter is urgent, for on it depends the future of world civilization.<sup>306</sup>

The *human and supernatural brotherhood* of humanity marked by *mutual solidarity*, *social justice* and *universal charity* is a Roman Catholic enunciation of the teaching of interbeing. Earlier, in *Pacem in Terris* 31, John the XXIII called this “mutual

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<sup>305</sup> *Proclaiming Justice and Peace*, 1971 Synod of Catholic Bishops quoted in T. Howland Sanks, *The Gift of the Church*, “The Teaching Office of the Church” ed. Peter C. Phan. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 280. (emphasis added).

<sup>306</sup> Vatican Website *Populorum Progressio*, 44. Paul IV  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html)

collaboration” and declared that because human beings “are social by nature they are meant to live with others and to work for one another’s welfare.”<sup>307</sup>

Jesus teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves. The Buddha teaches that we should not regard other persons as separate from ourselves; to do so is not consistent with *reality as it is (suchness)*. Again, Jesus’ teaching is exposed to a new kind of light, an ancient light—the teaching of the Buddha—which can help Christians first better understand and then put into living practice, love, which is pure salvation in the Kingdom of God. This is the fruit of establishing a new Christianity grounded in the practice of active, abundant, and generous love. The light of salvation helps us see the truth that God does not ration love, and neither should we.

### ***The Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing***

The *Seven-Fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* gives expression to the imprint of God on the cosmos. The salvation of the *Seven-Fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing* is a way to witness with Christian eyes the Buddha’s dharma of *pratitya samutpada*:

Our true salvation nature is to *be Creation*, not to be in opposition to Creation. All of the created order is a gift and is involved in lavish gift giving. Realizing our place as intimately and inexorably interwoven with the evolution of the entire cosmos in the Buddha’s dharma of dependent co-arising or interbeing, we recognize suffering in creation and vow to transform the suffering of creation into peace and liberation by our loving generosity.

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<sup>307</sup> David A. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 135.

Our true salvation nature is to *be Pentecost of Torah*, which means it is our nature to know the truth and live according to the truth we know. The truth of Torah is generous love which must go out from us in every direction: to the cosmic creation in our relationships with other people (“Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you.” “You shall not kill.” “You shall not commit adultery.” “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”); to the cosmic creation in our relationships with goods and resources (“You shall not steal.” “You shall not covet your neighbor's house.” “You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male or female slave, nor his ox or ass, nor anything else that belongs to him.”). The truth of Torah is generous love which is to go out in every direction: in our relationship with God (“You shall not have other gods besides me.” “You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth.” “You shall not take the name of the LORD, your God, in vain.” “Remember to keep holy the sabbath day” [Exodus 20:3-17].). Awakened to the boundless generosity which blossoms out in limitless ways in every moment we vow to live lives according to the truth we know, live lives in mindful, awakened awareness.

Our true salvation nature is to *be Incarnation* which means to be fully alive, fully awake and fully human, fully selfless and fully generous, thus manifesting God’s image which is the purpose of our creation. Realizing our no-self nature, we vow to live in mindful awareness of the vastly impossible gift of a human life, and not to waste this sublime cosmic opportunity to be the self-reflexive awareness of the cosmos. We must lovingly and generously give our gifts back to the cosmos.

Our true salvation nature is to *be Crucifixion* which means to be limitlessly selfless in our generous sacrificial giving. Realizing our impermanent nature, we vow to achieve our full human potential by offering everything we are to the future which will manifest itself only as a result of our actions. We must decide they will be actions of selfless generous love, and not actions of desperate and ignorant clinging.

Our true salvation nature is to *be Resurrection*, which means that we enter unreservedly into the evolving and becoming of the cosmos. Realizing our no-birth, no-death nature, and no longer shackled by notions of death and permanence, nor by those of birth and impermanence, we vow to live lives in the awakened awareness that we go out in every direction every moment and are resurrected in every moment in limitless manifestations.

Our true salvation nature is to *be Ascension*, which means that I am not this body, that I am love without limit, that our true nature is to transcend time and space and particularity. But only by total immersion in time and space and particularity in each present moment is this transcension possible. Realizing Ascension is realizing our no-birth, no-death, no-coming, no-going, no-same, no-different, no-permanence and no-annihilation nature.<sup>308</sup>

Our true salvation nature is to *be Pentecost of Spirit*, which means the burning fire of the Holy Spirit purifies our generous interbeing and the divine breath vivifies our generosity, divinizing us, and making us a new creation of fulfilled humanity. Realizing our buddha nature, our nirvana nature, we vow to cultivate peace and harmony in every human relation, in every cosmic relation, in order to empower every being to give completely, and selflessly and absolutely.

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<sup>308</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, 14. (These are the “eight nos.”)

Every aspect of the Seven-fold Sacrament of Generous Interbeing interpenetrates every other aspect. For instance, Resurrection contains, and is contained by Creation, Pentecost of Torah, Incarnation, Crucifixion, Ascension and Pentecost of Spirit. The same relation applies to every one of these seven elements.

### ***The Salvation of the Divine Presence***

The spirit of awakened mindfulness, that is the gift of the divine presence of the Holy Spirit, everywhere and always animates the Body of Christ here on earth. There is no confusion between the Holy Spirit and the body in which it dwells. Proceeding from the Father and the Son, the Spirit perpetuates the Incarnation by enlivening (that is, giving life to) the Body of Christ, which is the human community of Christians, which is the Church. But, this is by no means the only place we can look to find the presence of the Holy Spirit. Doubtlessly, the Holy Spirit dwells in the farthest reaches of our world, in the deepest recesses of each heart touched by generous love. God does not withhold the Spirit of Love based on a more or less properly articulated formulation about the Trinity or about Jesus Christ. God's love is too expansive to be contained by the concoctions of the human mind. The Holy Spirit, by its pervasive and unimaginably abundant inherence in creation, making all life possible, in turn makes salvation possible. The Holy Spirit of mindfulness and wisdom breathes hope and life into creatures and draws them into the life of God. Salvation is the divine presence indwelling through the Holy Spirit of mindfulness and love. Our participation in the life of the Spirit, the grace of God, the indwelling of the Spirit, the energy of mindfulness constitutes our salvation.

## *Salvation*

Christianity and Buddhism are concrete articulations of the deepest human longings to participate completely in the most important drama of the cosmos: the interrelationship between the ultimate dimension and creation, the relationship between God and creatures. The earnest religious person seeks to harmonize a life of suffering with an irrefutable hope and expectation that suffering is not all there is; is not all there ever will be. Christians strive forward to the hope of the Resurrection and the advent of the terminus of all afflictions: the *Kingdom of God*. Buddhists step gently into the transformation of suffering in the liberation of enlightenment: *nirvana*.

Dwelling peacefully in the here and now, we step joyously into the cessation of misery and the abundance of love. Generous as God is generous we breathe the liberation of the Spirit of enlightenment. Loving as God is loving, we step into the freedom of nirvana, we cross to the farther shore: the generous and loving salvation of the Kingdom of God.

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