

CARMELITE MYSTICISM AND EASTERN MYSTICISM

A Paper Presented at The International Seminar

THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD TODAY AND CARMELITE MYSTICISM

Mystagogy and Inter-Religious and Cultural Dialog

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International Seminar

Zidine, Bosnia

September 17-22, 2007

This paper is dedicated to my father,

Frank Eugene Barron, Jr.,

who mortally ill *insisted* that I attend and present this paper at the conference

and then left this world while I was there on

September 21, 2007.

May God rest his beautiful soul in eternal peace.

Abstract

The Second Vatican Council, in its document, *Nostra Aetate*, exhorts Catholics to “dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life.” (NA 2) We are called beyond dialogue, to “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.” (NA 2)

Interreligious dialogue is not a luxury to be indulged in, but a necessary and inescapable means to achieving understanding between peoples and peace in the world. In all of the religions of the world, those who commit themselves authentically to the ascetical-mystical life are the proponents of peace, love and universal goodwill for all. We cannot afford to bury our heads in the sand of spiritual self-interest and escape the moral exigencies for dialogue in our world today.

As one who has been actively engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue for more than thirty years, I was tempted to engage in such dialogue for this paper. I have, however, become ever more sensitive to the many problems of interreligious dialogue that I see occurring over the last few decades, including serious problems with methodology and the casual appropriation of that which seems to be good or just plain exciting from Asian religion. I will in this paper, therefore, address the following: 1) an introduction to the topic; 2) the Catholic Church’s exhortation to interreligious dialogue and the urgent need for dialogue, especially by Carmelites who may be lagging behind other Catholic orders (e.g., Benedictines, Trappists and Jesuits), 3) a review of the types of interreligious dialogue that are taking place and some problems that are occurring in them; 4) methodological concerns (a great deal of interreligious dialogue taking place between Christianity, and Asian religions is unsystematic and without clear methodological parameters); 5) a suggestion of methodology for successful dialogue (i.e., non-reductive methodologies that maintain a central concern for epistemology); 6) “Carmelite and Eastern Mysticism: the Search for Common Ground” (a summary review of Carmelite dialogue with Eastern religion, with a more in-depth look at some parallel language and possible common ground between Carmelite and Buddhist mysticism); and 7) the articulation of what is essentially different between Carmelite and any Eastern mysticism, that is, the irreplaceable centrality of Jesus Christ as the source and telos of mystical experience for Carmelites.

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Carmelite Mysticism and Eastern Mysticism

Keith Reeves Barron, OCDS, Ph.D.

I. INTRODUCTION

As a doctoral student studying “Spirituality” at The Catholic University of America (through most of the 1980's), I had four major areas of study on which I was examined. One of these was titled “Asian Meditation Traditions: Tibetan Buddhist Meditation.” During my eight years of study, research and teaching at The Catholic University of America, I spent five years studying Tibetan Buddhism with Khenpo Konchog Gyaltshen, Rinpoche and other Tibetan lamas who visited Washington, DC during that time, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama. As one who has been actively engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue for more than thirty years, I was tempted simply to engage in such dialogue for this paper. I have, however, become ever more sensitive to the many problems of interreligious dialogue that I see occurring over the last few decades, including serious problems with methodology and the casual appropriation of that which seems to be good or just plain exciting from Asian religion.¹

¹Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, culturally has many similarities to Catholicism: monastic celibacy, religious vows, highly developed systematic philosophy, psychology and what might be loosely termed “theology,” a “sacramental” view (again, loosely speaking) of the world that incorporates religious forms familiar to Catholics, such as diverse meditations, rosaries, incense, chant, elaborate and beautiful iconography, different religious orders, intercessory prayers to their saints, etc. For this reason, it is not uncommon to find former Catholics among the ranks of new Tibetan Buddhist practitioners who find a somewhat familiar home.

In addition to this “Introduction” (section I), I will in this paper address the following: II) the Catholic Church’s exhortation to interreligious dialogue and the urgent need for dialogue, especially by Carmelites who may be lagging behind other Catholic orders (e.g., Benedictines, Trappists and Jesuits); III) a review of the types of interreligious dialogue that are taking place and some problems that are occurring in them; IV) a consideration of methodological concerns, especially in the dialogue between Carmelite and Eastern mysticism; V) the need for nonreductive methodologies that maintain a central concern for epistemology; VI) an examination of some dialogue between Carmelite and Eastern mysticism: the search for common ground; and VII) the articulation of what is essentially different between Carmelite and any Eastern mysticism, that is, the irreplaceable centrality of Jesus Christ as the source and telos of mystical experience for Carmelites. For our purposes here, I will define mysticism as the spiritual, experiential embrace–intellect and will–of the transcendent Mystery in a dark, obscure, ineffable knowledge usually understood in theistic religions as apprehended through love.²

II. INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND THE CHURCH

The Second Vatican Council in its “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” *Nostra aetate*,³ states:

²Mysticism is defined by the group Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) as “The experience of the divine by means of a direct and personal encounter or union with God.” (See: <http://monasticdialog.com/glossary.php?l=m>.) Mystical experience may be either explicit or implicit in the life of the mystic. Carmelite author Ruth Burrows call this “light on” and “light off” experience which, much like Karl Rahner, she attributes to a natural psychological, not supernatural, gift. See *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1980), 50; and Karl Rahner, “Mysticism,” in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 1011.

³Vatican II, *Nostra aetate*, “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (28 Oct 1965).

In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship. . . . The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. (NA 2)

The document goes further, exhorting Catholics to a “dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life.” (NA 2) We are called beyond simple dialogue, to “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.” (NA 2) *Nostra aetate* is a reformulation of the Catholic teaching that salvation comes through the Catholic Church.⁴ We are strongly encouraged to interreligious dialogue with non-Christians, to recognize what is true and holy in them as reflections of the ray of Truth (i.e., God) that enlightens them, and to promote what is good in them, not only the moral but *the spiritual as well*. Furthermore, the council teaches “whatever good or truth is found” in other religions is “given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.” (LG 16)⁵

The Council fathers declare that the Holy Spirit has been present and active, though not to the fullness of Catholic faith, in the non-Christian religions: “without doubt, the Holy Spirit was at work in the world before Christ was glorified.” (AG 4 & 9)⁶ “All this holds true,” they state, “not for Christians only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly.” (GS

⁴See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 846-847; quoting *Lumen gentium* 16; cf. DS 3866-3872.

⁵Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (21 Nov 1964).

⁶Vatican II, *Ad gentes divinitus*, “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity” (7 Dec 1965).

22)⁷ This is reconfirmed time and again by His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, who states: “In the Holy Spirit every individual and all people have become, through the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, children of God, partakers in the divine nature, and heirs to eternal life. All are redeemed and called to share it in glory in Jesus Christ, without any distinction of language, race, nation or culture.”⁸

Pope John Paul II asserts clearly the Church’s affirmation that the Holy Spirit works “outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body (RH 6; cf. LG 16; GS 22; AG 15).”⁹ He further declares that “We can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person.”¹⁰ In the 1991 document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, the Church affirms that,

the fruits of the Spirit of God in the personal life of individuals, whether Christian or otherwise, are easily discernible (cf. Gal 5:22-23). . . . From this mystery of unity it follows that all men and women who are saved share, though differently, in the same mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ, through his Spirit. . . . [T]he mystery of salvation reaches out to them, in a way known to God, through the invisible action of the Spirit of Christ.¹¹

By far the most comprehensive document on dialogue is a booklet issued by the Vatican on September 21, 1967, “Suggestions for Dialogue with Members of Non-Christian Religions: Toward

⁷*Gaudium et spes*, “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (7 Dec 1965), 22.

⁸Address from Manila to the People of Asia 1981, quoted in Giovanni Cereti, “Presence and Action of the Holy Spirit in the World and in Other Religions,” Commission for Interreligious Dialogue (September 1997), available on Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01091997_p-56_en.html.

⁹John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis* (4 March 1979), quoted in Ibid.

¹⁰Pope John Paul II, “Address to the Roman Curia” (Christmas 1986), quoted in Ibid.

¹¹Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation” (19 May 1991), 30.

the Meeting of Religions.” It calls “the path of dialogue, a path of charity . . . [and] faith,”¹² stating that,

the Church . . . not satisfied with mere proclamation (*kerygma*) and witness (*martyrion*), . . . urgently exhorts Catholics today through the voice of the Council and the Pope, to establish an actual dialogue on the human level, that is to say, frank and friendly contact, to promote in common the good of the entire community in accordance with the Gospel, also to seek the values inherent in the various religions and finally, to engage in religious dialogue properly so-called.¹³

This document points out that “man is intrinsically open to the supernatural and tends toward it, and everything in his environment testifies to a transcendent Reality.”¹⁴ It further states:

In other words, since human nature is made in the image of God and is called to God from the depths of its being, it can be said that the mystical aspiration is inherent in human nature and that everything leads to the belief that God lavishes His grace on those who seek Him. In such cases one may speak of true "mystical" experience, even though the quality of analogy which links these experiences with those of Christian saints must be emphasized.¹⁵

The Vatican, in setting out methodology for such dialogue, states: “Dialogue is a two-way

¹²Chapter 1.

¹³Ibid., 2,4. This document, quoting *Lumen gentium*, explains: “Non-Christians who are deprived of explicit knowledge of Christ nevertheless benefit by the universal Providence of God. . . . Consequently, ‘those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by His grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them, through the dictates of conscience’ (*Lumen gentium*, 16). A regime of personal graces therefore undoubtedly exists outside the Church and has existed prior to the Church. ‘God has other ways of saving souls outside the cone of light which is the revelation of salvation’ (Paul VI, O. R., May 15, 1965) despite the uncertainty and the arguments carried on by theologians as to the channels by which this grace can reach individual souls, and on the nature of this grace.” (“Suggestions for Dialogue,” 2, 2)

¹⁴Ibid., 3, 2.

¹⁵Ibid., 3, 11. This document further clarifies: “unfounded is the antithesis between prophetic (theistic) religion and mystical religion (pantheism) since mystical experience and mysticism are to be found in varying degrees in all the non-Christian religions. At best it is a question of experience occurring unexpectedly in the innermost depths of the spirit, of beatifying union with the superempirical Principle of all reality.”

communication. It implies speaking and listening, giving and receiving, for mutual growth and enrichment. It includes witness to one's own faith as well as an openness to that of the other. It is not a betrayal of mission of the Church, nor is it a new method of conversion to Christianity."¹⁶

Interreligious Dialogue: Catholicism and Asian Religions

There is an impressive amount of interreligious dialogue taking place between Roman Catholic lay and religious—individuals and groups—and representatives of various Asian religions, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism. Monastic communities of Benedictine heritage (OSB & OCSO)¹⁷ are engaged in very substantial dialogue with non-Christian monks and nuns from the East, particularly Buddhist, Hindu and Shinto, through the North American Board for East-West Dialogue and the related group Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID). The first MID Bulletin was published in 1978, and in 1980 a spiritual and educational exchange program between Catholic and Buddhist religious (monks and later nuns) began and continues today. Carmelites have only marginally been involved in this particular dialogue (e.g., Tessa Bielecki, OCD and Bruce Baker, OCarm).

Persons working from a Carmelite background, both lay and religious, are also actively involved in interreligious dialogue with Eastern religions. Three friars who live and write in the East are Gregory D'Souza, OCD, living in India, who has written *Teresian Mysticism and Yoga*;¹⁸ Rudolf

¹⁶Vatican Document, "The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue" (15 July 1999), available on Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_pro_20051996_en.html.

¹⁷OSB is an abbreviation for the Order of St. Benedict and OCSO for the Order of Cistercians Strict Observance.

¹⁸Gregory D'Souza, OCD, *Teresian Mysticism and Yoga* (Mangalore: Divya Jyothi Publications, 1981). See also: Gregory D'Souza, OCD, *Interculturality of Philosophy and Religion* (Bangalore; NBCLC, 1996).

