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**Religious Interbeing:  
Buddhist Pluralism and Thich Nhat Hanh**

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## **Abstract**

Interreligious concord constitutes one of the most important issues within the religiously diverse context of the late modern world. Among responses to the challenge of religious diversity, the discourse of pluralism affirms the equality of religions as a critical measure against exclusive and injurious claims to religious superiority. Pluralism contends that the fact of religious diversity in conjunction with the escalation of global crises calls for a deepening of interreligious dialogue and collaboration. The Christian tradition has presented a highly developed articulation of the theological position of pluralism. This thesis, however, is primarily concerned with the ongoing construction of the discourse of Buddhist pluralism. With the intention of contributing to this discourse, this research applies the theory of pluralism towards an analysis of the contemporary teachings of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

The majority of extant research concerning Thich Nhat Hanh addresses his teachings of Engaged Buddhism and his social activism during the Vietnam War. Nhat Hanh's teachings regarding religious diversity have received far less recognition, and what attention they have received has issued from the domains of Christian theology. With the intention of advancing research of Nhat Hanh's teachings, and of providing an alternative interpretation, this thesis presents a contextual, textual, and theological investigation of Thich Nhat Hanh from the methodological perspective of Buddhist Studies. Within an analysis of Nhat Hanh's approach to tradition, modernity, and religious diversity, it is suggested that his teachings contain valuable resources that could contribute towards the discourse of Buddhist pluralism.

Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings concerning religious diversity propose the interdependence of religions. He affirms both the unity and diversity of religions, whilst asserting the need for interreligious engagement with the suffering of the

world. As such, his approach can be understood as constructive of an experiential, ethical, and engaged form of Buddhist pluralism. This thesis constructs the notion of Religious Interbeing to conceptualise Nhat Hanh's position of pluralism. It is contended that such a position could contribute to both the ongoing articulation of pluralism, and the dynamics of interreligious dialogue within the late modern global community.

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## Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Contents.....	v
List of Illustrations.....	viii
Introduction.....	1

### PART I

#### Theoretical and Methodological Foundations

<b>1</b>	<b><i>Religious Diversity and the Possibility of Pluralism: An Introduction</i></b> .....	<b>6</b>
	The Christian Theology of Religions.....	9
	Exclusivism.....	11
	Inclusivism.....	14
	Pluralism.....	16
	Identist Pluralism.....	21
	Differential Pluralism.....	27
	Dialogue.....	37
	Interior Dialogue and Thomas Merton.....	40
	Experiential Pluralism.....	48
 <b>2</b>	 <b><i>Buddhism and Religious Diversity: A Literature Review</i></b> .....	 <b>54</b>
	Christianity and Buddhism Compared.....	55
	Questioning Stereotypes.....	60
	Towards a Buddhist Theology of Religions.....	67
	Buddhist Exclusivism.....	69
	Buddhist Inclusivism.....	78
	Buddhist Pluralism.....	90

<b>3</b>	<b><i>Hermeneutics, Orientalism, and Buddhist Theology: Methodological Considerations</i></b> .....	<b>115</b>
	Kiblinger's Analysis.....	119
	Philosophical Hermeneutics: Some Suggestions.....	127
	Buddhist Studies, Orientalism, and the Methodological Shift.....	132
	Buddhist Theology.....	141
	Gross's Method of Inseparability.....	145

## PART II

### The Teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh: Towards a Position of Buddhist Pluralism

<b>4</b>	<b><i>On Tradition: Continuity, Adaptation, and Actualisation</i></b> .....	<b>151</b>
	Tradition.....	152
	Thich Nhat Hanh.....	154
	The Buddhist Struggle Movement.....	161
	Engaged Buddhism.....	170
	Engaged Buddhist Ethical Theory.....	172
	<i>Causality, Interdependence, Emptiness</i> .....	173
	<i>The Imperative to Act</i> .....	183
	<i>The Soteriological Shift</i> .....	187
	<i>Nonviolence and Being Peace</i> .....	190
	<i>Non-Partisanship and the True Enemy</i> .....	193
	Engaged Buddhist Forms.....	196
	<i>Tiep Hien – The Order of Interbeing</i> .....	197
	<i>The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings</i> .....	200
	The Actualisation of Tradition.....	203
<b>5</b>	<b><i>On Modernity: Spirituality, Community, and Dialogue</i></b> .....	<b>212</b>
	Modernity, Crisis, and Religious Resurgence.....	214
	When Thich Nhat Hanh Came to the West.....	226
	Diagnosis: Hungry Ghosts, Toxic Culture, Global Terror.....	231
	<i>A Psychological Analysis</i> .....	231
	<i>A Social Analysis</i> .....	234

<i>A Global Analysis</i> .....	237
Cure: Spirituality, Community, Dialogue.....	240
<i>Spirituality</i> .....	240
<i>Community</i> .....	243
<i>Dialogue</i> .....	247
<b>6 On Religious Diversity: Interbeing, Mindfulness, and Peace</b> .....	<b>259</b>
Thich Nhat Hanh and Religious Diversity.....	261
Reading One: Interbeing.....	262
<i>Emptiness and Buddhist Pluralism</i> .....	263
<i>Interbeing and Religious Diversity</i> .....	264
<i>Interbeing and Nhat Hanh's Dialogue with Christianity</i> .....	269
Reading Two: Mindfulness.....	274
<i>Buddhist Pluralism and the Experiential Nature of Truth</i> .....	275
<i>Mindfulness Practice and Religious Diversity</i> .....	277
<i>Mindfulness and Nhat Hanh's Dialogue with Christianity</i> .....	280
Reading Three: Peace.....	286
<i>Buddhist Pluralism, Ethical Criteria of Evaluation, and Engagement</i> .....	288
<i>Peace and Religious Diversity</i> .....	290
<i>Peace and Nhat Hanh's Dialogue with Christianity</i> .....	293
Critique and Response.....	296
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>305</b>
<b>List of Chapter Quotation Sources</b> .....	<b>309</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>310</b>
<b>Appendix: The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings</b> .....	<b>334</b>

## List of Illustrations

<b>I</b>	<b>Thich Nhat Hanh</b> .....	<b>211</b>
<b>II</b>	<b>Plum Village Stained-Glass Window: <i>Smyti Samādhi Prajñā</i></b> .....	<b>258</b>
<b>III</b>	<b>Plum Village Gāthā Sign: <i>You Have Arrived</i></b> .....	<b>305</b>

## Introduction

Despite predictions of secularisation and proposals of homogeneity, a diversity of religions constitutes a defining feature upon the landscapes of the late modern world. Within the global context of religious diversity, the need for interreligious concord has become critically apparent. Among responses to the challenge of religious diversity, the discourse of pluralism affirms the equality of religions as a critical measure against exclusive and injurious claims to religious superiority. Pluralism calls for a critical interreligious collaboration, and asserts that every religion contains the necessary resources to affirm religious equality and facilitate interreligious dialogue without undermining particularity and commitment. Indeed, for those who acclaim such a response, pluralism is considered to be both possible and necessary.

This thesis is primarily concerned with the emergent discourse of Buddhist pluralism. In comparison to the plethora of Christian theological literature addressing the position of pluralism, the equivalent body of Buddhist literature is slight. However, as a tradition that has repeatedly flourished within religiously diverse cultures, and as a religion that is acknowledged for its tolerance, it is apparent that Buddhism has much to offer the pluralist debate concerning interreligious encounter and exchange. The primary intention of this thesis is to advance the research of Buddhist responses to religious diversity, and to contribute towards the ongoing construction of the discourse of Buddhist pluralism. To fulfil this task, this research specifically applies the theory of Buddhist pluralism to the teachings of the contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

The majority of research concerning Thich Nhat Hanh addresses his teachings of Engaged Buddhism and his activism during the Vietnam War. Nhat Hanh's teachings regarding religious diversity have received far less recognition, and

what attention they have received has mainly issued from the domains of Christian theology. As such, it is the further intention of this thesis to advance the research of the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh by providing an analysis of his approach to religious diversity in relation to the Buddhist tradition and from the methodological perspective of Buddhist Studies.

In general, the extant research on Nhat Hanh's teachings of Engaged Buddhism has not taken into account his teachings regarding other religions. Moreover, the scant research on Nhat Hanh's teachings regarding religious diversity has not discerned the connection between his early teachings of Engaged Buddhism and his later engagement with religious others. It is a primary contention of this thesis that these two elements of Nhat Hanh's career and teachings should not be understood in separation. Accordingly, this research provides an initial investigation of Nhat Hanh's approach to tradition and to modernity in order to establish a contextual and textual foundation of understanding. Upon this foundation, a more constructive and theological analysis of Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity is presented.

Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings concerning religious diversity propose the interdependence of religions. He affirms both the unity and diversity of religions, whilst asserting the need for interreligious engagement with the suffering of the world. As such, his approach can be understood as constructive of an experiential, ethical, and engaged form of Buddhist pluralism. This thesis proposes the notion of Religious Interbeing to conceptualise Nhat Hanh's position of pluralism. It is contended that such a position could contribute to the ongoing articulation of Buddhist pluralism, the Christian theological debate concerning pluralism, and the global dynamics of interreligious dialogue.

The corpus of Nhat Hanh's written works constitutes the body of primary sources of this research. This research has also been supported by informal encounters with members of Nhat Hanh's monastic order, and the author's experience of attending a two-week meditation retreat at Plum Village, Nhat Hanh's monastic centre in France, in July 2006. The secondary sources of this research encompass

a wide range of theoretical and theological material addressing the issue of religious diversity, as well as relevant material concerning Thich Nhat Hanh.

Part I of this thesis establishes the theoretical and methodological foundations of the research. Chapter One introduces the contemporary global context of religious diversity and explores the dimensions of the Christian theological response to its challenge.

Chapter Two presents a literature review of the extant material addressing Buddhist responses to religious diversity. It applies the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism towards the literature concerning Buddhist responses and thereby constructs a 'Buddhist theology of religions'.

Chapter Three constructs the methodological framework of the research. It begins by presenting a critique of an established analysis of Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity, and in response to the critique explores some suggestions from Philosophical Hermeneutics. It also examines the critique of Orientalism and its implications for Buddhist Studies. Finally, it draws upon the discourse of Buddhist theology to establish a 'plural methodology' that combines contextual/historical, textual/objective, and constructive/theological forms of analysis. On the basis of this methodology, it is determined that Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity should be investigated in relation to the Buddhist tradition, Nhat Hanh's cultural-historic context, and the corpus of his teachings.

Part II of the thesis encompasses the investigation of the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh and their application towards a proposal of Buddhist pluralism. Chapter Four examines Nhat Hanh's approach to tradition and thereby locates the origins of his contemporary interpretation of Buddhism within the cultural-historic context of the Vietnam War. This chapter examines the dynamics of continuity and adaptation within Nhat Hanh's teachings of Engaged Buddhism, and thus demonstrates the traditional foundations of his pedagogy while elucidating his emphasis on the need for religious renewal and actualisation.

Chapter Five examines Nhat Hanh's approach to modernity, which constitutes a critique of the spiritual malaise of the modern West. This chapter explores Nhat Hanh's 'diagnosis' of modern ills, and also delineates the dimensions of his 'cure', which encompasses a prescription of spiritual practice, the manifestation of community, and the enactment of dialogue between nations. This analysis of Nhat Hanh's approach to modernity presents the key elements of his pedagogy and demonstrates their continual actualisation within the context of the modern West.

As the culmination of this thesis, Chapter Six draws upon the initial elucidation of Christian and Buddhist discourses of pluralism, and what has been discovered of Nhat Hanh's approach to tradition and to modernity, in order to theologially and constructively analyse his approach to religious diversity. Specifically, this chapter applies the theory of pluralism to Nhat Hanh's teachings concerning other religions, and thereby reveals a number of valuable resources that could be used towards the construction of a position of Buddhist pluralism. This chapter presents the notion of Religious Interbeing to conceptualise this position and affirms that such a position could contribute not only towards the discourse of pluralism, but also towards the dynamics of interreligious dialogue within the late modern global community.

