

A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology

Theological Studies
2014, Vol. 75(3) 635–657

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DOI: 10.1177/0040563914541028

tsj.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article is an exercise in comparative theology from a Buddhist perspective. Christian liberation theology and engaged Buddhism both seek to empower people by liberating them from causes of suffering that prevent them from realizing their deeper identity and fuller potential. Christian and Buddhist liberation theologies differ in what they identify as the main conditions of suffering, as well as in the epistemologies they use to disclose those suffering conditions and to address them. Through their differences, the author argues, each tradition points out an epistemological weakness in the other that would otherwise have remained unnoticed and, by exposing it, helps correct it.

Keywords

Buddhism and Christianity, comparative theology, compassion and wisdom, contemplation and action, ecofeminism, engaged Buddhism, epistemology, interreligious dialogue, liberation theology, love and justice, preferential option, prophetic anger

This article argues that there are important things Christians and Buddhists need to learn, which can only be learned from each other by comparison and contrast. The focus here is on Christian liberation theology and Buddhism as mutually illuminating and correcting frameworks of thought and practice. Historically, both Christians and Buddhists have viewed their own traditions as lacking nothing

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essential, certainly not needing any fundamental correction by another religious tradition. The aim of this essay is to point out a weakness in each tradition, an incompleteness that the other tradition discloses and thereby helps correct.¹

One weakness in Christian liberation epistemology is a tendency to construct and reify a duality between those who are preferred by God and those who are not, a duality that makes it difficult, practically speaking, actually to love *each* person unconditionally in the way that Jesus taught. This difficulty is exacerbated by insufficient attention to layers of suffering in people that drive their unjust actions against others. I draw on Buddhist epistemology to uncover these problems by critically analyzing the language of several early liberation theologians. More recent ecofeminist liberation theology avoids dualistic tendencies of early liberation theology by emphasizing the deep interdependence of all beings, but can overlook the need for a contemplative discipline that would take us beyond a merely rationalistic discourse into a fuller knowing of, and responsiveness to, that interdependent reality. Buddhist epistemology, in its fundamental connection to contemplative disciplines, highlights these issues.

Christian theology, on the other hand, highlights and helps correct certain weaknesses in Buddhist epistemology. Buddhism lacks both the concept of a God who chose to incarnate Godself uniquely among the most marginalized and rejected, and the related Christian concept of social sin. The consequent focus of Christian liberation theology on sinful structures that oppress beings can sharpen Buddhist attention to “nonpersons” in our midst and to the social forces behind their marginalization and suffering. Christian liberation theology thus informs and helps reframe Buddhist understandings of compassion and its cultivation, and stimulates new insights into current social implications of ancient Buddhist teachings of karma, interdependence, and bodhisattva practice.

This article begins with Buddhist ideas, but is not a religious studies analysis of them concerned with their diverse developments through history; rather, it is the Buddhist equivalent of an exercise in comparative, constructive theology, which speaks from within a specific location in a Buddhist tradition to explore how dialogue with part of another religious tradition—here Christian liberation theology—may stimulate fresh insights.

Buddhist Epistemological Principles Relevant to Christian Liberation Theology

In what follows I summarize and draw on elements of Tibetan Buddhist theory and practice from the Nyingma tradition, the most ancient Tibetan Buddhist

1. The directions of thought in this article were evoked in conversations with Paul Knitter, Kyeongil Jung, Melanie Harris, Won-jae Hur, Karen Enriquez, and Stephanie Corigliano. Several colleagues generously gave critical responses to an early draft: Paul Knitter, Roberto Goizueta, Stephen Pope, David Hollenbach, Kenneth Himes, Andrew Prevot, Brian Robinette, Bhikku Bodhi, and Deanna Thompson. I thank them all.

tradition.² According to the theory and practice of this tradition, all our experiences of self, others, and world possess two essential qualities: emptiness and cognizance. The mind's cognizance is the knowing, aware quality within each experience. The mind's emptiness is the basic space in and through all experiences that permits everything we experience to be as impermanent as it is. Emptiness is also described as the basic space of dependent arising that permits each thing to arise in dependence on, and as an expression of, other things. Emptiness is thus also the lack of any isolated, autonomous being in anything we experience. The essence of enlightenment dawns when the mind's cognizant quality recognizes the emptiness of all its experiences, the basic space of dependent arising in and through all things. Emptiness then becomes the space of freedom for our cognizance to express more fully its latent capacities of loving connection, compassion, and wisdom. These are qualities of a Buddha's enlightenment.³ Please note, therefore, that the term "emptiness" should not be misunderstood to imply that nothing exists or that we do not exist. Indeed, to have insight into the emptiness of our being is to recognize our deep inner unity with all persons and beings, which permits our fuller humanity to manifest our underlying capacity for greater love, care, discernment, courage, and creative responsiveness to the world. Such enlightened insight recognizes that our limiting thoughts of self and other, which we tend to mistake in the moment as fully defining of persons, are merely relative, limited constructs, not fully defining of anyone.

The Buddha disclosed this possibility of enlightenment because by and large we are *not* enlightened in the way described above, but are caught in an entrenched delusion that affects everything we think, feel, and do, a delusion that binds us into layers of individual and social suffering without awareness. At its root this delusion is induced by fear of the insubstantial, unbounded nature of our experience, which is utterly impermanent, empty of substance, interdependent with all, and thus beyond boundary. This fear of the empty, insubstantial, and unbounded nature of our being generates a compulsive urge to think up a self that can feel ultimately bounded, separate, substantial, concrete, and secure: the thought of self as a seeming refuge from

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2. The following discussion of types and causes of suffering is shared with many other traditions of Buddhist thought in Asia. The emphasis here on Buddha nature as a primordial awareness, endowed with latent capacities of enlightenment, is a focus of the Nyingma Tibetan tradition, which shares this emphasis with several Buddhist traditions of East Asia, such as Zen.
 3. For an introduction to Tibetan Buddhist principles, practices, history, and culture, see Geoffrey Samuel, *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: Routledge, 2012). For a fuller introduction to ideas from Tibetan Buddhism explained in these paragraphs, see Longchen Rabjam, *The Practice of Dzogchen: An Anthology of Longchen Rabjam's Writings on Dzogpa Chenpo*, intro., trans., and annotated by Tulku Thondup, ed. Harold Talbott (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2002); Tulku Urygen Rinpoche, *As It Is*, vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe, 2000); Reginald Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001); Tsoknyi Rinpoche, *Open Heart, Open Mind* (NY: Harmony, 2012); John Makransky, *Awakening through Love* (Boston: Wisdom, 2007).

the frighteningly insubstantial and unlimited nature of being as it is. But this thought of a substantial, isolated self is, in itself, just a passing thought. The mind, in order to make its thought of self feel like something more substantial, strings together transitory thoughts of self into a chain, thereby sustaining the impression of a separate unchanging self. In this way, the mind *reifies* its narrow thoughts of self, mistaking the current thought of self, moment to moment, for the totality of one's being.⁴

Life thus becomes a struggle at a subconscious level, because each situation feels like it must be interpreted to establish the concreteness of a self that is actually just a series of ephemeral thoughts. To reify its thoughts of self, the mind also reifies its thoughts of others, routinely mistaking its own self-concerned, partial thoughts of other persons for their whole being. When others speak or act in ways that support our brittle, reified sense of self, making it feel real or important, we think of them as likable. When others seem to undercut this sense of self, we think of them as dislikable. Those who seem irrelevant to our sense of self at the moment evoke the thought of them as "stranger," which we also mistake for those people. In this way we mistake our own reified thoughts of everyone for the actual persons, moment by moment, day by day. This profoundly impedes our potential to commune with others in their fuller humanity with reverence, appreciation, and love.

