

## THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF GOD: A BUDDHIST READING OF AQUINAS

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COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY is a better way of responding creatively and responsibly to the fact of religious pluralism than a theology of religions. The article that follows proceeds from this premise. In lieu of a generalized theory of religion or a systematic theology of religions, I will offer a limited exercise of comparison leading to tentative findings. Comparative theology is not comparative religions. It is not interested in investigating a theory of religion in general. It does not begin in a pan-religious perspective. Comparative theology is Christian theology in its basic sense: the project of interpreting the Christian tradition. In the case at hand, however, interpretation will be driven by placing Christian texts in conversation with a Buddhist text. This article is also founded on a hope, viz. that non-Christian religions pose not only a threat to our present theological understandings, but also offer resources for a creative revision of those understandings.

Specifically, I propose a rereading of the Thomistic doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God by means of a reading of Nagarjuna's *The Stanzas on the Middle Path*. This will entail a three-part structure. The first part is devoted to an analysis of selected texts from Thomas's *Commentary on John*, with the aim of clarifying some ambiguities attending his doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. The second part is given to an analysis of Nagarjuna's text. The aim here is to reach an understanding of this philosopher's approach to the seminal Buddhist notion of emptiness. The third part seeks to work a comparison of Thomas and Nagarjuna in which the familiar (Thomas) is reinterpreted with the unfamiliar (Nagarjuna).

### THOMAS'S DOCTRINE OF GOD'S INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

The doctrine of God's infinite incomprehensibility remains an aspect of Thomas's theology which richly deserves further discussion.<sup>1</sup> Although pertinent texts can be located in the *Summa theologiae*, the incomprehensibility of God is most clearly seen as an issue in the

<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, S.J., may be credited with opening the contemporary discussion of this aspect of Thomas's work with a series of articles published roughly during the last decade of his life. See Rahner's "Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of God," *Journal of Religion* 58 Supplement (1978) S107-25.

scripture commentaries, especially three sequential sections of the *Commentary on John*.<sup>2</sup>

The eleventh lecture of this text (sections 208–222) is devoted to a discussion of John 1:18, “No one has ever seen God; it is the Only Begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made him known.” Sections 208–10 address our need for wisdom in the face of human ignorance of God with references to Augustine (209) and the seeming contradictions in other passages of Scripture (210). Then, in section 211, Thomas asks, “How are we to understand what the evangelist says: ‘No one has ever seen God?’”

Section 211 enumerates three ways of seeing God. First, God is seen by means of a created substitute, as with the appearance of the three visitors to Abraham at Mamre. Second, God is seen in representations to the imagination, such as with Isaiah’s vision in the temple. Third, God is seen as an intelligible species abstracted from material things, as with the intellect discerning the greatness of the Creator reflected in creation, or is seen “through a certain spiritual light” infused by God into spiritual minds during contemplation. It is in this latter manner that Jacob can be said to have seen God face to face (Genesis 32:30). Then comes a qualification. “But the vision of the divine essence is not attained by any of the above visions: for no created species . . . is representative of the divine essence as it is.” This is because “nothing finite can represent the infinite as it is.” For this reason, instead of a knowledge of the divine essence, we are left with a knowledge that is “dark and mirrored, and from afar.” Thomas’s point in this section may be taken to mean that God’s incomprehensibility is the necessary result of the ontological disproportion which obtains between the infinitude of God and the finitude of the created intellect.

Section 212, however, argues against those who would claim that the divine essence will never be seen by the created intellect. Thomas rejects such a position as “false and heretical” in three ways. First, citing 1 John 3:2 and John 17:3, this view is seen to be contrary to Scripture. Second, such a view is to be rejected because “the brightness of God is the same as his substance, for he does not give forth light by participating in light, but through himself.” God is not seen in the ordinary fashion as an object that becomes visible to the eye by being bathed in a light which shines on it from without. God is the light by which we see light itself. Thus to see the light of God is to see God. Finally, he reminds the reader that, in accordance with Christian teaching, “it is impossible for anyone to attain perfect happiness except in the vision of the divine essence.” Thomas supports this third claim with an analysis of the natural desire of the intellect, which is “to understand and know the causes of all the effects it knows.” This fundamental desire cannot be fulfilled unless the intellect attain an understanding of the ultimate causes of all. “Therefore, to take away

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on John, Part One*, trans. James A. Weisheipl, O.P., and Fabian R. Larcher, O.P. (Albany, N.Y.: Magi, 1980).

the possibility of the vision of the divine essence by man is to take away happiness itself." In support of his view, Thomas again quotes Scripture: "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). In contrast to the ontological disproportion noted in the previous section, here Thomas wants to remind the reader that the promise of a full vision of God can be expected with the assurance of faith.