V. D'Souza, OCD, also in India, whose doctoral dissertation at the Gregorian University is "The Bhagavadgita and St. John of the Cross;"¹⁹ and Ichiro Okumura, OCD, a convert from Buddhism, living in Japan, who crafts an informal dialogue between Carmelite mysticism and Zen Buddhism in his book, *Awakening to Prayer*.²⁰ A substantial dialogue between Carmelite mysticism, particularly the teaching of St. John of the Cross and the Theravada Buddhist practice of *vipassana*, or insight meditation, is found in the newly republished *Christian Insight Meditation: Following in the Footsteps of John of the Cross*, written by Mary Jo Meadow, SFCC, Daniel Chowning, OCD and Kevin Culligan, OCD.²¹ This book has grown out of years of giving *Silence and Awareness* retreats that bring together the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross and the *vipassana* meditation technique of Theravada Buddhism. Their contribution will be examined in greater detail below. Besides these creative efforts, there appears to be little direct Carmelite dialogue with Eastern mysticism, especially on the interpersonal level with representatives of Asian religions.

Interreligious dialogue is not a luxury to be indulged in, but a necessary and inescapable means to achieving understanding between peoples and peace in the world. Much of the current strife and conflict in our world today proceeds from conflicting world-views and people's intolerance

¹⁹ Rudolf V. D'Souza, OCD, "The Bhagavadgita and St. John of the Cross" (Ph.D. diss., the Gregorian University, n.d.).

²⁰ Augustine Ichiro Okumura, OCD, *Awakening to Prayer* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1994).

²¹ Mary Jo Meadow, SFCC, Daniel Chowning, OCD and Kevin Culligan, OCD, *Christian Insight Meditation: Following in the Footsteps of John of the Cross* (Summerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2007). This book was formerly published as *Purifying the Heart: Buddhist Insight Meditation for Christians* (New York: Crossroad, 1994). See also Daniel Chowning, OCD, Kevin Culligan, OCD and Mary Jo Meadow, SFCC, *Silence and Awareness: A Retreat Experience in Christian-Buddhist Meditation* (Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes, National Catholic Reporter Publishing).

of culture and religion not their own. In the Western world, the oversecularization and commercialization of life has marginalized the wisdom of our ascetical-mystical traditions. In all of the religions of the world, those who commit themselves to the ascetical-mystical life are the proponents of peace, love and universal goodwill for all. We cannot afford to bury our heads in the sand of spiritual self-interest and escape the moral exigencies for dialogue in our world today. Carmelites, especially because of our rich ascetical-mystical tradition, must heed the call by the Church to enter more fully into this dialogue.

III. ELEMENTS OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

All of us bring explicit and implicit attitudes, assumptions and presuppositions about religious traditions not our own to any possible interreligious dialogue. These attitudes, assumptions and presuppositions greatly affect how one dialogues or not. Some basic views can be identified that form something of a continuum between extremes. These are the exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist positions.²² Exclusivists believe they have a privileged or absolute claim to truth that excludes all other traditions;²³ traditional inclusivists hold that while they possess the fullness of truth, some degree of it exists, though perhaps to a lesser degree, in the other traditions;²⁴ and pluralists hold that no tradition has a monopoly on the truth, and that all traditions are, more or less, equally valid.²⁵

²²The following discussion is a generalization of these three positions that have, in fact, a great deal of variation in how they are understood and nuanced in the work of different scholars.

²³Religious fundamentalism would fall into this category.

²⁴It could be argued that this is the inherent position of Vatican II in both *Nostra aetate* and *Lumen gentium*.

²⁵“Pluralism” in this sense refers to those variants of pluralism that advocate what might be termed “doctrinal indifferentism.” There are other forms of pluralism that do not fit this description. One variant of pluralism is “parallelism” as described by Panikkar: “if you cannot dismiss the

One may, however, be an inclusivist and still adopt something of a pluralist posture while in a dialogue out of respect for the religious other. One does not in doing so move to a position of religious relativity, but rather one of courteous regard.

Planning Interreligious Dialogue

In any interreligious dialogue one must make explicit the “who, what, when, where, why and how” of the encounter. *When* and *where* are the easiest to deal with as practical concerns of scheduling and location. The other questions place a greater demand on the participants of the encounter: *Who* is the “other” of my dialogue—ordinary practitioners or scholars, monks or laypersons? (This will determine how one dialogues.) *What* are we dialoguing about—beliefs, practices, mystical experience, theology, or social justice concerns? *Why* are we engaging in the dialogue—to understand the other, to discover new ideas for my own faith articulation and self-understanding, or to bring about a transformation of self and world in the encounter? *How* will we dialogue—casually or scholarly, in writing or open forum, mutually or unilaterally? A great deal of “dialogue” is unilateral and not a full, mutual, bilateral exchange between persons of different traditions. One must also identify one’s epistemological assumptions about what is “truth,” what it means to know the truth and how one *validates* that knowledge.

Types of Interreligious Dialogue

Practically speaking, there are three fundamental types of interreligious dialogue that occur:

religious claim of the other nor assimilate it completely into your tradition, a plausible alternative is to assume that all are different creeds which, in spite of meanderings and crossings, actually run parallel to meet only in the ultimate, in the *eschaton*, at the very end of the human pilgrimage.” See Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), xviii, where he spells out both advantages and difficulties with this approach.

1) casual or *informal dialogue* where each person gets to know the other in daily living or through casual encounters; 2) academic or *scholarly dialogue* that proceeds through a thorough education in language, symbols and world-view of the religious other; and 3) *participatory dialogue*, which may be either casually or academically grounded, wherein at least one member of the dialogue moves into the other tradition and experiences the religious beliefs and practices of the other.

Informal participatory dialogue with Asian religions is very popular in the Western world and is evidenced in the syncretism of the New Age movement and also in the shallow appropriation of Eastern religion by many casual converts. Such casual dialogue runs the risk of trivializing and deforming the content of the dialogue. In typical consumerist fashion, Westerners often pick and choose those aspects that are mysterious and exciting but that will neatly fit into their thoroughly Western consciousness and lifestyle.

Scholarly participatory dialogue, on the other hand, attempts to avoid such pitfalls by learning enough of the language and tradition in an attempt to avoid distortion of the content. Minimally, in scholarly participatory dialogue, in order to avoid a syncretistic conflation of symbols, at least one member of the dialogue will “bracket” his or her world-view and tradition and cognitively, and very possibly experientially, enter into the world-view of the religious other. To “bracket” one’s world-view means that one attempts to learn the symbol system and spiritual language of the religious other to such a degree that one is able to think and converse in these terms without constant reference by way of comparison or translation back to one’s own spiritual language and world-view.²⁶ Bracketing is necessary at this level of dialogue in order to prevent a syncretistic

²⁶This is not to say one should never translate or understand the other’s symbols or world-view from the perspective of one’s own (this is inevitable), but that in the dialogue, one attempts to understand the inner coherence of the other’s thought. Likewise, one ideally will share one’s own faith perspective and expect the religious other to bracket their own world-view as well.

adaptation that minimizes differences, and consequently, devalues the language and symbols of the religious other, not to mention one's own.²⁷ Scholarly participatory dialogue characterizes the interreligious dialogue of several Carmelite scholars, particularly Daniel Chowning and Kevin Culligan, who have seriously engaged East Asian religion, particularly Buddhism, especially in terms of meditative practice.

In addition to these three ways that interreligious dialogue is done, there seem to be three basic reasons or motives for engaging in interreligious dialogue: 1) to inform or be informed; 2) to consult with the other; and 3) mutually to form one another. These could be called informative, consultative and interformative forms of interreligious dialogue.²⁸ *Informative dialogue* seeks merely the sharing of information and the deepening of understanding for one or both members of the dialogue. An example of this is the article in the New Catholic Encyclopedia on Hinduism written to provide clear information on this religion to interested Roman Catholics. *Consultative dialogue* draws on the knowledge and experience of the religious other in order to a) better work

²⁷Raimundo Panikkar, very strongly, with good argument, critiques the idea of “bracketing” in interreligious dialogue when he states that, “the problem arises when we pretend to bracket not a formulation, a notion, but a fundamental conviction of the person at the existential level. If we accept the distinction between faith and belief, we may be able to agree to a certain necessary *epoché* of our beliefs, but I would prefer to call for transcending them altogether as long as we are engaged in a serious interreligious dialogue. The *epoché* looks rather like a closet for temporarily storing one's personal convictions for the sake of the dialogue; whereas transcending our concepts is not simply a methodological device. A non-conceptual awareness allows different translations of the same transconceptual reality for different notional systems without methodological strategies.” See *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 43. The problem is that the vast majority of individuals who are inclined to interreligious dialogue do not have the time, resources, education or training to do this to the degree Panikkar advocates.

²⁸I borrow the term “interformation” from Adrian van Kaam, who states that “interformation . . . points to the relatively free and insightful formation that takes place continuously and mutually between people.” *Formative Spirituality, Vol. 4, Scientific Formation* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 26.

together for the benefit of society and world or b) better understand or practice one's own tradition through a consideration of the formative wisdom of another, as when a Carmelite scholar studies and practices the *vipassana* meditation tradition of Theravada Buddhism (e.g., Chowning and Culligan).²⁹ *Interformative dialogue* takes place when each person in the dialogue studies and learns from the other at such a depth of experience that both are fundamentally changed by the encounter. This last form of dialogue seems to be rather rare. Examples of this would be the journal, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*,³⁰ the book *A Bridge to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* by Seiichi Yagi and Leonard Swidler,³¹ or the essays in *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity*, edited by Roger Corless and Paul F. Knitter.³² Sometimes this interformative dialogue moves to the level of deep personal synthesis as with the coauthor of *Christian Insight Meditation*, Mary Jo Meadow, who as a "Sister for Christian Community" is also "vowed to the Theravadan Buddhist nun's precepts."³³

Debate within the Church

How interreligious dialogue is accomplished has generated a great deal of heated debate over the years and has resulted in measures by the Vatican to correct what it views as serious deviations from Church teaching by individuals going too far in this kind of dialogue. On August 6, 2000, the

²⁹Another example of this would be Dom Aelred Graham's *Zen Catholicism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963).

³⁰*Buddhist-Christian Studies*, University of Hawaii Press.

³¹Seiichi Yagi and Leonard Swidler, *A Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).

³²Roger Corless and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).

³³Notice on Wisdom Publications' website for the book *Christian Insight Meditation*, see <http://www.wisdompubs.org>.

Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, “On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.”³⁴ This document forcefully denounces any syncretistic fusion of traditions that appears to deny the role of Jesus Christ and the Church as the “universal sacrament of salvation . . . and the instrument of salvation of all humanity.”³⁵ Despite the very strong tones of this document, it is important to read it within the context of other statements from the Vatican. Pope John Paul II, explaining the coming together of the major world religions at the Day of Assisi he hosted in October 1986, states clearly: “The differences (between religions) are a lesser important element in relation to the unity, which, on the contrary, is radical, fundamental and determining.”³⁶ While the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger) sternly warns Catholics about fusing Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian, he affirms clearly that,

The majority of the great religions which have sought union with God in prayer have also pointed out ways to achieve it. Just as the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions, neither should these ways be rejected out of hand simply because they are non-Christian. On the contrary, one can take from them, what is useful so long as the

³⁴See the Vatican Website: http://www.vatican.va_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents.

³⁵In this document, section VI, titled “The Church and the Other Religions in Relation to Salvation,” asserts: “With the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument for the salvation of all humanity (cf. Acts 17:30-31; cf. *Lumen gentium* 17; John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 11). This truth of faith does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for the religions of the world, but at the same time, it rules out, in a radical way, that mentality of indifferentism characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another.' (John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 36) If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation. (Cf. Pius XII, *Mystici corporis*: DS 3821).” (This position is still “inclusivism” but on the border of exclusivism.)

³⁶22nd December 1986.

Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured.³⁷

Furthermore, despite all the caution in this document, the Congregation continues by stating that this “does not mean that genuine practices of meditation, which come from the Christian East and from the great non-Christian religions, which prove attractive to the man of today, who is divided and disoriented, cannot constitute a suitable means of helping the person who prays to come before God with an interior peace, even in the midst of external pressures.”³⁸

It could therefore be argued that interformative dialogue is recognized by the Vatican as possible for Catholics. In 1984, the Holy See’s Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions, in its document titled, “The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions,” advocates “the dialogue of religious experience, which is the sharing of experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith and duty, expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute, *leading to mutual enrichment and the promotion of the highest spiritual values* (emphasis added).”³⁹ Not only are we encouraged

³⁷The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops on the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation” (15 October 1989), 16. It is important to note that the Vatican critique of Buddhism in this letter and in some statements by Pope John Paul II (quoted in the next section) have been thoroughly analyzed and critically challenged by both Buddhist and Christian scholars as so seriously misstating Buddhism that, in fact, what they say has little or no connection to Buddhism at all. See especially Buddhist scholar, Victoria Urubshurow, “Love is God: A Buddhist Interreligious Response to the Vatican Instruction on ‘Some Aspects of Christian Meditation’” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991): 149-172. See also: John Borelli, “Reflections on ‘Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation,’” *Ibid.*, 139-147; and Pascaline Coff, OSB, “The Inner Journey: Reflections on the Awakening of Mind and Heart in Buddhism and Christianity,” *Ibid.*, 173-195.

³⁸*Ibid.* Kevin Culligan, OCD asserts that “Christian insight meditation directly addresses the major concerns of the Vatican’s warning.” He then demonstrates that the practice is compatible with Church teaching and John of the Cross. See *Christian Insight Meditation*, 174-75.

³⁹The Holy See’s Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions names four forms of dialogue: 1) “the dialogue of life, which . . . (implies) concern, respect and hospitality toward others”; 2) “the dialogue of deeds, which is collaboration with others toward goals of the humanitarian social economic or political nature addressing the great problems with which humanity is struggling”; 3)

to share with one another our respective religious beliefs for the goal of mutual understanding, but we are encouraged to mutually enrich one another and promote the highest spiritual values in one another's lives of faith. This nuance is most important for the Carmelite dialogue with Eastern mysticism since a number of Carmelites who are engaged in interreligious dialogue are dialoguing at this level.

IV. METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

In any dialogue between systems of thought or belief that are articulated in different languages or symbol systems (as in a dialogue between theology and psychology or a dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism), sound methodology that guides the dialogue is absolutely crucial in order to arrive at clear mutual understanding that does not distort the content of either symbol system or tradition.

How Not To Dialogue

On one hand, scholars and writers who have a deep sympathy for the religious other and find some commonality of experience often tend to blur the meanings of particular religious concepts and symbols of their own or the other's tradition in an effort to identify what they see as the essential unity of such experiences. On the other hand, apologists will often defensively contrast the truth as they know it in their own tradition with what they see as woefully inadequate in the tradition of the other in order to show the deficiency of that tradition. An example of this first error would be those

“the dialogue of specialist, which is the exchange of views and joint study of those who have developed special expertise” to promote mutual understanding, friendship, and the appreciation of each other's spiritual values; and 4) “the dialogue of religious experience, which is the sharing of experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith and duty, expressions and ways of searching for absolute, leading to mutual enrichment and the promotion of the highest spiritual values” (“The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions,” nos. 28-35).

scholars who argue that the concept of “emptiness” in John of the Cross is fundamentally the same concept as that articulated by the first century Buddhist Madhyamaka scholar Nagarjuna.⁴⁰ (This issue will be addressed in much greater detail in Section VI below.) Likewise, a glaring example of the apologetic misstatement of the position of the religious other is found in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, where His Holiness, John Paul II relates:

The "enlightenment" experienced by Buddha comes down to the conviction that the world is bad, that it is the source of evil and of suffering for man. To liberate oneself from this evil, one must free oneself from this world, necessitating a break with the ties that join us to external reality—ties existing in our human nature, in our psyche, in our bodies. The more we are liberated from these ties, the more we become indifferent to what is in the world, and the more we are freed from suffering, from the evil that has its source in the world.⁴¹

When Buddhists of any tradition read this statement, they are stunned by what they view as a complete misrepresentation of the Buddha’s teaching. The highly respected Tibetan Buddhist scholar, Thinley Norbu, responds to this erroneous description of Buddhism by John Paul II in a ninety-three-page book. He forcefully asserts:

The misrepresentations of Buddhism in his book may have come from listening to advisors who were unfamiliar with Buddhism, from simply glancing at books at the Hinayana level, or by being shown books by misinformed authors. Perhaps he only looked at negative conceptions about Buddhism written by followers of other doctrines who had malicious intentions, or by idiots who wrote books for money without caring that they were full of mistakes. In any case, the Pope definitely heard about Buddhism from sources that did not know anything about it. It seems . . . as though he . . . scooped a few drops of water from an immeasurable ocean with

⁴⁰Abraham Vélez de Cea analyzes the problems with doing this in his article: “A New Direction for Comparative Studies of Buddhists and Christians: Evidence from Nagarjuna and John of the Cross,” in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006): 139-55.

⁴¹His Holiness John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 1994), 85-86. This statement reminds me of the many conversations that I have had with fundamentalist Evangelical Christians who assure me that Catholics do, in fact, worship idols (among other fictions), and they are surprised that I do not know my own tradition any better despite my protests to the contrary!

a piece of grass and even misunderstood these few drops.⁴²

Norbu offers valuable advice, often neglected, about the parameters of good dialogue: “Without studying and understanding other doctrines deeply, to say many things about them is not wise.” Norbu continues; “it is not enough just to say a few negative words, since it can create the tracks of hatred between religions, which is harmful to everyone.”⁴³

It is not only the apologist, however, that runs the risk of distorting the beliefs of the religious other. Well-meaning inclusivists and pluralists can blur concepts and confuse or conflate symbols between traditions that eventually lead to deep misunderstanding or misappropriation of one or both traditions.⁴⁴

It appears that a great deal of interreligious dialogue taking place in the West between Christianity and Asian religions is unsystematic and without clear methodological parameters. The casual or informal dialogue is often motivated by a fascination with Asian religion by Westerners who are disenchanted with Western religious traditions. Consequently, what often occurs is a misappropriation of Asian religion by an involvement with what is popular or exciting that is then assimilated into the seeker’s Western consciousness. This kind of appropriation typically deforms the content of the Asian religion and often devolves into a syncretism of whatever ideas an individual finds appealing. This kind of syncretism characterizes the New Age movement, which has a smorgasbord approach to spirituality; that is, one takes a little of this and a little of that but fails to

⁴²Thinley Norbu, *Welcoming Flowers from Across the Cleansed Threshold of Hope: An Answer to the Pope’s Criticism of Buddhism* (New York: Jewel Publishing House, 1997), 2.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴For a detailed critical analysis of the dialogue of Christianity with Asian religions, see James Arraj, *Christianity in the Crucible of East-West Dialogue*, (Chiloquin, OR: Inner Growth Books, 2001).

savor any one dish in its entirety. This tendency is found, not only in those seekers who are cut off or alienated from Western traditions, but in some persons theologically well-educated who are excited by personal encounters with Asian religious teachers and the parallels found between their own tradition and that of the religious other. Not only does the danger of syncretism exist here, but so does the danger of conflating highly complex symbols into one another, for instance, assuming that *satori*⁴⁵ or *moksha*⁴⁶ are functionally or even ontologically equivalent to union with God or the spiritual marriage of St. John of the Cross.

An example of the conflation of symbols occurs in *Christian Insight Meditation* when Mary Jo Meadow asserts that the experience of *Nibbana* in Theravada Buddhism is the experience of Ultimate Reality for which others use different names “such as God, Brahmin, the Absolute, Allah . . .”⁴⁷ She states: “that nothing but God—or Nibbana—gives true satisfaction.”⁴⁸ In a review of the *Silence and Awareness* retreat in the Carmelite journal, *Spiritual Life*, this author notes this problem with some aspects of the presentation by Mary Jo Meadow:

⁴⁵In Zen Buddhism, *satori* is the experience of becoming fully awakened or enlightened.

⁴⁶In Hinduism, *moksha* is the final liberation from *samsara*, the perpetual cycle of birth, death and rebirth, either through union with God or knowledge of Ultimate Reality.

⁴⁷Meadow, 15. One must seriously ask whether Muslims would find this statement at all acceptable, and what are the consequences of this for dialogue with them?

⁴⁸Ibid., 82. *Nibbana*, (Pali; in Sanskrit: Nirvana) meaning literally “extinction,” in Buddhism describes the passage from the determining effects of *karma* (cause and effect in cyclic existence) into another mode of existence that is transcendent, supramundane and unconditioned. This is routinely misunderstood in the West to mean a literal annihilation, which is a thorough misconception of this term. A similar concept in Christianity might more appropriately be “Heaven” not “God.” In Buddhism, the concept probably with the greatest *similarity* to the apophatic description of “God” in Christianity would probably be the *Dharmakaya*, which is the true transcendent nature of the (eternal) Buddha as the Ultimate Essence of all that is. (See *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion*, Boston: Shambhala Press, 1989 for accurate, clear definitions of these terms.)

I question her occasional disregard for, what I believe to be, real differences between Theravadin and Christian beliefs. . . . Again and again she equates Buddhist Nibbana (Nirvana in Sanskrit) with the Christian God, and implies that purgatory might be a symbol for a kind of reincarnation through many lifetimes. About Christ she states: "The whole life of Jesus can be seen as giving us what is necessary for our salvation by dying in order to show us how to live, thus teaching us the necessity of living in relinquishment of self. I have long been convinced that the salvation that Jesus won for us is the salvation in this lesson." (Side 20)

Serious questions emerge here concerning the enduring ontological reality of the human person in relation to God and the work of redemption in Jesus Christ. Union with God, for St. John of the Cross, is a divine gift made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This union is a union with the real, living person of Jesus. It is a participation in the life of the Trinity, not an absolute "relinquishment of self" or disappearance into the Godhead.

These are important issues that cannot be glossed over in any serious dialogue between Buddhists and Christians. In practical applications of spiritual wisdom from two different faith and formation traditions such as this, facile equivocation runs the risk of syncretism.⁴⁹

The essential, inescapable, but perhaps the most neglected, part of interreligious dialogue is clarifying the epistemology of each person engaged in the dialogue. If each person's epistemology is not adequately understood and minimally congruent with the other, the dialogue will break down since each person will be operating from different, possibly incompatible, epistemological frames of reference. That is, they will be coming from different understandings of *what it means to know* and even *what is known*.⁵⁰ They will consequently articulate their experience of reality, in this case especially Ultimate Reality, in language that the other does not understand but may assume that she or he does. It is so much safer to say: "In many ways, the concept of *Nibbana* (which Buddhists declare is *ultimately* not *Nibbana*!) has similarities to St. John of the Cross' understanding of God who is beyond all categories and distinctions," than to say, "*Nibbana* is God." When we move to

⁴⁹Keith Reeves Barron, "Review of Silence and Awareness: A Retreat Experience in Christian-Buddhist Meditation," in *Spiritual Life*.

⁵⁰Even among Christians, many attempted dialogues break down over the truth of Sacred Scripture because each person is approaching the text from a different epistemological assumption about what constitutes knowing the truth: as when a person who has made the shift into historical-critical consciousness attempts to explain to a fundamentalist why the six days of creation in Genesis were not literally twenty-four-hour periods.

this latter statement, we risk bringing real interreligious dialogue to an end, no matter how satisfying the statement may seem to be. To be fair, individuals like Meadow are operating from an exceptional level of what Raimundo Panikkar calls *intrareligious dialogue*—a level of personal integration and prayerful realization not readily available to most Christians or Buddhists.