There is nothing wrong with the mere thought of self or others *if* it is recognized as a mere thought or label. Such thoughts unify the elements of our experience and personality so we can carry out our roles in relation to others. But when the mind *reifies* its thoughts of self and other, it mistakes the whole person for one small set of characteristics imputed to him by one's mind, reducing the other person to a simple, singular thing that the mind absolutizes as the whole person. We thus routinely mistake our own fragmented images and thoughts of others for their whole being: "just a janitor," "just some old guy," "just a girl," "just a [racial epithet]." We then react to our own narrow thought and associated feeling of the other person, mistaking it for the actual person. This habit, cultivated pervasively in individual and social conditioning, hides everyone's deeper personhood, the cognizant emptiness of each person that possesses a vast potential of love, compassion, wisdom, creativity, joy, and courage. In authentic moments of loving connection, we momentarily commune with others in their deeper personhood, the primordial goodness and potential of their fuller humanity. Yet, far more than we are conscious, we mistake our own reductive thoughts of them for them, thereby shutting down our potential to commune with their fuller humanity from within our own fuller humanity.⁵

These unconscious dynamics condition levels of suffering in us that are also largely unconscious, which the Buddha disclosed. The first is the *suffering of self-centered conditioning*: the suffering inherent in the mind's ongoing struggle to establish a substantial self that does not exist by reifying its own reductive thoughts of persons and world. This level of suffering conditions the second level that all persons are caught in: the suffering of transience. This suffering is felt in our ongoing attempts to ground

4. On this, see Makransky, *Awakening through Love* 36–40, 103–5.

5. *Ibid.* 95–156.

ourselves by holding on to passing things for the reified self—such as material goods, pleasant settings, home, loved ones—as if they were the very source of lasting safety and well-being, when deep down we know that in time we must lose every one of them. The suffering of transience, largely unconscious to us, takes expression in the daily turmoil of our emotions as we try to flee our mortality by grasping things, circumstances, and people that can never provide lasting safety and well-being, since they do not last. The third level is the suffering of obvious physical or mental pain, experienced within our reified sense of self, which includes sufferings such as agonizing illness, physical harm and exploitation by others, hunger, or intense grief of loss.⁶ Societies tend to think of compassion for others only when their suffering is of this obvious kind. We tend not to view others with compassion in their moments of happiness under pleasant circumstances, yet clinging to temporal happiness exemplifies the second-level suffering of transience. It is peoples' response to this suffering of transience, not fully conscious to them, that takes expression in forces of greed, hatred, and oppression in our societies, as people seek stable security by gaining power over goods, wealth, and other persons, none of which can provide lasting safety; indeed, such seeking intensifies the virulence with which corrupt regimes, for example, defend their power as if fighting for their very lives.

Because the Buddha had insight into all three levels of suffering, and into the primordial, positive potential hidden in the depth of everyone's mind (called "Buddha nature"), he taught an unconditional compassion and love for all persons equally, no matter how badly anyone behaved. He understood that all are caught in sufferings of transience and conditioning beyond what we see, and that we try to avoid these sufferings by acting in harmful ways that we do not see as harmful, in the futile attempt to ground ourselves by possessing things, controlling others, and defending our reified conceptual world. In pointing to nirvana or Buddha nature, the Buddha showed that ultimate safety is found only in the interdependent, cognizant, and empty nature of our being, which, when realized, permits our latent potential for unconditioned wisdom, unconditional love, and compassion to be actualized. In sum, the Buddha taught a path of liberation that aims to free us from bondage to the reified identities we have all been caught in, so we can know self and others in their depth and underlying potential, live from that depth, actualize that potential, and challenge others to do likewise.

Problems of Christian Liberation Epistemology in Light of Buddhist Epistemology

Christian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, speaking from within the massively oppressive conditions of impoverished peoples of Latin America, articulates an

6. On these three levels of suffering, see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1974) 19–28; Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, vol. 1, ed. Joshua W. C. Cutler and Guy Newland, trans. the Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2000) 289–92; Makransky, *Awakening through Love* 161–63.

epistemology of social sin that shows how our world has been caught in patterns of social conditioning that block our capacity to know, empathize, and take action for the oppressed. The privileged tend not to see the depth of suffering of the poor; they rationalize it with ideologies that naturalize unjust social structures in ways that make those structures seem inevitable, while relegating the poor and marginalized to the status of nonpersons. The prophetic message of the Bible, Gutiérrez argues, shows God's special care for the poor, identifying with the oppressed over against their oppressors throughout history: God's preference for the poor.⁷ By pointing this out, Gutiérrez seeks to awaken the consciences of all who participate in unjust structures and to empower the poor to recognize their special place in God's care, to move from the margins to a new position as historical subjects, and to imagine a world of justice in which the social order can be remade.

The epistemology in this approach, informed by the prophetic tradition that culminates in Jesus' identification with the oppressed, points our attention intensively to the most poor and socially marginalized and, through them, to the oppressive structures that mediate their suffering. This epistemology is therefore informed by a social analysis that goes beyond what Buddhist epistemology, in its classical forms, has attempted to do. This perspective, through its influence on contemporary Christian social ethics, has significantly informed elements of Engaged Buddhism today. I will argue later that this Christian liberationist approach can beneficially inform many aspects of Buddhist thought and practice. In this section I focus on ways that the theologies of Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians, in light of Buddhist epistemology, harbor hidden obstacles to the unconditional love that they as Christians proclaim.

The problem I am pointing to takes expression in some of Gutiérrez's (and other theologians') use of language. In his *Theology of Liberation* he writes,

To deny the fact of class struggle is really to put oneself on the side of the dominant sectors. Neutrality is impossible. It is not a question of admitting or denying a fact which confronts us; rather it is a question of which side we are on. . . . The Gospel announces the love of God for all people and calls us to love as he loves. But to accept class struggle means *to decide for some people and against others*. . . . To love all men does not mean avoiding confrontations. . . . Universal love is that which, *in solidarity with the oppressed*, seeks also to liberate the oppressors from their own power. . . . In the context of class struggle today, to love one's

7. "From the very first the theology of liberation has insisted on the importance of maintaining both the universality of God's love and the divine predilection for 'history's last.' . . . The Beatitudes of the third evangelist underscore the gratuity of the love of God, who preferentially loves the concrete poor" (Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993] 235–50, at 239, 247). "He is a God who takes sides with the poor. . . . Jesus Christ is precisely God become poor. . . . He chose to live with the poor. He addressed his gospel by preference to the poor. . . . He is proclaiming a kingdom of justice and liberation, to be established in favor of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized of history" (Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* [New York: Orbis, 1983] 7, 13, 14).

enemies presupposes recognizing and accepting that *one has class enemies* and that it is necessary to combat them. It is not a question of having no enemies, but rather of not excluding them from our love.⁸

It is important first to acknowledge the historical situation out of which Gutiérrez writes, which, as he says, necessitates decisive action on behalf of the powerless and marginalized. While I admire the moral force of his argument, his use of language creates a problem that might tend to impede the universal love he also declares. He writes, “To accept class struggle is to decide for some people and against others.” From a Buddhist perspective, the epistemological error hidden in this language is the tendency to think we must decide for some persons over others (in their whole being) in order to liberate both. This error is further expressed in Gutiérrez’s use of the word “solidarity.” God’s love is “in solidarity with the oppressed,” not equally in solidarity with the oppressor, although it also seeks to free oppressors from their inhumanity. But if God’s love is not in equal solidarity with all persons in the very core of their being, it is not unconditional love (Mt 5:43–48).