Section 213 is the most troubling of the three, because Thomas does not resolve the contradiction of Christian faith and metaphysical reason in the manner one might expect. Once again, he makes three points. First, in keeping with the ontological disproportion established in section 211, the divine essence will never be seen by the bodily eye, which can only see "sensate bodily things." Second, we are told that "as long as the human intellect is in the body it cannot see God, because it is weighed down by the body so that it cannot attain the summit of contemplation." Now we might expect to hear that the intellect, freed from the body by death and entered into the fullness of contemplation in the beatific vision, will see the divine essence in conformity with Christian faith in ultimate beatitude. But Thomas's third point comes as a surprise: "no created intellect (however abstracted, either by death, or separated from the body) which does see the divine essence, can comprehend it in any way." This leads to an unexpected conclusion: even in the beatific vision, God remains incomprehensible.

Thus, in order to reach an adequate understanding of Thomas's teaching regarding the incomprehensibility of God, three separate claims must be reconciled: (1) that God's incomprehensibility results from an ontological disproportion (211); (2) that indeed, God remains incomprehensible even in the beatific vision (213); and yet despite this, (3) the ultimate happiness of the human person in the immediate vision of the divine essence is a revealed doctrine of faith (212). An adequate interpretation of Thomas requires that points 1 and 2 be understood in such a way as not to preclude point 3. In other words, we must understand the immediate vision of God in such a way that God's incomprehensibility is preserved, not overcome, and we must understand the incomprehensibility of God so as not to diminish the fullness of the immediate vision.

Our exercise in comparative theology will explore this aspect of Thomas's thought in conversation with the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (second century C.E.) in the hope that a careful reading of a Buddhist text may suggest new ways of understanding the Thomistic doctrine.

#### NAGARJUNA: THE DOCTRINE OF EMPTINESS

Nagarjuna is noteworthy for his approach to Buddhist emptiness in his most famous work, *The Stanzas on the Middle Path (Mulamadhyamakakarika)*.<sup>3</sup> Although legendary material exists in abundance, little

<sup>3</sup> Various translations of the original Sanskrit are available in English. See, among

is known reliably about his life.<sup>4</sup> More important for present purposes would be to note that he is revered as a patriarch by almost every Mahayana Buddhist sect. This widespread recognition should serve notice that his thought encapsulates something fundamental for Buddhists of the Mahayana tradition. It also signals the existence of a considerable conflict of interpretations. Nagarjuna's most influential modern interpreters include Paul Williams, David Seyfort Ruegg, Christian Lindtner, and Gadjin Nagao (whose work has been influential in Japan).<sup>5</sup> These authors see Nagarjuna as one of the earliest expressions of Mahayana thought. In contrast to this line of interpretation, David Kalupahana takes a more controversial position, arguing that Nagarjuna is not a Mahayana thinker and indeed, more of a commentator than an innovator, who sought to return Buddhist thinking to the original teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha.<sup>6</sup> Given my research interests in Japanese Buddhism, my approach to Nagarjuna has been largely shaped by Nagao. However, Kalupahana's critical edition of Nagarjuna's *Stanzas* cannot be ignored and his translation will be used throughout. For comparative theology, the most sensible approach would be to rely on the scholarly consensus and to bring the conflict of interpretations into the discussion where useful. In the case at hand, scholarly consensus lies with Nagao who identifies Nagarjuna with the beginnings of Mahayana thought. Near the end of this article, however, the considerable differences between Nagao and Kalupahana will be introduced into the discussion.

The historical Buddha taught a practical path for finding release from suffering. Since suffering arises as a result of attachment to things that are in fact transient, the end of suffering can be realized by

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others, David Kalupahana, *Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Albany: State University of New York, 1986), Kenneth K. Inada, *Nagarjuna: A Translation of his Mulamadhyamakakarika with an Introductory Essay* (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1970), and Frederick Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (New York: Abington, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of some of this legendary material, see Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 55–56.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism* 55–76; David Seyfort Ruegg, *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981); Christian Lindtner, *Nagarjuniana* (Copenhagen: Akademisk, 1982), and *Master of Wisdom: Writings of the Buddhist Master Nagarjuna* (Berkeley: Dharma, 1986); Gadjin Nagao, *The Foundational Standpoint of Madhyamika Philosophy*, trans. John Keenan (Albany: SUNY, 1989), and *Madhyamika and Yogacara: A Study of Mahayana Philosophies. The Collected Papers of Gadjin Nagao*, ed. and trans. L. A. Kawamura (Albany: SUNY, 1991). The conflict of interpretation predates the modern period. Within the Madhyamika school itself, Buddhapalita and Bhavaviveka initiated two diverging paths for interpreting Nagarjuna. Candrakirti is generally held to be Nagarjuna's most influential ancient commentator. For a detailed discussion of this tradition of commentarial conflict, see Ruegg 47–86.

