

JAPANESE BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES AND COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY: SUPREME WAYS IN INTERSECTION

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[Adherents of a particular religion consider their own tradition as absolutely authoritative for them in regard to ultimate destiny and norms for human living. The author here examines three views of the Supreme Way in Japanese Buddhism, namely, of Kūkai, Dōgen, and Nichiren. He then sets these views in conversation with Catholic perspectives on key religious questions about final destiny and demands of human living. In the process, he demonstrates how engaging in comparative theology can deepen one's understanding of one's own religious tradition seen in intersection with other forms of the Supreme Way.]

TO PROFESS ADHERENCE or commitment to a particular religious tradition is to take the teachings of that religion as absolute truth and its prescriptions for living as absolutely authoritative. The question thereby arises as to how adherents of a given religious community are to regard or relate to other religious traditions that, needless to say, present views on ultimate reality different from their own. In our contemporary world, an acute awareness of this situation of conflicting absolutes has emerged more than ever before.

This issue has been taken up by philosophers, theologians, and practitioners of different religions especially in the last two or three decades. From a Christian perspective, the theology of religions, as an area of inquiry on the role of the world's religious traditions in salvation history or on the way that these religions can be understood vis-à-vis the gospel message, has become an area of lively discussion. There have been signifi-

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cant contributions in this area of theological inquiry which we cannot list exhaustively here.¹

Spurred by the questions raised in the theology of religions, comparative theology takes a definitive step beyond a mere taxonomy of possible Christian theological positions in regard to other religious traditions.² Rather than simply offering reflective and speculative insights about other religions based on Christian premises, comparative theology actively engages other traditions in conversation, through their texts, rituals, and other expressions, and/or living members. In and through this process of engagement, the theologian seeks to discover new perspectives or insights that can shed light on questions of ultimate or practical religious import valid for one's own tradition, and hopefully for others as well. My contribution to this issue explores ways of addressing the situation of conflicting absolutes in our world today.

First I present key features in the religious thought of three major figures in Japanese Buddhist history, namely Kūkai (774–835), Dōgen (1200–1253) and Nichiren (1222–1282).³ From the standpoint of their own respective religious teachings considered by each as the Supreme Way, I examine their views and attitudes toward other teachings or spiritual paths known to them during their lifetime. Secondly, I explore new arenas in Christian theology and spirituality, based on various themes that emerge in the examination of these three Japanese Buddhist perspectives on the Supreme Way.

¹ For evaluative surveys of various proposals toward a Christian theology of religions, see e.g. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982); Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985); Joseph DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington: Catholic University, 1992); Don Pittman et al., *Ministry and Theology in Global Perspective: Contemporary Challenges to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) is a collection surveying differing positions on the issue, designed for class use.

² See the works of Francis Clooney, S.J., notably his *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (New York: SUNY, 1993); *Seeing through Texts* (New York: SUNY, 1996); *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999); *Hindu God, Christian God* (New York: Oxford University, 2001). Also, for a lucid presentation of the premises and tasks of comparative theology, with concrete examples, see James Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths* (New York: Paulist, 1999).

³ There are many Buddhist figures in different epochs of Japanese history that could be considered in this regard, but for this article I am taking Kūkai, a ninth-century figure, and Dogen and Nichiren, both of the thirteenth century. Their writings make explicit references to their attitudes toward other religious teachings, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, in a way that sets the distinctiveness of their own religious standpoint.

As a background and prelude to my inquiry into Japanese Buddhist thinkers, a few summary remarks about doctrinal developments in Buddhism are in order.⁴ From its native soil in India, Buddhism took root, developed, and flourished over the centuries in other Asian countries including China, Korea, and Japan, as religious teachings and practices that arose out of the transformative experience of Gautama the Awakened One (Buddha) were accepted, assimilated, and reformulated in new cultural contexts.⁵ This blossoming was due in great part to the influence of religious geniuses of different epochs who, taking up the message of the Buddha and embodying it in their own lives, succeeded in giving it renewed forms and expressions that resonated with the needs of the people of their times.

Buddhist thinkers in China had to address the question of what attitudes to take toward Confucianism and Taoism, two traditions that informed the cultures and world views of East Asia long before the advent of Buddhism. These thinkers also were confronted by a more complicated task of sorting out the manifold teachings attributed to the Buddha as transmitted in written form through different scriptural sources that manifested wide divergences in content, style, and religious import. Some teachers came up with ways of presenting the varieties of doctrines in a coherent framework, offering a unified vision and integral form of practice of the Buddhist Dharma (Truth), with their own teaching presented as the Supreme Way above all the others.

Chih-i (538–597) of the T'ien T'ai school, for example, classified the manifold Buddhist Scriptures into a hierarchical framework based on five periods of the Buddha's public career and eight kinds of teaching based on content and disposition of the seeker, placing the Lotus Sutra at the apex.⁶ The Hua-Yen school offered a ten-level classification of Buddhist teaching based on degrees of depth of realization of the Dharma, with the teaching of the Hua-Yen Sutra as embodying the Supreme Way.⁷ These are but two noted examples of how particular Buddhist schools expounded on the Dharma based on a given set of scriptures taken as authoritative above others, and proclaimed the superiority of this teaching over other render-

⁴ John Makransky examines in his article in this issue the broad range of doctrinal developments that effect Buddhist perceptions of truth in other religions, covering periods from early Buddhism through Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna. My essay focuses on particular Japanese developments, characterized by the deliberate selection (*senchaku*) of one core teaching among the many Buddhist doctrines as “the one thing necessary” for ultimate realization, and the concomitant abandonment of all others, hence the nomenclature, “Supreme Way.”

⁵ See Donald Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University, 2001).

⁶ *Ibid.* 190–91.

⁷ *Ibid.* 197–99.

ings of the Dharma taught in other scriptures or expounded by other teachers.

These developments in Buddhist thinking that took place in China over several centuries came to be introduced in Japan via the Korean peninsula in the formative years of its own history.⁸ Different schools of Buddhist thought and ways of Buddhist practice were introduced, and coexisted and developed in their own ways in this island nation. In due time, over the succeeding centuries, Japanese Buddhist spiritual leaders and thinkers arose who gave distinctive thrusts to Buddhist teaching based on their own religious experience and reflection responding to the exigencies of their own time.

THE SUPREME WAY IN JAPANESE BUDDHISM

I now examine in some detail three major figures of Japanese Buddhism each of whom presents a distinctive Buddhist standpoint, emphasizing its supremacy vis-à-vis other Buddhist schools or teachings known in their day. I focus principally on how they regarded other religious doctrines, from the perspective their own Buddhist teaching.

Kūkai and the Ten Stages of Mind

Popularly known as Kōbō Daishi or “Great Teacher who spread the Dharma far and wide,” Kūkai (774–835) founded a monastic community in Mt. Kōya that continues to thrive in the present day as a training center for priests of the Shingon sect, who would eventually serve in temples scattered all over the country. His enduring legacy for Buddhism is the systematization of the Esoteric Teaching of the Truth Word (Shingon Mikkyō).

His *Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings (Sangō Shiki)*, written at the age of 24, presents a comparative treatment of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Here he describes the first two as limited and unsatisfactory teachings that may help one in putting order and decency and derive benefit in one’s life, but are ultimately unable to fulfill the highest spiritual longings that lay deep in the human heart. Buddhism alone is proclaimed as the teaching able to respond to these deepest aspirations that Kūkai himself was pursuing and nurturing in his own life at that time.