**Part I**

**Theoretical and Methodological Foundations**

## 1

**Religious Diversity and the Possibility of Pluralism:  
An Introduction**

*Genuine ecumenism requires the communication and sharing, not only of information about doctrines which are totally and irrevocably divergent, but also of religious intuitions and truths which may turn out to have something in common... Ecumenism seeks the inner and ultimate spiritual 'ground' which underlies all articulated differences. A genuinely fruitful dialogue cannot be content with a polite diplomatic interest in other religions and their beliefs. It seeks a deeper level.*

Thomas Merton

Throughout the progression of religious history, the world religions have generally maintained permeable boundaries of interaction and exchange. Within the current era of globalisation, however, technological advancements and political shifts have escalated the rate of interreligious encounter and increased the variety of religions encountered. Consequently, a diversity of religions constitutes a defining feature upon the landscapes of the late modern world. The global fact of religious diversity presents a direct challenge to all religious assertions of absolutism or ultimacy. At the heart of this challenge are issues concerning multiple and conflicting claims to universality, uniqueness, and a finality of salvific truth. Amongst negative responses to this challenge, egregious eruptions of fundamentalism and the so-called ‘clash of civilisations’ are fiercely apparent reactions. However, more positive responses can be discerned within movements towards interreligious understanding and amity, which are quietly but steadily advancing. Within the dynamics and discourse of each world religion, the emergence of genuine interreligious communication is initiating the breakdown of old structures of superiority and imperialism. Such developments are contributing towards the evolution of an interreligious consciousness of pluralism, which affirms ‘unity in diversity’ within a vision of global community.

In order to introduce the issue of religious diversity and explore the dimensions of its challenge, this chapter will investigate the specific response of Christianity. Due to the prolonged ascendancy of the Christian Church, religious diversity has presented a particularly acute challenge to the Christian tradition. Consequently, the discourse of Christian theology has articulated a highly developed and systematic theoretical response, which is articulated in the so-called ‘theology of religions’. This chapter will investigate each element of the Christian theology of religions’ three-fold typology of classification, consisting of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. As this thesis is specifically focused on the discourse of pluralism as a valid response to religious diversity, this chapter will pay particular attention to the theological and philosophical debate that surrounds this position. The principal concern of pluralism is the equality of religions. Within the domain of Christian theology this equality has been proposed in a number of different ways, some of which are contentious. In particular, we will examine the debate between *identist* and *differential* pluralism.

Identist pluralism affirms religious equality on the basis of a shared religious essence or a universal category, and argues that each religion refers to the same salvific end – the one ultimate reality or truth. In contention, differential pluralism argues against the assumption of unity, in recognition of the inherent danger of the imposition of alien categories and the consequent denial of difference. As such, differential pluralism affirms religious equality on the basis of religious difference, arguing that ultimate reality or truth is multifaceted and multidimensional, and that different religions therefore refer to different salvific ends.

The philosophical debate between identist and differential pluralism appears to lead to a logical impasse, which undermines the possibility of affirming both the unity and diversity of religions. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, alternative perspectives may be found within the domains of interreligious dialogue and religious experience. In particular, we will investigate the model of *interior dialogue*, as it has been represented by the American Trappist monk Thomas Merton. The type of pluralism manifested by Merton's interior dialogue can be understood as a *mystical* or *experiential* pluralism. Often in reference to religious traditions from the East, experiential pluralism affirms both the unity and diversity of religions on the basis of spiritual experience, transformation, and the transcendence of religious language and forms. This chapter will culminate with an elucidation of arguments for experiential pluralism, which suggest that while pluralism may not be a philosophical or rational possibility, within the dimensions of religious dialogue and experience it may be a spiritual possibility.

The intention of this chapter is to present the issue of religious diversity and explore the Christian theological response to its challenge. While the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism has been constructed within the discourse of Christian theology, it is today utilised in cross-cultural discussion and interreligious exchange. Indeed, in the following chapter the typology will be applied to Buddhism, in order to investigate how the tradition has responded to religious diversity and what it may have to contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding pluralism. Moreover, in Part II the discourse of pluralism will be specifically applied to the teachings of the contemporary Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, in order to examine his

contribution to Buddhist pluralism. As such, this chapter is intended to introduce the principal ideas and debates that form the theoretical background of this thesis and underlie its main propositions.

### The Christian Theology of Religions

The theologian John Hick has observed, "Each of the great religious movements includes powerful strands of thought and feeling for which the fact of religious plurality constitutes not only a profound puzzle but a disturbing challenge."<sup>1</sup> As mentioned above, the crux of this challenge is defined by conflicting claims to universality, truth, and uniqueness. As another theologian, Joseph DiNoia, has recognised, "Each religious community seems to combine a claim to the universal applicability of its teachings with an insistence on their privileged and indeed unique embodiment in the community's authentic traditions."<sup>2</sup> While these observations may be true of all religions, it is apparent that religious diversity presents a specific challenge to the monotheistic consciousness of the prophetic traditions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Jewish covenant with God through Abraham and their distinction as the Chosen People, the Christian affirmation of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ as 'the Way, the Truth, and the Life', and the Islamic testimony of faith in the finality of the one God's revelation to the Prophet Muhammad, expressed in the *shahada*,<sup>3</sup> all make claims to absolute truth and a finality of salvific means and ends. As the theologian Geoffrey Parrinder has argued, "The challenge is acute for the Semitic or Western religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. They have been accustomed to think of themselves as supreme, in religion and culture, possessing the highest truths and the oldest and best philosophy."<sup>4</sup>

Of the three monotheistic faiths, Christianity has demonstrated the greatest preoccupation with religious others. Underlying this preoccupation is Christianity's

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<sup>1</sup> John Hick, "Religious Diversity as Challenge and Promise," in *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, ed. John Hick and Hasan Askari (Aldershot: Gower, 1985), 4.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. DiNoia, "Pluralist Theology of Religions: Pluralistic or Non-Pluralistic?," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 121.

<sup>3</sup> The *shahada* is the central creedal utterance and confession of faith in Islam. It claims: *la ilaha illa Allah; Muhammad rasul Allah* – "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah."

historical ascendancy and its persistent assumption of superiority, as represented by the power of Rome and its salvific monopoly, and the missionary zeal of its European colonial empires. Christianity's attitude towards non-Christian religions has long been pursued within a theological discourse which has centred upon the question of salvation. Indeed, the so-called 'theology of religions' emerged out of the Christian missionary context in which the question of "who is saved and who is not" was at the forefront.<sup>5</sup> This question continued to lend its hue to Christian dialogical exchange until well into the twentieth-century. However, the interwar years witnessed a rapid growth in Christian interreligious endeavours, indicative of Christianity's increasing awareness of other religions. Following the collapse of colonialism in the aftermath of World War II, the challenge of religious diversity became a principal concern within mainstream Christian theological debate. The theologian Langdon Gilkey has commented on this post-World War II era of Western and Christian collapse:

Colonies vanished, Europe disappeared as a major power, other non-Western power centres appeared representing other ways of life and other religions. The West no longer ruled the world; Western ways were no longer unassailable; Western religion became one among the other world religions; and (not insignificantly) the Christian faith became the one now most morally culpable, the chief imperialistic, nonspiritual, and in fact barely moral faith! Correspondingly, Western culture became radically open to non-Western religions; missionary influence flowed in the opposite direction; and the spiritual power of other faiths began to assert itself on Christian turf... This dramatic new situation has forced – and this is the right word I think – a new understanding of the interrelationships of religions, a new balance of spiritual power.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the last half-century, both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant World Council of Churches have become directly involved in theological endeavours concerning the interrelationship of religions. These endeavours have produced a three-fold paradigm of categorisation consisting of *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism*. This trichotomy was introduced by John Hick and then circulated in the publications of his pupils. In particular, Alan Race's work *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* is representative.<sup>7</sup> In this

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder cited in J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997). 132

<sup>5</sup> Terry C. Muck, "Instrumentality, Complexity, and Reason: A Christian Approach to Religions," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 22 (2002). 119

<sup>6</sup> Langdon Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987). 40

<sup>7</sup> See Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell Books, 1986), John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), Alan Race,

work, Race presents the paradigm as a “broad typological framework within which most of the current Christian theologies of religion can be placed.”<sup>8</sup> Today, the typology is used as a trans-religious tool. It is generally assumed that it represents three basic attitudes of response to religious others that can be discerned not only within Christianity but also within the ‘theology’ of all religions. As the theologian Diana Eck has recognised,

[T]hese three ways of thinking about the problem of diversity and difference are not simply Christian theological positions, but are recognisable in the thinking of people of other religious traditions and in the thinking of nonreligious people. All of us – Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and others – struggle to interpret the experienced facts of diversity to ourselves and to our communities.<sup>9</sup>

In brief, the *exclusivist* response asserts that the ‘home religion’ is the one and only truth and way to salvation, excluding all others. The *inclusivist* response claims that there are many religions and salvific truths, but the home religion is the superior culmination of the others, or is wide enough to include aspects of the others under its universal canopy, and in our own terms. Finally, the *pluralist* response affirms that truth is not the exclusive or inclusive possession of any one religion, but that the plurality of world religions each possesses salvific truth that is as valid, effective, and valuable as any other.<sup>10</sup> We will now examine each of these attitudes as they have been represented within the history of Christianity’s encounter with other religions.

### Exclusivism

The early centuries of Christianity were a period of self-definition that witnessed a progression from Christocentrism to Ecclesiocentrism, a development that emphasised commitment to the Christian community and exclusive allegiance to the Church. Cyprianus’ famous dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – “Outside the Church there is No Salvation” – was a well-established ecclesiastical position by the third-century and it has continued to influence the Christian attitude towards other

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*Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SMC Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*. 7

<sup>9</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). 170. See also Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology - Clarified and Reaffirmed,” in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005). 13-27

<sup>10</sup> I have relied on Eck’s descriptions of the three theological categories in my rendition. See Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. 168

religions. Within the history of Christian exclusivism, religious others have often been perceived as superstitious heathen or idolatrous infidels, and interreligious relations have generally been characterised by either enmity or the fervour of proselytism. Christian exclusivism persists. Despite the developments enacted by the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholicism continues to affirm the unique salvific efficacy of the Catholic Church,<sup>11</sup> while the Protestant Christological formulation asserts "Without Jesus Christ, there is no salvation."<sup>12</sup> The Christian belief in God's incarnation in Christ, and Christ's role on Earth as *the* Saviour, defines the uniqueness of Christianity for its adherents and deems non-Christian representations of the absolute as radically separate or incomplete. As John Hick has recognised:

Until fairly recently it was a virtually universal Christian assumption, an implicit dogma with almost creedal status, that Christ/the Christian gospel/Christianity is 'absolute,' 'unique,' 'final,' 'normative,' 'ultimate' – decisively superior to all other saviours, gospels, religions.<sup>13</sup>

The work of twentieth-century Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth represents this attitude of irreducible uniqueness. In a critique of the nineteenth-century liberal tradition of Protestant theology, Barth's 'Neo-Orthodox' position reaffirms the uniqueness of Christian revelation. Barth depicts all non-Christian religions as merely human attempts to understand and approach God. In contrast, Barth defines Christianity not as a human phenomenon, a 'religion', but as a unique gift of revelation and a witness to God's initiative through Jesus Christ. Juxtaposing religion with revelation Barth claims, "Religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed, we must say that it is the one great concern, of godless man."<sup>14</sup> Christian exclusivism has also been expressed in the work of the Dutch Reformed theologian Hendrik Kraemer, particularly in his book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. Following Barth, Kraemer stresses the "radical discontinuity" between the Gospel and all other religions, the latter being dismissed as merely "human attempts to apprehend the

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<sup>11</sup> For example, see the recent Vatican documents: *Christianity and the World Religions* (International Theological Commission, August 1997) & *Dominus Iesus* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, September 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther's damnation of idolatry and his denouncement of "those who remain outside Christianity, be they heathens, Turks, Jews or false Christians (i.e. Roman Catholics) although they believe in only one true God, yet remain in eternal wrath and perdition," colours Protestant exclusive attitudes in an equally negative light as the Catholic. Quoted and translated from Luther's collected works by Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faiths* (London: Epworth Press, 1986). 11

<sup>13</sup> Hick, "Religious Diversity as Challenge and Promise." 16

totality of existence.”<sup>15</sup> Although Kraemer was involved in Orientalist pursuits and upheld a belief in the positive benefits of dialogical exchange between East and West, he still exemplifies the conservative Christian position of exclusivism, which essentially asserts that salvation is found in Christ alone, and discerns little, if any, salvific or religious value elsewhere.