<sup>6</sup> For a classic summary of early Buddhist teaching, see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove, 1959).

bringing an end to attachment. The Buddha's counsel of nonattachment included not only material things, but also our obsession with religious dogmas and philosophical theories. The earliest historical materials indicate that the Buddha advised his disciples not to become entangled with two much-controverted philosophical views: (1) the idea of an immortal soul (*atman*) subsisting beneath the appearances of the personality, and (2) the nihilistic denial of karmic law operating across births, based on *atman*, which forms the basis for moral order. In lieu of these two philosophical positions, the Buddha taught a middle path between such metaphysical preoccupations with the aim of leading his disciples to release (*nirvana*) from the suffering generated by egocentric desire and intellectual obsessions. In the absence of an eternal soul, the experience of individuality was explained as the result of a momentary amalgamation of components which cause one another by arising dependently on one another (*pratitya-samutpada*). Obsession can be extinguished by bringing this mutual causation to an end, like a flame deprived of its fuel.<sup>7</sup>

Given the controversial nature of these teachings and the polemical atmosphere of northern India in the formative years of the Buddhist movement, a philosophical analysis of the Buddha's doctrines was inevitable. This period of intellectual creativity produced a body of scholastic literature known as the Abhidharma. According to this early Buddhist scholasticism, we become attached to the world by reifying experience into false views (*maccha-ditthi*) so that things appear to possess an inherent existence (*svabhava* = "own being"). Attachment generated by false views is the origin of suffering. By means of scholastic analysis, false views can be factored into their component parts (*dharmas*) and shown to have no inherent existence. By deconstructing our illusions, attachment ceases and suffering is overcome. In their effort to understand the arising of false views, the Abhidharma scholastics generally took a realistic approach to the *dharmas*. Unlike our false views, the *dharmas* have an inherent existence (*svabhava*). Nagarjuna sought to deconstruct even the Abhidharma's realism. Not only is our reified view of the world and ourselves without inherent existence, the *dharmas* themselves arise dependently and exist only momentarily. All *dharmas* are empty and impermanent mental constructs; no *svabhava* is to be found. In this manner, in *The Stanzas*, Nagarjuna argues that all our conceptual categories are merely conventions. However useful, concepts do not name eternal, substantial realities.<sup>8</sup>

Nagarjuna accomplishes this task in *The Stanzas* by means of a four-part structure. Chapters 1–2 are concerned with the doctrine of de-

<sup>7</sup> Classic texts from the Buddhist *sutras* include the *Kaccayanagotta-sutta* and the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*, both of which are collected in the *Samyutta-Nikaya*, ed. Leon Feer (London: Pali Text Society, 1890).

<sup>8</sup> Ruegg, *The Literature* 12.

pendent arising. There is nothing that exists inherently. All arises dependently by being caused by factors that in turn are contingent on other factors. Chapters 3–15 are devoted to an analysis of Abhidharmic terminology with an aim of expunging any misunderstanding of these terms as representations of transcendent or substantial realities. Chapter 15 ends this section with a lengthy discussion of substances. Nagarjuna argues that interpreting experiences in terms of inherent existence or mere nothingness is not in keeping with the middle path of the Buddha. “Those who perceive self-nature (*svabhava*) as well as other-nature (*parabhava*), existence as well as non-existence, they do not perceive the truth embodied in the Buddha’s message.”<sup>9</sup> In chapters 16–26, Nagarjuna turned to an analysis of the basic doctrines of Buddhism itself with the same aim: if scholastic concepts are not ultimately real, neither is the teaching of the Buddha to be enthroned as an absolute, eternal truth. In these chapters Nagarjuna demonstrates the radical lengths to which he is willing to go in showing that all our mental constructions are empty of inherent existence. The final chapter summarizes the work by restating the early Buddhist notion of “right view” (*samma-ditthi*). Since I am concerned with Nagarjuna’s use of the principle of emptiness, especially in relation to his fourfold dialectical negation, I will restrict my comments to material in the third section (chapters 16–26).

In chapter 25 of *The Stanzas*, Nagarjuna addresses the problem of a proper understanding of *nirvana*. Does *nirvana* exist as a metaphysical state of being beyond the contingencies of dependent arising? Should *nirvana* be thought of as a transcendental realm in opposition to *samsara*? Does *nirvana* lie beyond this world of suffering as something to be desired? In his opposition to any transcendental or ontological understanding of *nirvana*, Nagarjuna makes use of a fourfold negation (the *catuskoti*). Note that in the following texts Kalupahana translates the Sanskrit *nirvanam* (a cognate form of *nirvana*) as “freedom.”