His sojourn in China (804–806) in further pursuit of truth opens him to the world of Esoteric Buddhism. He comes back to Japan with Scriptures and items for ritual practice, empowered and equipped to transmit this tradition to others. *The Difference Between Exoteric and Esoteric Bud-*

⁸ Ibid. 241–82.

dhism (*Benkenmitsu-nikyō ron*) expounds on the crucial differences between the various doctrinal expressions presented by the different schools of Exoteric Buddhism in Kūkai's day on the one hand, and his own transmitted teaching. The roughly 50 works attributed to him, written after his return from China up to the time of his death in 835, are all expositions of this Esoteric teaching from different angles.

In a treatise written in compliance with an imperial request for a summary of the teachings of the recognized Buddhist schools of the day, Kūkai composed *The Ten Stages of Mind* (*Jūjūshinron*), which, as the title indicates, describes ten stages of the human mind in ascending order. Esoteric Teaching is situated at the apex, the tenth or supreme state of mind that is the mark of Buddhahood, the ultimate goal of all sentient beings. This long treatise with extended citations from various scriptural sources is summarized in a work entitled *The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury* (*Hizō Hōyaku*), written during his last years.

In the presentation of the ten stages of the mind, Kūkai expounds his views of other religious teachings, non-Buddhist as well as Buddhist, corresponding to the various stages of mind on the way to the realization of Truth.

Stage one is called the goat mind, described as indulging in pursuits motivated by the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. Though ascribed to human beings, this is looked upon as a sub-human state wherein the animal instincts hold sway, and where moral or religious sensibilities are lacking. Those teachers who held pleasure as the highest good belong to this stage.

Stage two is the childlike, abstemious, but controlled state of mind. Here, one follows ethical precepts and rules for moral conduct, manifesting a basic awareness of the rights of others and of one's duties toward them. Kūkai regarded this stage as one that corresponds to the state of mind of those who follow Confucianism.

Stage three is called the fearless mind, referring to those who have realized the unsatisfactoriness of this earthly life. Persons of this mind aspire for immortality and seek rebirth in heaven. In Kūkai's scheme, this corresponds to the followers of Taoism, as well as of the 16 Hindu schools including Sāṅkhya, Vaiśeṣika, Yoga, and others, who practice bodily discipline and cultivate the human spirit's aspirations toward the afterlife. Here Kūkai also places Buddhist followers whose religious views and practice centered on seeking rebirth in Pure Land. This stage of mind is characterized by a pessimistic view of this world, held by those who are practicing asceticism in various forms, but which basically derives from a kind of egoism albeit a spiritual kind.

Stages four to nine are those corresponding to the various schools of Buddhism that Kūkai ranks in ascending order depending on their level of

profundity as expressions of ultimate truth. These are the “small vehicle” or Hīnayana (stage four); the self-enlightened ones who remain apathetic toward other sentient beings, thereby failing to cultivate compassion (stage five); the followers of the path of meditative union or Yogācāra (stage six); the proponents of the doctrine of Emptiness who expound their doctrine through logical argumentation, taking cue from third-century Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (stage seven); the followers of the Tendai school who teach the interpenetration of the ten realms of being, represented by Kūkai’s contemporary Saichō (stage eight); and the followers of the Avatamsaka or Kegon school, who have come to a clear awareness of ultimate truth as nonimmutable, and interconnected, interpenetrating, and interdependent. All these stages of mind rely on Buddhist Exoteric doctrine which Kūkai grants as expressive of varying degrees of truth.

The tenth stage of mind, described as the Glorious Mind, the most secret and most sacred, is what Kūkai identifies as the Supreme Way, the way taught in his own school of the Esoteric Buddhism of the Truth Word (*Shingon Mikkyō*). It is the Supreme Truth, towering above all other partial or provisional truths taught in other religions or other Buddhist schools.

Kūkai grounds this affirmation of the supremacy of Esoteric Buddhism above all others on three points. First, it is the teaching revealed by the universal Dharmabody or Body of Truth (*Dharmakāya*) personified in Mahāvairocana Buddha. This is an infinite, all-encompassing Buddha that is the embodiment of Truth itself, set in contrast with the finite, time-bound, human Buddha (the historical Śākyamuni), called the Body of Transformation (*Nirmānakāya*) who taught the various doctrines classified as Exoteric teaching.⁹ The six basic elements of the universe (earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness) are regarded as the manifest expression of the unceasing activity of Mahāvairocana Buddha in preaching the Dharma. In short, all other Buddhist schools base themselves on the teaching of this latter, earth-bound, historical Buddha, while Esoteric Buddhism is the direct revelation of the infinite and all-encompassing Truth personified in Mahāvairocana Buddha.

Second, supreme, perfect enlightenment (= Buddhahood) can be realized in this lifetime, in this very body.¹⁰ This is in contrast to the notion held by Theravāda and some schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, that it takes many

⁹ See Ruben Habito, “Trīkāya Doctrine in Buddhism,” *Buddhist Christian Studies* 6 (1986) 56–62.

¹⁰ This point is conveyed in the treatise with the title “Attaining Buddhahood in This Very Body” (*Sokushin-jōbutsu*), which remains one of Kūkai’s most popular and widely cited works.

lifetimes to be able to gain enough merit and thus be able to attain Buddhahood. For example, a passage from a sutra that Kūkai cites states that “if sentient beings who have come across this teaching practice it diligently four times day and night, they will realize the stage of joy in this life and perfect enlightenment in their subsequent sixteen lives.” Kūkai then comments that “by ‘sixteen lives’ is meant that one is to realize the attainments of the sixteen great Bodhisattvas.”¹¹ He thus de-emphasizes the expectation of future lives and places his focus on the grandeur and depth of the experience of realization awaiting the practitioner in this very life in this very body.

Third, this supreme, perfect enlightenment is attained through a mode of holistic meditative and ritual practice that involves one’s body—one’s mouth in particular and one’s mind. In offering specific prescriptions for posture and hand gestures (*mudrā*), verbal formulas (*mantra*), and sacred visualizations (*mandala*), the entirety of the practitioner’s being is engaged in the realization of perfect enlightenment. These three (hand gestures, verbal formulas, and sacred visualizations) are called “mystic” or “secret” practices, and understood to be the modes of manifestation of the macrocosmic Buddha in the microcosmic dimension of the individual human practitioner. This holistic mode of practice is set in contrast with other forms that involve only one or other of the three dimensions of the human being (physical, verbal, mental) in the quest for enlightenment.

It is significant that one of the underlying notions of Kūkai’s Esoteric Buddhism is that of *kaji*, a compound of two characters meaning respectively “to support, to add” and “to hold, to retain,” a term translated by some scholars as “grace.” “The compassion of the Buddha pouring forth on the heart of sentient beings, like the rays of the sun on water, is called *ka* (adding), and the heart of sentient beings which keeps hold of the compassion of the Buddha, as water retains the rays of the sun, is called *ji* (retaining).”¹²

In sum, Kūkai presents his Supreme Way of Esoteric Buddhism as a way of realizing the infinite in the finite, the universal in the particular, the impersonal in the personal, transcendence in immanence. It is a religious path that affirms the sacredness of the natural world, enabling the practitioner to unleash the dynamic power of wisdom and compassion in one’s life in the here and now, as one looks toward eons and eons of practice of wisdom and compassion in future lives.