Looking further afield, there is no shortage of examples of exclusivism within other religions. As the theologian John Cobb has recognised, “The pluralistic situation can lead to fundamentalist self-isolation in all the traditions.”<sup>16</sup> Evidently, it can also lead to fierce proselytism and violent opposition of the religious other. Within the exclusive position, belief systems are often utilised as “symbolic weaponry”<sup>17</sup> upon humankind’s numerous battlefields. It is indeed difficult to identify any recent situation of violent conflict that has not been fuelled by the powerful rhetoric of religious identity and difference and the dire strategies of religious communalism and fundamentalism. As one commentator has observed:

There is no other sphere of discourse in which human beings so fully articulate their differences from one another, or cast these differences in terms of everlasting rewards and punishments. Religion is the one endeavour in which us-them thinking achieves a transcendent significance.<sup>18</sup>

The boundaries of belonging and religious identity that demarcate the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are further reinforced within the exclusive position by a prevalent disregard for interreligious dialogue and exchange. Positive interreligious dialogue presupposes an attitude of mutual appreciation and it depends upon being open to perspectives of the other, to “the possibilities of religious renewal and creative transformation.”<sup>19</sup> Within the context of exclusivism only monologues are heard.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956). 299-300.

<sup>15</sup> Hendrick Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938). 135

<sup>16</sup> John B. Cobb, “Beyond ‘Pluralism,’” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990). 87

<sup>17</sup> Diana L. Eck, “In the Name of Religions,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1993). 11

<sup>18</sup> Sam Harris, “Killing the Buddha,” *Shambala Sun*, March 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng, “Prologue – Religious Dialogue in the Twentieth Century: Issues, Approaches, and Possibilities”, in Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng, eds., *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1986). 4

### Inclusivism

While exclusivism persists within contemporary forms of Christianity, particularly in fundamentalist and evangelist traditions, a growing liberal Christian discourse is representative of inclusivism. The inclusive position can be traced to members of the ancient Church, such as Justinus (second-century) and Eusebius (third/fourth-century), who discerned aspects of Christian truth in Hellenistic philosophy and the Old Testament. However, it was not until the twentieth-century, in response to the expansion of Christian cross-cultural consciousness and interreligious awareness, that inclusivism as a theological position became fully established. Theologically supported by the belief that the *logos* incarnate in Christ is universally present as the 'life and light' of all people, the Christian attitude of inclusivism is today the most common position towards non-Christian religions. Eck explains the historical and theoretical foundations of this attitude:

At least one strong stream of the mission movement was fed not by an exclusivist theology that deemed all non-Christians to be lost heathens, but by an inclusivist "fulfilment theology" that held non-Christians to be genuine seekers of a truth found fully in Christ. That is, other religious traditions are not so much evil or wrong-headed as incomplete, needing the fulfilment of Christ. In some ways other religious traditions have prepared the way for the Good News of Christ. While not wholly false, they are but partially true. All people of faith are seekers, and Christ, finally, is what they seek.<sup>20</sup>

While Christian superiority is maintained within the inclusive paradigm, this position signifies a decline in the Church's exclusive insistence that it holds the only pathway to truth and salvation, and it therefore represents the emergence of religious tolerance.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) played an important role in promoting developments within Christian inclusivism. The Council's conclusive statement – "Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (also known as *Nostra Aetate*) presents a deep appreciation of the value of religious others. Affirming the world faiths, the document proclaims:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In him,

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<sup>20</sup> Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. 179

in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor. 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life.<sup>21</sup>

While salvation outside the Church is still refuted, *Nostra Aetate* confirms that God's "providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all men."<sup>22</sup> Thus, certain universalistic resources – God's universal love, the gift of God's grace, God's desire to save all men – are utilised to include religious others within the soteriological structure of Christianity. While this liberal approach recognises aspects of salvific value within other religious structures, they are understood as the result of God's redemptive work through Christ, and seen to be in need of fulfilment in Christ. Jesus becomes the "cosmic Christ" whose saving Spirit is "active, in camouflaged ways, throughout the 'cosmos', especially in the religions of the world."<sup>23</sup> The theologian Karl Rahner, who has been deemed the "chief architect of the inclusivist paradigm,"<sup>24</sup> has proposed the notion of the "anonymous Christian" to represent this kind of Christian inclusivism. Rahner asserts that the world religions are "positively included in God's plan of salvation." Accordingly, due to the universality of God's saving grace in the world, all followers of non-Christian religions are unwittingly saved by Christ, even though they do not "name the name."<sup>25</sup> Rahner's position had a profound influence on Vatican II, and on the swelling of dialogical exploration that proceeded it.

Looking further afield, it is evident that certain strains of understanding and belief within the world religions can be understood in inclusivist terms. Not only Christians speak of 'anonymous' believers. Within the Hindu tradition, the Supreme Brahman is believed to be the goal of all religions, and the Upanishadic notion of *tat ekam* is posited as the 'one reality' or 'mountain top' that all religions seek. Within the Buddhist tradition, the affirmation of the universality of Buddha-nature suggests that everyone, Buddhist or not, is capable of attaining Buddhahood. Finally, the Islamic tradition proposes that all people are born Muslims and are destined for submission to

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<sup>21</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, in Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1975). 740

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

<sup>23</sup> Paul F. Knitter, "Searching for the Common Thread within Religions," *ReVision* 22, no. 2 (1999). 21

<sup>24</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*. 143

<sup>25</sup> Gerald A. McCool, ed., *A Rahner Reader* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975). 218

Allah, even if they have not found God through the prophet Muhammad. Inclusivism is perhaps the least demanding of the three positions – it does not require a vehement denouncement of religious others, nor a restructuring of one’s own essential commitment. Inclusivism provides a seemingly adequate means of making sense of religious others within one’s own religious framework. Inclusivism affirms the value of other religions (though it may not be ultimate), and thereby establishes tolerance and acceptance, laying a firm foundation for open and possibly self-questioning dialogue.

### Pluralism

The expansion of Christian consciousness towards the horizons of religious others has advanced alongside contemporary philosophical investigations into the significance of historical and cultural context in relation to the nature of knowledge and truth. With regard to Christianity’s interactions with religious others, a recognition of the significance of context has generated an awareness of relativism and the adoption of a hermeneutical, as opposed to an absolutist, approach.<sup>26</sup> In a discussion of these developments, the theologian Leonard Swidler has observed, “our understanding of truth and reality has been undergoing a paradigm shift,” in which all statements about reality have come to be seen as “historical, praxial or intentional, perspectival, language-limited or partial, interpretive, and dialogic.”<sup>27</sup> Such a perspective is represented by the theological paradigm of pluralism, which acknowledges the equality and validity of all religions. According to the position of pluralism, no one religion can be considered as normative or superior to all others. Rather, all religions are seen as complex historically and culturally conditioned human responses to an absolute reality. From the perspective of Christianity, pluralism thereby implies that “the existence of the other great religious traditions, in their plurality and diversity, is

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<sup>26</sup> As Mircea Eliade proclaimed: “Western culture will be in danger of a decline into a sterilising provincialism if it despises or neglects the dialogue with other cultures. Hermeneutics is Western man’s response – the only intelligent response possible – to the solicitations of contemporary history, to the fact that the West is forced...to this encounter and confrontation with the cultural values of ‘the others’”. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). 10

<sup>27</sup> Leonard Swidler in Leonard Swidler et al., *Death or Dialogue? From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue* (London: SCM Press, 1990). 59

not ultimately a threat to be warded off, or an embarrassment to be studiously ignored, but a reality of which we must seek to discover the positive meaning."<sup>28</sup>

A wide range of theologians, such as John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Paul Knitter, Diana Eck, John Cobb, Raimundo Panikkar, and Thomas Merton have contributed to the construction of this new paradigm of pluralism. A representative volume titled *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* defines pluralism as "a move away from the insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity towards a recognition of the independent validity of other ways."<sup>29</sup> This work represents the magnitude of this movement for Christianity by comparing it to Caesar's crossing of the River Rubicon in 49 BCE. Equating this river with the Christian claim to absoluteness, the pluralist move is defined as "the crossing of a theological Rubicon."<sup>30</sup> However, while Caesar's motivations encompassed the deliberate and divisive desire for war, the irenic intentions of today's pluralists seek the demonstration of amity between the world religions. Conscious of the inappropriate and obsolete reification of Christian claims to superiority and imperialism, and convinced of the possibility of a greater unity, pluralism affirms parity among the diversity of religious expressions and perceives an imperative to establish mutual understanding and even transformation through constructive forms of dialogue.

Because pluralism is often misrepresented, a number of theorists and commentators have chosen to explicate the pluralist approach through a kind of 'lens of inversion'. From this perspective, pluralism can best be defined in relation to what it is *not*. Appropriating this approach, we will here seek clarification of the pluralist position by exploring a number of its antitheses: plurality, tolerance, and relativism.

When discussing pluralism as a theological discourse and paradigm, it is important to distinguish between *plurality* and *pluralism* as they are sometimes used

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<sup>28</sup> Hick, "Religious Diversity as Challenge and Promise." 3

<sup>29</sup> Paul F. Knitter, "Preface," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987). viii

<sup>30</sup> John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, Faith Meets Faith Series* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987).

interchangeably and this can be confusing. Religious plurality is simply another way of referring to religious diversity. To clarify, while plurality signifies an objective fact and implies no subjective interaction, pluralism necessitates direct subjective and theological involvement with the religious other. As Diana Eck defines, "Religious pluralism requires active positive engagement with the claims of religion and the facts of religious diversity."<sup>31</sup> Paul Ingram has confirmed:

[W]ithout engagement with one another, the mere facts of the existence of neighbouring churches, temples, and mosques are just salad bowl examples of religious diversity. We can study diversity, celebrate it, or complain about it, but diversity alone is not pluralism. Pluralism is not an empirical fact, as religious diversity is an empirical fact. Pluralism is an attitude, a theological orientation, a theoretical construct that seeks to coherently interpret the data of religious diversity.<sup>32</sup>

Pluralism also denotes much more than *tolerance*. Religious tolerance is typically championed as a liberal approach to religious others. Indeed, the acceptance of difference implied by tolerance is worthy of such acclaim. However, is this what tolerance really implies? Such an 'open' approach may be deceptive; tolerance may in fact be nothing more than a sentimental platitude. As the contemporary religious scholar Harry Oldmeadow has perceived, "in the religious field [tolerance] can easily cloak an insolent condescension on one side or, worse, an impious indifference to each and every religion on the other. 'Tolerance' can often signify nothing more than a vacuum of any firmly-held beliefs or pieties."<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, a position of tolerance can undermine the possibility of dialogue by establishing or reinforcing distance. As Eck has ascertained, "Tolerance alone does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another by building bridges of exchange and dialogue. It does not require us to know anything new, it does not even entertain the fact that we ourselves might change in the process. Tolerance might sustain a temporary and shaky truce, but it will never bring forth new creation."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. 192

<sup>32</sup> Paul O Ingram, "'That We May Know Each Other': The Pluralist Hypothesis as a Research Program," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 24 (2004). 136

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth ("Harry") Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo: The Sri Lankan Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000). 199. Note that Harry Oldmeadow also goes by the name of Kenneth Oldmeadow.

<sup>34</sup> Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. 193. For a further examination of the notion of tolerance in relation to religion, and particularly to the religious context of India, see Wilhelm Halbfass, Chapter 22 - " 'Inclusivism' and 'Tolerance' in the Encounter between East and West" in Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988). 403ff

The recognition of the distinction between pluralism and *relativism* is critical to a thorough understanding of pluralism. Relativism is often considered an intellectual solution to many of the problems raised by religious diversity. Relativism explains religions as distinct human constructions, which are relative to and conditioned by the historical and cultural conditions in which they function. Accordingly, the beliefs and practices of any religious community are seen to be true for its adherents but irrelevant for others, because religious truths can only ever be understood in relation to their contexts. By affirming the relative truth of all religions, and therefore their equality, such a perspective may seem to represent a position of pluralism. Indeed, many critics have argued for the equation of relativism and pluralism. Concerned with the issue of immorality or irreligion, some critics contend that pluralism implies a relative, uncritical, and therefore dubious acceptance of all claims to truth. Other critics contend that because pluralism affirms the relative truth of religions, they are each asserted as equally viable and therefore they each become equally worthless.