Some Observations on Methodology

Both exclusivists and pluralists make basic epistemological errors in interreligious dialogue. Exclusivists operate from an epistemology that tends to deny the relative nature of conceptual knowing by absolutizing the symbols and content of faith. The extreme of this tendency is a fundamentalism that confuses the language and symbols of faith with that to which the symbols refer— the divine Mystery that transcends all such limitations.⁵¹ As one Zen master is reported to have said, “one can point one’s finger at the moon, but he who takes his finger for the moon is a fool.” Exclusivists become reductionistic when subjecting the language, symbols and beliefs of others to a critique that the other finds invalidating and incorrect. Pluralists move in the opposite direction when they so completely relativize the symbols for the Mystery that they assume all experiences of the transcendent are (more or less) the same. In this case, one finger pointing at the moon becomes no different from any other. Instead of either absolutizing or relativizing, there needs to be a moderate middle path that affirms the relative nature of conceptual, symbolic knowing of the transcendent Mystery but that does not conflate the symbols or experiences of the Mystery in the separate traditions into one another without regard to the formative power of culture and tradition.

Valuing appropriately the role of epistemology in interreligious dialogue actually holds a

⁵¹“Mystery” will be used throughout to designate that which the various religions of the world recognize as transcendent Truth or the Absolute, that which is sacred or divine, that which theistic religions call God.

great deal of promise in examining the mystical experience of persons from separate traditions. Mystics from different traditions often find a complementarity of language because of their common inability to articulate in words their experience of the transcendent Mystery. Mystics worldwide typically refuse any fundamentalist absolutization of religious symbols no matter how sacred the symbols are to them. When mystics “err” in interreligious dialogue, it is usually in the direction of universalizing experience. When it comes to dialogue about ineffable, transcendent contemplative experiences, there may actually be more understanding between a Carmelite friar and a Tibetan Buddhist lama, for example, than between the same friar and a fundamentalist Protestant preacher who finds all talk of “mysticism” alien and vociferously shuns it as “not Christian.”

When one enters into dialogue with the religious other, it is essential that both one’s epistemology and methodology, as well as one’s intentions, be understood and disclosed. For instance, does one a priori assume that one’s own faith tradition has an exclusive grasp on what is true or not? One must ask: How will one’s assumptions affect the partner in dialogue? Is one simply seeking to become more informed about the religion of the other, or is one open to being changed by the encounter? If one goes further and recognizes valuable formative wisdom in the other’s tradition, does one simply consult in order to better understand and practice one’s own faith? Or, does one enter into such a thorough dialogue of mutual exchange that each participant is open to being fundamentally transformed by the depth and breadth of the encounter? (Can I come to that place where I get a glimpse of the transcendent Mystery *through their eyes*?) Of this kind of dialogue, Raimundo Panikkar asserts: “I shall never be able to meet the other as he meets and understands himself if I do not meet and understand him in and as myself.”⁵² In any encounter, there

⁵²Panikkar, p. 40. Panikkar observes that “we often hear more talk about interreligious dialogue than actual dialogue.” Instead, he stresses “the often neglected notion of an *intrareligious*

also needs to be a certain *dialogical validation* in which my understanding finds authentication in the religious other by asking and verifying that my knowledge, understanding and rearticulation of their faith are accurate and congruent with their belief and practice. Far too often, having learned a little about the other, we either assume that we really understand what they believe or that we must be talking about the same experiences, or we launch into a misinformed critique of them with an apologetic for our own beliefs and practices. How much more good would we do by developing an articulate response that clearly values the inner coherence and integrity of their tradition without assuming that we must either be talking about the same or different experiences of the transcendent Mystery.

V. METHODOLOGY FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

While mystics around the world might use language describing their encounters with the transcendent Mystery in similar terms, one cannot simply assume they are all talking about the same thing either experientially or ontologically. While the concepts of God and Nirvana may both be valid symbols for the sacred Mystery, one cannot assume that the experiences of mystics in each tradition are actually the same. Many will argue that, given the forming power of cultural and personal context, they cannot be the same.⁵³ Even the language we are using for this talk on

dialogue; i.e., an inner dialogue with myself, an encounter in the depth of my personal religiousness, having met another religious experience on that very intimate level. In other words, if *interreligious* dialogue is to be real dialogue, an *intrareligious* dialogue must accompany it, i.e., it must begin with my questioning myself and the *relativity* of my beliefs (which does not mean their relativism), accepting the challenge of a change, a conversion and the risk of upsetting my traditional patterns. . . . One simply cannot enter the arena of genuine religious dialogue without such a self-critical attitude.”

⁵³There is serious debate between *perennialists*, who assert that there is a “common core” of truth across traditions that can be addressed in dialogue, and *constructivists*, who maintain that all mystical experience is so radically determined by the language of the tradition that there is no

Carmelite and Eastern “mysticism” projects on the religious other a concept not truly shared by all. The terms “mystic” and “mystical” are fundamentally Western and Christian terms, and no easy equivalents are found in Buddhism.

All transcendent encounters of the divine Mystery are personal encounters that are understood and articulated within the particular context of each individual as they are formed uniquely by culture, language, family, experience and interpersonal relations. Mystical experiences of the divine Mystery are by their nature ineffable, transcending the particular concepts, symbols and language of the mystic. When these experiences are shared with others, they are by necessity “translated” from the ineffable experience into the particular language and symbol system of the mystic (i.e., *mystagogy*). They are therefore reduced to the particular religious, social and psychological context of the mystic. This is the “mediated” experience without which one must remain silent.

While the particular experience of a mystic may well be an authentic experience of the transcendent Mystery, when it is reflected on, psychologically appropriated by the mystic and conveyed in language to others, one is left with a limited and circumscribed account of that experience.⁵⁴ It is somewhat like trying to show a sketch of a mountain panorama to others who only

common core at all. A moderate perennialist position holds that the various world mystical traditions are talking about the same Ultimate Reality, though couched in the languages and histories of different cultures and traditions.

⁵⁴Any experience of the transcendent Mystery that is reflected upon or communicated to another is by necessity mediated through the physical consciousness—that is, the brain—of the human being who has the experience. It is therefore always a mediated experience. The mediated communication is neither the transcendent Mystery nor even the experience of the Mystery *per se*. To say that the experience of the Mystery is ineffable is to say that there is no true comparison with anything else known, that is, anything known through the senses, and it transcends the brain’s capacity to know that by any natural means. When persons compare their experiences of the Mystery, what they are comparing are their mediated experiences, the experiences that are communicated through the language and tradition of that religious tradition, not the experience itself.

get a faint impression of what the original experience of actually being there must have been like. Even the original experience of the mystic, on reflection, is formed by his or her context and frame of reference. I have a friend who once took a man who had spent his whole life in the mountains of North Carolina to see the Atlantic Ocean for the first time. Driving right up onto the beach, the man got out, looked for a few moments, shook his head and asked, "Is that it? I thought it was a lot bigger than that!" He returned to the car and said, "Well I seen it (sic). Let's go." This was a real experience of the Atlantic Ocean, but it was formed and appropriated by his experience of life in the mountains where one can see for many miles on a clear day, which sharply contrasted with his very limited experience of the ocean that looked small to him from the beach. Any experience is understood by reference to other previous experiences. This is not to say, however, that one does not indeed know the Mystery in mystical experience, but for Carmelite mystics, authentic mystical experience is clearly the dark and obscure "knowing in unknowing" of faith. (It is a knowledge of God by love.)

What is needed in interreligious dialogue are methodologies that avoid reducing the contents of the respective traditions to the "same thing" while at the same time recognizing that there are universal aspects to human religious experience and ongoing spiritual formation. These methodologies will vary according to the aim, motive or reason for dialogue as mentioned above. They may be concerned with gathering information and arriving at some understanding of the religious other that is validated by that other as relatively accurate. Honest, accurate dialogue necessitates the validation by the religious other of one's understanding of them, otherwise it really is not "dialogue" in the full sense of this word. They may be consultative when some useful knowledge or practice of the religious other is appropriated or adopted into one's understanding,

belief or practice. Or they may be interformative when the participants involved enter into a deeper, mutual dialogue that shapes not only that particular exchange but changes them personally and spiritually. How can such dialogue, either for consultation or interformation, happen without running the risks described above of reductionism or syncretism?

Constructive-Relational Methodology

One methodology that allows different perspectives (or disciplines) to speak to the same data of experience has been suggested by William R. Rogers, who attempts to overcome the pervasive tendency to reduce one language, model or discipline to another. Rogers offers an integrative paradigm that he calls a “constructive-relational model”:

one which attempts to remain faithful to the primary phenomena, while encouraging relational attention to multiple disciplines of interpretation—moving toward a more constructive and holistic understanding (that cannot be "claimed" or reduced by any *one* of the various approaches). Here there may be both mutual critique and support, empirical attentiveness, and innovative possibilities for integration.⁵⁵

Such a constructive position provides, what Rogers calls, a “synthetic, multidimensional understanding” of the phenomena under study.⁵⁶

The constructive-relational model aims at overcoming both the theoretical and practical deficits that occur when working from only one particular language, model or discipline to examine

⁵⁵William R. Rogers, “Interdisciplinary Approaches to Moral and Religious Development: a Critical Overview,” in *Toward Moral and Religious Maturity: The First International Conference on Moral and Religious Development* (Morristown: NJ: Silver Burdett, 1980), 11-50.

⁵⁶An extensive example of this, drawing on both theology and psychology to expose contemplative transformation in the works of John of the Cross, is the doctoral dissertation of this author: Keith Reeves Barron, “A Study of St. John of the Cross’s Theology of Transformation from the Perspective of Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory” (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1989). A summary of this work is found in “The Dark Night of God,” article published in *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 13:1 (1992): 49-72.

some area of human life or experience. Interdisciplinary approaches benefit from the diverse experience of scholars working from different fields toward mutual collaboration. A constructive-relational methodology in interreligious dialogue would focus primarily on the phenomena of ongoing spiritual formation or the religious experiences of persons within particular faith and formation traditions. These phenomena would be examined from various perspectives through a multidisciplinary approach using language and symbols that have both accuracy and compatibility with the data in order to describe and articulate findings and make comparisons. An example of this approach might be the consideration of ascetical practice, exploring whether it represents a formative or deformative process in the spiritual life. A constructive dialogue would occur when relevant information is brought together from diverse traditions together with insights from the human sciences and possibly the arts to examine the dynamics of ascetical practice.⁵⁷

Methodological Considerations

Some important methodological considerations that could facilitate interreligious might include: 1) identifying the purpose of the dialogue (informative, consultative, or interformative); 2) grounding the dialogue in an epistemology that each understands, that is, each knows “where the other is coming from”; 3) finding an avenue, or common language, of dialogue that each participant of the dialogue finds congenial by which they can validate the understanding of the other (this could mean that each one learns well the language and tradition of the other); and 4) respecting the tradition of each other without participants either a) conflating concepts or symbols despite apparent

⁵⁷The author does this in the paper, “Asceticism: Self-Abuse or Means of Transformation?” delivered to the Mysticism Group of the American Academy of Religion Annual Conference (21 Nov 1993). In this paper, the health or pathology of ascetical process is examined through a dialogue with Christian, Buddhist and psychological sources.

similarities, that is, the syncretist's tendency, or b) reducing them to a simplistic, inadequate explanation because they appear so dissimilar to one's own, that is, the fundamentalist's tendency. To wholly avoid these errors, thorough dialogue needs to occur between a credible number of scholars and theologians faithfully representing each tradition so that one's understanding and interpretation of the religious other is validated by them. Mindful of these guidelines, this paper will, in the next section, take a closer look at dialogue between Carmelite and Eastern mysticism.

VI. CARMELITE AND EASTERN MYSTICISM: THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language. Thus in Hinduism, men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust. Again, Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. (NA, 2)

Those writers who seek to bring Carmelite mystics into dialogue with Asian religion typically will go to Hinduism for a dialogue with St. Teresa of Avila and to Buddhism for dialogue with St. John of the Cross. The primary reasons for doing this are that these scholars find what, they believe, are significant parallels between Teresa's seven dwelling places and the yogic stages of consciousness or the seven *chakras*, or they find parallels between John's apophatic mysticism and Buddhist emptiness, as well as the transformation of desire through the ascetical process found in both.