¹¹ Yoshito Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University, 1972) 225–26.

¹² *Ibid.* 92, 232. See also “Kūkai,” in *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World*, ed. Ian McGreal (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) 295–98.

Dōgen—The Supreme Way of the Awakened

Dōgen began his religious search in his youth as he experienced the impermanence of this earthly life, precipitated no doubt by the death of his own mother while he was still a child of five.¹³ He was troubled by a doubt concerning a basic doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism taught in common by different schools flourishing in his time. If, as the doctrine asserts, “all sentient beings are originally endowed with Buddha nature,” what then is the point of taking up the prescriptions of Buddhist practice? Finding no one in Japan to answer his questions, he sailed to China, and met Ch’an (Zen) Master Ju-ching, under whose skillful guidance he was led to a profound experience of enlightenment.¹⁴

He resolved his doubt in the realization that “practice” is not a means toward “enlightenment,” but rather, that enlightenment comes to be fully manifest in and through practice. In other words, practice is itself the very embodiment of enlightenment. And for Dōgen, “practice” is centered on *zazen*, or seated meditation. In seated meditation one experiences this awakening to what one already is and has been right from the start.

Dōgen’s major work, the *Eye Treasury of the True Dharma* (*Shōbōgenzō*), is a collection of his talks over many years, addressed to practitioners of seated meditation in the context of monastic life. In these talks we can glimpse that world of enlightenment that Dōgen himself experienced and continued to deepen throughout his life, the world he invites all his listeners (and readers) to enter with him, in and through their practice of seated meditation. It would not be an exaggeration, therefore, to put forth, as many commentators have done, that the entirety of Dōgen’s teaching is summed up in the phrase “*shikan taza*” (just sitting) as the very heart of the Buddha Way, the True and Supreme Way.

Consequently, *zazen*, even done for a short time by one person, enlivens and unifies all forms of existence. It covers infinite time and pervades past, present and future while simultaneously working for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Buddhas, sentient beings, and phenomena have only one form of practice and one undifferentiated enlightenment.¹⁵

“Just sitting” however is not to be taken as a separate mode of being from one’s activities in daily life. On the contrary, in “just sitting,” one awakens to the infinite expanse of one’s being, as embracing “mountains and rivers and the great wide earth” as well as “all the myriad things of the

¹³ See “Dogen,” in *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World* 322–26.

¹⁴ See Takashi James Kodera, *Dogen’s Formative Years in China* (Boulder, Colo.: Prajna, 1980).

¹⁵ *Shōbōgenzō—The Eye and Treasury of the True Law*, trans. Kosen Nishiyama and John Stevens, Vol.1 (Tokyo: Nakayama, 1975) 150.

entire universe.”¹⁶ As such, it is not just in sitting, but likewise in standing, laughing, crying, and all that one’s life is all about, wherein this infinite expanse is manifested and experienced.

But in inviting his listeners and readers to experience this world of enlightenment for themselves, Dōgen also cautions them as to misleading notions and erroneous beliefs that can serve as obstructions to the Supreme Way. From his comments dealing with different topics through his writings, we can get a general picture of his stance toward those “other teachings” (*gedō*).¹⁷

He dismisses Confucianism and Taoism as not even worthy of consideration, noting that “the teachings of Lao-Tzu and Confucius are much inferior to that of Buddha, that is as clear as the difference between Heaven and Earth.”¹⁸ Thus, on several occasions, Dōgen heaps critiques against those who profess to be followers of the “Zen Sect” but who consider the three teachings—namely, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—to be on an equal plane.

Dōgen also criticizes others who fall short of the Supreme Way, in being led to believe in erroneous doctrines. Among these doctrines are those of “eternalism,” the belief that there is an immutable, unchanging mind that is separated from and outlives the body, traditionally ascribed to the heretical monk Śrenika.¹⁹

It must be clear that Mind is the original gate to the true teachings of Buddhism and it includes the entire essence of phenomena, which cannot by any means be divided into different aspects such as body or mind, life or death, enlightenment or nirvana. All phenomena, all the myriad forms of existence are only this one Mind. Nothing is excluded. This is the way Buddhists interpret the mind. Therefore, do not differentiate between body and mind, life or death and nirvana. All of us are basically disciples of Buddha, so refrain from listening to the babble of non-believers.²⁰

Concerning other Buddhist schools that present different teachings, Dōgen remarks, in response to the question about the Hokke, Kegon, and Shingon schools, that the point is

... not a matter of arguing which teaching is superior or inferior, or which is more profound, but rather finding which is most authentic. . . . Do not play with words. In order to realize direct enlightenment, we must follow the splendid Way taken by the Buddhas to bestow enlightenment from teachers to students, making them true disciples. . . . All disciples who follow the right transmission of an enlightened master thus convey the Buddhist dharma from generation to generation.²¹

¹⁶ These are expressions that occur repeatedly in Dōgen’s writings.

¹⁷ Literally, “outside, or other ways,” also translated as “heretical teachings,” or “non-Buddhist beliefs.”

¹⁸ *Shōbōgenzō—The Eye and Treasury of the True Law* 3.86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 1.155.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 1.156.

²¹ *Ibid.* 1.152.

In short, for Dōgen, speaking from the living stream of the Zen tradition that “does not rely on words or concepts,”²² it is not a matter of teaching or doctrine or conceptual understanding, but authentic practice, under the guidance of an enlightened master who has received transmission, that is, confirmation of this enlightenment experience, that makes the crucial difference in entering and living the Supreme Way. It should be noted however, that Dōgen takes extreme care to expound what he considers correct doctrine that the seeker of the Supreme Way not be misled by false doctrine or erroneous beliefs in one’s path. This is what motivates him to present the critiques of those doctrines or beliefs that sidetrack one from authentic practice and thus obstruct the Supreme Way.

In this vein, Dōgen addresses those who take the doctrine of original enlightenment to its extreme implications and thus deny the necessity of practice.²³ This refers to a doctrine of nonduality that affirms this phenomenal world as in itself the manifestation of absolute reality, this world of birth-and-death as no different from nirvana. It must be noted first of all that many passages throughout the *Eye Treasury of the True Dharma* resemble those of writings espousing this doctrine of original enlightenment, as Dōgen likewise makes affirmations that “birth-death is nirvana itself, and apart from birth-death there is no nirvana,” or that “all living beings and existents in entirety are buddha-nature.” However, these affirmations by Dōgen are made from a standpoint of assiduous practice, as he notes that “although this truth (of Buddha-nature inherent in all beings) is said to be abundantly present in everyone, it does not become manifest if one does not practice, and one does not attain it if there is no realization.”

In sum, for Dōgen the Supreme Way is not a body of doctrine nor a set of teachings to be believed, but instead is truly a Way of living an awakened life in each moment, wherein a person realizes oneself as one with the mountains and rivers and the great wise earth, and with all sentient beings, with each breath, each step that one takes. The authenticity of the Supreme Way is tested not by doctrinal or creedal standards, but by its fruits in the awakened life itself. His critiques against “others” in short are grounded on this standpoint of the Supreme Way that transcends words and concepts, that transcends doctrine, and bears its mark of genuineness in the way it transforms an individual’s life.