In Buddhist epistemology, as noted, enlightened wisdom knows that all persons possess a vast potential of goodness within their fundamental awareness, and how that potential is impeded by layers of self-centered grasping. In other words, such wisdom knows the enlightened potential latent in persons *beyond* the reductive images that we tend to mistake for their whole being. Unconditional love, as the expression of such wisdom, upholds that potential equally in *every* person while challenging what impedes it in the same persons.

From the perspective of such love, what needs to be challenged in each person differs. For the marginalized and oppressed, self-images of unworthiness and powerlessness need to be challenged. For the powerful and corrupt, rationalized selfishness, apathy, and cruelty need to be challenged. In both cases, there can be no “decision for some people against others” as Gutiérrez called for. There can be no stance of solidarity with some that excludes equal solidarity with the others as full human beings. Instead, there is a choice to uphold the deeper humanity in all, by confronting what impedes the fuller potential in all, equally on behalf of all. To accept class struggle, then, in the sense of working to overcome oppressive social forces—*pace* Gutiérrez—does not entail choosing sides to confront one group on behalf of another. It entails different modes of confrontation for the different groups involved. The choice is not for some against others. The choice of unconditional love and compassion is always *for* every person, by confronting every person differently.⁹

8. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1973) 275–76, emphases added.

9. Further examples of Gutiérrez’s language that suggest a choice of some human beings over others: “An option for the poor is an option for one social class against another. It means taking sides with the dispossessed. . . . It means entering into solidarity with its interests and its struggles” (*Power of the Poor in History* 45). This is a choice to cultivate empathy for some, not all, human beings. “The gospel enjoins us to love our enemies. . . .

Some readers may react by saying, “Oh, Gutiérrez meant that in what he wrote.” But his language communicates otherwise, and the distinction is important.¹⁰ To decide for some people over others as whole persons, as his words connote, is to mistake our limited, reified thoughts of people for the actual persons. That is the error that conditions everyone to react to many others each day as merely “strangers” (basically, as nonpersons), collectively contributing to the social injustices in which we are all involved. Leaders of oppressive regimes seek to crush valid opposition because they are caught in that very problem. In their suffering of transience, they cling to social structures of power to secure their reified concepts of self and world, while mistaking the people oppressed by those structures for their own limited thoughts of them as nonpersons. To decide for some people against others as whole persons, thereby losing the fuller persons for our limited thought of them, is to replicate the pattern of misperception operative in the corrupt officials we oppose in the name of opposing them. To choose one person as a whole over another is to fall, in that moment, from the equal

This means we have to recognize the fact of class struggle and accept the fact that we have class enemies to combat. There is no way not to have enemies. What is important is not to exclude them from our love” (ibid. 48). Although this seems reasonable when holding an overarching belief in universal love, the partial image of another whole person as “class enemy,” in the very moment of that thought, conditions aversion, not love, for the reified enemy. To cultivate aversion for persons unconsciously in many such moments of thought is to contradict, in practical terms, one’s belief in love, without consciously noticing the contradiction. “In Christian circles . . . we are not very much accustomed to thinking in conflictual, concrete terms. . . . We have to learn to live peace, and think peace, in the midst of conflict” (ibid. 48). But to choose one group of human beings over another is not to live peace. That is the choice that corrupt regimes have made, leading to injustice and conflict. To live peace would be to choose the latent power of peace present in the hearts of every person involved, while challenging all thoughts and actions that impede it. “To know God is to do justice, is to be in solidarity with the poor person. . . . At the same time, a relationship with the God who has loved me—loved me first and loved me freely—despoils me, strips me. It universalizes my love for others and makes it gratuitous too” (ibid. 51). But to speak of solidarity so frequently as only with some and not others is to obstruct the possibility of love actually becoming unconditional, equal for all, like God’s love. “God has a preferential love for the poor . . . simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God’s will” (Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job* [New York: Orbis, 1985] 94). If, as Gutiérrez elsewhere argues, God’s love for the poor is also a love on behalf of the rich and powerful to liberate their fuller humanity, why depict God as having a preferential love for the poor? Is not God’s love equally directed to all (not just the poor), and that is why it confronts all differently in order to liberate the fuller humanity in all by socially uplifting some and socially challenging others?

10. In the 1988 edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez continues both to uphold the universality of God’s love and God’s preferential love for the poor while also continuing to assert the difficulty of maintaining both together (xxvi). What I am suggesting is that to hold together universal and particular poles of love is not a great challenge if we understand universal love as a power that never confronts some persons on behalf of others but always confronts *every person* in the particular ways necessary for each.

love for all that is ascribed to God in Christian understanding, even if we *believe* cognitively that we are enacting such love.¹¹

Exacerbating the problem of losing the person in our reductive thought of him or her is the tendency to view one group alone as the one suffering, the other group as not suffering but only inflicting suffering. I often hear Christian activists refer to “those who are suffering” to distinguish the oppressed from the oppressors, as if oppressors’ actions were not attempts to avoid their sufferings of transience and conditioning by futilely seeking safety in possessiveness and violence. The moment we think the phrase “those who are suffering,” implying that others are not, we hold only the *obvious* level of suffering in mind, not the subconscious sufferings of *transience* and *conditioning* from which people seek escape by oppressing others, in a fruitless attempt thereby to find safety and well-being. We lose sight, in that moment, of the *causality* of the “oppressors’” behavior, and thus tend to view oppressors as simply wicked, with no conscious awareness of the deeper humanity in them that their behaviors hide—their latent potential to find safety in the deepest ground of their being, in God or Buddha nature. By losing the fuller person in our reductive image of him as “oppressor,” we lose the chance to refract God’s (or the Buddha’s) love to that person—to uphold his fuller humanity by confronting what obscures it in him.¹²

Gutiérrez affirms that other persons are really the enemy and then claims that to view them as such is right and good, as long as we also love them. But to think of another, in the moment of reading such words, as just “my enemy” tends to lose the

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11. In discussing these points, one of my colleagues raised this objection: “Gutiérrez is arguing for us to side with the poor only with regard to their economic and social situation. He is not saying to side with them against others as full persons.” I do not argue against the notion of “taking sides” in that limited sense. But Buddhist epistemology raises a subtle point: when, as Gutiérrez states, we must “decide for some people and against others” or to be “in solidarity with” some and not others (without qualifying such statements as my colleague did) the wording automatically tends to become absolutized in our minds. Remember, in Buddhist observation our minds reify our limiting thoughts of persons moment by moment, reducing the person *just* to that limiting thought of him or her. To decide for some people against others, then, is almost automatically to care for some and not others, i.e., to be for some and against others as whole persons.
 12. Jon Sobrino argues that we should give the suffering of the world’s poorest our primary attention, not the lesser forms of suffering of many in the First World. If too much attention is paid to the universality of suffering, he argues, it would become an excuse to avoid the essence of mercy, which is “the praxic love that swells in a person at the sight of another person’s unjustly inflicted suffering” (*The Principle of Mercy* [New York: Orbis, 1994] 22–23). His concern is to counter apathy in the church and among the privileged. But compassion is the awareness of others’ suffering that wishes them to be freed from it. If we avoid that awareness, we have avoided compassion. In consciously choosing not to be aware of the sufferings of transience that drive harmful actions in people of power, Sobrino loses sight of the object of compassion, their suffering. If divine love and compassion extend to all persons, to follow Sobrino in that choice is to shut off our potential to refract such divine love and compassion by being in touch with the fuller humanity of all involved.