Besides the Carmelite scholars mentioned in Section II above, other attempts to pull Teresa into dialogue with Hindu tradition include a number of individuals that have written doctoral dissertations over the last fifteen years, including: Kevin Patrick Joyce, who brings Teresa into a

dialogue with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of Transcendental Meditation fame;⁵⁸ Rod Davis, who asserts that Teresa's teaching is essentially the same as the *chakra* symbolism of *kundalini* yoga;⁵⁹ Veronica Cahill who identifies Teresa's seven mansions with the *chakras*;⁶⁰ and Margaret South who compares Teresa's "mystic fire" with "*kundalini* phenomenon."⁶¹ With the exception of Kevin Patrick Joyce's work, these dissertations pay scant attention to methodology and often conflate symbols from the two traditions, assuming that they are really talking about the same phenomena but simply in different languages. Joyce is the exception as he sets out a methodology for interreligious dialogue rooted in the work of Bernard Lonergan in which he attempts to transpose mystical language into the language of interiority. Joyce's dissertation benefits by the extra care he gives to providing a careful methodology and philosophical language to the dialogue.

Some examples of scholarly work that bring St. John of the Cross into dialogue with Asian religion include: Thomas J. Myladil's dissertation, "Renunciation in St. John of the Cross and in the Bhagavad-Gita";⁶² Peter Feldmeier's *Christianity Looks East*, a dialogue between John and the

⁵⁸ Kevin Patrick Joyce, "A Study of Higher States of Consciousness and Their Interpretation According to Teresa of Avila and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi" (Ph.D., diss., The Catholic University of America, 1992). See also his master's thesis: "Contemplation in the Writings of St. Teresa of Avila Compared with the Transcendental Meditation Program" (M.A. thesis, St. Patrick's Seminary, 1980).

⁵⁹Rod Davis, "Stages of Spiritual Development: An Inquiry Based on the Chakra Symbolism of Kundalini Yoga and the Christian Mystical Text, *Interior Castle*, by Teresa of Avila," (Ph.D. diss., The California Institute of Integral Studies, 2003).

⁶⁰Veronica Cahill, "Two Paths up the Same Mountain: Teresa of Avila's Seven Mansions and the Seven Chakras" (M.A. thesis, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, 1995).

⁶¹Margaret South, "The Mystic Fire of Teresa of Avila: a Comparative Study of Mysticism and the Kundalini Phenomenon" (Ph.D. diss., the University of Ottawa, 2001).

⁶²Thomas Myladil, "Renunciation in St. John of the Cross and the Bhagavad-Gita" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1994).

Buddhist master Buddhaghosa;⁶³ Springs Steele’s article, “Christian Insight Meditation: A Test Case on Interreligious Spirituality”;⁶⁴ and a well-written critique of the attempts to dialogue by Abraham Vélez de Cea’s in his article “A New Direction for Comparative Studies of Buddhists and Christians: Evidence from Nagarjuna and John of the Cross.”⁶⁵ An excellent work that provides a well-constructed critique of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, focusing particularly on those attempts to identify the teachings of John of the Cross and Nagarjuna, is Joseph Michael Thometz’s dissertation, “Speaking With and Away: A Buddhist-Christian Meta-Dialogue.”⁶⁶

It is somewhat surprising that there is so little critique of the methods and assumptions of these attempts to bring the Carmelite mystics into dialogue with Asian religion. Carmelite mystics, especially John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, seem to be common targets for a one-sided interreligious “dialogue” that attempts to conflate their images into proofs or examples of non-Christian religious experience. One dissertation that exemplifies this problem is “Stages of Spiritual Development” by Rod Davis who uses Teresa’s *Interior Castle* to illustrate the stages of *kundalini* yoga. One hesitates to call this work a “dialogue” at all. He basically translates Teresa into the world-view of *kundalini* yoga using Jungian psychology and examples from other traditions to claim

⁶³ Peter Feldmeier, *Christianity Looks East: Comparing the Spiritualities of John of the Cross and Buddhaghosa* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

⁶⁴ Springs Steele, “Christian Insight Meditation: A Test Case on Interreligious Spirituality,” in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 20 (2000): 217-29.

⁶⁵ Abraham Vélez de Cea, “A New Direction for Comparative Studies of Buddhists and Christians: Evidence from Nagarjuna and John of the Cross,” in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006): 139-55.

⁶⁶ Joseph Michael Thometz, “Speaking With and Away: A Buddhist-Christian Meta-Dialogue” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2002).

that *kundalini* yoga and Teresa's *Interior Castle* are merely "different maps for the same territory."⁶⁷ Neither "Jesus" nor "Christ" are mentioned in this dissertation that ends on a pantheistic note.⁶⁸ Another dissertation, much more critically done is "Fire and Wood: the Journey Leading to Transformation of the Soul in Union with God/Brahman as Described in the Writings of Ramanuja and John of the Cross," by Denise Marie Hanusek. Instead of conflating religious language and symbols, she carefully examines the ongoing formation and overall life of each of these men to discover significant parallels in their respective mystical journeys. Hers is a much more carefully nuanced treatment that not only compares, but also contrasts these two mystics as she points out both similarities and salient differences.⁶⁹ On the whole, it appears that one of the fundamental problems in interreligious dialogue between Carmelite and Eastern mysticism is trying to find common ground for understanding and at the same time resisting the temptation to conflate symbols and to assume that similar language is always talking about the same realities.

Carmelite-Buddhist Dialogue

John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila give us some of the most detailed psychology of mystical experience and the ongoing process of contemplative transformation in all of Christian writing on these subjects. Both this fact and the deep Carmelite appreciation and integration of apophatic spirituality provide a natural base for communication with Buddhism, which is essentially

⁶⁷Davis (cited above), 228.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹ Denise Marie Hanusek, "Fire and Wood: the Journey Leading to Transformation of the Soul in Union with God/Brahman as Described in the Writings of Ramanuja and John of the Cross" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999).

psychological and apophatic.⁷⁰

This paper will limit its consideration of more specific interreligious dialogue to some dialogue between Buddhism and John of the Cross: first, a comparison of the mystical epistemology of the Madhyamaka⁷¹ teaching of Nagarjuna and the theology of John of the Cross, and second, between the practice of *vipassana*, or insight, meditation in Theravada and the teachings of John of the Cross. This paper will not attempt to argue for or against a unity of mystical experience in the two traditions, but will look primarily at parallels in epistemology and some formative dynamics of the mystic path in the two traditions.

The Mystical Epistemology of Nagarjuna and John of the Cross

This paper will briefly explore the foundational epistemological position of both Nagarjuna and John of the Cross in order to see a parallel process in articulating transcendent experience of the divine Mystery (the ultimate nature of Reality) or the Absolute. It will not make a claim that they are necessarily talking about the same ontological experience. It remains the consistent position of this writer that it fails to serve either tradition well to condense others' symbols into ours or ours into theirs no matter how easy or tempting it might be.⁷²

⁷⁰“Apophatic” is used here with caution, since it is a concept associated with Christian theology, although it is also being used to describe Buddhist descriptions of Nirvana in some dialogues.

⁷¹Madhyamaka and Madhyamika are often confused: Madhyamaka is the system, Madhyamika are the followers of the system.

⁷²Abraham Vález de Cea criticizes many of the better known attempts at Buddhist-Christian dialogue for what he calls “questionable hermeneutical tendencies” (140). In general, these questionable hermeneutical tendencies tend to overidentify concepts that, on the surface, seem to be the same in John of the Cross and Buddhism, particularly the first century Mahayana scholar Nagarjuna. This includes, for him, the tendency to exaggerate apparent similarities between John of the Cross and Buddhism, the tendency to interpret John with concepts foreign to his theological

The Buddha does not claim to be a prophet, and nor does he claim any revelation per se of the divine Mystery.⁷³ In fact, the Buddha remains silent on a number of metaphysical or ultimate questions. These questions are called in the tradition the “fourteen Inexpressibles” (*avyakrita-vastuni*) that refer to issues such as: Is the world eternal or not? Do beings have existence after death or not?⁷⁴ The Buddhist position on answering these ultimate questions is to take the middle path or *madhyama-pratipada* between eternalism and nihilism. Instead of affirming or denying these questions, the Buddha, in his teaching, offers a phenomenological assessment of the human condition in this world as one of suffering. He then provides a psychological analysis of the human condition and the possibility of a radical transformation of consciousness through ascetical, moral and meditative-contemplative means that leads one to a full realization of Ultimate Reality and a consequent release from the samsaric cycle of suffering (birth, death and rebirth). Fundamental to the Buddha’s analysis is his particular epistemology that affirms both an absolute inexpressible Truth and a world of relative truths of conceptual and symbolic content.⁷⁵

framework, and the tendency to assume that John of the Cross’ language of negation is essentially the same as the other Christian mystics representative of the *via negativa*. Vélez de Cea identifies similar problems with understanding Nagarjuna, including examining him through the eyes of non-Buddhists, reading his understanding of emptiness through later Buddhist interpreters, and too readily identifying his understanding of emptiness with the Christian *via negative* apophatic approach to God.

⁷³Chögyam Trungpa, *Meditation in Action* (Boston: Shambala Pocket Classics, 1991), 9.

⁷⁴T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Madhyamaka System* (London: Mandala Books, 1980), 36.

⁷⁵For a concise, accurate introduction to Buddhism, see: Roger J. Corless, *The Vision of Buddhism: The Space under the Tree* (New York: Paragon House, 1989). It is interesting to note that Corless is a Roman Catholic / Tibetan Buddhist practitioner, alternating days of practice. Also see: Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1982).

This epistemological frame of reference is expanded and systematized in the first century CE by the Mahayana scholar Nagarjuna in the formulation of the Madhyamaka school.⁷⁶ Central to the Madhyamaka is the concept of *shunyata*, or emptiness, which is the absence of any enduring existence or self-sustaining reality of any thing (*dharma*).⁷⁷ *Shunyata* is not some quality or substance conditioning all things, but rather the Ultimate Truth (*paramartha-satya*) that there is no “self” (i.e., enduring self-nature) in any thing (*dharma*). The reason the Buddha remains silent on metaphysical questions is that Ultimate Truth cannot be conceived of or categorized by human thought. Ultimate Truth utterly transcends all rational or conceptual processes. It is inaccurate, for instance, to say that *dharma*s either exist or do not exist, as “thing” is but a mere conceptual determination and hence is completely unable to describe the “*tathata*” or “suchness” of existence: “reality as it is.”⁷⁸ The attempt to categorize, define or analyze either *shunyata* or Nirvana is to take them from the orbit of higher truth and make them just one more “thing” in the world of experience. There are therefore two orders of truth. The conventional or relative truth (*samvriti-satya*) is operative in the world of human language and everyday experience (*samsara*). The Ultimate Truth (of Nirvana) is *shunyata* and ultimately beyond any statements one can make about it, for all analyses

⁷⁶Nagarjuna’s major work is the *Mulamadhyamakakarikas (Verses on the Principles of the Middle Way)*, which is also known as the *Madhyamakashastra (Treatise on the Middle Way)*, and the *Vigrahavyavartani*. Both texts can be found in Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967). See also Venkata K. Ramanan, *Nagarjuna’s Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 1978); Richard H. Robinson, *Early Madhyamika in India and China* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967); and Jaidev Singh, *An Introduction to Madhyamaka Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 1978).

⁷⁷The word *dharma* here means simply “entity” or “thing.” It is not the *Dharma*, which is the teaching or truth spoken by the Buddha and by all who are awakened.

⁷⁸“Reality as it is” is the transcendental view or apprehension of the Real that is free of any egoic distortion or manipulation through either attachment or aversion that would deny the impermanency of all *dharma*s, including particularly any notion of an enduring “self.”

of it become *ultimately* false (i.e., they become conventional truth). This is not merely a philosophical exercise in epistemology, but an attempt to point to the Buddhist practitioner's experience of Absolute Truth in Nirvana.