²² One of the four cardinal maxims of the Ch’an/Zen tradition, the three others being the following: a special transmission outside of Scriptures, directly pointing to the mind, seeing into one’s true nature and becoming awakened (in other words, a Buddha). See Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism*, Vol. 1, India and China (New York: Macmillan, 1990) 85.

²³ See Tamura Yoshiro, “Critique of Original Awakening Thought in Shoshin and Dōgen,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies (JJRS)* 11/2-3 (1984) 243–66.

Nichiren—The Supreme Teaching of the Lotus

Nichiren (1222–1282) stands out among the major Buddhist figures in Japanese history for his militant stance and clear-cut pronouncements condemning other religious teachings prevalent in his day. This critical stance vis-à-vis other teachings and paths is based on a conviction, arrived at early in his career, of the primacy of the Lotus Sutra above all other teachings, and of its universal efficacy in bringing about the ultimate goal of all sentient beings, namely the attainment of Buddhahood. His writings, from his essay on the precepts written at the age of 21, through his major treatises composed in his early 50s, up to the pastoral letters to devotees written shortly before his death at the age of 61, echo this recurrent theme. This conviction of the primacy and absolute authority of the Lotus Sutra thus became the cardinal principle of his entire religious career, as well as the impetus for his dynamic engagement with the religious, social, and political forces of his time.

Nichiren's religious mission was spurred by a stark look at the realities around him, which he describes in the opening lines of his landmark treatise *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land (Risshō Ankoku ron)*.²⁴ Here Nichiren laments the situation whereby, due to the calamitous events and tragic circumstances in which many people of his day found themselves, they were easily led to forsake all hope in worldly realities, and turn their gaze instead toward a better rebirth in the next life. This ethos of abandonment of hope in this life and turn of attention to the next was a key factor in the popular reception of the Pure Land teaching of Hōnen (1133–1212). The latter emphasized the recitation of the name of Amida Buddha as a means of being assured of rebirth in the Pure Land after death.²⁵ But for Nichiren, this attitude was tantamount to a slander of the True Dharma taught by the Eternal Buddha Śākyamuni, Lord of the Lotus Sutra.

For one, Amida Buddha was only a peripheral Buddha among the many emanations of the original, Eternal Śākyamuni. This Eternal Śākyamuni is the Parent of all sentient beings, the Teacher of the True Path to Buddhahood, and the Lord and Master of this earthly realm. To offer allegiance and seek the assistance of a Buddha other than the Eternal Śākyamuni is a grave breach of filial piety. For another, abandoning hope in this earthly realm is also an affront against the Eternal Śākyamuni, who has vowed to make this earthly realm his domain and guide sentient beings in order to transform it into a veritable Buddha-realm.

²⁴ *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, ed. Philip Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University, 1990) 11–41.

²⁵ See Harper Coates and Ryugaku Ishizuka, *Honen, the Buddhist Saint* (Kyoto: Chion-in, 1925); and McGreal, *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World* 303–6.

Thus, aside from Hōnen's Pure Land teaching, other Buddhist schools that were subjected to Nichiren's critique and condemnation as erroneous and slanderous doctrine included the Zen sect, which taught silent meditation above all and thereby ignored the teaching of the Lotus Sutra; the Vinaya sect, which emphasized the observance of traditional Buddhist precepts rather than faith in the teaching of the Eternal Śākyamuni as embodied in the Lotus Sutra; and the Shingon school of Esoteric Buddhism, for whom the Buddha Mahāvairocana was the central object of devotion rather than Śākyamuni.

Nichiren took to task the ruling authorities of his time for allowing the proliferation of such "erroneous teaching." This critical stance taken against the political and military rulers of his day led to Nichiren's persecution and banishment, first to an outlying area in the Izu peninsula, and later to Sado Island in the Japan Sea. These experiences of persecution confirmed for Nichiren and his then small band of followers all the more the authenticity of his message, as such harassment and persecution of the bearer of the message of the Lotus Sutra was predicted in the Sutra itself.²⁶

Nichiren enjoined all the people to receive the Lotus Sutra in an act of faith as the Supreme Teaching that will assure all beings of the realization of the ultimate goal, Buddhahood. This act of faith is expressed in the vocal recitation or chanting of the august title of the Lotus Sutra, pronounced in Japanese in a seven-character form, *Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō*.²⁷ Nichiren also recommended the placing of an icon, a calligraphic representation of the Eternal Śākyamuni flanked by accompanying Buddhas and bodhisattvas and divinities, as a central object of worship before which a devotee was to chant the august title.

Following the teaching of the Chinese T'ien T'ai Masters who wrote systematic commentaries on the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren expounded on the notion of "three thousand worlds in every single thought-moment." This is a doctrine which taught that each recitation of the august title of the Lotus Sutra in its seven character form places the devotee in mystic communion with the 3000 worlds, that is, all the manifold beings in the universe throughout past, present, and future.

It is perhaps significant to note that in contrast to Nichiren's highly critical and denunciatory tone vis-à-vis other Buddhist schools, his view of non-Buddhist paths, specifically Confucian and Hindu doctrines, had a tone of inclusiveness.

²⁶ See Ruben Habito, "Bodily Reading of the Lotus Sutra: Understanding Nichiren's Buddhism," *JRS* 26 (1999) 281–306.

²⁷ J. Stone, "Chanting the August Title of the Lotus Sutra," in *Re-visioning "Kamakura" Buddhism*, ed. Richard Payne (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1998) 116–66.

Confucius declared that there were no wise (ones) or sages in his country, but that in the land to the west there was one named Buddha who was a sage. This indicates that non-Buddhist teachings should be regarded as a first step toward Buddhist doctrine. Confucius first taught propriety and music so that, when the Buddhist scriptures were brought to China, the concepts of the precepts, meditation and wisdom could be more readily grasped. They taught the ideals of ruler and minister so that the distinction between superior and subordinate could be made clear, they taught the ideal of parenthood so that the importance of filial piety could be appreciated, and he explained the ideal of the teacher so that people might be taught to follow.²⁸

. . . Secondly, we come to the non-Buddhist teachings of India. In Brahmanism, we find the two deities, Shiva, who has three eyes and eight arms, and Vishnu. They are hailed as the loving father and compassionate mother of all living beings and are also called the Honorable Ones of Heaven and sovereigns . . . The devout followers of the non-Buddhist teachings observe the five precepts and the ten good precepts, practice the kind of meditation that is still accompanied by outflows, and, ascending to the worlds of form and formlessness, believe they have attained nirvana when they reach the highest level of the triple world. . . . And yet the final conclusion of these non-Buddhist teachings constitutes an important means of entry into Buddhism.²⁹

In short, while pointing out the errors and deficiencies in these non-Buddhist teachings, Nichiren took a magnanimous stance toward them, declaring that they disposed people to live virtuously and in consonance with Buddhist teaching during those times when the Buddha had not yet appeared in history. His view of these pre-Buddhist doctrines could be described as a mode of *praeparatio saddharmika*, as teachings that prepared for the coming of the True Dharma.

As I have described, in contrast to this inclusive stance toward non-Buddhist teachings, Nichiren takes a harshly critical stance against other Buddhist schools that do not accept the Lotus Sutra as Supreme Way. He condemns these as guilty of slander of the True Dharma, warning that their followers are awaiting a fate in the deepest recesses of hell.