person in our reductive, aversive thought of her. In the split second that we mistake our partial thought of someone as enemy for her whole being, we are *not* conscious of the hidden levels of suffering that drive her actions, or of the fuller human potential that her actions hide. In that moment, we automatically hate her, even if we are not conscious of it, because we are out of touch with anything in her beyond the hateful image “enemy.” In that moment we cannot give rise to the compassionate love for “enemy” that Jesus embodied.¹³

As discussed in Buddhist epistemology and observed in mindfulness practice, two directly opposing states of mind do not coexist at the same moment.¹⁴ In the mental moment of hate, we do not love. To implicitly cultivate moments of aversion through such language, while proclaiming a cognitive framework of universal love (as Gutiérrez does), is to unconsciously cultivate aversion in the name of love. Many Christian social activists report that they have become trapped in dysfunctional feelings of anger and aversion toward those they oppose, fueling burnout.¹⁵ This stems in part from the error of losing the persons in our reductive images of them, preventing us from communing with their fuller personhood so as to uphold it by challenging what impedes it—a perspective from which we can not choose one person as a whole over another. Jesus’ use of the word “enemy” in Matthew 5:43–45 *de-reifies* the word by demonstrating the possibility compassionately to commune with the conventional enemy at the level of his being, his deepest potential, and to pray for him there; this avoids reifying the concept “enemy.” Gutiérrez’s use of the word “enemy” does not replicate Jesus’ profound de-reification of the word.¹⁶

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13. Mayra Rivera raises a similar point. Drawing on Levinas’s observation that “subjects are reduced to instances of [our] preestablished concepts, and Others are [thereby] approached as objects to be appropriated for the constitution of the self,” she asks how can we encounter the Other as more than our reductive concept of her? For, as she notes, “When we encounter the Other, the process of representation has already begun. We arrive too late” (*The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007] 102).
 14. See Daniel Goleman, *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them? A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama* (New York: Bantam, 2004) 75–76; and Geshe Rabten, *The Mind and Its Functions: A Textbook of Buddhist Epistemology and Psychology*, trans. and ed. Stephen Batchelor (Mt. Pèlerin, Switzerland: Tharpa Choeling, 1978) 88–90.
 15. The prevalence of dysfunctional anger and burnout in Christian social activists is part of what motivated Paul Knitter’s exploration of Buddhist practice, as he reports in *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009) 173–79. In multifaith workshops I have taught the past 14 years, which focus on meditations of compassion adapted from Tibet, I have met many Christian activists who reported this problem as a reason for attending the workshop.
 16. Thich Nhat Hanh, in *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Penguin, 1995) 79–81, also critiques, from a Buddhist perspective, the argument of liberation theology that we must choose sides. While agreeing with Thich Nhat Hanh, I try to go further into the Buddhist epistemology behind the critique.

Implied in the prior two paragraphs is a related Buddhist teaching: the teaching of ultimate and conventional truths. To know the *ultimate truth* of persons is to know them in their emptiness and interdependent existence, as infinitely mysterious and multifaceted. Our functional labels of persons, which are *conventional truths*, do not capture the full reality of persons, but function in limited ways for conventional understanding and action. For example, when I am sick, I visit the woman who is my doctor for diagnosis and treatment. But to reify and absolutize the label “doctor” (which our minds tend to do) is to think of her as only a doctor. She may also be a mother, a loving aunt, a social activist, a careful driver, and so on. The word “doctor” is a conventional truth, useful in certain contexts, that never captures the person’s fuller, interdependent reality. Similarly, in order usefully to retain the word “enemy” as merely a conventional truth (as Gutiérrez wants to do), we would have to avoid reifying it. For that, we would have to be mindfully aware, in the moment of using the word, of how it functions as a conventional construct that never captures the full reality of anyone. A person, when viewing me as his opponent and seeking to overcome me, is conventionally functioning as an “enemy.” But when my mind reifies the concept “enemy” (as our minds are conditioned to do), the concept is absolutized and no longer functions as a contextual, conventional truth. At that point the whole person has become an “enemy” to me. In that moment, I have lost touch with the fuller reality of self and other (the other’s fuller humanity and my capacity to know that in him), the fuller reality in which authentic love as social challenge to the “enemy” can function.¹⁷

In *The Principle of Mercy*, Jon Sobrino writes: “Liberation from oppression . . . means destroying the person oppressing, in his formal capacity as oppressor. And

17. Paul Knitter, upon reading this paragraph, suggested that to consider “doctor” and “torturer” as “conventional truths” in the same way would be difficult for many Christians to swallow in their concern for justice. The word “Conventional,” when used to indicate behaviors that are unjust or evil, he wrote, falls flat and may even be considered dangerous. Such an observation focuses our attention, as Christian activists importantly do, on the virtual impossibility of breaking free of limiting labels for others if one is undergoing overwhelming suffering inflicted by them. The complementary issue here, from a Buddhist perspective, concerns how the inflictor of such suffering got to that point, the point of so thoroughly not knowing the humanity of the people he harms. In how many moments has he mistaken other persons for his own reductive thought of them unaware? How many such moments, individually and socially conditioned, preceded those harmful actions? To what degree have we all been part of that web of mis-seeing and mis-reacting? In effect, this part of my article is a Buddhist plea to those of us who are not suffering torture at the moment to look deeply into our own conditioned patterns of mis-knowing and mis-reacting, thereby to better discern how human beings get caught in such patterns, in order to challenge what should be challenged in societies without inwardly replicating the pattern of injustice in thought and action that we are trying to solve. Mādhyamika Buddhism, influential in medieval Indian Buddhism and Tibet, is a primary source here for the teaching of ultimate and conventional truths. See Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism, Teachings, History and Practices*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University, 2013) 114–26; and Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009) 76–79.

although this task is difficult and dangerous, it cannot be abandoned *for love of the oppressed*. The spirituality of forgiveness must integrate this *tension between love and destruction*.¹⁸ If Sobrino understood God's love as truly equal for oppressor and oppressed, it would be difficult to end his next to last sentence that way: "[This task] cannot be abandoned *for love of the oppressed*." For the urge to confront the oppressor would come as much from love for the oppressor as from love for the oppressed. The seeming tension between "love and destruction" (between love and just confrontation) that Sobrino notes is created only when we lose the fuller person in our partial image of him, absolutized as the whole person (just "oppressor"). There is no such tension when everyone involved is viewed as a full person, composed of multiple aspects. Then love, to uphold one aspect of the "oppressor" (his deep human potential), must confront another aspect of him that impedes that potential, ultimately to its destruction. Authentic love would do the same with regard to anyone, not just with regard to "oppressors."¹⁹

Toward the end of his book *On Job*, Gutiérrez seeks a way to integrate justice (the "prophetic") with gratuitous love (the "contemplative").²⁰ When justice is misconceived as on behalf of one person or group over another, it conflicts with the unconditional love ascribed to God as equal for all (Mt 5), generating the apparent tension between justice and love that Gutiérrez and Sobrino struggle to resolve. But when justice is seen as an imperative to confront what must be confronted in every person in order to uphold each person's humanity, and when love is understood always to confront each person in that way out of love, then there is no logical tension between justice and love. Buddhist epistemology refuses to permit any human being to be reduced to a single reified trait, mistaken as the whole person. Indeed part of what justice must confront is the tendency in each of us to mistake our own reductive

18. Sobrino, *Principle of Mercy* 65, emphases added. Please note that what I criticize in the quotation is not Sobrino's assertion of the need to destroy the oppressor in his formal capacity of oppressor, but Sobrino's assumption, implied in his wording, that this is to be done out of love just for the oppressed, not for the oppressor.