In response to the critique of pluralism as relativism, it firstly needs to be acknowledged that while pluralists affirm the relative truth of all religions, this does not mean that they do not employ value-judgements regarding religious positions. As one commentator has explained, if this were the case a pluralist “would not be able to distinguish between the truth claims of, for example, the Confessing Church and those German Christians who followed Hitler.”<sup>35</sup> It also needs to be acknowledged that while pluralists affirm the relative truth of all religions, this does not mean that they deny the existence of an ultimate truth that provides the ultimate referent and thus value of all religions. Indeed, from the perspective of pluralism, such reductive relativism, which perceives religions as merely so many separate human constructs, amounts to nothing but nihilism. The theologian Langdon Gilkey has articulated this danger of relativism:

[I]f they are relativised, God, Christ, grace and salvation, higher consciousness, *dharmā*, nirvana, and *mukti* alike begin to recede in authority, to take on the aspect of mere projections relative to the cultural and individual subjectivity of the projectors, and so in the end they vanish like bloodless ghosts.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Rose Drew, “Reconsidering the Possibility of Pluralism,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 40, no. 3 (2003): 247

<sup>36</sup> Gilkey, “Plurality and Its Theological Implications.” 43-44

What the theologian John Cobb has deemed the “corrosive acid of relativism”<sup>37</sup> ignores the pluralist affirmation of commitment, it undermines the possibility of dialogue, and it disavows the presence of any underlying foundation of real religious meaning. The Traditionalist Frithjof Schuon has referred to this kind of reductive nihilistic relativism, in which everything of religious import becomes merely “the fruit of a contingent elaboration: Revelation becomes poetry, the Religions are inventions, sages are thinkers... and every principial truth” is denied.<sup>38</sup> With regard to relativism, Diana Eck has succinctly stated the pluralist position:

Pluralism is not, then, the kind of radical openness to anything and everything that drains meaning from particularity. It is, however, radical openness to Truth – to God – that seeks to enlarge understanding through dialogue. Pluralism is the complex and unavoidable encounter, difficult as it might be, with the multiple religions and cultures that are the very stuff of our world, some of which may challenge the very ground on which we stand. Unless all of us can encounter one another’s religious visions and cultural forms and understand them through dialogue, both critically and self-critically, we cannot begin to live with maturity and integrity in the world house.<sup>39</sup>

While all pluralists affirm the existence or presence of ultimate truth or reality, they differ in their understanding of religious representations of this reality. Two opposing camps of pluralism have thus emerged. The first considers that all religions are oriented towards the same religious object (whatever it may be called) and promote the same end or salvific goal. This universalist approach has been deemed *identist pluralism*. Because all religions are seen to refer to the same one reality, they are considered to be ontologically identist, and because they are united by a shared salvific essence, they are considered to be soteriologically identist.<sup>40</sup> In contention, the second camp underscores the uniqueness of each religion and attests that they each represent different ends or salvations by being oriented towards different religious objects. These objects are representative of different ultimate realities, or aspects of a reality that is multidimensional. This particularist approach has been deemed *differential pluralism*, as it considers religions to be ontologically and

<sup>37</sup> John B. Cobb in Swidler et al., *Death or Dialogue? From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*. 4

<sup>38</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, cited in Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*. 135

<sup>39</sup> Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. 196

<sup>40</sup> While identist pluralism may appear to be simply another form of inclusivism, it should be noted that its proponents consider the one reality to which all religions refer and the shared salvific essence that unites them to be non-tradition-specific, that is, a universal. See below for further discussion.

soteriologically different.<sup>41</sup> While the first camp enters into dialogue on the basis of a common denominator or uniting essence, the second, affirming difference, endeavours instead to discover areas of complementarity. Exemplifying the first camp, the Buddhist philosopher Masao Abe has commented on the pivotal conception of the common essence:

The most serious and crucial question in the current situation of religious pluralism is whether there is a basic unity or common denominator for world religions... whether there is something common to, something universally true for, all religions... whether there is an absolute One as the common essence of all religions.<sup>42</sup>

Denouncing the idea of a common denominator as a superficial 'meta-theory', David Ray Griffin represents the second camp. Griffin pronounces

...a call for deep pluralism – one that recognises that religious diversity involves real differences in the diagnosis of the basic human problem, the type of 'salvation' needed, and the nature of the ultimate reality to which attention is directed. A deep pluralism would, furthermore, see truth in other religions in relation to aspects in which they are different from one's own tradition, as well as in relation to aspects in which they are similar.<sup>43</sup>

### Identist Pluralism

The theologian John Hick has been recognised as "the most articulate protagonist of the acceptance of religious pluralism as a systematic position in Christian theology as well as in the philosophy of religion."<sup>44</sup> He has also been deemed "the most important representative" of the identist model of religious pluralism.<sup>45</sup> Hick's theology of pluralism commenced with a call for a "Copernican revolution" to invert Christianity's "Ptolemaic" perception that all religions revolve around the 'sun' of Christ.<sup>46</sup> In Hick's words:

<sup>41</sup> See David Ray Griffin, "Religious Pluralism: Generic, Identist, and Deep," in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 24ff

<sup>42</sup> Masao Abe, " 'There is No Common Denominator for World Religions': The Positive Meaning of this Negative Statement," in Masao Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Steven Heine, Two vols., vol. I (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 40-41

<sup>43</sup> Griffin, "Religious Pluralism: Generic, Identist, and Deep," 29

<sup>44</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims: The Problem of a Theology of the World Religions," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 97

<sup>45</sup> Yong Huang, "Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue: Beyond Universalism and Particularism," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995), 128

<sup>46</sup> See John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1973), viii-ix

We have to realise that the universe of faiths centres upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. [God] is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways.<sup>47</sup>

Despite its honourable intent to traverse Christianity's 'Rubicon', Hick's initial position of theocentric pluralism received criticism for its exclusion of non-theistic traditions such as Buddhism. This critique proposed that the movement from christocentrism to theocentrism requires a further step beyond the dualism of theism and non-theism.<sup>48</sup> In response, Hick established a corrective 'hypothesis' proposing a category of 'the Real' as the ultimate source and referent of the world religions. Hick explains:

[T]he great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human... One then sees the great world religions as different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances.<sup>49</sup>

The ultimate metaphysical referent of 'the Real' is epistemologically unknowable and therefore ineffable. Directly informed by Kant, and evidencing the influence of Rudolf Otto, Hick employs a distinction between the noumenal, which is independent of human perception, and the phenomenal, which can be humanly perceived.<sup>50</sup> 'The Real' refers to a divine noumenal reality – "that putative reality which transcends everything other than itself but is not transcended by anything other than itself."<sup>51</sup> Yet it is ontologically real and can be authentically encountered and experienced through the phenomenal *personae* or *impersonae* – the different gods and impersonal absolutes venerated in the world religions, which are embodiments or manifestations of transcendent divine reality. Hick suggests a further identification between the

<sup>47</sup> John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980). 71

<sup>48</sup> For example, Sumner B. Twiss has observed, "a recognition of the possible ill fittingness between Hick's claim and some religious traditions suggests the possibility that his claim might well be theistically loaded and at best applicable only to those theistic traditions that are historically related (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam)." Sumner B. Twiss, "The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: A Critical Appraisal of Hick and His Critics," *Journal of Religion* 70 (1990). 557, n. 37

<sup>49</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989). 240

<sup>50</sup> See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1958). And for a succinct discussion of Otto's distinction between the noumena and the phenomena, see Chapter 3, "The Numinous Experience" in Philip C. Almond, *Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to His Philosophical Theology* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). 55-87

<sup>51</sup> John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). 164

soteriologies of the various religious traditions, which are all seen to transform religious adherents from 'self-centredness' to 'Reality-centredness':

[W]ithin each of [the world religions] the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative soteriological 'spaces' within which, or 'ways' along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfilment.<sup>52</sup>

Uniting the world religions within a cohesive metaphysical divine reality and a common soteriological core, Hick ostensibly affirms the equal value of religions.

According to the identist position of pluralism, the confirmation of a common essence or shared soteriological goal among the world religions is a crucial corrective to religious imperialism; the realisation of the common essence affirms that all religions have equal inherent value. Furthermore, if the goal of all religions is understood as the authentic embodiment or actualisation of this essence, it becomes a criterion of evaluation that can be used to judge the efficacy of each religious system. Finally, owing to this common essence, the meeting of the religions can take place on an ostensibly common ground, in reference to some trans-religious category of understanding, such as 'the Real'. In addition to Hick, numerous Christian theologians, as well as philosophers and commentators from other religions, have proposed 'theories of essence'. We will here present but a few.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the eminent historian of religions, has identified 'faith' as the common substance of all religions, the essence which unites them within a single historical continuum. Emphasising the primacy of 'personal truth' over the truth of doctrines, Smith defines faith as "a universal quality of human life."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Smith compares faith to beliefs or doctrines, which he considers to be mere intellectualisations about faith. Faith is the essence of the various human responses to ultimate reality,

...a serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enables one to feel at home in the universe and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*. 240

<sup>53</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1981). 113

<sup>54</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). 12

From the ethical perspective of liberation theology, Paul Knitter has proposed the centrality of 'soteria' or 'soteriocentrism' as the unifying factor of the world religions. Knitter suggests that a common 'liberative spirit', while differently expressed, can be discerned within all religious traditions:

If the religions of the world...can recognise poverty and oppression as a common problem, if they can share a common commitment (expressed in different forms) to remove such evils, they will have the basis for reaching across their incommensurabilities and differences in order to hear and understand each other and be transformed in the process.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious proposal of the common essence of religions issues from the realms of mysticism. Every major religion of the world has manifested a tradition of mysticism, including the Advaita Vedānta of Hinduism, the Kabbalah of Judaism, Gnosticism and the apophatic or negative theology of Christianity, and the Sufism of Islam. While the ascetic or esoteric practices of mystical traditions may lead to a variety of experiences, including pantheistic, panentheistic, dualistic, and nondualistic, they are united by their concern with the inner world of self-transformation and gaining access to the ultimate dimension of reality. The transformative experiences of mysticism encompass a transcendence of the normal modes of perception, and the communion, union, or direct encounter with ineffable divine or absolute reality.<sup>56</sup> William James, one of the most esteemed scholars of mystical experience, has observed the trans-religious manifestation of mysticism:

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<sup>55</sup> Paul F. Knitter, "Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 186.

<sup>56</sup> This description of mysticism is necessarily brief and it should be noted that the debates that surround its proposals are more complex and involved than space allows us to discuss here. While more will be said on mysticism and related debates, it is worth here noting a number of representative works. See Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960), R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeter-Natural Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity.<sup>57</sup>

According to the mystical traditions of every religion, mystical experience opens a kind of spiritual doorway that leads beyond the confines of specific religious boundaries to a universal current or essence of truth that is the ultimate source and centre of all religions. Among the vast company of mystics, a suitable representative can be found in the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, who has articulated the mystical view of pluralism in a succinct analogy, which proclaims: "The lamps are different, but the Light is the same."<sup>58</sup>

Bearing similarities and indeed direct links to the position of mysticism, the school of Traditionalism affirms the 'perennial philosophy' or the *sophia perennis* as the uniting factor of religions.<sup>59</sup> One of the most renowned Traditionalists, Frithjof Schuon, has presented an esoteric understanding of the common essence as the "transcendent unity" of religions:

[T]he unity of the religious forms must be realised in a purely inward and spiritual way and without prejudice to any particular form. The antagonisms between these forms no more affect the one universal Truth than the antagonisms between opposing colours affect the transmission of the one uncoloured light... Just as every colour, by its negation of darkness and its affirmation of light, provides the possibility of discovering the ray that makes it visible and of tracing this ray back to its luminous source, so all forms, all symbols, all religions, all dogmas, by their negation of error and their affirmation of Truth, make it possible to follow the ray of Revelation...back to its Divine Source.<sup>60</sup>

The Hindu spiritual activist Mohandas K. Gandhi has utilised a similar analogy of light to represent the unity of religions from a Hindu perspective. Gandhi proclaims: "Truth is the same in all religions though, through refraction, it appears for the time being variegated, even as light does through a prism."<sup>61</sup> Gandhi utilises the Sanskrit

<sup>57</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans Green, 1902). 410

<sup>58</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson, ed., *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, 8 vols. (Cambridge: The Trustees of the "E.J.W. Gibb Memorial", 1925-40). Volume III, verse 1259