Freedom, as a matter of fact, is not existence, for if it were, it would follow that it has the characteristic of decay and death. Indeed, there is no existence without decay and death.<sup>10</sup>

If freedom is not existence, will freedom be non-existence? Wherein there is no existence, therein non-existence is not evident.<sup>11</sup>

If freedom were to be both existence and non-existence, then release would also be both existence and non-existence. This too is not proper.<sup>12</sup>

The proposition that freedom is neither existence nor non-existence could be established if and when both existence and non-existence are established.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *The Stanzas* 15:6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 25:7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 25:15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 25:4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 25:11.

The fourfold negation excludes all possible metaphysical positions vis-a-vis *nirvana*. Nagarjuna's position is *not* (1) that *nirvana* exists, nor (2) that it does not exist, nor (3) that it both exists and does not exist, nor (4) that it neither exists nor does not exist. Thinking of *nirvana* as an ultimate reality opposed to this world and a transcendental state to be desired is not a "right view" conducive to finding release from suffering. Like other metaphysical concepts, *nirvana* is empty, i.e. not to be desired for release from suffering.

When all things are empty, why [speculate on] the finite, the infinite, both the finite and the infinite and neither finite nor the infinite? Why [speculate on] the identical, the different, the eternal, the non-eternal, both or neither?<sup>14</sup>

Metaphysical speculation does not lead to an adequate understanding of *nirvana*. Yet this exercise in logic is helpful for reaching a right view (*samma-ditthi*) of this basic Buddhist teaching, in that it lays bare the mind's tendency to distort reality in very specific ways. The right view of *nirvana* does not entail the presumption of its inherent existence or its nonexistence, or both, or neither. When these four speculative positions are abandoned, the right view of *nirvana* arises.

This connection between strategic negation and emptiness is evident in Nagarjuna's discussion of the status of the Buddha after death as well. Nagarjuna raises this question in the context of a discussion of the eternal soul (*atman*) in chapter 18 and continues the argument in chapters 22 and 25. Early scriptural texts speak of the Buddha as the *Tathagata* ("thus gone") after the end of his physical existence. Even if there is no *atman*, does the enlightened one exist eternally after death as the *Tathagata*? In answering the question, Nagarjuna resorts to the fourfold negation once again. "It is not assumed that the Blessed One exists after death. Neither is it assumed that he does not exist, or both or neither."<sup>15</sup> To cling to any of these assumptions would be to take a metaphysical view of the *Tathagata* incompatible with the middle path which leads to release. Instead, like the term *nirvana*, the *Tathagata* is empty and not to be thought of as a supernatural state or transcendent god.

The roots of Nagarjuna's philosophy become evident when we compare this section of *The Stanzas* with one of the Sutras. In the "Discourse to Vacchagotta on Fire" the wandering monk Vacchagotta asks the Buddha about the status of the *Tathagata*. The Buddha responds with the familiar four-fold negation:

I, Vaccha, am not of this view: "The Tathagata is after dying."

I, Vaccha, am not of this view: "The Tathagata is not after dying."

I, Vaccha, am not of this view: "The Tathagata both is and is not after dying."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 25:22-23.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 25:17.

I, Vaccha, am not of this view: "The Tathagata neither is nor is not after dying."<sup>16</sup>

When Vacchagotta then asks, "What is the peril the revered Gotama beholds that he thus does not approach any of these (speculative) views?" we are told,

Holding a view, the wilds of views, the wriggling of views, the scuffling of views, the fetter of views; it is accompanied by anguish, distress, misery, fever; it does not conduce to turning away from, nor to dispassion, stopping, calming, superknowledge, awakening, nor to nibbāna (*nirvana*). I, Vaccha, beholding that this is a peril, thus do not approach any of these (speculative) views.<sup>17</sup>

The purpose of the fourfold negation is not to promote a philosophical agnosticism about our ability to reach a right view of the *Tathagata*. The question regarding the status of the Buddha is not to be abandoned in frustration, but rather transformed. The mind's normal way of raising the question, i.e. in terms of inherent existence or nonexistence, must be overcome in order to reach a right view.