Many of Nichiren's writings address this theme of the superiority of the Lotus school above all others. In one of these, he describes the crucial difference between the teaching of the Lotus Sutra and those of other scriptures in the following manner:

This doctrine proving the Lotus Sutra to be the ultimate teaching of all sutras is the lamp that shines in the darkness of the long night in the world of illusions through life and death, and it is the sharp sword that cuts off the roots of spiritual ignorance. The teachings of such Buddhist schools as the Truth Word and the Flower Garland were preached with expedients according to the ability of the people to understand, so they are easy to understand and believe. However, they do not really represent

²⁸ *Selected Writings of Nichiren* 54.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 54–56.

the true intention of the Buddha. As their canons were expounded by the Buddha, catering to the whims of those in the nine realms (of hell, hungry spirits, beasts and birds, fighting spirits, human beings, heavenly beings, hearers of the dharma, solitary buddhas, and bodhisattvas) they are called “teachings based on people’s states of mind.” It is like a wise father following the wish of his ignorant children. The sutra in which the Buddha clearly speaks of his enlightenment is called “teaching according to his own mind.” It is like a sage father guiding his ignorant children.³⁰

By way of summary, I note certain tensions manifest in Nichiren’s religious teaching. First, for him, ultimate reality presents itself as personal, embodied in the figure of the Eternal Śākyamuni, Teacher of the Lotus Sutra, Parent, and Sovereign above all sentient beings. But at the same time it also presents itself as impersonal, as manifested in the three thousand worlds in a single thought-moment. Secondly, there is an emphasis in accepting this earthly realm as that wherein the Eternal Śākyamuni dwells immanently, and thereby also accepting the mandate to transform it into Buddha Land through the establishment of the correct teaching, none other than the Lotus Sutra. At the same time, the hope of rejoining the Eternal Śākyamuni in the afterlife in Eagle Peak where he reigns in full glory in a transcendent realm, is also a recurrent theme in Nichiren’s writings. Another tension that stands out is in the proclamation of the universal efficacy of the Lotus Sutra toward attaining Buddhahood, which is ironically coupled with the message that those who fail to do homage to the Lotus Sutra and to its Teacher, the Eternal Śākyamuni, are guilty of slander, and are thereby consigned to a fate in hell.³¹

TYPOLOGIES OF JAPANESE BUDDHIST SUPREME WAYS

It is important to note that for these three thinkers, and for Japanese Buddhism as a whole, the indigenous ethos and mythological framework that later strategists and ideologues of this modern period idealized and systematized as “Shinto” was part of the religio-cultural landscape that informed their entire world view. As such what is called “Shinto” did not present itself as an “Other” in the way that Confucianism and Taoism did, but rather stands for what was constitutive of the very soil in which Japanese Buddhism took root, blossomed, and thrived.

Examining the teachings of Kukai, Dōgen, and Nichiren in the context of

³⁰ “The Difficulty and Ease in Understanding the Lotus Sutras and Other Sutras,” in *Writings of Nichiren Shonin, Doctrine 2*, ed. George Tanabe (Tokyo: Nichiren Shu, 2002) 281–85, at 283.

³¹ Buddhist understanding of hell is to be distinguished from the Christian conception of eternal punishment. In the Buddhist conception, hell, described as a realm of suffering as the consequence of one’s own harmful karmic actions, is nevertheless temporary, and after one’s lifespan has been exhausted in this realm, one is reborn in a realm again based on one’s karmic merits or demerits.

typologies of positions taken toward “others” based on one’s religious standpoint, we can perhaps venture, tentatively, the following correspondences.

Kūkai, endeavoring to place the various non-Buddhist and Buddhist doctrines in hierarchical order within a coherent framework that placed his own Esoteric stance at the apex and as the fulfillment of all teachings, leading to the ultimate goal of Buddhahood, can be considered as taking an “inclusivist” stance toward these others. However, in so doing, Kūkai draws oversimplified caricatures of the teachings of these other schools, and thus fails to do justice to the complexities and nuances of their respective positions.

Dōgen, placing primacy on religious praxis over doctrine as such, and critiquing various kinds of doctrine, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, based on his criterion of liberative and illuminative praxis, would not fall under any of the three classic positions (that is, neither exclusivist, inclusivist, nor pluralist), and would perhaps be aligned with those who similarly uphold orthopraxis over orthodoxy.³² This however did not mitigate his concern for correct teaching, and as noted earlier, he continued vigilant critiques against those who taught erroneous doctrines that were obstacles to right praxis.

Considering non-Buddhist (specifically Confucian, Taoist, and Hindu) teachings, Nichiren tends toward an inclusivist position, acknowledging these as partial truths that prepared the way for the advent of Buddhism. But he takes an “exclusivist” stance in his clear-cut pronouncements against other Buddhist teachings that do not recognize the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra, consigning the followers of these teachings to the deepest recesses of the Buddhist hells.

From my examination of these Buddhist versions of the Supreme Way and their positions vis-à-vis “others,” I now reflect on some implications of the above from, and for, a Catholic perspective.

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY: A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Since its establishment in apostolic times, and for all these centuries leading up to the present, the Catholic Church has understood itself as teaching the Supreme Way, revealed by God in and through the Incarna-

³² Liberation theology, for example, takes an analogous position. In the theology of religions, the proposals of Knitter (“Toward a Liberation Theology of Religions”), Marjorie Suchocki (“In Search of Justice: Religious Pluralism from a Feminist Perspective”), both excerpted in *Ministry and Theology in Global Perspective* (see above n. 1) 115–22, and 182–88, can also be noted in this regard. The proposal of Hans Küng and others for a Global Ethic to which the different religious traditions are called to be accountable, is another analogous example.

tion of Jesus Christ, actualized in his Death and Resurrection, and infused upon the believing community in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.³³

In this light, the Second Vatican Council set out clear guidelines for ways of regarding and relating with members of other religious traditions, encapsulated in the following words from *Nostra aetate* (no. 2):

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions. It regards with respect those ways of acting and living and those precepts and teachings which, though often at variance with what it holds and expounds, frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone. Yet, without ceasing it preaches, and is bound to preach, Christ who is “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14,6), in whom people find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Cor 5:18–19).³⁴

In this section then, I now venture into conversation with the three Japanese Buddhist founders each of whom presented his own vision of and prescriptions for the Supreme Way. My approach is grounded on the heuristic principle outlined by *Nostra aetate* in the passage just cited, namely, that the Catholic Church “rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions.” I go a step further and ask: What then can be learned from these features that are true and holy in their religious world view?

One needs to be aware first of all of the wide spectrum that would fall under the heading of “Catholic.” My particular choice of themes to highlight in this conversation will be merely one possible set among others.³⁵ This particular Catholic attempt at conversation with Japanese Buddhist perspectives can hopefully generate further intra-Catholic and intra-Christian conversations and spur new directions in theological reflection.

At the outset a key premise needs to be enunciated, namely, that participants, on each side, regard their own position as the Supreme Way. The question then is this: can this encounter become a learning, and perhaps transformative, experience instead of a confrontation about which one is *the true* Supreme Way, falsifying the claims of the other? For it to become

³³ See above Fredericks’s article in this journal. The more recent *Dominus Iesus* can be seen as a restatement of this self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church as the Supreme Way above all others.