Any experience of Nirvana is fundamentally ineffable and transcends all conceptual formulations to express it. This is, in part, why it is *shunya* or empty. *Shunyata* is understood to be an absolute fullness as much as it is an emptiness, but then neither of these concepts is really true in that these relative terms cannot in themselves encapsulate the Absolute. Wisdom (*prajña*), or transcendental insight, that arises from right understanding and right contemplation of Reality (as it is) enables one to pierce the veil of multiplicity and attain to the Ultimate Truth that all is *shunya* (i.e., ultimately empty of the limits of conceptual thought or egoic attachment and rejection). It is transcendental, not because it leaves the familiar world behind or because Nirvana is a separate realm of existence, but because it transcends all conventional categories and mental concepts as the form of illusion (*maya*).

Scholars familiar with the epistemology of John of the Cross may recognize some similarities with the epistemology of Nagarjuna. John draws upon both the mystical tradition of pseudo-Dionysius and Thomistic faculty psychology to articulate his mystical theology of knowing God. Before examining John's epistemology, however, it would help first to look at his predecessor (pseudo-) Dionysius, upon whom he depends.

In his *Mystica Theologiae*, Dionysius describes two fundamental forms of the knowledge of God. The first way is the way of ordinary knowing that proceeds by the way of affirmation as it uses symbols and conceptual representations of God.⁷⁹ The second way is the way of mystical knowing

⁷⁹Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystica Theologiae*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 135-41.

that proceeds by the way of negation. This way of knowing plunges one “into that darkness, which is beyond intellect” where language falters and one enters into a silent “unknowing.”⁸⁰ Although symbols, concepts, and particular knowledge in general are necessary, they are completely inadequate means for the mystical knowledge of God that transcends all finite understanding and ordinary ways of knowing. He writes:

It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding . . . there is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it . . . and, by virtue of its pre-imminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.⁸¹

John of the Cross draws on the Dionysian division of the knowledge of God into two fundamental kinds.⁸² First, there is a particular knowledge that is (relatively speaking) clear and distinct. This can either be received naturally through the senses or imparted supernaturally to the person. The second type of knowledge is the dark and general knowledge of contemplation infused in faith. “Contemplation, consequently, by which the intellect has a higher knowledge of God, is called mystical theology, meaning the secret wisdom of God. For this wisdom is secret to the very intellect that receives it. St. Dionysius on this account refers to contemplation as a ray of darkness.”⁸³ For John, nothing that can be imagined or apprehended by the intellect, whether natural

⁸⁰Ibid., 137.

⁸¹Ibid., 141.

⁸²Abbreviations for the works of John of the Cross are as follows: A = *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*; N = *The Dark Night*; C = *The Spiritual Canticle*; and F = *The Living Flame of Love*. All quotations are from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, revised edition, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991).

⁸³A 2.8.6. For John, "contemplation" and "mystical theology" are synonyms as he points out: "Contemplation is also termed mystical theology, meaning the secret or hidden knowledge of God." (C 27.5) For John, growth in contemplative prayer is a mystical transformation. Unlike the

or supernatural, can act as a proximate means for this mystical knowledge of and union with God.⁸⁴ This means, for John, that no knowledge that is comprehensible to the intellect can have any resemblance to God or be a means of union with God.⁸⁵ “Everything the intellect can understand, the will enjoy, and the imagination picture is most unlike and disproportioned to God.”⁸⁶ One must therefore become completely divested of and wholly detached from all clear, distinct, particular knowledge, whether natural or supernatural, to arrive at this mystical union with God, which he describes as an obscure knowledge, a knowing by the way of unknowing, in the pure darkness of faith.⁸⁷ John tells us: “To come to the knowledge you have not you must go by a way in which you know not.”⁸⁸

A comparison of the epistemological foundations of Nagarjuna and John shows that both men work from the understanding that there are two orders of truth, one relative, the other Absolute.

contemporary understanding of “mystical theology,” which defines it in terms of theory and doctrine, John views it in the classical sense where it is equated with mystical experience. In the cases where “mystical” is not modifying “theology” for John, it is usually found modifying the terms “knowledge” or “wisdom.”

⁸⁴A 2.8.4-5.

⁸⁵A 2.3.3; A 2.4.3; A 2.8.

⁸⁶A 2.8.5.

⁸⁷A 2.4.4, 2.10.4; 2.26.18; N 16.8.2.

⁸⁸A 1.13.11. He clarifies: “In contemplation God teaches the soul very quietly and secretly, without its knowing how, without the sound of words, and without the help of any bodily or spiritual faculty, in silence and quietude, in darkness to all sensory and natural things. Some spiritual persons call this contemplation knowing by unknowing. For this knowledge is not produced by the intellect that the philosophers call the agent intellect, which works on the forms, phantasies, and apprehensions of the corporal faculties; rather it is produced in the possible or passive intellect. This possible intellect, without the reception of these forms, and so on, receives passively only substantial knowledge, which is divested of images and given without any work or active function of the intellect.” (C 39.12)

Relative truth is “truth,” but when compared to the experience of the Absolute, it is so partial and incomplete that it *ultimately* is not true. To say that there is a relative order of truth does not for either man mean that relative truths are meaningless or useless. To the contrary, the way to Absolute Truth is first discovered by means of relative truth where some meanings convey better than others the experience of the Absolute. Why else would either man explain or write about these distinctions? Operating in the relative order of truth, some truths are truer than others in pointing the way to the Absolute. For both Nagarjuna and John, the path of ascetical discipline, purification of mind and heart, and moral behavior are considered essential preparation to the experience of the Absolute.

If we move beyond the similarities of each man’s epistemology to that of their experience, what can we say? Are they really talking about the same mystical experience? Some writers identify *shunyata* with John’s apophatic theology or claim that contemplative union with God in John is identical to Buddhist enlightenment.⁸⁹ If we take both John and Nagarjuna at their word, however, what we are comparing in a comparative dialogue is *ultimately neither the experience of God nor of Nirvana*. All we can compare are the interpretations of such experience that are all couched in symbols and language particular to each tradition. The experience is itself ineffable and incomparable! So we are left with a perplexing problem: how do we dialogue (speak about) that which cannot ultimately be spoken?⁹⁰ They must by necessity fall back upon their culturally

⁸⁹See James L. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 66. Christopher Nugent asserts: “that St. John of the Cross, who never left sixteenth-century Spain, experienced *satori*.” He comes to this conclusion based on similarities of John’s language for his experience with that of the Zen Buddhist’s experience of *satori*. See “Satori in St. John of the Cross,” *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* 47 (1993).

⁹⁰Abraham Vélaz de Cea analyzes and critiques attempts that jump easily to an identification of “emptiness” in Nagarjuna and John. He observes: “Both John of the Cross and Nagarjuna have

conditioned modes of expression: for Nagarjuna, it is “Nirvana,” for John “God.” Any experience of the transcendent Mystery is probably as unique as each person is, not to mention the infinite possibilities that exist in relation to the Mystery that cannot be contained by any limit of language, symbol or concept.

Scholars and practitioners will address these issues in different ways. Two approaches will be considered here: first, a philosophical critique in Joseph Michael Thometz’s analysis of the *aporia* of linguistic transcendence in Nagarjuna and John (an example of careful scholarly study regarding Buddhist-Christian dialogue), and second, a practical integration of Theravadan *vipassana* meditation with the teaching of John of the Cross by Chowning, Culligan and Meadow (a practical participatory dialogue).

In his doctoral dissertation, “Speaking With and Away: A Buddhist-Christian Meta-Dialogue,” and in an article summarizing this work, Joseph Thometz engages in a “comparative philosophical study of the *aporia* of linguistic transcendence: the dilemma of expressing in language a sacred or most highly esteemed truth deemed not fully expressible in language.”⁹¹ He does this by a careful examination of the *aporia* in Nagarjuna’s *Mulamdhymakakrika* and in John of the Cross’, *Ascent of Mt. Carmel* and *The Dark Night*. He asserts that in this dialogue it is necessary to make the *aporia* hermeneutically explicit while taking into account the semantic ambiguity resulting from the *aporia* so that both John’s and Nagarjuna’s expositions of the highest truth are presented and

been interpreted through concepts and categories foreign to their respective frameworks, sometimes from the perspective of other religions, and at other times, the standpoint of other fellow Christians or Buddhists.”

⁹¹Joseph Michael Thometz, “Speaking With and Away: A Buddhist-Christian Meta-Dialogue,” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2002), i. See also “Speaking With and Away: What the Aporia of Ineffability Has to Say for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006):119-137.

understood accurately.⁹² He states: “The *aporia* engenders an interpretive rubric, manifested as simultaneous epistemic standpoints: the act of articulation of highest truth (from the standpoint of *samvritisatya*), the articulation of the failure of articulation (from the standpoint of *paramarthasatya*), and the realization of ‘truth’ in silence (*quietud interior*; *āryatūsnimbhāva*).”⁹³ Furthermore, when one recognizes the inherent breakdown in Nagarjuna’s and John’s articulation of the “truth,” one is not able to either affirm or deny that the truth of transcendence in their writings is actually the same “truth.”⁹⁴

What one has is “a dilemma of linguistic transcendence that turns language back onto itself in the realization of a higher affirmation.” In light of this linguistic collapse, all talk of truth must move to a “metadialogue” that becomes “talk about the collapse of talk concerning sacred truth.” For Thometz, this forms a “higher affirmation” pointing to a “meaningful silence, that is, as a noble silence (*āryatusnim*) for Madhyamaka or as interior quietude (*quietud interior*) for [John of the Cross].”⁹⁵ He concludes by stating: “In short, the *aporia* of linguistic transcendence calls for a simultaneous affirmation (conventionally speaking), redress (within the heuristic field of unknowing that enables ongoing revision), and collapse into silence of the categories employed in contemporary Buddhist-Christian academic discussions.”⁹⁶ For Thometz, this simultaneity reveals a fundamental gap between any discussion about mystical experiences and “what it means to realize a ‘truth’ that

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Thometz diss., I-ii.

⁹⁴Thometz art., 129-30.

⁹⁵Ibid., 130.

⁹⁶Ibid., 132.

has been articulated as either indeterminate or beyond articulation.”⁹⁷ Any Buddhist-Christian dialogue, especially of mystical experience, that fails to place this collapse of language in the forefront of discussion risks seriously misrepresenting either John or Nagarjuna, or any other ineffable mystical experience for that matter.⁹⁸ Thometz argues that, “comparative study must proceed in a self-conscious manner that must take great pains to avoid interpreting ‘the other’ with categories that distort rather than illuminate.”⁹⁹

Christian Insight Meditation and John of the Cross

Another, very different practical, integrative approach to interreligious dialogue is taken by Chowning, Culligan and Meadow in their newly re-published book *Christian Insight Meditation*.¹⁰⁰ This work is perhaps the most significant example of Buddhist-Christian dialogue from the Carmelite tradition. This book has grown out of these authors’ thorough study and intensive practice of both *vipassana* (insight) meditation and the teachings of John of the Cross as well as years of careful integration of these two paths in their own practice and in giving the *Silence and Awareness Retreat* (discussed above in Part IV: “Methodological Concerns”).

John of the Cross provides little practical instruction on meditation methods in his collected works as he tends to focus primarily on ascetical formation, the experience of contemplative prayer and union with God. These authors, therefore, turn to *vipassana* meditation practice because of its

⁹⁷Thometz, diss., 241.

⁹⁸Thometz, art., 132.

⁹⁹Thometz, art., 122.

¹⁰⁰Cited above. See also: Mary Jo Meadow and Kevin Culligan, “Congruent Spiritual Paths: Christian Carmelite and Theravadan Buddhist Vipassana,” the *Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 19:2, 1987.

very detailed psychological and systematic methodology. These authors maintain that *vipassana* is a tradition-neutral practice that can be incorporated into any religious tradition. They do, nonetheless, introduce insight practice from the Theravada perspective, and then attempt to dialogue it with and integrate it into the mystical theology of John of the Cross.