If the *Tathagata* is not a god and *nirvana* is not ultimate reality, then is emptiness itself to be thought of as ultimate foundation of all? Enthroned as ultimate reality, emptiness readily functions like a metaphysical substratum or ontological ground. Apparently Nagarjuna was well aware of this danger. For instance, in *The Stanzas* 13:8 he complains that "those who are possessed of the view of emptiness are said to be incorrigible." Then in 24:13 Nagarjuna accepts no blame for those who make emptiness itself their obsession. And but two verses before this we find the famous *monitum*: "A wrongly perceived emptiness ruins a person of meager intelligence. It is like a snake that is wrongly grasped or knowledge that is wrongly cultivated."<sup>18</sup> In claiming that all viewpoints are empty, Nagarjuna does not intend to promote emptiness as a metaphysical equivalent to Being. Emptiness itself is empty and not to be taken as a metaphysical foundation. This is the reason Nagarjuna refrains from making the statement "all is empty" despite the fact that the term emptiness appears everywhere in *The Stanzas*. Instead, we consistently find statements such as "all *this* is empty" (emphasis mine).<sup>19</sup> There is no emptiness beyond the emptiness of particular things. Thus, not only are the conceptual categories of the Abhidharma empty, but also the teachings of the Buddha as well. And beyond even this, neither is emptiness itself to be reified into an absolute.

Is Nagarjuna then a nihilist? Many of his opponents have thought so. Nagarjuna's use of the fourfold negation precludes any attempt to hypostatize emptiness into a metaphysical foundation. Are we not left

<sup>16</sup> *Aggi-Vacchagottasutta* 484–485.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 485.

<sup>18</sup> *The Stanzas* 24:11.

<sup>19</sup> Kalupahana observes that Nagarjuna always employs the demonstrative *idam* ("this") in order to particularize his claims about emptiness (*Nagarjuna* 85–86).



then with dread before the utter meaninglessness of life? If emptiness is not Tillich's Being Itself, is it Nietzsche's *nicht Sein*? In a less radical vein, we might ask if Nagarjuna is an agnostic about the metaphysical nature of things. Does emptiness imply that we are simply to stop thinking about *nirvana* and the *Tathagata*? But for Nagarjuna, emptiness is more than the acid of deconstruction applied to our presuppositions regarding the inherent existence (*svabhava*) of religious ultimates. Right views of *nirvana* and the *Tathagata* can be realized only when these presuppositions are transformed. The right view of the teachings of the Buddha arises when subjectivity is set free from its obsession with *svabhava*. Nagarjuna's fourfold negation of *nirvana* and the *Tathagata* does not lead to nihilism, but rather to awakening.

Emptiness, as employed in *The Stanzas*, is neither a metaphysics nor a nihilism. Nagarjuna sees it as identical with dependent arising itself. "We state that whatever is dependent arising, that is emptiness. That is dependent upon convention. That itself is the middle path."<sup>20</sup> This verse of *The Stanzas* also links emptiness with the Buddha's middle path. In this respect, emptiness is Nagarjuna's restatement of the Buddha's practical religious wisdom regarding metaphysics and nihilism. In the Buddhist tradition, wisdom (*prajna*) has to do with the reorientation of subjectivity which leads to a release from attachments. Wisdom releases the person from obsession. More positively stated, the aim of wisdom is to liberate one for relating to the world in freedom. Herein lies the scholarly consensus regarding emptiness in *The Stanzas*.<sup>21</sup> Emptiness should not be understood metaphysically. Neither should it be mistaken as a form of nihilism. Emptiness, in *The Stanzas*, is equivalent to the Buddhist wisdom of nonattachment.

#### A BUDDHIST READING OF AQUINAS

The earlier reading of the *Commentary on John* led us to factor Thomas's doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God into three statements: (1) God's incomprehensibility is the result of an ontological disproportion between the finitude of the created intellect and the infinity of God; (2) God remains incomprehensible even in the beatific vision; and yet (3) the human person's final happiness in the immediate vision of God must be affirmed as a revealed doctrine of faith. These findings suggest the following problem for interpretation: How can the ultimate fulfillment of the human person in the immediate vision of God be reconciled with God's incomprehensibility even in the beatific vision? The remainder of this article proposes to place Nagarjuna's notion of emptiness in conversation with Thomas in order to illuminate this issue.

<sup>20</sup> *The Stanzas* 24:18.

<sup>21</sup> See Kalupahana, *Nagarjuna* 67–69, Nagao, *Foundational Standpoint* 89, and Streng, *Emptiness* 82–98.