³⁴ *Nostra aetate* no. 2; translation from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2: *Trent—Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990).

³⁵ I myself come from a Roman Catholic background and perspective, but acknowledge that there are communities of Christians who also take the term “Catholic” in their self-identification, as the Anglo-Catholics, Orthodox Catholic, and so on. And further, needless to say, within the same Roman Catholic community, there is a spectrum of possible theological standpoints that can be held maintaining fidelity to the official magisterial positions.

such an experience, an attitude of openness and listening is required for a genuine encounter.³⁶

Kūkai: Toward a Theology of Sacramentality

As I have already noted, Kūkai views other religious paths from a ten-stage schema, with his own at the summit. According to his schema, Catholics, whose faith is centered on the belief in an otherworldly salvation and for whom entry of one's immortal soul into heaven after bodily death is the whole point of Christian life, would be placed by Kūkai in the third stage of mind. Such believers are described as subject to the error of "eternalism," that is, the belief in an immortal soul that is separate from this body. This kind of religious belief sets this impermanent, fragile, and perishable earthly existence in stark contrast with a permanent, solid, and imperishable kind of existence in the heavenly kingdom, to be attained in the afterlife. This attitude tends to make one denigrate this life and look down upon it as a mere stepping-stone, a disposable stage, to the next life.

Belief in an immortal soul that separates from the body after death, though held by many Catholics (and Christians in general) does not represent the official teaching of the Church, at least as proclaimed time and again in the creeds since apostolic times. The core proclamation in the creeds is rather expressed as belief in "the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting."³⁷ The theological and existential implications of this proclamation call for further elucidation, as a way of responding to Kūkai's putative critique vis-à-vis the belief of many Catholics in the afterlife in a way that denigrates this earthly existence. In other words, can further reflection on the implications of this core doctrine of the resurrection of the body be given further impetus, as it is set in conversation, comparison, or contrast, with Kūkai's teaching on "the attainment of Buddhahood in this very body"?

This conversation could invite Catholics to take a closer look at their own spiritual heritage, as lived by the saints and mystics throughout the ages, who experienced God's presence "in this very body," and who lived

³⁶ The partners in conversation, present to us mainly through their writings, remain putative ones in this case, and how they will respond to the Catholic side will also be a putative scenario that we can ground likewise on the writings. Actual living encounters, however, with the Buddhist followers of the figures considered here, remain to be taken up as a future task, with the reflections offered here as possible guideposts.

³⁷ See Ruben Habito, "The Resurrection of the Body, and Life Everlasting: From a Futuristic to a Realized Christianity," in *The Sound of Liberating Truth*, ed. Sallie King and Paul Ingram (New York: Curzon, 1997) 223–38.

in the light of this presence. Further reflection on the scriptural themes connected with “realized eschatology” could be given impetus in this light.³⁸

One need not agree totally with Kūkai in his subordination of the afterlife, as such is a key feature of Catholic belief. But his emphasis on the realization of Buddhahood, in other words, the awakening to a life of wisdom and compassion in this very body and in this life, could serve as an important reminder for Christians of themes that tend to be underplayed in our own tradition. This includes the indisputable affirmation that the gospel is not merely about the afterlife, but is precisely an invitation to a total transformation of mind and heart (*metanoia*) that the followers of Jesus are called to experience in the here and now, in this very body. This invites closer attention to Jesus’ own words, uttered after having read the passage from Isaiah and proclaiming the coming of the Reign, and reflection on its concrete implications in our individual lives and our global society: “Today, these words are fulfilled in your very midst (Luke 4:21).

Further, conversations with Kūkai can also bring out in greater relief the Catholic teaching on the sacredness of the human body as a temple of God. This is a theme attested to in Scriptures, but is unfortunately lost in the tradition that saw the body as an occasion of sin, in dualistic opposition versus the spirit. This can also lead to further endeavors in the theology of the body that would see through and overcome two extremes, that is, the disdainful view of the body as a source of evil on the one hand, and the quasi-idolatrous cult of the body beautiful on the other. Kūkai’s practice of the three mysteries, involving body, mouth, and mind, as the loci of expression of the sacred Dharmabody, may spur new directions in liturgy, with a heightened attention to the significance of bodily expression in worship.

Kukai’s teaching on the six elements (earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness) as manifestations of the Dharmabody can invite Christian reflection on the sacredness of this whole earth itself, as the locus of God’s loving activity. This conversation can spur further possibilities in the much-needed area of ecological theology, as we face the impending destruction of our earth brought about by our technological society that is now showing us its shadow side.

These are only some examples of new avenues of theological reflection that could enhance Catholic understanding based on conversations with the eighth-century Japanese Buddhist Kūkai. His Supreme Way could pre-

³⁸ See *ibid.* 223–28, for a discussion based on biblical sources. See also the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1967) 5.536, noting a direction whereby “eschatology is now more integrated with the whole of theology.”

sent itself to the Catholic not as a rival Supreme Way to be refuted, but as the basis of dialogue for an enhancement of Catholic self-understanding.

Dōgen: Praxis Seeking Understanding

Over the last two decades there have been notable initiatives on the part of Christians to engage in dialogue with the Zen tradition. This has included endeavors in meditative practice in the Zen tradition by Christians, as they receive guidance from authentic Zen Buddhist teachers. We are already seeing fruits of this kind of encounter as Christians who have ventured into it reflect on their experience and write about the renewed spiritual horizons it has opened to them.³⁹ The theological implications of these experiences and horizons are only beginning to be explored.⁴⁰ His emphasis on the primacy of praxis conveys a very important point related to the very endeavor of “doing theology.”

For Dōgen, as we have seen, inquiring into the nature of reality led him to the cushion, that is, to the practice of seated meditation, rather than to intellectual speculation. It was this practice that opened him to a religious experience of a dimension that, in Zen parlance, “does not rely on words or letters.”⁴¹ Grounded in this experiential realization, Dōgen could see through the inherent limitations of conceptual attempts at understanding ultimate reality. However, this realization did not thereby lead Dōgen to shun intellectual pursuits, to abandon the use of words and letters, of conceptual language altogether. He was in fact highly critical of those who took this turn and thereby fell into the pitfall of anti-intellectualism.⁴² Instead, Dōgen never ceased in his endeavors to articulate in precise and clear-cut language the manifold implications of the vision of reality opened to him in and through his praxis. In short, Dōgen took language as far as it would take him in attempting to express his vision and convey it to other seekers, knowing all too well its inherent limitations. And from his attempts came his masterpiece of religious thought, the *Shōbōgenzō*, which serves as a gateway not only to Dōgen’s inner life, but to a vision of reality given expression in manifold ways by countless masters of the Ch’an/Zen tradition before and after Dōgen. These expressions employ conceptual

³⁹ See Robert Kennedy, *Zen Gifts to Christians* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); Sr. Elaine MacInnes, O.L.M., *Light Sitting on Light: A Christian’s Experience in Zen* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); and *Zen Contemplation* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2001).

⁴⁰ See Taitetsu Unno’s comments in his response to one essay in *The Sound of Liberating Truth* 247–64.

⁴¹ This is captured in the traditional Zen image of words and concepts such as “a finger pointing to the moon.”