19. Roger Haight, in his "Logic of the Christian Response to Social Suffering," in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (New York: Orbis, 1989) 139–53, is careful to declare God's love totally equal for all persons. Yet, he writes, "God's creative love fills up what is lacking, reestablishes what is missing, in all persons. In this sense are the poor the favorites of God in a special way, for the more one lacks in integral humanity and acquired power, the more powerful is God's love in reestablishing it" (145). But if God's love fills up what is missing *in all* persons, why are not those corrupted by acquired power equally noted in the quoted sentence, like this: "and the more a person lacks in integral humanity because of the corruption of acquired power, the more powerful is God's love in reestablishing that person's humanity by confronting him, out of love." This omission seems to disclose the same unconscious tendency to lose the fuller person of the oppressor in our partial image of him, so we do not actually hold the oppressor fully in parallel with the oppressed in declaring God's reestablishment of what is missing in each person.

20. Gutiérrez, *On Job* 94–97.

thoughts about each other for the whole persons, leading inevitably to hatred, possessiveness, or apathy toward them in our thoughts and actions. In terms of distributive justice, this epistemology suggests that those who harm others by preventing a just distribution of resources harm themselves by resisting their own fuller humanity, and must be confronted for their sake as much as for the sake of those impoverished by their actions.

What Gutiérrez does not sufficiently notice is that biblical statements of God's preference for the poor, when understood as expressions of God's universal love, must express equal love for the poor *and* the privileged.¹ This means that to give preferential attention to the poor is the way that God challenges both the poor *and* the privileged to uncover their fuller potential. It is an act as much on behalf of the privileged as on behalf of the poor. The notion that God takes the side of poor people over the privileged in the social and economic arrangement of things out of equal love for both creates a problem if translated too quickly (as Gutiérrez does) into human imitation of God. The problem occurs when we think that our belief that God takes the side of the oppressed over the powerful out of equal love for both, and our desire to follow God, means that we have joined God in taking the side of the oppressed over the powerful out of equal love for both. But to participate in such an unconditional divine perspective as basis for social challenge would require much more than belief and desire. It would require a de-reifying contemplative discipline that undercuts our reified concepts of some people as just the good or lovable ones and other people as just the bad or unlovable ones. I discuss such contemplative training in my next section.

Is there room in this analysis for what Christians and Jews call "righteous anger"? Anger at injustice contains important truth, but is not immune to critical investigation. How does righteous anger differ from ordinary anger? From a Buddhist perspective, the ordinary anger we experience in daily life is a strong *aversion* in the mind reacting to a negative image that the mind has constructed of someone or something, with the mind unaware of the extent to which it is reacting to its own construct. In the moment we think the angry thought "he is horrible," we are unaware that we have lost the fuller human being for our reductive thought of him.²¹ Does "righteous anger" avoid that error? In any moment, what percentage of "righteous" anger is truly righteous—responding to the deepest truth and potential of all who are involved in the situation? What percentage is more self-righteous than truly righteous in a prophetic sense? How is one to discern the difference? Is there a way to purify righteous anger to its truest, underlying intent?

Buddhist philosophy recognizes that there is much to be confronted in persons: all our ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are reductive of beings and harmful to them. But because of the falsity of anger—its tendency to mistake its own reductive images of persons for the actual persons—when we confront others out of anger, we do not see their worth and potential beyond the reductive image. Thus to confront others out of anger is ironically to repeat the pattern of mis-seeing and mis-treating that

21. Geshe Rabten, *Mind and Its Functions* 88–90.

we think our anger is opposing. For this reason, the Buddhist principle of confrontation is a fierce form of love, a fierce compassion, rather than any ordinary form of anger. This kind of love/compassion is exemplified in Asian stories of enlightened beings who fiercely challenge individuals or groups out of compassion for all involved. Fierce compassion is also imaged in the wrathful, enlightened deities of Tibetan Buddhism. Fierce compassion is the power to confront—forcefully if necessary—someone who thinks and acts harmfully both on behalf of those he harms and on behalf of his own positive potential, his fuller personhood. Such a fierce, confronting compassion is possible only if it is the expression of a de-reifying wisdom rather than any kind of reifying anger.²²

The Crucial Importance of Contemplative Discipline to Uncover the Unity of Justice and Love

In order to confront another without losing the fuller person in our narrow image of her, we need a de-reifying wisdom that senses others in the primal goodness and potential of their being, beyond the partial images operative in all our minds. But as the Buddha taught, all of us are caught in the entrenched habit of losing the fuller person in our reified, partial thoughts of her. Only a contemplative discipline that shows us that error as it arises in the mind in the moment, a discipline that draws our minds away from identification with our reified thoughts back to the ground of our being, can bring us a greater freedom to know persons more fully, with greater awareness of their hidden potential and what obscures it. Through such a contemplative discipline, we learn to surrender to the ground of our being, where the primal goodness and potential of our being is revealed. From there we can know the same primal potential in others and uphold it in them, while noticing how they are caught, as we have been, in errors of self-clinging misperception.²³ This is the purpose of various forms of Buddhist

22. On fierce compassion as a Buddhist principle of confrontation, see Makransky, *Awakening through Love* 179–85; Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Visual Dharma: The Buddhist Art of Tibet* (Berkeley, CA: Shambhala, 1975) 21. See also Tsang Nyon Heruka, *The Life of Marpa the Translator: Seeing Accomplishes All*, trans. Nalanda Translation Committee under the direction of Chogyam Trungpa (Boston: Shambhala, 1995) xix–l. This principle is depicted in many stories in which a Buddhist teacher fiercely challenges his disciples or the larger community, as in several of the stories from China and Japan compiled in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, ed. Paul Reps (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle, 1957), and from Tibet in Surya Das, *The Snow Lion's Turquoise Mane* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992). Fierce compassion as confrontation also takes the form of social criticism in Buddhist cultures, e.g., Paltrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994) 204–9, 354.

23. On Jesus' de-reifying wisdom, see p. 644 above. The "ground of being" in the Tibetan Nyingma tradition is the space in and through all impermanent experience (emptiness), a space that is undivided from the primordial awareness operative in all experience. This primordially aware emptiness (Tibetan: *rig pa*, Buddha nature) is endowed with a great

meditation and, I would argue, must be part of the purpose of any contemplative system if it is to support work against injustice that avoids the fractured misperception of other persons that contributes to the dynamics of injustice itself.²⁴

This argument—that for social challenge to be just, it must never decide for some over others, but must enact a love and compassion equal to all that challenges everyone differently—is aligned with the views and actions of Martin Luther King, Howard Thurman, Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu, Mohandas Gandhi, and others. What I have argued for here by drawing on Buddhist analysis does not arrive at an exclusively Buddhist way of being.