In *The Stanzas*, Nagarjuna develops a doctrine of emptiness in the form of a Buddhist wisdom of nonclinging. Can God's incomprehensibility be read in a similar fashion? An answer to this question is suggested in the discussion of incomprehensibility found in the *Summa theologiae*.<sup>22</sup> In Part 1, Question 12, Article 7, Aquinas asks the question, "Can a created mind comprehend God's essence?" In the reply we are given a negative answer supported by a three-point argument: to comprehend is to understand perfectly; to understand perfectly is to understand a thing as well as it can be understood; and, God is incomprehensible because God is infinitely *understandable*. This last statement is noteworthy for what it does not claim, viz. it does not claim that God's incomprehensibility is rooted in a part of God that remains eternally denied to the finite intellect in its quest of understanding. "When we say that God is not comprehended we do not mean there is something about him that is not seen, but that he cannot be seen as perfectly as intrinsically he is visible."<sup>23</sup> In the beatific vision, incomprehensibility results not from a deficit in the *lumen gloriae*, but rather from its fullness which overwhelms the finite intellect. Thomas's subtlety on this point is noteworthy. In rooting God's incomprehensibility in God's unlimited ability to be comprehended, he succeeds in avoiding alternatives unacceptable to Christian faith. On the one hand, if God's incomprehensibility resulted merely from an ontological disproportion (statement 1), then the final happiness of the human person would not be achievable (a violation of statement 3). Like the "virtuous pagans" of Dante's limbo, the ultimate truth of human existence would be to say, ". . . without hope, we live on in desire."<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, if God were ultimately comprehensible in the beatific vision (a violation of statement 2), then in comprehending God, human subjectivity would transcend God. In this case, Nietzsche would have the last laugh: in the death of God, the finite subject would be burdened with the unhappy obligation of being its own god. Thomas's solution is to speak of the incomprehensible God as the infinitely understandable God.

But more exactly, how is God incomprehensible by being infinitely understandable? Nagarjuna's notion of emptiness as Buddhist wisdom may be illuminating. As a Buddhist, Nagarjuna looks on life as utterly transient. Suffering arises when the mind churns illusions into attachments which reify life into static categories. As a purely practical matter, concepts are necessary. Suffering results when conceptual views are absolutized. What is in fact merely conventional and useful leads to suffering when made ultimate. The "happiness" of the human person (or more accurately, what early Buddhism calls "bliss") consists in being liberated from obsessions. For Thomas, the happiness of the human person consists in knowing the truth. The final happiness of

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Herbert McCabe, O.P. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>23</sup> *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 12, a. 7, reply. <sup>24</sup> *Inferno* 4:42.

the human person, which we can hope for with the assurance of faith, is possible only if God is infinitely understandable. As noted above, the human person's ultimate happiness would be impossible if a part of God remained eternally concealed to the created intellect or if God were ultimately understandable. A more Buddhist approach to this Thomistic insight would emphasize that unhappiness results when the finite intellect becomes fixated on a false view of God which is purely a conventional truth at the expense of entering into a deeper knowledge of God. That God is incomprehensible because endlessly understandable is, as the citation of *ST 1*, q. 12, a. 7 shows, Thomas's own approach to incomprehensibility. Reading Thomas after Nagarjuna also alerts us to a truth at least implicit in Thomas's texts: the ultimate unhappiness of the human person results from the refusal to surrender fully to God in an act of self-transcendence through knowledge.

Emptiness as the wisdom of the middle path suggests new ways of reading Thomas. The Thomistic doctrine can be read as a Christian wisdom of nonattachment, which is at once similar and different from Buddhist wisdom. For Thomas and Nagarjuna, ultimately the human person is not bound: for Nagarjuna, not bound to obsessions; for Aquinas, not bound to false gods, however orthodox these ideas of God might be from a purely doctrinal perspective. Every understanding of God is preliminary. As an initial finding, therefore, let it be noted that both incomprehensibility and emptiness are required, in their respective contexts, as integral parts of differing religious soteriologies. If Thomas is to succeed in affirming the human person's ultimate potential for happiness, he must also affirm the abiding incomprehensibility of God as the infinitely understandable. If Nagarjuna is to succeed in affirming the human person's ultimate potential for freedom from attachments, he must also argue for the emptiness not only of *nirvana* and the *Tathagata*, but of emptiness itself. If God is not incomprehensible in the Christian context, and if emptiness is not empty in the Buddhist, then the human person is ultimately bound. Emptiness and incomprehensibility must be understood as religious soteriologies.<sup>25</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to equate Thomas's incomprehensi-

<sup>25</sup> Rahner reaches an interpretation of the Thomistic problematic which has similarities and differences with the reading of Thomas being developed here in connection with Nagarjuna. He interprets the Thomistic doctrine as an implicit theological anthropology which affirms the unlimited capacity of the human subject for self-transcendence into God as incomprehensible mystery ("Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of God," S116-25). Reading the Thomistic problematic in connection with *The Stanzas* does lead to a recognition of the soteriological function of the doctrine of incomprehensibility, a point on which Rahner would readily agree. A Buddhist reading does not, however, lend itself to a heightened appreciation of mystery in Rahner's theological sense. For a discussion of Rahner and Buddhist emptiness, see Hans Waldenfels, S.J., *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1980).

ble God with Nagarjuna's emptiness. Thomas's God is not empty. Comparative theology should not proceed by underscoring similarities while ignoring differences. The sizable differences separating Thomas and Nagarjuna may prove to be greater resources for Christian theological reflection than even the similarities.