⁴² He chides in particular those who take the Zen dictum of “non reliance on words and letters” in a simplistic and absolutistic manner, as missing the point.

language in skillful ways precisely to point beyond the words and letters, inviting the hearer/reader of these words and letters back to the cushion, that is, to the practice of seated meditation that is the locus of a transformative religious experience. This in turn leads to a more enhanced appreciation of the import of these expressions, in a confirmation and deepening of the religious experience that flows out of the practice.

Taking the traditional notion of theology as “faith seeking understanding,” a Christian theologian in conversation with Dōgen would find in the latter a resonating theme, namely, that an adequate construal of reality is grounded on a fundamental stance of faith, as the human response to divine revelation. Thus, the theological endeavor can be seen as at the service of the enhancement of the understanding of the life of faith and its implications for the faithful. In short, the stance of faith on the one hand, and the intellectual enterprise toward the fully reflective understanding of that witness of faith on the other, are seen in mutual complementarity, serving toward mutual enhancement, in an ever-deepening spiral movement.

An understanding of Dōgen’s writings may of course be gained without recourse to the practice of seated meditation. In fact, the *Shōbōgenzō* has served as the inspiration for philosophical reflection and constructive religious thought for many of its readers throughout the ages, and has been the subject of academic study in university settings. Analogously, to engage in the theological enterprise, as an intellectual endeavor that is both critical and constructive and employing criteria for truth on par with other academic disciplines, need not require a stance of faith.⁴³

A conversation with Dōgen along these lines could serve to remind theologians that there is a dimension that cannot simply be set aside in the theological enterprise and upon which the whole enterprise is grounded. Attention to this dimension, as both the ground as well as terminus of the theological endeavor, provides a check against tendencies to enshrine any given theological position and equates it with absolute truth. In other words, attentiveness to this dimension will serve as a check against a form of doctrinalism that pronounces judgment on the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of other positions based on criteria other than congruency with the stance of faith qua liberating praxis. This attentiveness to the dimension of liberating praxis will in turn provide the grounds for the critique of doctrinalist or ideological positions that have strayed from liberating praxis.⁴⁴

In addition, the healing of the rift that occurred in the history of Christian thought between systematic theology on the one hand, and what is

⁴³ See Ogden, *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986) 17–19.

⁴⁴ Ogden writes of the need for “de-ideologizing” theology (ibid. 137–47).

called spiritual theology, as well as practical theology, on the other, is a direction that this conversation with Dōgen would encourage.⁴⁵

Further, a Christian's perusal of Dōgen's writings would also inspire renewed theological reflection on key themes of Christian doctrine and spiritual teaching. For example, Dōgen's view of temporality and historicity vis-à-vis the realm of the timeless that is described as a dimension of the Zen experience, his view of birth-and-death also seen in the light of this realm of the timeless, his understanding of Buddha nature as an immanent dimension in all beings but which likewise presents itself as transcendent, are examples that can serve as reference for theological questions raised from a Christian perspective.⁴⁶

In sum, Dōgen's constant return to the cushion, that is, to the practice of seated meditation, as the source that would shed light on these questions, echoes St. Augustine's view of the relationship between knowing and loving, in a way that could call 21st-century theologians back to the wellsprings of Christian tradition.

Nichiren: Toward a Theology of Earthly Transformation

Nichiren's religious vision, based on the teaching of the Lotus Sutra, stems from a way of reading the events of history in the light of the Sutra as authoritative Scriptures. It presents a view of this earthly reality as the domain of an Eternal Buddha who, though having transcended history, nevertheless continues to be engaged in events of this earthly realm out of compassion for its dwellers, sentient beings who are his very own children. His conviction of the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra as offering a message of universal liberation for all sentient beings, ironically, led Nichiren to take a harshly critical stance toward other Buddhist schools, and consigning their followers as destined to fall into the hellish realms.

A conversation with Nichiren then can be undertaken with several themes as possible points of inquiry from a Catholic perspective. First, there is the question of Scriptural authority and hermeneutical strategy in the reading of Scriptures. Second, the notion of ultimate reality as transcendent yet immanent in history, personal yet transpersonal, calls our

⁴⁵ The theological writings of Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx, among others, present outstanding examples of systematic theology grounded on spirituality. For more recent works, see William M. Thompson, *Christology and Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), as well as his *Fire and Light: The Saints and Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1987), and Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

⁴⁶ See Masao Abe, *A Study of Dogen*, ed. Steven Heine (New York: SUNY, 1992). Joan Stambaugh, *Impermanence is Buddha-Nature: Dogen's Understanding of Temporality* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1990).

attention. Third, the consideration of our historical tasks in this earthly realm in the light of the question of our ultimate destiny is a key theme that stands out in Nichiren's teaching.

There is an analogous way in which the Bible is for Christians the authoritative source of divine teaching as the Lotus Sutra was supremely authoritative for Nichiren. Nichiren's way of reading the Lotus Sutra in the light of the events of his time, and vice versa, the way of reading events of the time in the light of the Lotus Sutra, could thus throw some light on the way Christians can read the Bible in the light of contemporary events, and vice versa. In this regard, Nichiren's "bodily reading of the Lotus Sutra" could open avenues for Christians toward a bodily reading of our own Scriptures, that would lead to an experiential discernment of the divine presence in the events of our own time.⁴⁷

The image of the Eternal Buddha Śākyamuni, transcending history yet incessantly acting out of compassion and using various skillful means to guide and teach sentient beings in this earthly realm, cannot fail to evoke familiar resonances in the Christian, with an understanding of God as transcending creation and yet as intimately involved and acting in historical events, centered on the revelation of Jesus as the Christ. The willing acceptance of suffering and persecution by the votary of the Lotus Sutra, as the messenger of the compassion of the Eternal Buddha, invites consideration as a possible Christ figure.

Nichiren's stated mission of transforming this earthly realm into Buddha land with the propagation of the Supreme teaching of the Lotus Sutra again presents a familiar resonance with the Christian's mission of proclaiming the gospel toward the transformation of this earthly realm into the reign of God. The understanding of the relationship between this earthly realm and the heavenly realm in the afterlife is a theological question in the area of eschatology, with Christian viewpoints ranging from what can be described as "futuristic" to "realized."⁴⁸ In Nichiren we see a shift in emphasis in his view of the relationship between this earthly realm and the afterlife, as he was influenced by the vicissitudes of his own religious career.

An encounter with Nichiren and his exclusivistic claims can confront a Catholic with the exclusivistic tendencies of one's own tradition, to reexamine this aspect and see how it reflects itself in one's attitude toward other religious standpoints. Or, as Nichiren can putatively regard Catholic

⁴⁷ See article on Nichiren, in *Papers of the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology*, ed. Jonathan Strom (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997) 43–62; see also, "The Bodily Reading of the Lotus Sutra: Understanding Nichiren's Buddhism," in *Revisiting Nichiren*, ed. Ruben Habito and Jacqueline Stone, Special Issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26.3/4 (1999) 281–306.

⁴⁸ See "The Resurrection of the Dead, and Life Everlasting," in *The Sound of Liberating Truth* 223–38.

teaching from an inclusive position as a positive factor that prepares Catholic believers for the reception of the Supreme Teaching of the Lotus Sutra, the Catholic may also regard Nichiren's teaching as helpful as preparations to the reception of the Christian gospel. But as one enters into the encounter with a willingness to listen and learn from the other, such an exclusivistic, or even inclusivistic attitude toward the other from either side would seem to fail to do justice to one another's position. Further, in holding on to the belief in one's own religious tradition as the Supreme Way, neither Nichiren on the one hand, nor the Catholic on the other, would thereby simply succumb to a stance of relativistic pluralism.