Does this argument imply we should not defend the poor against the depredations of corrupt people and systems? No. It means that to do so is *not* to be in solidarity with some against others but to be in solidarity with all. To defend those who suffer most intensely against depredations of the powerful is not to decide for the powerless over the powerful but to choose the fuller humanity in both, and so to confront both differently—challenging the powerless to discover their power; challenging the powerful to stop acting in ways that not only hurt the poor but also impede their own fuller humanity. Contemplative disciplines that empower such love, compassion, and wisdom challenge all of us in our entrenched habits of misconceiving persons, habits that contribute to injustice in our responses to others every day, beyond our conscious awareness.

Some more recent theological writings avoid the tendency of earlier liberation theologies noted above to construct partialities that unconsciously impede the universality of divine love. Ivone Gebarra, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, and Mayra Rivera avoid that mistake by critiquing patriarchal and modernist frameworks

potential of love, compassion, wisdom, creative responsiveness, joy, equanimity, and other qualities associated with enlightenment, capacities that are impeded and distorted by our self-clinging patterns of reification, possessiveness, and aversion. Further details are in Makransky, *Awakening through Love* 33–43, 96–125, and in Tsoknyi Rinpoche, *Open Heart, Open Mind*. I tried to word this section in a way that can also support Christian understanding of the ground of being in God, from which the image of God within us, with all qualities of goodness given in creation, may be restored through deepening surrender to God's grace.

24. There is a broad parallel in my argument to Gutiérrez's call for prophetic confrontation as the expression of God's gratuitous love for all. As Lefebure summarizes Gutiérrez from *On Job*, "Without the prophetic challenge to practice justice, contemplative language could be a flight from responsibility. Without the contemplative emphasis on gratuitous love, the prophetic insistence on justice could imprison God in a framework of retribution" (*The Buddha and the Christ: Exploration in Buddhist and Christian Dialogue* [New York: Orbis, 1993] 183). But my epistemology differs from Gutiérrez's. As long as reified, partial images of persons are subconsciously mistaken for those persons themselves—and the phrasings by Gutiérrez, Sobrino, and Haight noted above tend to support that reification—love is caught in reified dualisms of the merely innocent against the merely wicked, and we become imprisoned in frameworks of retribution subconsciously, even if we think we have escaped them.

that, they argue, generate dualistic and hierarchal sets of preferences.²⁵ I will focus here on ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebarra as representative of this direction of thought. Like earlier liberation theologians, Gebarra shows special concern for the poor and marginalized but departs from those theologians in focusing on ways that oppressive socioeconomic forces unfold from patriarchal patterns of thought that hide everyone's deep interdependence. In her book *Longing for Running Water*, Gebarra writes:

The patriarchal world always made distinctions between the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, and the masculine and the feminine; it always erected clear boundaries around what it pompously judged to be good, just, pure, and perfect. The closing of this century offers us the great challenge of learning to think of ourselves in categories that are no longer oppositional, but rather inclusive.²⁶

Gebarra argues against a tendency to locate God only in the positive side of dualistic hierarchies, as if good and evil were easily locatable in different persons and groups: "In the perspective we are developing, God is in all and all is in God—including suffering, dirt, and destruction."²⁷ "This new vision . . . helps us leave behind the dualistic and confining anthropocentrism that has characterized our western Christian tradition, a dualism that has not only opposed God and humanity, but also spirit and matter, man and woman, good and evil."²⁸ "Every being and every moment is unique and extraordinary within this immense Sacred Body, whose boundaries are immeasurable."²⁹ "This vision insistently calls on us to see the universe as our body, the earth as our body, the variety of human groups as our body."³⁰

To enter into this holistic vision of the cosmos as our Sacred Body, we must "recover our human experience—to permit the meaning of our deepest beliefs to develop in our minds and bodies."³¹ "Our interdependence and relatedness . . . encompass nature, the powers of the earth and of the cosmos itself," yet "our senses are seldom educated to perceive this interdependence's great importance. Once we do recognize its importance. . . we will be able to care for the earth and all its inhabitants as if they were close relatives, as parts of our greater body." Gebarra's ecofeminist perspective thus becomes "an invitation to a deeper perception that includes our greater self,"³² a perspective that

25. See, e.g., Ivone Gebarra, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); and Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*.

26. Gebarra, *Longing for Running Water* 108.

27. *Ibid.* 107.

28. *Ibid.* 169.

29. *Ibid.* 129.

30. *Ibid.* 170.

31. *Ibid.* 50.

32. *Ibid.* 52.

is “all-encompassing and intimately interwoven . . . allow[ing] us to broaden our understanding of human life, and especially of human suffering” by knowing that “the pain of the whole is mysteriously felt in every being.”³³

Gebarra’s ecofeminist vision is profoundly harmonious with the Buddhist vision of interdependence noted above, and the breadth of her social, political, and ecological vision is a valuable resource for contemporary Buddhist reflection. But what her vision lacks is a contemplative discipline that would be essential if we are to accept her invitation to educate our senses to more fully engage the vast field of relatedness in which we are situated. Having identified our tendency conceptually to project dualistic, oppositional constructs that hide our foundational interdependence, and having argued for the importance of multiple forms of knowing to sense this field of relatedness,³⁴ she provides no discipline by which to do so. Instead, she offers only further modes of discursive analysis. She acknowledges the tendency of conceptual thought to exaggerate its knowledge of reality by mistaking its limited representations for the whole.³⁵ But she offers no discipline of attention, focus, mindfulness, or contemplative prayer through which we may become more vividly aware of how our patterns of thought separate us from others, from a perspective that does not fully identify with those patterns. So we can sense “the earth and all its inhabitants as if they were close relatives,” as she calls us to do.³⁶

As feminist Buddhist theologian Anne Klein observes, “Several feminist writers describe uncommon forms of self-experience or new ontologies of selfhood, but offer very little clarity about how such experience is accessed.”³⁷ This critique could be applied to Gebarra. Klein further notes:

One of the effects of mindfulness and other meditation practice is a calm that is not just the absence of worry or looking away from problems. Such calm both causes and results from going deeper into mind and body, becoming more deeply connected with the unlanguage areas of mind and the more subtle energies of the body. In this way mindfulness and other practices expand the dimensions of selfhood.³⁸

Gebarra too seeks to expand the dimensions of selfhood.

33. Ibid. 53.

34. See *ibid.* 62–63.

35. “Our reference points are always limited and relative, but we often forget these limits and treat them as absolutes. . . . We need to be ever more clear in acknowledging how partial our own knowledge is” (*ibid.* 70–71).

36. *Ibid.* 52.

37. Anne Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self* (Boston: Beacon, 1995) 87.

38. *Ibid.* 199. Leonardo Boff’s *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), in contrast with Gebarra’s work, emphasizes the importance of nurturing mystical experience to motivate liberating work and to become increasingly aware of the fuller reality that relativizes all our perspectives. It is useful to compare and contrast Boff’s more general explanations of mystical theory and practice (*ibid.* 142–62) with Klein’s Buddhist analysis of particular methods to cultivate specific qualities of awareness (*Meeting the Great Bliss Queen* 63–88, 114, 124–45, 152–58, 198–99).