For example, in Nagarjuna, there is transformation without transcendence in the Platonic sense. This observation opens up a line of comparison whose potential will not soon be exhausted. *Nirvana* is not to be misunderstood as a transcendent realm beyond this world. Nagarjuna knows nothing of transcendence in the Platonic sense so familiar to Aquinas. However, for Mahayana Buddhism, being in the world while also being free from attachment to the world constitutes a kind of transcendence. This latter sense of transcendence is surely intended by Nagarjuna and evoked when Kalupahana translates *nirvana* as "freedom." In *The Stanzas*, emptiness functions as a tool for the reorientation of subjectivity whose object is a religious transformation: freedom from obsessions. But in contrast to Thomas, Nagarjuna's negative dialectics do not lead to a *via negativa*, if this is understood as an ascent of the soul into God. The fourth line of the *catuskoti* ("do not say neither/nor") entails a rejection of negation as a path to transcendence that we associate with Christian Neoplatonic mysticism and theology. Since Thomas is indebted to this tradition as much as he is to Aristotelianism, Nagarjuna's use of the *catuskoti* must be seen as an alternative to the *exitus-reditus* structure of the *Summa*. The Thomistic use of negation always implies a prior affirmation. This is not the case with Nagarjuna, for whom even emptiness itself is not a position about ultimate reality. In *ST* 1.12.7, the *via negativa* constitutes the path of the soul in its quest for knowledge of the infinitely understandable God. Nagarjuna's dialectical use of negation, in contrast, is not in the service of a mystical ascent. It is not an *itinerarium*, at least not in the tradition of Christian scholasticism. In *The Stanzas* there is negation and there is transformation, but negation and transformation do not lead to a Platonic ascent beyond the world of appearances. In place of the Christian doctrine of creation, *The Stanzas* speak only of dependent arising. Instead of the depth metaphors of Christian scholasticism (e.g. *trans-cendence* into the *super-natural*), *The Stanzas* contribute to the "rhetoric of immediacy"<sup>26</sup> which we have come to associate with the Zen movement in Japan (i.e. the "suchness" of all things as they arise in nondiscriminating consciousness). Perhaps most strikingly, if the doctrine of incomprehensibility entails a manifestation of the holiness (otherness) of God, then Nagarjuna's emptiness must be seen as the negation of that holiness.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The phrase is taken from Bernard Faure; see his *Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> Also note that this transformation without transcendence precludes Nagarjuna

Differences such as these are not superficial, and efforts to declare them merely apparent are wrong-headed. But as stated above, Buddhism may prove to be most stimulating to Christian theological reflection precisely where it presents itself as Christianity's radical Other. Based on the texts under discussion, let me suggest two examples which merit further reflection and development by comparative theologians.

First, if Nagarjuna's emptiness overcomes the holiness of the Christian God, does it not also overcome dualistic understandings of God and creation, natural and supernatural, nature and grace? This may be true in two ways. First, emptiness may negate the transcendence of God and the Christian doctrine of creation so as to render God a principle entirely immanent within the world. Theologically this would lead to pantheism, or perhaps panentheism. Metaphysically, this would lead to monism. But Nagarjuna is meticulously clear about the unsuitability of interpreting emptiness as a metaphysics. Emptiness is Buddhist wisdom, not a philosophical foundationalism. Therefore, a second alternative for relating emptiness to Christian theism would be to recognize that emptiness critiques dualistic views of God and creation without leading necessarily to pantheism. In this regard, it may prove fruitful to compare *The Stanzas* with the attempts of Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner in the middle of this century to break away from the neo-Scholastic theology of creation, or with the Latin American theologians in their attempts to move away from transcendental understandings of salvation history.<sup>28</sup> If the doctrine of creation does not allow God to be juxtaposed dualistically over against the world, and does not allow God and the world to be identified monistically, does not Christian faith in the Maker of heaven and of earth require Christians both to construct and then to deconstruct metaphysical positions vis-a-vis God and creation? If metaphysical constructions eventually break down in their attempts to inscribe Christian faith, does this imply nihilism or agnosticism? Or does the ultimate failure of metaphysics to account adequately for the Christian experience of creation suggest the need for a new reading of the Christian wisdom tradition? Here Nagarjuna's transformation without transcendence might prove to be stimulating to Christian theologians in revising their theological understandings.