<sup>59</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the connections between Traditionalism and the question of religious diversity see Chapter 16, "Dialogue, Pluralism and the Inner Unity of Religions" in Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004). 420-449

<sup>60</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books - Theosophical Publishing House, 1984). xxxiv

<sup>61</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi in Robert Ellsberg, ed., *Gandhi on Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991). 61

word *satya* to characterise the essence of religion. *Satya* can be translated as ‘truth’ and in Gandhi’s vision it signifies *the* truth – that which all religions ultimately refer to but which transcends any particular religious expression. Like the relativist, Gandhi perceives the integral role of culture and language in constructing religions, but unlike the relativist, he affirms truth as an ineffable unity underlying each attempted expression:

Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so is there one true and perfect Religion, but it becomes many, as it passes through the human medium. The one Religion is beyond all speech. Imperfect men put it into such languages as they can command, and their words are interpreted by other men equally imperfectly. Whose interpretation is to be held to be the right one?<sup>62</sup>

The prospect of a universal religion to unite humankind has appealed to many theorists and has found particular resonance within Hinduism.<sup>63</sup> To provide another example from the East, His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV’s approach initially confirms the view of ‘one religion’. From a pragmatic and utilitarian perspective, His Holiness emphasises the affective dimension of religions – the importance of the function and purpose of religious doctrines over and above their philosophical peculiarities. For the Dalai Lama, it is not a question of which philosophical system is right and which is wrong, but a question of the efficacy of each in actualising its intention. According to the Dalai Lama, this goal is universal – the cultivation and promotion of love, compassion, inner peace, a deep respect for others and engagement with their suffering, lasting happiness for all, and a respect for a “higher force.”<sup>64</sup> Explicitly, the Dalai Lama describes the “essence of religion” as “compassion”<sup>65</sup> and proposes the possibility of “a universal religion of love.”<sup>66</sup> In reference to this altruistic goal as the ultimate trans-religious purpose, the Dalai Lama

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 62

<sup>63</sup> See Arvind Sharma, “All Religions Are: Equal? One? Same? A Critical Examination of Some Formulations of the Neo-Hindu Position,” *Philosophy East and West* 29, no. 1 (1979).

<sup>64</sup> Dalai Lama XIV (HH Tenzin Gyatso), “Religious Harmony’ and Extracts from *the Bodhgaya Interviews*,” in *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990). 163-166

<sup>65</sup> Dalai Lama XIV, “Religious Values and a Human Society,” in Dalai Lama XIV (HH Tenzin Gyatso), *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*, trans. Jeffrey Hopkins (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1984). 13

<sup>66</sup> Dalai Lama XIV (HH Tenzin Gyatso), “Religious Harmony’ and Extracts from *the Bodhgaya Interviews*.” 165

suggests, “we must consider the question of religious diversity from this viewpoint...when we do, we find no conflict.”<sup>67</sup>

In spite of such clear evidence of universalism within the Dalai Lama’s interreligious discourse, His Holiness poses a relatively unique case; staying true to the ‘middle path’, his position of universalism is balanced by a position of particularism. Reinforcing his utilitarian approach to religions with an analogy, common to Buddhist discourse, of sickness and cure, the Dalai Lama affirms the value of religious differences. Based upon an awareness of the historical and cultural relevance of religions, the Dalai Lama’s analysis suggests: “Different medicines are prescribed for different diseases, and a medicine which is appropriate in one situation may be inappropriate in another. Thus I cannot say of Buddhism very simply, ‘This medicine is best’.”<sup>68</sup> As we shall now see, the critique of identist pluralism and the position of differential pluralism are underscored by such affirmations of religious difference.

### Differential Pluralism

A prevalent metaphor within the discourse of identist pluralism presents the image of a single mountain traversed by many different paths that all lead to its summit. This image is used to symbolise the assertion that all religions, or paths, lead to the same one ultimate reality, or mountain top. The critique of identist pluralism has reworked this image. No longer is there only one mountain and one summit, but a vista of many mountains, of contrasting terrain, traversed by many paths, some of which intersect, and all leading to a diversity of summits.<sup>69</sup> As this revision implies, the critique of identist pluralism argues against the existence of a common ground (or mountain) and a common goal (or summit) among religions. In their attempt to undermine claims to superiority and grant value to all religions, it is argued that the identists have subsumed religious differences beneath ostensibly neutral meta-theories and allegedly universal categories. Such propositions as ‘the Real’, ‘faith’, ‘soteria’, ‘transcendent

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 167

<sup>68</sup> Dalai Lama XIV (HH Tenzin Gyatso), *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*. 49

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Kaplan’s recent publication exemplifies this perspective. Kaplan presents a threefold typology of paths and mountains – the paths of the theists who seek communion with God; the path of Advaita Vedānta, which aims at final identity with the changeless real; the paths of the many forms of Buddhism, which seek to realise the interconnected nature of the self and the

unity', 'truth', and 'compassion' fail to provide any universal denotation of the essence of religion, as they are all in fact tradition-specific categories. The identists are accused of imposing these categories upon other religions, thereby distorting and misrepresenting them. In the name of religious unity, real religious differences are ignored and the original endeavour of pluralism paradoxically defeats itself. Essentially, this critique discerns a problem of imperialism ensuing from the assumption of neutral ground, and a danger of homogenisation posed by the denial of context and religious differences. The proposition of differential pluralism is offered as an ostensible corrective to this problematic position of identist pluralism.

The objection to imperialism is based upon a recognition of "the myth of the neutral observer"<sup>70</sup> in pluralist views. The argument suggests that identist pluralism has "pretensions to occupy an Olympian neutral position"<sup>71</sup> beyond the positions of all traditions. In practice, this purported neutrality ironically becomes just another absolutist position. The theologian Gavin D'Costa has advanced an incisive critique of an apparent imperialism within John Hick's pluralist hypothesis. D'Costa's article "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions"<sup>72</sup> argues that the pluralist, in practice, employs tradition-specific criteria according to an exclusivistic logic. The neutral ground claimed by pluralists is in fact illusory because, according to D'Costa, there can be "no non-tradition-specific approach."<sup>73</sup> D'Costa explains:

[T]here is no such thing as pluralism because all pluralists are committed to holding some form of truth criteria and by virtue of this, anything that falls fowl of such criteria is excluded as counting as truth (in doctrine and in practice). Thus, pluralism operates within the same logical structure as exclusivism and in this respect pluralism can never really affirm the genuine autonomous value of religious pluralism for, like exclusivism, it can only do so by tradition specific criteria for truth.<sup>74</sup>

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process that is reality. See Stephen Kaplan, *Different Paths, Different Summits: A Model for Religious Pluralism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

<sup>70</sup> Eric O. Springsted, "Conditions of Dialogue: John Hick and Simone Weil," *Journal of Religion* 72, no. 1 (1992): 22f

<sup>71</sup> Alan Race, *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue* (London: SCM Press, 2001): 111

<sup>72</sup> It is worth noting that D'Costa was originally one of Hick's students. See Gavin D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32, no. 2 (1996): 223-232. See also Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000).

<sup>73</sup> D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*: 19

<sup>74</sup> D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions." 225-6

In other words, D'Costa argues that pluralists impose their own understanding of salvation as universally true. Thus, while claiming neutrality, the approach inevitably misrepresents and subsumes the religious other. In another publication, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, D'Costa directly applies this critique to Hick, suggesting that his "apparently neutral, disembodied location is in fact the tradition-specific starting point of liberal modernity."<sup>75</sup> Drawing upon the theory of such postmodern theologians as John Milbank, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Kenneth Surin, D'Costa argues that Hick's position fails to address plurality, since "disputants are invited to leave their traditions (which constituted the original points of disagreement), so as to join a common and new one: liberal modernity."<sup>76</sup> In other words, Hick's pluralism is in fact a form of exclusivism defined by the values and presuppositions of Western liberal modernity.

Another critic, the theologian S. Mark Heim, is credited with providing "what may be the best-argued critique of pluralist theologies of religion in print."<sup>77</sup> Heim has mounted a critical deconstruction of the kind of pluralism presented by theologians like John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Paul Knitter.<sup>78</sup> Like D'Costa, Heim affirms that in practice pluralist theologies are ironically not in fact very pluralistic. Rather, they amount to forms of reductionism that eradicate religious differences and are in fact no less imperialistic than the positions of inclusivism or exclusivism that they criticise. According to Heim, the theory of such pluralists

...appears to deconstruct the pluralism it seeks to affirm. They insist that despite any apparent indications to the contrary, there is no diversity in the religious object (Hick), in the human religious attitude (Smith), or the primary religious function (Knitter). Thus they agree that the faiths cannot be regarded as serious religious alternatives.<sup>79</sup>

Focusing specifically on Hick, Heim argues that his model of pluralism attempts, but fails, to function as a neutral religious Esperanto, into which "the sentences from Swahili are first translated...and then from that structure into French or any other

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<sup>75</sup> D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*. 19

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 20

<sup>77</sup> James L. Fredericks, "Book Review - *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* by S. Mark Heim," *The Journal of Religion* 77, no. 4 (1997). 641

<sup>78</sup> See S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Marynoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 102

tongue.”<sup>80</sup> Heim argues that Hick’s ‘language’ represents “the cultural structures of plausibility against which modern Western Christianity has been tested.”<sup>81</sup> According to Heim, Hick’s category of ‘the Real’, despite its claim to be ‘meta-religious’, is in fact a religiously specific perspective, which asserts a claim about salvation, and then alleges that this salvation is at work in the doctrinal systems of other religions. In accord with D’Costa, Heim denounces the imposition of Western and Christian standards onto all religious traditions.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, another of Hick’s students, Kenneth Surin, has equated Hick’s hypothesis to the universalisation of McDonalds.<sup>83</sup>

The underlying issue of these critiques concerns contextuality and the inevitability of perspective. These critics emphasise the fact that the ground upon which we stand is always located in time and space and that our perspective is therefore inevitably determined by our cultural-historic-religious context. In confirmation, Gordon Kaufman has argued against positions that penetrate “beneath all the ‘accidental’ and ‘historical’ differences among humans and their religions to some supposed ‘essential oneness’ we all share.” Affirming historical consciousness, Kaufman states:

[E]very religious (or secular) understanding and way of life we might uncover is a particular one, that has grown up in a particular history, makes particular claims, is accompanied by particular practices and injunctions, and hence is to be distinguished from all other particular religious and secular orientations. Doubtless there are similarities, parallels, and overlappings of many different sorts within this enormous human diversity – and it is just as important to grasp these connections as to apprehend the differences – but it seems undeniable that every position to which we might turn is itself historically specific. A universal frame of orientation for human understanding and life is no more available to us than is a universal language.<sup>84</sup>

George Lindbeck, in articulating his cultural-linguistics theory of religion, echoes Kauffman:

[I]t is just as hard to think of religions as it is to think of cultures or languages as having a single generic or universal experiential essence of which particular religions – or

<sup>80</sup> S. Mark Heim, “Pluralism and the Otherness of World Religions,” *First Things* 25 (1992). 34

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 29

<sup>82</sup> See Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. 13-43.

<sup>83</sup> See Kenneth Surin, “A ‘Politics of Speech’: Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald’s Hamburger,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religion*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

<sup>84</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, “Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987). 5

cultures or languages – are varied manifestations or modifications. One can in this outlook no more be religious in general than one can speak language in general.<sup>85</sup>

The recognition of contextuality undermines the proposal of universal categories as it denies the existence of any kind of universal perspective from which such categories could be discerned or applied. Indeed, to propose that such neutral ground can be located assumes a privileged position, somehow untainted by context or perspective, in possession of a bird's eye view, as an 'outsider'. According to these critiques, however, human experience is necessarily located within its context, perspective is thereby predetermined by that context, and thus we are all 'insiders'.