Among recent liberation theologians, Mayra Rivera espouses a postcolonial theology of transcendence that provides another way to avoid the tendency of earlier liberation theologies to construct a field of opposition that would impede universal love, by focusing intensely on the transcendent dimension of each being. Yet Rivera, like Gebarra, does not provide any contemplative discipline, any means of knowing beyond discursive analysis itself, to help us become more attuned to this transcendent dimension of self and others, the dimension that transcends our reified, reductive thoughts of them.³⁹

Does this Buddhist critique of Christian liberation theologies reject their focal concern forcefully to challenge and change social systems out of a compassion evoked by special attention to those who suffer most intensely within them? No. Indeed liberation theology can help Buddhists further awaken the compassionate attitudes and actions that can unfold only through increasing awareness of the fuller social realities. That is the subject of my next section.

Problems of Buddhist Epistemology, and New Buddhist Possibilities, in Light of Christian Liberation Theology

Buddhism also has an epistemological weakness that is brought to light by Christian liberation theology.⁴⁰ The focus of Buddhist attention on investigating the nature of one's own experience has great power to reveal how we have each been caught, unconsciously, in mental causes of harm and suffering that we had not recognized. But this focus on personal experience does not of itself reveal suffering that *others* experience as an effect of their location in a social system that differs from one's own place in it. And the Buddhist argument presented above for solidarity with all does not of itself point out those who suffer most intensely within social structures, nor why the rest of us tend not to notice them, nor what that tendency to ignore them signifies about us and the social structures in which we participate. As Paul Knitter observes:

The tendency to ignore the poor and marginalized comes not just from inattention, but from fear of confronting how we are complicit in their oppression, insofar as we are part of an oppressive economic or political system. We ignore those who suffer differently from us in order to avoid critically inquiring into the systems that bring us so much benefit.⁴¹

This is an important observation that encourages deep reflection as a Buddhist.

39. Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence*. Rivera's focus on recovering the notion of transcendence for liberation theology in light of postmodern and postcolonial thought is a profoundly important approach that could come into deep dialogue with Buddhism for mutual learning. I plan to write on this in a future essay.

40. This section is informed by generous critical input by Knitter and Rita Gross. Any errors or oversights that may remain are mine.

41. Private communication.

Generosity has been a central value of Asian Buddhist cultures, and while there is a special emphasis for lay people on offering material goods to the monastic community and institutions that transmit the Buddha's teaching, Buddhists have also been taught to be generous toward other communities, guests, strangers, and the poor. Buddhist cultures focus on personal cultivation of generous attitudes and actions, which are viewed as karmically fruitful, as empowering one's path of awakening, and as inspiring others to act similarly. The Buddha is quoted as saying, "The noble disciple lives at home with a heart free from the taint of stinginess, he is open-handed, pure-handed, delighting in self-surrender, one to ask a favor of, one who delights in dispensing charitable gifts."⁴² A number of scholars therefore argue that in Buddhist cultures, personal acts of generosity (*dāna*), not concepts of structural justice, have been the touchstone of Buddhist social thought.⁴³ The traditional emphasis on personal acts of generosity and compassion does not give primary attention to socioeconomic structures that cause special suffering for the poor and marginalized, suffering that the more privileged have difficulty noticing. Contemporary engaged Buddhist thinkers such as Sulak Sivaraksa, A. T. Ariyaratne, the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, David Loy, and Bhikku Bodhi have given new attention to social structures as causes of massive suffering. Christian liberation theology has been and continues to be an important modern instigator for this fresh focus in Buddhist thinking and can further inform it.

The cultivation of compassion for others that is central to Buddhist traditions calls for us to bring to mind beings who suffer in all realms of existence (humans, animals, beings in hellish realms, ghostly realms, and others) to generate strong compassion that seeks their freedom from all levels of their suffering. But as many Buddhist teachers point out, if we do not cultivate vivid attention to particular persons and beings, we can lose them too much in our general wish of compassion for all. And in their particulars, my meditations of compassion may tend to include only those beings that I am socially conditioned to think of or notice. What about all those beings that my conditioning tends to filter out—people of other races, classes, ethnicities, sexualities, parts of the world? Christian liberation, feminist, and black theologians, by relentlessly pointing to the most marginalized people of societies, expose unconscious ways I have been socially conditioned not to see them. I do not see past my own non-noticing of particular sufferings of the most marginalized unless someone points me to their visceral experience in its particulars and, through that, to the social dynamics that contribute to their suffering in ways I also had not noticed. This is what writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, Martin Luther King Jr., Howard Thurman, Ivone Gebarra, Mayra Rivera, Delores Williams, James Cone, Shawn Copeland, James Baldwin, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and others have done for me.

42. Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism* 63, quoting *Anguttara Nikāya* II.66.

43. See Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues* (New York: Cambridge University, 2000) 202, referencing Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer, eds., *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1990) 13.

Why does Christian liberation ethics have such a profound social epistemology from which a Buddhist can learn in this way? As Gutiérrez, Sobrino, Cone, and others argue, the Abrahamic tradition of the prophets discloses God's special focus on the oppressed and God's fierce challenge of the powerful who exploit them. This focus culminates in Christianity with the traditional assertion that God chose, in God's incarnation as Jesus, to live among the most marginalized and to undergo an ignominious death on the cross in oneness with society's nonpersons. Such a life and death raised up the social sinfulness of societies, showing how their values reverse God's, so that socially embedded powers of authority routinely mistook good for evil and evil for good in each of their decisions leading to Jesus' death. Jesus' interactions with others throughout his life, death, and resurrection simultaneously reveal the unconscious sin operative in the norms of societies and the divine power of unconditioned goodness that transcends it.⁴⁴

Gutiérrez interprets God's actions in history to mean that God actually prefers poor over powerful people, a position I have rejected as contradicting the meaning of unconditional love, which can prefer none and confronts all. But the Christian revelation that God's one human incarnation occurred among the powerless motivates, for early liberation theologians, a fiercely compassionate look into society from the bottom up, a way of looking and seeing that has profoundly informed the development of social ethics in today's Catholic Church.⁴⁵ Although Buddhist texts describe rebirths of bodhisattvas in all realms of existence—including birth among the poor—out of compassion for beings, Buddhism lacks early liberation theology's unique focus on the poor and most marginalized, provided by God's unique incarnation among them, as *the* hermeneutic key to the unconscious, socially conditioned sin that we participate in and do not see.⁴⁶

To focus attention first on society's nonpersons is the most effective way to expose the suffering nature of the social system as a whole—the hellacious karma of

44. See Matthew 25:31–46. Knitter, critically responding to this paragraph, wrote, “I suggest that you might recognize liberation theology's challenge to Buddhism (and to all) to be aware of systemic oppression caused by structures and not just personal oppression of others that comes from delusion about the self.” This point is basically correct, but I would add, from a Buddhist perspective, that the deluded attempt in all our minds to reify the self and, in support of that, to reify our reductive images of others that support that false sense of self, is a crucial underpinning in the creation of social and economic systems that privilege the few while ignoring the needs of the many and the planet.