Vipassana meditation practice was taught by the Buddha more than two and a half millennia ago. Meadow explains: “It is a very precise and elaborate developmental psychology . . . [and] simply a way to pay a fine-grained, continuous awareness to all our experiences of mind and body. Although it is this simple, it leads us to the highest stages of spiritual unfolding as the major spiritual traditions and figures, including John of the Cross, see them.”¹⁰¹ *Vipassana* practice begins with a gentle awareness of one’s breathing, and then expands to include everything that enters one’s awareness. As the mind slows down and empties, awareness expands, bringing with it growing insight into the reality of “things as they are”—unmanipulated and undistorted by egoic attachment and aversion. The whole process rests upon self-emptying, moral behavior, purification of mind and heart, and a transcendent openness to the whole of one’s experience of self, other and world with compassion and equanimity. These authors maintain that *vipassana* is an exceptionally efficient method that disposes one to contemplative prayer and authentic mystical experience. This book is filled with a great deal of practical insight into meditation practice, something very much missing from the writings of John of the Cross or most Christian mystics for that matter. The authors go to great lengths to draw out the parallels and similarities between *vipassana* meditation practice and the contemplative theology of John of the Cross.

Springs Steele offers a balanced, measured critique of their work in his article: “Christian

¹⁰¹Meadow, *Christian Insight Meditation*, 19-20.

Insight Meditation: a Test Case on Interreligious Spirituality.”¹⁰² He begins with statements from the Vatican that question those who attempt “to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian.”¹⁰³ Steele then demonstrates that Christian insight meditation, as presented by the three authors, “is organically rooted in the perceptual or cognitive set of Theravadan *vipassana* practice,” is indistinguishable from it, and therefore “cannot be neutral” and is subject to the Vatican critique.¹⁰⁴ He states: “From the magisterial standpoint then, Christian Insight Meditation, to the extent that it is functionally Buddhist *vipassana* meditation, cannot claim to be a direct means to the experience of the ‘God revealed in Christ.’ At best it could be only a preparation for such experience.”¹⁰⁵ For Steele, the problem with both perspectives, that of our three authors and that of the Vatican, is that neither has actually constructed “an argument based on primary sources.”¹⁰⁶ He then proceeds to do this.

First, Steele offers a careful analysis of the definitions of ultimate reality (*Nibbana* and union with God) found in Theravada Buddhism and in John of the Cross. True congruency between the two traditions would necessitate that the goal of *vipassana* (*Nibbana*) and the goal of John’s spirituality (union with God) be one and the same goal (as Meadow asserts). The conclusion Steele draws from his analysis of the definitions of Ultimate Reality is that, “The ultimate goal in each

¹⁰²Springs Steele, “Christian Insight Meditation: a Test Case on Interreligious Spirituality,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 20 (2000): 217-229.

¹⁰³Ibid., 217, quoting Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation” (15 October 1989).

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 218 & 220.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 220.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

tradition is the experience of an incomprehensible, ineffable reality. Given this ineffability, how is it possible to determine objectively whether they are a single reality expressed in different cognitive sets (Culligan, Meadow, Chowning), or different realities (Cardinal Ratzinger and Pope John Paul II)?”¹⁰⁷ For Steele, the only possibility for solving this dilemma is to examine the path of each tradition as it *proceeds* to its respective goal. Since the goals themselves are implicit in the spiritual methods leading to their realization, this could indicate similarity or sameness.¹⁰⁸

Steele then undertakes an analysis of the spiritual methods in both *vipassana* and John by focusing on the concept of *purification* that is a core principle of each tradition. In his analysis on method, he finds important developmental similarities between the two spiritual traditions: each is grounded upon the “purification of behavior,” then proceeds by the way of meditative concentration, through the complete emptying out of inordinate attachments and desires with regard to both the senses and the spirit by the embrace of “mindful equanimity,” which then arrives at the immediate experience of the “ineffable goal” that both traditions articulate in very similar ways.¹⁰⁹

In the summary of his critique, Steele agrees that there are similarities in nearly every respect between the practice of *vipassana* and the teaching of John of the Cross. This does not, however, necessarily suggest that *vipassana* is really neutral and therefore transferable to any tradition. Otherwise, Steele observes, “a non-tradition-dependent method leading to the ultimate religious end of all spiritual traditions is to render all such traditions irrelevant.” If it is really neutral, he asks, why bother trying to integrate *vipassana* with John of the Cross at all? Rather, he suggests a second

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 221.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 221-22. Steele quotes Robert Buswell and Robert Gimello, *Paths to Liberation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), p. 22.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 222-24.

possibility, that is, they are “two independent, but congruent subtraditions.”¹¹⁰ Steele concludes by saying:

[W]hat Culligan, Meadow, and Chowning have discovered is the generic congruency between two deconstructive mystical paths, one Buddhist and one Christian, rather than a neutral universal spiritual methodology. The advantage of adopting this standpoint is that it allows for the independent origins of the two mystical traditions, their different cognitive sets, and the possibility of significant differences, while still affirming the fundamental similarities. And it is the similarities that offer a wonderful opportunity for dialogue and mutual refinement and enrichment of practice, reflection, and theory for both Buddhist and Christian practitioners of their respective mystical traditions. Perhaps with deepened practice and honest dialogue, and likely only with these, can come a nuanced judgment on whether these two paths are ultimately parallel or identical.¹¹¹

In this critique, Steele affirms the similarities between *vipassana* practice and the teachings of John of the Cross without conflating the symbols and language of either into the other. Steele resists the temptation to claim an identity for the ineffable experience in these two spiritual paths while at the same time he leaves open the possibility that the ultimate goal for each is a realization or union with the Absolute—the transcendent Mystery—that Buddhists call *Nibbana* and Christians name God. He makes a salient point: if Theravadan *vipassana* meditation is all we need to reach union with God, then is not Christian faith (and therefore much of Carmelite spirituality) superfluous?

We must then ask: What difference does Carmelite spirituality make in our lives? Why be Carmelite at all? These are not simply rhetorical questions but indicate a necessary prologue to any authentic Buddhist-Carmelite dialogue. To be a Carmelite is to live and practice a tradition and spirituality that is thoroughly and necessarily personal, Trinitarian and Christocentric. For Carmelites, apophatic experience does not ultimately negate the kataphatic since neither the “self”

¹¹⁰Ibid., 226-27.

¹¹¹Ibid., 227.

(or soul) of the person nor the body is ultimately transcended, but all await instead the resurrection promised by our Christian faith in the world to come.¹¹² In the next section, this paper will examine the irreplaceable centrality of Jesus Christ as the source and telos of mystical experience for Carmelites, examine the need to move from this to a fuller understanding of mysticism that includes both ascetical process and the movement toward praxis, and then will conclude with a summary of what is needed in an interreligious dialogue.

VII. JESUS CHRIST: THE CHRISTOLOGICAL HEART OF CARMELITE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Section II of this paper related how the Catholic Church affirms what is true and good in non-Christian religions, the working of the Holy Spirit in all people, their participation in the life of grace and redemption, and that all authentic prayer, Christian or not, is “called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person.”¹¹³ All human beings “without any distinction of language, race, nation or culture” are “children of God, partakers of the divine nature, and heirs to eternal life.”¹¹⁴ Church teaching, however, makes clear that this is done in and through the person of Jesus Christ; although, in non-believers, this may be accomplished in a non-explicit and mysterious manner. This Christological stance may be criticized when it is used imperialistically to discount the world-view of the religious other, but it cannot be neglected as it is the essential

¹¹²“Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” (1 Cor 15:12-17.)

¹¹³John Paul II, 1986.

¹¹⁴John Paul II, 1981.

element that conveys the heart of Carmelite spirituality and its mystagogy in any interreligious dialogue.

In conversations with Buddhists, Jesus Christ is typically seen as a great bodhisattva or sometimes an enlightened teacher.¹¹⁵ Other Buddhists, however, question this view because Jesus' crucifixion indicates for them the continued playing out of negative karma not yet purified in him and the consequent implication of moral imperfection.¹¹⁶ Jesus called his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him instead of showing them a way out of suffering in this life, which is viewed by Buddhists (and Christians) as a significantly different approach to the human condition from the teaching of the Buddha. Buddhist masters are respectful when speaking of Jesus, but they are often puzzled by the premise that the cross, death and resurrection are redemptive for humanity. This view essentially contradicts the soteriology of Theravada Buddhism where salvation ultimately depends upon oneself and no other. In Mahayana Buddhism, buddhas and bodhisattvas do provide compassionate help to sentient beings struggling for release from *samsara*, but this is done through compassionate teaching and empowerment, not by dying for them as Christians believe that Christ has done.¹¹⁷

As mentioned above, in the brief survey of this paper, many scholars go to John of the Cross as a source for dialogue with Buddhism because of similarities in epistemology, the description of

¹¹⁵This was suggested to me by the Tibetan Lama, Kenpo Konchog Gyaltshen. See also: Dom Aelred Graham, *Conversations: Christian and Buddhist* (New York: Harvest, 1968), 182.

¹¹⁶I have heard this complaint in personal conversations typically made by Western converts to Buddhism.

¹¹⁷Victoria Urubshurow, Tibetan Buddhist and Religious Studies scholar, states that, "there is no doubt about it: important differences, even blatant contradictions, exist between Christianity and Buddhism. Often the discrepancies stem not merely from problems of religious language, but from deep structural variations." See "Love of God," 166 cited above.

ascetical process, and the articulation of the ineffable experience of the transcendent Mystery. Some of these go so far as to make John of the Cross appear to be a Buddhist in Christian disguise. They assume that Jesus Christ disappears for John of the Cross in the apophatic experience of contemplative prayer. Even Christian scholars and theologians have made this error regarding John.¹¹⁸ Karl Rahner questions the integrity of John's christology when he states:

Christian mysticism . . . has always been tempted (even in St. John of the Cross) to let everything in the mystic act disappear in the face of God, so that over and over again subsequent corrections of such a basic start on a pantheistic basis were found to be necessary to enable the mystic to hold on to the fact that he may and can still occupy himself with the humanity of Christ.¹¹⁹

What these scholars seem to miss is that the radical apophatic experience in contemplative prayer—which is “totally beyond words”—is only possible for John of the Cross *in and through* the “mysteries of the humanity of Christ.”¹²⁰ One wonders if these scholars actually read beyond John’s *Ascent of Mt. Carmel* and *The Dark Night* and really take in the essential message of *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*, both of which are completely focused on the love of God in union with Jesus Christ. For John, the Incarnation not only mediates one’s transformation and

¹¹⁸Dom John Chapman was inclined to reject St. John of the Cross and called him a "Buddhist." See Dom Roger Hudleston, ed. *The Spiritual Letters of Dom John Chapman, O.S.B.* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), 269. Chapman refers to Abbot Marmion who claims that John is a like a sponge full of Christianity when squeezed out you still have his mysticism intact. See also Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy: An Interpretation of the Great Mystics, East and West* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), 55.

¹¹⁹Karl Rahner, "The Eternal Significance of the Humanity of Jesus for Our Relationship with God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 42.

¹²⁰*The Spiritual Canticle* 26.4, 37.4. He writes: “in his Son Jesus Christ, the soul is most sublimely and intimately transformed in the love of God. And with unspeakable delight she thanks and loves the Father again through his Son Jesus. She does this united with Christ, together with Christ. And the savor of this praise is so delicate as to be totally beyond words.” © 37.6.)

union with God, but Jesus Christ is the very goal for which the Christian hopes.¹²¹ For him, Christ is the Spouse of the soul¹²² and her Beloved.¹²³ Jesus Christ, who cannot be separated from His humanity, is both the path and the final transformation of the soul in John's mystical theology.¹²⁴ In union, the soul's intellect is united "with God in the knowledge of the mysteries of the Incarnation, in which is contained the highest and most savory wisdom of all His works."¹²⁵ In eternity, the soul is transformed into "the beauty of both His created and uncreated wisdom, and also into the beauty of the union of the Word with His humanity, in which she will know Him face to face as well as from the back."¹²⁶ Clearly, not only is the humanity of Christ not left behind in any way whatsoever in John of the Cross, but the soul is transformed into that very same beautiful union of God and humanity in "eternal bliss."¹²⁷

Carmelite mysticism not only has a profound appreciation for the apophatic experience of

¹²¹The centrality of the humanity of Christ in the works of John of the Cross is thoroughly spelled out in Keith Reeves Barron, "A Study of St. John of the Cross's Theology of Transformation from the Perspective of Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory" cited above.