These arguments are informed and reinforced by critiques of mysticism and the purported universality of mystical experience that have issued from the school of Constructivism. As exemplified by S.T. Katz, the Constructivist critique argues:

There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences... all experience is processed through, organised by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways.<sup>86</sup>

Katz asserts that the interaction of beliefs and experience form a reciprocal relationship, or a "two-directional symmetry". Certain "constructive conditions of consciousness" such as memory, apprehension, expectation, language, accumulation of prior experiences and concepts, produce the grounds on which religious experience becomes possible.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, according to Katz, all religious experience is "'over-determined' by its social milieu", which shapes and colours the experience through its specific "concepts, images, symbols and values."<sup>88</sup> Finally, for Katz, different religious conceptions of ultimate reality cannot be equated because each tradition has "differing mental and epistemological constructs, ontological commitments and metaphysical superstructures which order experience in differing ways."<sup>89</sup> According to Constructivism, propositions of universal categories and perspective, such as those presented by mysticism and identist pluralism, can only ever amount to what has been

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<sup>85</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 23

<sup>86</sup> Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism." 26

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 30, 59 & 63

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 46

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* 62

called “a view from nowhere”<sup>90</sup> – a metaphysical perspective dislocated from its cultural and ideological presuppositions and thereby invalidated.

In alliance with contemporary postmodern theory, these critics articulate a ‘discourse of difference’. This discourse repudiates essentialist ‘meta-theories’ for undermining real religious difference by asserting putative universal truths or categories of judgement. According to these critics, identist pluralism fails to encompass the vast differences between the world religions. Rather, it homogenises them by forcing them into a tradition-specific, cultural-relative framework, ignoring or discarding any bits that don’t seem to fit. In contention, it is argued that interreligious exchange can be just as fruitful when based upon differences as when based upon similarities. As F. J. Hoffman has professed, “differences between religions are at least as important as similarities”; diversity should be viewed as “a sign of great human vitality rather than as something to be homogenised.”<sup>91</sup>

The theologian J. A. DiNoia has argued against the identist strategy for dealing with the specific features of different religions. According to DiNoia, this strategy “construes religious differences about the nature of the objects of worship and quest as ultimately resolvable into a higher synthesis which transcends the reach of the doctrines of all existing religious communities.”<sup>92</sup> Such an approach, observes DiNoia, “would in effect modify rather than actually encompass the existing particularities of religious affirmation.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, DiNoia calls for a new strategy which, “rather than suggesting major alterations in the world’s religious landscape...would attend to its specific features and strive to account for them in all their intractable diversity.”<sup>94</sup>

Heim also argues against the identist debasement of religious differences. Heim is particularly concerned with Hick’s Kantian distinction between the phenomena, signifying the diversity of religions, and the noumenon, which is definitively singular.

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<sup>90</sup> See M. Raphael, *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). 1

<sup>91</sup> F. J. Hoffman cited in Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*. 138

<sup>92</sup> DiNoia, “Pluralist Theology of Religions: Pluralistic or Non-Pluralistic?.” 128

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 125

What this suggests, according to Heim, is that “differences over historical and trans-historical facts may remain between the traditions, but none of them can be religiously significant since salvation/liberation takes place as well on one side or the other.”<sup>95</sup> In endeavouring to grant autonomy and equality to all religions, Hick has affirmed that all paths lead to salvation. What Heim disagrees with, however, is the singular definition of salvation. As Heim sees it, to tell the Muslim that she or he is seeking the same thing as the Hindu is not likely to be well received.<sup>96</sup> In contrast, Heim proposes a model that takes into account the varieties of “salvations” and constitutes “a true religious pluralism in which the distinctness of various religious ends is acknowledged.”<sup>97</sup> It also asserts the possibility of a variety of ultimate realities because, “the God in whom we [Christians] believe is not quite the same as that of the Jew or Muslim, since our God’s character is fundamentally defined by a different standard.”<sup>98</sup> Heim utilises the image of lock and key to metaphorically define his vision of a plurality of religious paths leading to a diversity of salvations within a multifarious ultimate reality. While each key belongs to its own particular lock, there is no universal key to open them all.

While Heim’s approach would appear to remain bound to relativism, other theologians have suggested dialogical models of pluralism that emphasise the complementarity and even congruence of religions and affirm the possibility of interreligious communion. The Catholic priest, esteemed scholar of religions, and venerated Hindu holy man Raimundo Panikkar provides an apt example. Panikkar has embraced Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism as his personal faiths and his work represents a ‘multi-theological’ perspective. Panikkar argues against the reduction of religious diversity into any kind of unifying category or system – the imposition of the ‘one’ onto the ‘many’. For Panikkar, the diversity of religions reflects the diversity of reality itself. He argues that the fact of religious diversity “does not allow for a universal system. A pluralistic system would be a contradiction in terms. The incommensurability of ultimate systems is unbridgeable. This incompatibility is not a

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 133

<sup>95</sup> S. Mark Heim, “The Pluralistic Hypothesis, Realism, and Post-Eschatology,” *Religious Studies* 25 (1992). 211

<sup>96</sup> S. Mark Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way?* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985). 29

<sup>97</sup> Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. 6

lesser evil... but a revelation itself of the nature of reality. Nothing can encompass reality."<sup>99</sup> While Panikkar affirms the diversity of religions, and indeed reality itself, he goes against the grain of relativism in his assertion of the value of interreligious dialogue. Indeed, Panikkar has articulated a celebrated model called *intrareligious* dialogue, which proposes the necessity of moving beyond 'outside' knowledge of religious others towards an interior experience and an understanding from 'within'.<sup>100</sup> On the basis of such internal dialogical understanding, the value of religious difference of can be realised.

The theologian John Cobb has proposed a similar view. In a comparative analysis of Buddhism and Christianity, Cobb has criticised the notion of a singular religious object or ultimate reality, in light of the fact that "Emptiness is not an object of worship for Buddhists." As such, Cobb argues that "it is not illuminating to insist that Emptiness and God are two names for the same noumenal reality."<sup>101</sup> Moreover, Cobb asserts that Christian notions of salvation are radically different to Buddhist conceptions of *nirvāṇa* or the Zen *satori*. Cobb has observed that "there are many Buddhists who do not understand themselves as seeking communion with the ultimate." Thus, he concludes that in comparison to Christianity, Buddhism offers "a different path to a different goal, a different name of a different aspect of reality, a different language through which something quite different from communion is sought."<sup>102</sup>

In recognition of such fundamental differences, Cobb has proposed a position of *differential or complementary pluralism*, which is based upon the philosophico-theological system of Alfred North Whitehead. This position suggests that "different religions emphasise the different salvific implications of different aspects or dimensions of the total truth." Moreover, Cobb's position "sees a central task of

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<sup>98</sup> Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way?* 143

<sup>99</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness," in Hick and Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. op. cit. p. 110

<sup>100</sup> See Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

<sup>101</sup> John B. Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). 43

<sup>102</sup> John Cobb, cited in Swidler et al., *Death or Dialogue? From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*. 81-82

theological dialogue to be the discovery of how these various doctrines are complementary rather than contradictory.”<sup>103</sup> An essential premise of this position is that “the totality of what is, is very complex, far exceeding all that we can ever hope to know or think.”<sup>104</sup> Regarding the different religious expressions of this totality, Cobb suggests:

[I]n different parts of the world at different times, remarkable individuals have penetrated into this reality and discovered features of it that are really there to be found. [Thus], alongside all the errors and distortions that can be found in all our traditions there are insights arising from profound thought and experience that are diverse modes of apprehending diverse aspects of the totality of reality.<sup>105</sup>

Cobb’s position presents a pluralistic metaphysics that proposes three kinds of ‘ultimates’: (1) the formless or acosmic, including Buddhism’s *sūnyatā*, Advaita Vedanta’s *Nirguna Brahman*, Meister Eckhart’s *Godhead*, and Heidegger and Tillich’s *Being Itself*; (2) the formed or theistic, including such forms of God or the Supreme Being as *Amida Buddha*, *Saguna Brahman*, *Ishvara*, *Yahweh*, *Christ*, and *Allah*; and (3) the cosmic, including affirmations of the sacredness of the universe and the totality of finite things, as represented in primal religions, Taoism, and Native traditions such as the Native Americans.<sup>106</sup> It is worth here noting a correspondence between Cobb’s three ultimates and R.C. Zaehner’s three types of mysticism: monistic mysticism, theistic mysticism, and nature mysticism.<sup>107</sup> Like Zaehner, Cobb discerns a diversity of types of religious experiences – monistic/formless/acosmic, theistic, and naturalistic/cosmic – and thus locates a diversity of ultimate realities. Furthermore, he also suggests a concurrent diversity of dialogical forms. The notion of complementarity comes to the fore within the dimensions of dialogue. For example, dialogue between two proponents of a theistic directed religion would encompass a dialogue of purification. But a dialogue between interlocutors from a theistic directed religion and an acosmic directed religion could be a dialogue of enrichment, which can involve a dynamic of complementarity and mutual

<sup>103</sup> David Ray Griffin, “John Cobb’s Whiteheadian Complementary Pluralism,” in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). 39

<sup>104</sup> John B. Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way Beyond Absolutism and Relativism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999). 135

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* 74

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* 184-5

<sup>107</sup> See Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeter-Natural Experience*.

transformation.<sup>108</sup> Complementary pluralism offers an alternative to the idea of a pre-established common ground as the basis of dialogue. Furthermore, its fundamental aim is reconciliation – “to transform contradictory statements into different but not contradictory ones”, and thereby move “toward a more comprehensive vision in which the deepest insights of both sides are reconciled.”<sup>109</sup> Indeed, differential pluralism has been proposed as a perspective that “can recognise the effective truth of what is truly other.”<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, as Cobb contends, “it helps those who accept it to acknowledge the deep differences among religious traditions without denying that each has its truth.”<sup>111</sup>

Among many contemporary theologians and scholars of religion, the ‘discourse of difference’ is considered to be the most philosophically acceptable pluralistic approach towards religious diversity. Due to the contemporary intellectual emphasis on context, and a recognition of potential connections between identist approaches and the ‘totalising’ discourse of Western cultural imperialism, universalism is today decidedly unfashionable.<sup>112</sup> Attempts to unearth a “religious Esperanto”<sup>113</sup> or establish a “world theology”<sup>114</sup> have born the brunt of the anti-identist critique; the latter has denounced such attempts at universalism as reductive and subsuming in their imposition of ideological systems onto religious others. Indeed, the insistence on acknowledging perspective and context is difficult to refute (though some have

<sup>108</sup> This description is based on Griffin’s. See Griffin, “John Cobb’s Whiteheadian Complementary Pluralism.” 47

<sup>109</sup> Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way Beyond Absolutism and Relativism*. 74

<sup>110</sup> Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. 124

<sup>111</sup> Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way Beyond Absolutism and Relativism*. 186

<sup>112</sup> A number of critics have suggested that the discourse of identist pluralism is in alliance with Western imperialism and functions as a covert means of subsuming religious differences within the dominant globalising model. For example, see Kenneth Surin, “Towards a ‘Materialist’ Critique of ‘Religious Pluralism’: A Polemical Examination of the Discourse of John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith,” in *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief: Studies Critical and Comparative*, ed. Ian Hammet (London & New York: Routledge, 1990). See also articles by Surin, Leslie Newbigin, Jürgen Moltman, and John Milbank in Gavin D’Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, Faith Meets Faith Series* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990). See also Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*. 138

<sup>113</sup> See Leonard Swidler, ed., *Towards a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

<sup>114</sup> See Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*.

tried<sup>115</sup>). As theorists such as D'Costa, DiNoia, Heim, and Katz so convincingly argue, it would appear that there is no escape from our cultural-historic-religious perspectives, which inevitably construct, interpret, and define our experience. As such, the identist-differential debate presents a specific dilemma that raises a number of questions. Essentially, do particularism and perspectivism preclude any possibility of establishing any kind of unity between the world religions? Do they undermine the possibility of ever really understanding the religious other? Does the inevitability of perspectivism determine that there can be no possibility of bridging the 'gaps of incommensurability,'<sup>116</sup> of ever establishing any kind of foundation of pluralism upon which all religions may stand together in their differences? Finally, is there any possibility of establishing a pluralist position that can affirm the parity of all religions, whilst not undermining particular commitment or doing any injustice to the other? In other words, can there be a pluralist position that affirms unity and diversity at the same time? As the suggestions of experience and complementarity offered by such theologians as Raimundo Panikkar and John Cobb imply, answers to these questions may be found within the multifarious field of dialogue.