In short, one who holds fast to one's own religious tradition as embodying the Supreme Way and yet who also takes a stance of openness and willingness to listen and learn from a religious other, by that very fact, already steps beyond the three positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

CONFLICTING ABSOLUTES TO SUPREME WAYS IN INTERSECTION

I have provided an overview of three perspectives within Japanese Buddhism, each of which proclaims itself as the Supreme Way above all others. This brings us back to the starting point of my article, namely, the situation of conflicting absolutes presented by different religious traditions in our world today. The question I am considering is this: how are those who profess adherence and commitment to a particular religious tradition as the Supreme Way to relate to those who belong to other traditions which likewise consider their tradition to be the Supreme Way?

Jacob Neusner notes that "the single most important problem facing religion for the next hundred years, as for the last, is that single intellectual challenge: how to think through difference, how to account within one's own faith and framework for the outsider, indeed, for many outsiders."⁴⁹

In the past, isolation, hostility, and competition have been among the characteristic modes, involving concomitant attitudes and action, taken by particular religious communities vis-à-vis the Other.⁵⁰ Other modes, from sheer ignorance coupled with indifference to (mere) tolerance, can also be named. These fall clearly short of the mark, considering the situation of our contemporary world. On the one hand, it is increasingly being brought together through instantaneous and widely accessible means of communi-

⁴⁹ Jacob Neusner, in an essay entitled "Shalom: Complementarity," in his *Jews and Christians: the Myth of a Common Tradition* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991) excerpted in Pittman, et al., *Ministry and Theology* 465–71.

⁵⁰ See David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

cation. Yet, on the other, it is also continually being torn asunder with violent conflicts on different levels and in many different areas of the globe. And added to the manifold political, economic, ethnic, and other lines that set humans against one another, the religious factor plays a significant part in these demarcations.

My brief survey of Japanese Buddhist perspectives has brought home the fact that religious believers tend to believe in their own tradition as the Supreme Way. The other articles in this volume attest to the same fact regarding other major religious traditions.⁵¹ In other words, to restate the obvious, the Catholic tradition cannot claim a monopoly regarding itself as the Supreme Way. We are thus called to take stock of this situation, whereby members of the various religious communities, committed absolutely to their own Supreme Way, live together on this one planet Earth, sharing a common matrix of life, sharing common concerns of our very survival as Earth community.

This fact that there are a plurality of Supreme Ways does not of itself demand that those who regard their own tradition as supreme abandon that claim. The question remains nonetheless: how are we are to live together in this earth community in a way that overcomes the negative and destructive ways that members of different religious communities have previously had of one another in isolation, hostility, or competition? The underlying presupposition in asking this question is that it would not require that those who hold their tradition to be the Supreme Way to abandon that claim, that is, to lapse into relativism.

The possibility of fruitful conversation between members of different religious traditions each of whom claim to be the Supreme Way gives rise to a concrete proposal in this regard. We might consider the differing religious standpoints, not as absolutes in conflict, but as Supreme Ways in intersection. Thus, the claim of one's own tradition as the Supreme Way need not imply a rejection or denial of the possible validity of other ways. But neither should the recognition that there are other traditions who claim to be the Supreme Way necessarily require one to question one's own claim to that effect.

Avoiding both a rigid "exclusivist" stance and an all-out "pluralist" stance, the engagement in the kind of conversations between Supreme Ways would lead to a better understanding of the religious Other, at the same time as it would enhance the understanding and deepen our commitment to our own. Such a stance that is poised for creative conversations with the other is not simply taking an "inclusivist" stance that assumes that what is good and true about the Other is already somehow "included" in

⁵¹ See in this thematic issue of *Theological Studies* especially the articles by Francis Clooney and Qamar-ul Huda.

one's own, but is a stance of humble attentiveness willing to learn from the Other, to explore possible areas wherein one's own Way may intersect and share common ground with that of an Other.

Such a model of Supreme Ways in intersection rejects as untenable a position of absolutistic exclusivism that would outright deny the validity of the truth-claims and salvific possibility of the Others. Likewise, however, it rejects a relativistic or a laissez-faire pluralism that takes the differing religious standpoints uncritically as equally valid and truthful. Further, it would not fall into the trap of a chauvinist inclusivism that would consider the Other as containing partial truths that are more fully manifested or taught in one's own. Rather, in acknowledging multiple claims of the Supreme Way that does not play down one's own, respective adherents would seek a creative encounter with those of others with a spirit of willingness to listen and to learn.

The question stands: can we relate with one another as partners and members of the same global community, while upholding our own commitments and remaining faithful to our own respective religious standpoints and traditions? A subsequent and corollary question would be thus: can those with absolute commitment to a Supreme Way be inspired and empowered precisely by this commitment, to take on the tasks of healing our wounded global community, in a way that joins forces with those committed to a differing Supreme Way?

These questions presuppose three crucial elements. First, faithfulness to one's own religious tradition, in a way that does not compromise its absolute claims, goes without question. Secondly, the acceptance of members of other traditions as members of the global community that we are called to live with and cooperate with on equal footing, is a prerequisite for even attempting to communicate with one another. Thirdly, the problematic situation of our global community in this 21st century, in its ongoing polarization and fragmentation, continuing violence, and ecological deterioration, is a shared context which adherents of the different religious traditions are called to address.

Mark Kline Taylor, in considering the tasks at hand for Christian theological reflection in a North American context, refers to these three elements as a "postmodern trilemma."⁵² Indeed, at first glance, the three elements appear to stand in opposition, or at least in tension, with one another. But there appears to be no better way, or perhaps even no way out, than to take this three-pronged task head on. We are called to remain faithful to our own respective traditions and recover its core message as it

⁵² Mark Kline Taylor articulates this as a "postmodern trilemma" with the three-pronged task of recovering tradition, celebrating plurality, and resisting oppression (*Remembering Esperanza* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988] 23–45).

addresses us today. We are called to welcome and accept one another in all our differences. We are called to join hands, share resources, in a common struggle against all the forms of violence and oppression that impinge upon all of us and threaten the very survival of our global community.

One significant point that comes out of this praxis of comparative theology is the fact that attentive listening to the Other can and does lead those committed to a particular religious tradition to an enhanced appreciation of various dimensions of one's own tradition. Likewise, it can invite members of a given tradition to a recovery of certain aspects neglected or taken for granted, as well as challenge them to a greater fidelity to the core message of their own tradition.

Finally, the question of mission arises from the Catholic as well as the more general Christian perspective. How are we to understand our "mission" vis-à-vis other religious traditions, given our understanding of them as Supreme Ways in intersection in the mode described above? Recognizing the possibility that we may have something to learn from others in our encounter with them leads to a view of the Supreme Ways in intersection as on mutual mission to one another. As we Christians engage members of other religious communities in conversation, we do so in a way that leads us toward greater appreciation of and fidelity to our own respective traditions, in celebration of one another's Otherness, and in common struggle against all forms of oppression. And in so doing, our eyes may be opened, and recognize the Good News being realized in our midst (Luke 4:21).