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from developing a doctrine of analogical language as Aquinas does. In Nagarjuna, there is no *symbolum* because there is no *realissimum*. There can be no analogical predication because there is no prime analogue. However, my discussion of *The Stanzas* does not deal with Nagarjuna's notion of the "two truths" or with language as "skillful means" (*upaya*). To continue this experiment in comparative theology, one might read this aspect of *The Stanzas* with the *Summa theologiae*, Part 1, Question 13.

<sup>28</sup> For de Lubac, see *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Mary Sheed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967). For Rahner, see "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961) 297-317. For the Latin American theologians, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973) 53-77.

Second, the possibility of grace would seem to be a major casualty of Nagarjuna's understanding of religious transformation without a Platonic model of transcendence. Thomas construes God's incomprehensibility in terms of the *lumen gloriae*. As a metaphor, *lumen* suggests disclosure, manifestation, and revelation. In the beatific vision, God's incomprehensibility is fully revealed and the human person is fully beatified. The language of grace effortlessly accompanies the language of light, revelation, and transcendence. In contrast, the annulling of transcendence at work in *The Stanzas* would seem to preclude the possibility of grace. Emptiness is a matter of deconstruction, not disclosure. However, a closer reading of Nagarjuna will complicate matters considerably, and entail a look at the commentarial material.

As mentioned above, David Kalupahana must be counted among the more influential contemporary commentators on *The Stanzas*. Kalupahana sets out to demonstrate the continuity between Nagarjuna and earlier Buddhism and to argue against the widespread view which identifies Nagarjuna with the beginnings of the Mahayana movement. Nagarjuna, in Kalupahana's view, is a critic not only of metaphysical tendencies of Buddhist intellectuals, but also of Mahayana teachers who emphasized faith in a transcendent Buddha.<sup>29</sup> Emptiness is merely a word, but a word useful for achieving "right views" which lead to release from obsessions. Sorrow is constructed by the mind. Freedom is realized in the deconstruction of sorrow. Given this reading of *The Stanzas*, emptiness would seemingly require a religious rhetoric of self-help, not grace. In contrast, Gadjin Nagao, arguably the most prominent commentator on Nagarjuna in Japan, interprets Nagarjuna as a Mahayana thinker. Moreover, Nagao is much indebted to the Japanese Pure Land (Jodoshinshu) tradition with its strong emphasis on grace.<sup>30</sup> In Pure Land Buddhism, the realization of emptiness is construed not as an act of self-help (*jiriki* = "self-power"), but rather as a transformation brought about by emptiness experienced as grace (*tariki* = "other-power"). "Only when the duality of self and other has disappeared in the sole presence of an inconceivable and unfathomable power," writes Nagao, "is there an 'other-power' that is not self."<sup>31</sup> "Other-power" is not an objective other which stands over against the subject. Rather, it arises when dualistic consciousness (and the obsessions which characterize such consciousness) is overcome in the realization of emptiness. Although "other-power" language is foreign to *The Stanzas*, the Pure Land movement explains emptiness in terms of a nondual transforming power (and feels no compunction in claiming Nagarjuna as its first patriarch). Thus the wisdom of the middle path

<sup>29</sup> Kalupahana, *Nagarjuna* xiii-xv.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of grace in relation to Mahayana Buddhist teaching on emptiness, see Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota, *Shinran: An Introduction to His Thought* (Kyoto: Honganji International Center, 1989) 128-31.

<sup>31</sup> Nagao, *Foundational Standpoint* 7.

which leads to release from obsessions is for Nagao a transformation involving grace, and yet there is no corresponding belief in the intervention of a supernatural being. How might the experience of grace, understood as the realization of wisdom as emptiness, serve as a resource for Christian theologians trying to rethink their tradition in an era when the voices of a dogmatic secularism and a resurgent naive supernaturalism dominate public discussion?

Comparative theology aims neither at protecting Christianity from the threat of other religions nor at harmonizing religions by means of a hierarchy of truths. Good comparison is suspicious of homologies and incommensurates. Instead, methods of comparison should contribute to the imaginative revision of our theological affirmations. For this reason, comparative theology should not content itself with the superficial comparison of terms. The comparative theologian seeks to place Christian discourse in conversation with discourses taken from various religions in the hope that they might enhance one another. How does a particular non-Christian religious claim, a claim that may be radically at odds with the claims of Christianity, require and enable us to revise our present understanding? To do Christian theology in such a manner is to place Christian self-understanding at risk. To fail to do so would be to lose an opportunity for the enrichment of faith.

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