### Dialogue

Grappling with the issues presented by the universalism-particularism debate, Diana Eck has proposed a suggestive definition of pluralism that appears to be neither identist or differential, or perhaps both:

[T]he universal is usually somebody's particular writ large. Pluralism, however, is a distinctively different perspective. The pluralist does not expect or desire the emergence of a universal religion, a kind of religious Esperanto. Nor does the pluralist seek a common essence in all religions, though much that is common may be discovered. The commitment of the pluralist is rather to engage the diversity, in the mutually transformative process of understanding, rather than obliterate it.<sup>117</sup>

What is implied by Eck's reference to 'engaging diversity' in a 'mutually transformative process of understanding' is *dialogue*. While pluralism as a theological position attempts to affirm unity or diversity *theoretically*, the *practice* of pluralism consists of manifesting this affirmation through the dynamics of dialogue.

<sup>115</sup> See Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*. And Forman, ed., *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*.

<sup>116</sup> See Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism."

<sup>117</sup> Eck, "In the Name of Religions." 99

Evidently, those who hold positions of exclusivism or inclusivism may also come together at the dialogical table. However, their motivations, methods and goals may greatly differ from those of pluralists. It has been suggested that dialogue in the case of exclusivism and inclusivism “can only be a convenient name for the religious mission of converting all to the only true or the only absolutely true religion after the demise of colonialism.”<sup>118</sup> Indeed, there is a general consensus within the plethora of literature addressing dialogue that the prime conditions for its authentic practice demand an affirmation of the ultimate value, difference, and integrity of each religious tradition. In order for dialogue to be constructive and transformative, an open attitude unhampered by dogmatism and proselytism is essential. However, at the same time, dialogue cannot shirk the points of collision by dodging the critical issue of commitment. As Masaaki Honda, a Japanese Christian, observes: “We cannot find the real field of dialogue without our own convictions, however criticised that may be from the academic side.”<sup>119</sup>

The tension between the universal and the particular that is represented in the identist-differential debate is also evident within the dimensions of interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue presupposes a commitment to a particular truth, in combination with an openness towards others that has the potential to generate renewal, transformation, or even conversion. Commenting on “the theoretical dilemma that plurality has forced upon us”, Langdon Gilkey has observed, “There seems no consistent theological way to relativise and yet to assert our own symbols – and yet we must do both in dialogue.”<sup>120</sup> According to the critiques of identist and differential pluralism, dialogue from both these perspectives would indeed seem problematic. Despite the identist endeavour to democratically deconstruct ‘the myth of uniqueness’ by equalising all religions as responses to the one reality, this position, according to its critique, is destined to impose alien ideology onto the other. Differentialism, guarding against such ideological imposition, leaves only one option

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<sup>118</sup> Huang, “Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue: Beyond Universalism and Particularism.” 127. Huang cites the Evangelical John Stott who argues that in “true” dialogue and encounter, “we seek both to disclose the inadequacies and falsities of non-Christian religions and to demonstrate the adequacy and truth, the absoluteness and finality of the Lord Jesus Christ.” See p. 141, n. 3

<sup>119</sup> Masaaki Honda, cited in Winston L. King, “Interreligious Dialogue,” in *The Sound of Liberating Truth: Buddhist-Christian Dialogues in Honour of Frederick J. Streng*, ed. Sallie B. King and Paul O. Ingram (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999). 48-9

– to assert that different religions are different human responses to different Realities. Thus, as critiques of differentialism have recognised, dialogue can only ever hope to confirm these differences, as the inherent relativism of the position determines that boundaries can never be transcended and real influence or transformative exchange would seem to be beyond reach.<sup>121</sup> When dialogue is understood and undertaken purely on the level of the conceptual or the discursive, this would seem to be the case. However, other forms of dialogue enacted as *spiritual praxis* may provide a way out of this impasse. Indeed, recent arguments have emerged that attempt to reconcile the debate between identist and particularist pluralism by looking beyond a philosophical pluralism towards a *dialogical* and *experiential* pluralism. These arguments suggest that the dynamics of dialogue, spiritual experience, and transformation provide a means of affirming both the unity and diversity of religions.

Paul Ingram has proposed that “dialogue between the religious traditions of the world is the most appropriate means of understanding and confronting the theological and philosophical issues posed by the facts of modern religious (and secular) pluralism.”<sup>122</sup> However, what exactly is meant by dialogue? In 1974, Eric Sharpe observed, “The literature of ‘inter-religious dialogue is already extensive, and growing rapidly; but it is not always clear in what sense (or senses) the word is being used, and what are the presuppositions that lie behind it.” Sharpe also perceived that the word dialogue has become so “excessively popular” that “in many cases it has degenerated into a cliché.”<sup>123</sup> By way of clarification, Sharpe identifies four kinds of dialogue: (1) *discursive dialogue*, which involves “meeting, listening and discussion on the level of mutual, competent intellectual inquiry”; (2) *human dialogue*, which penetrates “divisive doctrinal and ideological rationalisations” and locates dialogue at the level of “common humanity”; (3) *secular dialogue*, which focuses on the situation of humanity “in the world” and the “need for joint secular action, irrespective of

<sup>120</sup> Gilkey, “Plurality and Its Theological Implications.” 44

<sup>121</sup> See Huang, “Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue: Beyond Universalism and Particularism.” 136ff. And John Hick, “The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D’costa,” *Religious Studies* 33 (1997).

<sup>122</sup> Paul O. Ingram, “Interfaith Dialogue as a Source of Buddhist-Christian Creative Transformation,” in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1986). 79

<sup>123</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, “The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in *Truth and Dialogue: The Relationship between World Religions*, ed. John Hick (London: Sheldon Press, 1974). 77-8

divergencies in religious conviction"; and (4) *interior dialogue*, which "owes little either to the intellectual or the existential tradition" but rather finds its locus in the "mystical, contemplative tradition."<sup>124</sup> While all these forms of dialogue are integral to the process of interreligious exchange, in our endeavour to explore non-philosophical or non-conceptual ways in which pluralism may be affirmed, it is the latter of Sharpe's forms – interior dialogue – that we shall focus on here.

### Interior Dialogue and Thomas Merton

Arguably the most esteemed and influential twentieth-century Western representative of the contemplative tradition is the American Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Merton is widely acknowledged as a prime contemporary exemplar of the spiritual life of Christianity. Merton's writings are acclaimed for their profound insights into religious experience and Christian mysticism, as well as their explorations into the relationship between the religious traditions of East and West. Following his death in 1968, Merton's spiritual vision has continued to provide inspiration and guidance, while his more critical musings and social commentary have maintained a standing of significant contemporary import.<sup>125</sup> As a modern monastic, one of Merton's principal concerns was the encounter with other religions. Specifically, Merton discerned the significance of a contemplative contribution to interreligious dialogue. We will here examine the dimensions of Merton's contribution, including: his proposal of monasticism as a universal ideal, the possibility of establishing interreligious congruence and complementarity at the level of spiritual experience, the practice of contemplative dialogue, and the encounter between Zen Buddhism and Christianity. In a book called *Mystics and Zen Masters* published in 1967, a year before his death, Merton wrote:

One of the most important aspects of the interfaith dialogue has also so far been one of the least discussed: it is the special contribution that the contemplative life can bring to the dialogue, not only among Christians, but also between Christians and the ancient religions of the East, perhaps even between Christians and Marxists.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 82-9

<sup>125</sup> To mention but a few of Merton's most influential works, see Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1958).

<sup>126</sup> Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967). 203

At this stage of his life Merton was well advanced along the contemplative path, having spent the last nineteen years of his life as a monk, living much of the time in solitude, exploring the wisdom and mystical traditions of Christianity, both intellectually and experientially. By this time, Merton was also deeply involved in an exploration of the traditions of the East. He was particularly interested in Zen Buddhism, which he had come to know through an ongoing dialogue with the renowned Zen Buddhist thinker D. T. Suzuki, as well as Sufism, which he had encountered through correspondences with the Traditionalist Marco Pallis and the French scholar of Islam, Louis Massignon.<sup>127</sup> Based upon his experience within Christian monasticism and his knowledge of the contemplative traditions of the East, Merton regarded monasticism to be a universal ideal. According to Merton, the life of contemplation, meditation, and prayer encompassed by monasticism could provide a meeting ground for the religious traditions of East and West (even where monasticism is not institutionalised, as in Islam). Merton refuted the escapism implied by the monastic ideal as illusory; he discerned monasticism to be “at once personal and communal” and “in a certain sense suprapersonal”. He continues:

This monastic “work” or “discipline”... goes beyond a merely psychological fulfilment on the empirical level, and it goes beyond the limits of communicable cultural ideals (of one’s own national, racial, etc., background). It attains to a certain universality and wholeness which have never yet been adequately described – and probably cannot be described – in terms of psychology. Transcending the limits that separate subject from object and self from not-self, this development achieves a wholeness which is described in various ways by the different religions; a self-realisation of atman, of Void, of life in Christ, of *fana* and *baqa* (annihilation and reintegration according to Sufism)...<sup>128</sup>

While Merton’s ‘intermonastic’ approach to dialogue may appear tangential to our purposes, in fact the monastic perspective represents a concentration of one of the principal themes of the above-discussed debate – commitment. Indeed, Merton insisted that “contemplative dialogue must be reserved for those who have been seriously disciplined by years of silence and by a long habit of meditation... [and] for those who have entered with full seriousness into their own monastic tradition and are

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<sup>127</sup> On Merton’s correspondence with Suzuki see Robert E. Daggy, ed., *Encounter: Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki* (Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 1988). On Merton’s correspondences with Pallis and Massignon see Rob Baker, “Merton, Marco Pallis, and the Traditionalists” and Sidney H. Griffith, “Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam” in Rob Baker and Gray Henry, eds., *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999). 193-265 & 51-78

in authentic contact with the past of their own religious community.”<sup>129</sup> This insistence upon a foundation of tradition and discipline is indicative of the absolute commitment enjoined by the monastic ideal.

Merton’s comments relating to the above-mentioned arguments concerning the universality of mystical experience and the issue of perspectivism further clarify and reinforce his position. Merton has referred to:

...a certain type of concordist thought today [which] too easily assumes as a basic dogma that ‘the mystics’ in all religions are all experiencing the same thing and are all alike in their liberation from the various doctrines and explanations and creeds of their less fortunate co-religionists. All religions thus ‘meet at the top,’ and their various theologies and philosophies become irrelevant when we see that they were merely means for arriving at the same end, and all means are alike efficacious.<sup>130</sup>

For Merton, this is a “very complex question” that has “never been demonstrated with any kind of vigour.” He is concerned that it “seems to imply a purely formalistic view of the theological and philosophical doctrines, as if a fundamental belief were something that a mystic could throw off like a suit of clothes and as if his very experience itself were not in some sense modified by the fact that he held this belief.”<sup>131</sup>

Merton’s acknowledgements of the important role of religious commitment within the dimensions of intermonastic exchange, and the defining impact of tradition upon mystical experience, are further fortified by his approach to religious difference and syncretism. Merton asserts the necessity for “a scrupulous respect for important differences” within dialogue. He explains: “There are differences that are not debatable, and it is a useless, silly temptation to try to argue them out. Let them be left intact until a moment of greater understanding.” Furthermore, Merton voiced his opposition to what he called “facile syncretism, a mishmash of semireligious verbiage and pieties, a devotionism that admits everything and therefore takes nothing with

<sup>128</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1975). 310

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* 316

<sup>130</sup> Thomas Merton, “A Christian Looks at Zen,” in *Thomas Merton on Zen* (London: Sheldon Press, 1976). 101. This article was originally as the preface to John Wu’s *The Golden Age of Zen*, and is also published in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*.

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

full seriousness.”<sup>132</sup> These perspectives would seem to put to rest any suspicions of Merton as a counterfeit idiosyncratic pseudo-spiritualist/mystic, of which there is a current veritable plague, and of which we should rightly be wary. On the contrary, it is clear that Merton has built his house on the solid rock of the Christian tradition.

Despite these particular qualifications, Merton nevertheless proclaims the “special value of dialogue and exchange among those in the various religions who seek to penetrate the ultimate ground of their beliefs by a transformation of the religious consciousness.” In other words, he affirms the value of dialogue on a contemplative or interior level – on the level of religious experience – between committed monastics or contemplatives from different traditions. He explains:

Without asserting that there is complete unity of all religions at the “top”, the transcendent or mystical level – that they all start from different dogmatic positions to “meet” at this summit – it is certainly true to say that even where there are irreconcilable differences in doctrine and in formulated belief, there may still be great similarities and analogies in the realm of religious experience... Cultural and doctrinal differences must remain, but they do not invalidate a very real quality of existential likeness.