¹²²*The Spiritual Canticle* 31.10, 37.8.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 39.8, 39.14, 40.1, 40.7, *The Living Flame of Love* 1.26, 1.27, 2.4, 2.35, 3.1, 3.7, 3.27, 3.28, 3.76, etc.

¹²⁴He writes: "if like Moses [the soul] hides herself in the cavern of the rock (in real imitation of the perfect life of the Son of God, her Bridegroom), she will merit that, while he protects her with his right hand, God will show her his shoulders [Ex. 33:22-23], that is, he will bring her to the high perfection of union with the Son of God, her Bridegroom, and transformation in him through love. In this union she experiences such closeness to him and is so instructed and wise in his mysteries . . ." (*The Spiritual Canticle*, 1.10; see also 12.7, 12.8.)

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 37.2.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 38.1.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

God, but it remains always thoroughly kataphatic, interpersonal and Christocentric.¹²⁸ Mystagogy for Carmelite mystics has consistently been the expression and articulation of the love of God in Jesus Christ. The Carmelite, Kevin Culligan, responding to questions from Christians concerning the place of Jesus Christ in Christian insight meditation, clarifies:

Pope John Paul II perhaps best summarized the Church's position on using Eastern meditation practices in Christian prayer. In a 1982 homily honoring Teresa of Avila, which is footnoted in the Vatican's letter ["Some Aspects of Christian Meditation"], the pontiff stated, "any method of prayer is valid insofar as it is inspired by Christ and leads to Christ, who is the Way, the truth, and the life." It is not the method per se that determines its validity for Christians, but the intention, faith, and love of the person using the method.

Thus, Christians can use insight meditation practice to deepen their personal union with God in love, to enter more fully into Jesus' paschal mystery, and to open themselves completely to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. This transforms Buddhist vipassana into Christian insight meditation.¹²⁹

Clearly, in maintaining the centrality of Jesus Christ, Carmelites Culligan and Chowning remain thoroughly within Carmelite tradition and practice.¹³⁰ Ichiro Okumura, a Carmelite convert from Buddhism, explains that his whole conversion focused on the person of Jesus Christ:

I still feel great pleasure when I come in contact with brave Zen Masters and good books on Zen, savoring as I do the breadth of the Zen mind and a sort of relief from some of the stiltedness of Western thinking prevalent in Christian theology. But I must say that I can find in Christ alone the deep human mystery that cannot be reached through any other religion, including Zen-Buddhism. Perhaps this will seem to our non-Christian friends to be only my own prejudice!¹³¹

¹²⁸Teresa of Avila is adamant on the necessary role of the humanity of Christ in her own and by extension also Carmelite mystical experience. See Chapter 22 of *The Book of Her Life*.

¹²⁹Culligan, 175.

¹³⁰They clarify as well the role of the humanity of Christ in the teaching of Teresa of Avila, 179-182.

¹³¹Ichiro Okumura, "Zen and Christianity: Memories of My Conversion," 98; quoted in James Arraj, *Christianity in the Crucible of East-West Dialogue*, Chapter 1.

Another fundamental dimension of Carmelite tradition that is a direct expression of the interpersonal nature of its mystical theology is the essential role of prophetic witness that flows forth from the life of prayer to challenge the unjust, unloving and sinful structures of human existence in this world. For Christians, and especially for Carmelite Spirituality, *theoria* and *praxis* are like two wings on a bird. One does not ascend to the divine on one wing alone. Love of God, Teresa of Avila tells us, forms a unity with love of neighbor: “the more advanced you see you are in love for your neighbor the more advanced you will be in the love of God.”¹³² It is in the mediated experience of the transcendent Mystery, that is, the mystical experience communicated in Carmelite mystagogy, where the prophetic character of Carmelite mysticism expresses itself in a praxis of social justice. Loving the individual human person has eternal significance for Carmelite spirituality. As one Carmelite mystic once answered a theologian’s question about what she found in her contemplative prayer—“Is it just you and God?” “No,” she replied, “the whole Church—the entire body of Christ—is there.” The centrality of the humanity of Christ in Carmelite mystagogy also means the centrality of Christ’s body, the Church, and also all of humanity. Carmelite mystics ascend to union with God in order to descend once again to embrace the whole of humanity. It is in this spirit that Thérèse of Lisieux promises that she will spend her “heaven doing good on earth.”¹³³

Abraham Vélez de Cea observes that a great deal of interreligious dialogue, particularly between John of the Cross and Buddhism, has focused on comparing the ineffable experience(s) of

¹³²*The Interior Castle* V,3.7. She adds: “if we practice love of neighbor with great perfection, we will have done everything.” (Ibid., V,3.9.) See also “Soliloquies” II, 2: “Whoever fails to love his neighbor, fails to love [God].”

¹³³At the second exhumation of her body a white silk ribbon was found that bore the words: "I intend to spend my heaven doing good on earth. After my death, I shall make a shower of roses rain down."

God and emptiness. He points out that this remains a highly problematic approach to interreligious dialogue, especially because “emptiness” means different things even to Buddhists of different traditions. Instead, he launches into relatively new territory by undertaking “a comparison of the ethical functions of emptiness . . . No one has hitherto compared the ethical functions of emptiness in John of the Cross and Nagarjuna.”¹³⁴ He demonstrates through textual analysis that for both John and Nagarjuna, emptiness actually “performs an instrumental ethical function in that it leads to more advanced kinds of ethical practice as well as to further cultivation of all virtues, cognitive and affective, wisdom as well as compassion.”¹³⁵ With his work, we see a definitive push to move interreligious dialogue away from a fixation on the cognitive and epistemological dimensions of mystical experience (e.g., the experience of “emptiness” in John and Nagarjuna) toward the ethical dimension of religious praxis. Carmelite spirituality in its fullest expression always maintains the integrated balance of the mystic and prophet, of the active and contemplative lives together.¹³⁶

Conclusion

It is in the spirit of Christian love that Carmelites engage in an authentic interreligious dialogue that seeks always to truly understand and value the beliefs and world-view of the religious other while at the same time articulating that which is essential to Carmelite life and Catholic faith. Dialogue should be explicit with regard to purpose and intention: whether it is informative,

¹³⁴Vélez de Cea (cited above), 147-48.

¹³⁵Ibid., 153.

¹³⁶Teresa of Avila appears to affirm this when she writes: “This is a great favor for those to whom the Lord grants it; the active and contemplative lives are joined. The faculties all serve the Lord together: the will is occupied in its work and contemplation without knowing how; the other two faculties serve the work of Martha. Thus Martha and Mary walk together.” (*The Way of Perfection* 31.5. See also *Meditations on the Song of Songs* 7,3.)

consultative or interformative. Dialogue should be done without conflating concepts or symbols despite apparent similarities (avoiding syncretism) and without reducing them to simplistic, ill-informed or inadequate explanations because they might appear so dissimilar to our own (avoiding reductionism); and understanding will be verified in a dialogue of mutual validation. This process will be greatly facilitated by an epistemology made explicit in a nonreductive methodology through a mutual language that all participants find congenial and fair to their tradition. Real dialogue will be bilateral and interpersonal, as between Carmelites and Buddhists, not merely a “dialogue” done by Carmelites with topics about “Buddhism” found in other’s writings. Finally, interreligious dialogue must move beyond its preoccupation with comparing “mystical” experience and enlarge its consideration to include the broader formative process that includes both the ascetical and praxis aspects of the mystical life.

This author wishes to encourage his brothers and sisters in the Carmelite Order(s) to reach out more vigorously to engage our fellow mystics of the East in an authentic, heart-felt but intellectually honest dialogue about our experiences and beliefs.

Epilogue

In this epilogue, I move from an academic consideration of interreligious dialogue to one that is personal and experiential. In the beginning, I describe briefly my own encounter with Tibetan Buddhism while in my doctoral studies. Beginning in high school, I began reading Thomas Merton with great interest and was intrigued by his encounter and dialogue with various Buddhist masters. As I grew older, I read more widely about the world religions and earned a double major in Psychology and Religious Studies. I was then recruited into the graduate program in Spirituality at The Catholic University of America by William Cenkner, OP, a Sanskrit scholar and expert in Asian

Religions, who became dean of the School of Religious Studies during my time there. In 1987, with Dean Cenkner's full support, I organized and participated in a series of scholarly presentations and lectures on Tibetan Buddhism at The Catholic University, including a Buddhist-Christian dialogue, which involved Religious Studies faculty, Tibetan Buddhist lamas, university students and other notable guests.¹³⁷ In any genuine encounter with these lamas one cannot help but be changed in positive and life-giving ways by their authentic personal presence and self-less love.

Over the centuries, the Catholic Church has learned much from non-Christian philosophers in order to better understand and articulate the faith. I now believe we are facing an equal or greater opportunity in the encounter with Asian religions. Buddhism in particular has an extraordinary and highly-developed psychology that provides a depth analysis of affectivity and desire, of consciousness and the unconscious, of meditative states and contemplative transformation, and of deep integration and healing at all levels of the human psyche and soul.

My experience working with Tibetan lamas and other Buddhists leaves me with the deepest respect for their sincere devotion, serious commitment to prayer and meditation, the sophistication of their religious philosophy and psychology, and most of all for the profound depth of their compassion and love for others. They are not people escaping the world, but a holy people fully engaging life and all those they serve. They uniformly exhibit presence, humility, simplicity and a seemingly perpetual joy, even in the midst of difficult life situations. Their homeland is an occupied territory (1.2 million innocents killed when invaded by the Chinese and 10,000 monasteries and

¹³⁷This included among others His Holiness Chetsang, Rinpoche, head of the Drikung Kagyu order of Tibetan Buddhism, and the Buddhist-Christian scholar, Aloysius Pieris, SJ. Later, I was also able to participate in the joint prayer service with Archbishop James Hickey (later Cardinal) and His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the Shrine (now Basilica) of the Immaculate Conception, coordinated by Dean Cenkner.

shrines destroyed along with countless cultural treasures), but they still pray for and love their oppressors in a radical commitment to nonviolent change. As I observe the fruits of their labors, I witness the spread of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control” (Gal 5:22-23) everywhere they go. There can be no doubt that the Spirit of Love is working in and through these Buddhists. All of them have taken the Bodhisattva vow to seek the salvation of all beings before themselves. Bodhisattvas (“enlightenment beings”) are completely devoted to the non-violent, compassionate removal of suffering in the world. They incarnate the essence of transcendent compassion and wisdom running through the universe, permeating all of life.

I will close with a quote from "The Perfection of Contemplation" ("*Dhyana-paramita*") in the eighth century Buddhist text *Entering the Path of Enlightenment*, the *Bodhicharyavatara*, of the master and poet Shantideva that beautifully describes the strength of the Bodhisattva vow:

Bodhisattvas, the compassionate,
having transformed their mentalities,
delighting in the tranquilizing of another's sorrow,
plunge into the deepest (Avici) hell,
like wild geese into a cluster of lotus.
When Beings are delivered
it is for them an ocean of joy which overwhelms all.
What good is deliverance for oneself alone?¹³⁸

May all beings everywhere have happiness and peace!

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¹³⁸My adaptation of Marion L. Matic's translation, *Entering the Path of Enlightenment: The Bodhicharyavatara of the Buddhist Poet Santideva* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 203.