45. See Kenneth R. Himes, “Liberation Theology and Catholic Social Teaching,” in *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Maryknoll, NY: 2008) 228–41.

46. Michael Himes observes, “We have to allow the suffering of the poor to be the standard by which structures are criticized, that it's always the people who are most marginalized who will give us the perspective from which the underside can most clearly be seen” (*Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about God, Relationships and Service* [New York: Paulist, 1995] 59). This articulates well Pope Francis's concern.

self-centered thought, action, and consequent suffering operative in all who participate in the system. Special attention first to those who suffer most evokes an urgency of compassion that wants to take a fierce look into social forces behind such suffering, and to take action to change them. Such a look can instigate an increasingly inclusive compassion that embraces all who are caught in those social forces at every level of participation (including fruitless attempts by many of us to avoid our sufferings of conditioning and transience, to flee from our mortality, by accumulating wealth, power, and status in ways that press down the most vulnerable and the planet while impeding our own fuller humanity).⁴⁷

Many Buddhist doctrines can be increasingly informed by Christian liberation theology.⁴⁸ Buddhist karma theory teaches that all our intentional actions have effects on our psyches and our world, but the traditional focus has been on actions of individuals, with their effects on the individual's experience of herself and her world over lifetimes. In classical texts, Buddhist analysis of karma has included a social dimension primarily in the context of rebirth, with the understanding that some group experiences constitute a fruition of communal actions that the same group of individuals did together in a past life. But Christian liberation theology pushes Buddhist thinkers to develop their understanding of social karma much further by focusing Buddhist attention on socially conditioned patterns of thought, feeling, and action that are embedded within social systems, and that make it hard for many people to have adequate food, water, housing, healthcare, and education. The same socially conditioned patterns tend also to prevent us from noticing those so affected and from taking responsibility for those effects.

Those themes from Christian liberation theology would also nuance Buddhist understandings of interdependence by pointing out ways that each individual in society tends to be conditioned, and to condition others, not to notice the nonpersons of their society and the social causes of their suffering, and how the awakening of even one individual to that reality, with equal compassion for all in their interdependence, can beneficially shake up the society from the bottom up (as exemplified by Martin Luther King, Bishop Tutu, Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi, and others).

To awaken compassion for all in the Buddhist sense would now include a new consciousness of those suffering most acutely from historical causes and effects of social structures that are difficult to see from one's own location in society, revealed not just

47. As David Loy (*Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* [Boston: Wisdom, 2003] 84, 87) argues, the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion in individuals become systemic in social systems that they build, which then condition individuals into those poisons as they participate in those social systems.

48. Most of the social directions of Buddhist interpretation and action suggested in the following paragraphs have already been taken up by modern engaged Buddhist leaders and social theorists such as Sulak Sivaraksa, the Dalai Lama, A. T. Ariyaratne, Ambedkar, Thich Nhat Hanh, Aung San Suu Kyi, Buddhadasa, David Loy, Rita Gross, Bhikku Bodhi, and Bernie Glassman. Here I highlight specific shifts in Buddhist doctrinal understanding that are prompted by specific aspects of Christian liberation theology.

by investigating one's personal experience but also by getting to know the experiences of others in diverse social locations, including many non-Buddhists. To this end, the writings of liberation theologians throughout the world should be added to the Buddhist curriculum.

This, in turn, would shift part of our Buddhist understanding of the six perfections that constitute the bodhisattva path of awakening, by encouraging us to take people previously marginal to our awareness into the center of our attention, both in contemplative practice and in concrete actions. This shift would amend the classical interpretation of the perfections to include not only one's personal interactions with other individuals and families but prominently also communal organization and action to address social and ecological problems and needs.⁴⁹ As more and more contemporary Buddhists find themselves motivated to work for social change and ecological protection, new Buddhist commentaries need to be written on how such work may specifically empower and be empowered by all other trainings of the bodhisattva path, to increasingly undercut inner and outer causes of suffering. Liberation theology would also shine light on Buddhist epistemological principles—for example, how reifying ignorance and the attempt by dominant groups to avoid sufferings of transience shape forms of racism, ethnocentrism, patriarchy, economic oppression, and ecological destruction that hide our motivations through ideological rationalization.⁵⁰

Finally for now, the classical Buddhist teaching on the preciousness of a fully endowed human life would take on new connotations in light of liberation theology. In Indian and Tibetan Buddhist systems of contemplation, within the preliminary practices of the path of enlightenment, practitioners repeatedly reflect on their individual good fortune to have received a human life possessed of all conditions and freedoms necessary to realize their fullest human and spiritual potential (including positive material, social, and political conditions and freedoms). The main purpose of this contemplation is to recognize one's priceless opportunity to use one's human life for spiritual awakening and thus to generate strong personal motivation for intensive spiritual practice.⁵¹

49. The six perfections are generosity, moral discipline, patience, perseverance, concentration, and wisdom. In classical Buddhist commentaries, these perfections concern the practice of the individual bodhisattva who puts them into action for the benefit of others. Such commentaries lack analysis of social structures and do not specifically apply the practice of the perfections to work for social change or ecological protection. See, e.g., Yangsi Rinpoche, *Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003) 353–478.

50. I have noted the power of liberation theology to point our attention to the margins of human societies. A distinctive strength of Buddhist and of ecofeminist theologies is that they point our attention also to the sufferings of animals and all sentient creatures that are part of our larger family within the web of interdependence (and through cycles of rebirth in Buddhist cosmology).

51. For traditional teaching on the precious human opportunity, see, e.g., Yangsi Rinpoche, *Practicing the Path* 81–96, which is based on the writings of the late 14th-century Tibetan teacher Tsongkhapa.

Buddhist dialogue with liberation theology would partly reframe this teaching, so that it is applied not only to one's own situation but equally to others'—noticing those who lack material and social resources essential for them to have the freedom to uncover their fullest human potential. This would tie the teaching of the fully endowed human life directly to the bodhisattva path itself, partly reframing the six perfections as practices of active compassion to help as many others as possible gain such a life in practical social and material ways.

Conclusion

Through the ages, both Christians and Buddhists have customarily viewed their own traditions as lacking nothing essential, not needing any fundamental addition or correction by another religious tradition. My aim here has been to point out a weakness in each tradition, an incompleteness, that the other tradition discloses and thereby helps correct. If this argument has merit, it suggests that Christians and Buddhists *need* to learn from each other if they are to fulfill the deepest intent of their traditions to empower our best possibilities and disempower our worst tendencies.

Author biography

John Makransky received his PhD in Buddhist studies from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and is now associate professor of Buddhism and comparative theology at Boston College. Specializing in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, comparative theology (Buddhist–Christian), Buddhist critical-constructive reflection, and Buddhist meditation theory and practice, he has recently published “Thoughts on Why, How, and What Buddhists Can Learn from Christian Theologians,” *Journal of Buddhist-Christian Studies* 31 (2011); “How Buddhist Practice Grounds Social Action in a Secular World,” *Dharma World Magazine: Living Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue* 39 (April–June 2012), online journal; and “Compassion in Buddhist Psychology,” in *Wisdom and Compassion in Psychotherapy*, ed. Christopher K. Germer and Ronald D. Siegel (2012). In progress is a monograph entitled “Awakened by Religious Others: A Buddhist Comparative Theology,” which develops a Buddhist way of doing comparative theology, demonstrating specific kinds of learning from Christianity and other religions.