...on this existential level of experience and of spiritual maturity, it is possible to achieve real and significant contacts and perhaps much more besides.<sup>133</sup>

While the above comments demonstrate careful stipulation regarding proposals of ‘transcendent religious unity’, it is apparent that the kind of experiential, contemplative dialogue Merton is describing implies a shared spiritual quest, the association of spiritual techniques such as meditation and prayer, and therefore some kind of mystical concord between religions. Indeed, it is worth noting the influence on Merton’s approach to other religions of the *sophia perennis*, as represented by the school of Traditionalism. As previously mentioned, in his later years Merton maintained a correspondence with the Traditionalist Marco Pallis, and he was invited by Frithjof Schuon to enjoin the Sufi order of the Maryamiyya. It has been suggested that Merton’s journey into Traditionalism and Sufism may have gone further, has his life not been cut short.<sup>134</sup> Either way, it is clear that the *sophia perennis* and the

<sup>132</sup> Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. 316

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* 312

<sup>134</sup> See Rob Baker, “Merton, Marco Pallis, and the Traditionalists” in Baker and Henry, eds., *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story*. 193-265 and Mark J. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). 162-165

notion of mystical communion between religions had a direct bearing upon Merton's proposal of contemplative dialogue.

Another distinguished Western Catholic monk involved in contemplative dialogue with the East, the Benedictine Dom Bede Griffiths, has also referred to a kind of contemplative dialogue, defining it as "a meeting of the different religious traditions at the deepest level of their experience of God." Griffiths followed in the footsteps of Dom Henri Le Saux as the head of a Hindu-Christian ashram in Tamil Nadu, Southern India. As he has explained, "Hinduism is based on a deep mystical experience and everywhere seeks not simply to know 'about' God, but to 'know God', that is to experience the reality of God in the depths of his soul. It is at this level that Christian and Hindu have to meet." Like Merton, Griffiths proposes monasticism as a universal ground, suggesting that this kind of meeting should take place within the setting of the contemplative life, "in which contact can be made with the Hindu mystical life."<sup>135</sup> In concord, Merton has suggested that contemplative dialogue extends and encompasses both before and beyond intellectual or 'discursive' forms of dialogue. Merton is here worth quoting at length:

True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, of conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth. The kind of communication that is necessary on this deep level must also be "communion" beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a "preverbal" level but also on a "postverbal" level.

The "preverbal" level is that of the unspoken and indefinable "preparation," "the predisposition" of mind and heart, necessary for all monastic experience whatever... [The monk] must be wide open to life and to new experience because he has fully utilized his own tradition and gone beyond it. This will permit him to meet a disciple of another, apparently remote and alien tradition, and find a common ground of verbal understanding with him. The "postverbal" level will then, at least ideally, be that on which they both meet beyond their own words and their own understanding in the silence of an ultimate experience which might conceivably not have occurred if they had not met and spoken...

This I would call "communion." I think it is something that the deepest ground of our being cries out for, and it is something for which a lifetime of striving would not be enough.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>135</sup> B. Griffiths in Sharpe, "The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue." 88. See Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India: Essays Towards a Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (Springfield: Templegate, 1984), Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West* (London: Collins, 1982), Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* (London: Collins, 1976).

<sup>136</sup> Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. 315-6

These three levels of contemplative dialogue can be applied to Merton's encounter with Buddhism. In doing so, it can be demonstrated how he was able to hold positions of particularism and universalism at the same time – how he maintained his commitment as a Catholic monk of the Trappist Order, whilst locating universal ground with the religious other at the level of contemplation and the spiritual experiences it engenders. Having established his 'preverbal' predisposition through a deep immersion in his own monastic tradition, Merton approached the verbal dimension of dialogue when he initiated a correspondence with D.T. Suzuki in 1959. Through this dialogue, Merton developed an understanding of Zen Buddhism and came to find congruence and resonance between the "metaphysical intuition" of Zen and apophatic aspects of Christianity represented by experiences of union with Christ in 'the Word of the Cross' and the self-emptying of *kenosis*.<sup>137</sup> As such, Merton sees Zen and Christian mysticism, and indeed Christian belief, as "perfectly compatible" and proposes that "both Christians and Buddhists can equally well practice Zen...if by Zen we mean precisely the quest for direct and pure experience on a metaphysical level, liberated from verbal formulas and linguistic preconceptions. On the theological level," Merton qualifies, "the question becomes more complex."<sup>138</sup> Indeed, Merton was well aware that at the stage of verbal dialogue, or dialogue concerned with the linguistic, doctrinal and theological aspects of religion, differences may erect barriers to understanding. Demonstrating an opposing perspective to the theory of Constructivism, as represented by such philosophers as Katz, Merton claims that "the great obstacle to mutual understanding between Christianity and Buddhism lies in the Western tendency to focus not on the Buddhist experience, which is essential, but on the explanation."<sup>139</sup> Because Christianity begins with revelation, it has continued to focus its attention on the objective doctrine and non-experiential theology. According to Merton, "this obsession with doctrinal formulas, juridical order and ritual exactitude has often made people forget that the heart of Catholicism, too, is a *living experience* of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations."<sup>140</sup> Merton has quite clearly affirmed the imperative element of theology and the inviolability of religious forms. However, he

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<sup>137</sup> See Merton, "A Christian Looks at Zen." 105ff

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. 102

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. 95

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 97

concurrently proposes the existence of an intuitive, mystical affinity between religions at the non-linguistic level of experience, and the potential agency of this affinity and complementarity to generate renewal, especially between East and West.

He states:

I think we have now reached a stage of (long-overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience. I believe that some of us need to do this in order to improve the quality of our own monastic life and even to help in the task of monastic renewal which has been undertaken within the Western Church.<sup>141</sup>

Elsewhere, Merton clarifies the dimensions of this kind of exchange: “The combination of the natural techniques and graces and the other things that have been manifested in Asia and the Christian liberty of the gospel should bring us all at last to that full and transcendent liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals – and mere this or that.”<sup>142</sup>

Through his own interior dialogue with Buddhism, as well as other spiritual traditions such as Sufism, Merton discovered doctrines and spiritual techniques that certainly complimented his own contemplative practice. Describing his intentions for travelling to Asia in 1968, Merton defined himself as “a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just ‘facts’ about other monastic traditions, but to drink from the ancient sources of monastic vision and experience.”<sup>143</sup> In a period of less than two months, Merton attended conferences in Bangkok and Calcutta, met with several Tibetan lamas including the Dalai Lama, and visited various historic religious sites in India, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Merton’s famed epiphany at Polonnaruwa, a Buddhist site in Sri Lanka, is indicative of the depth of his spiritual attainment and the degree of impact that Buddhism had had on his mystical vision. Merton described his experience of emptiness and union as a realisation that “there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no ‘mystery’. All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya...everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.”<sup>144</sup> It goes

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<sup>141</sup> Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. 313

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* 343

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.* 312-3

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* 235

without saying that something more than just conceptual understanding is involved in a Trappist monk having what we would normally define as a Buddhist experience of awakening. Evidently, Merton had reached the 'postverbal' stage of his dialogue with Buddhism. Essentially, this encompassed the deconstruction of the ego and a direct encounter with ultimate reality, a process that eventuated in compassion and love for the world. Within the dimensions of dialogue, the realisation of the illusory nature of the egoic self implies a direct encounter with the other:

It is what is seemingly not present, the void, that is really I. And the 'I' that seems to be I is really a void. But the West is so used to identifying the person with the individual and the deeper self with the empirical self that the basic truth is never seen. It is the Not-I that is most of all the I in each of us.<sup>145</sup>

Merton's dialogical insights resonate with the proposals of a number of other theorists on dialogue. To refer once again to the theologian Raimundo Panikkar, parallels may be discerned with his notion of the intrareligious dialogue. As mentioned above, Panikkar's proposal suggests the dialogical, interior, and experiential understanding of other religions. In order to achieve this perspective, our normal notions of self and other need to be deconstructed. Panikkar explains, "The intrareligious dialogue is a religious phenomenon, it's a religious attitude which implies an emptying of the self in order to be able to love the other as myself."<sup>146</sup> Thus, within the dynamics of intrareligious dialogue, I meet the other "in and as myself."<sup>147</sup> In other words, I realise the other as none other than myself. Or, as Diana Eck puts it, "We are other to one another."<sup>148</sup> For Merton, this emptying of the self lay at the heart of his monastic vocation; in emptying his self of the ego he found the totality of God, of other persons, and of reality. This, for Merton, encompassed the intermonastic goal of total inner transformation. Finally, the encounter with reality as transcendent union with the other is the foundation of communion between religious traditions.

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<sup>145</sup> Letter to John Wu written in 1965. See Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985). 627

<sup>146</sup> Interview with Panikkar on Compass (ABC Television Program), "The Quiet Revolution: New Prophets (Episode 1)," in *The Quiet Revolution* (Australia: ABC TV, 2007).

<sup>147</sup> Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*. 40

### Experiential Pluralism

The debate between identist and differential pluralism, and the dialogical dilemma of professing commitment within open encounter, centre upon the issue of the concurrent affirmation of the unity and diversity of religions. In the wake of the acknowledgement of perspectivism, this endeavour would seem to become impossible. It would appear that no end of theologising or philosophising about pluralism could confirm its viability or possibility. However, as the case of Merton has revealed, within the experiential dimensions of dialogue, and in particular those forms of dialogue that go beyond the intellectual and the conceptual, some kind of resolution may be found. Indeed, it could be suggested that the multi-dimensional nature of religion precludes its analysis from a purely philosophical perspective, that is, a philosophical perspective that is bound by the dictates of rational thought and logical process and does not address the non-conceptual realm of experience.

Recent arguments proposed by Judson Trapnell, and further elaborated by Rose Drew, directly address the possibility of reconciling and affirming the position of pluralism within the dimensions of spiritual experience and dialogue. Such a position can be understood as one of *experiential pluralism*. Presenting a response to D'Costa's philosophic arguments concerning the supposed impossibility of pluralism, constructed in an analysis of Buddhism, Jainism, and M. K. Gandhi, Trapnell suggests that "these Indian sources demonstrate that a pluralistic view is not primarily a theory subject to rules of logic but is a vision grounded in spiritual discipline. That is, what is not possible logically may indeed be realisable in practice."<sup>149</sup> Arguing against the *finality* of the theories of contextualism, perspectivism, and constructivism, and seemingly in unanimity with Merton, these authors propose that Indian sources provide evidence of the possible experiential transcendence of the confines of our linguistic, tradition-defined perspectives within the moment of authentic ineffable spiritual experience. As Drew explains:

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<sup>148</sup> Eck, "In the Name of Religions," 97

<sup>149</sup> Judson B. Trapnell, "Indian Sources on the Possibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35, no. 2 (1998): 212

The possibility of having experiences that transcend the conceptual categories of one's own tradition suggest that pluralism should be understood as experientially rather than theoretically based. Understood in this way, pluralism is possible.<sup>150</sup>

Trapnell begins his investigation with Buddhism's teaching of co-dependent origination, suggesting that the enlightened perception of interdependent reality it implies can be lent to the support of pluralism. This perception envisages each object as a "combination of elements," constantly in flux and in ever-changing "relationships of mutual conditioning with other objects." As such, "the approach to differences, whether of times of day or religions, found in the awakened mind is not the same as what most of us experience in that it causes suffering neither to ourselves nor to the other who is being compared."<sup>151</sup> According to Trapnell, such a perspective, in conjunction with other practices and principles such as nonviolence and nonattachment to views, is supportive of an experiential pluralism. As Trapnell discerns, the spiritual praxis of Buddhism leads to the transformation of consciousness and the attainment of an enlightened vision of interdependence, which is able to uphold both the integrity of the part and the unity of the whole. He explains:

The kind of seeing the Buddha exemplifies would be integral to a pluralist view: the ability to see elements both in their autonomy (without projection) and in their irreducible interrelationship (without resorting to mere plurality or relativism).<sup>152</sup>

Trapnell's examination of the Jain doctrine of many-sidedness further explores alternative apprehensions of reality that may support pluralism. According to Trapnell, the Jain doctrine of the many-sided nature of reality implies the realisation that one's own perspective and language convey only a partial reality. This vision of metaphysical plurality suggests: "In its wholeness, any reality is the coexistence of contradictory elements, such as eternity and transience, or unity and multiplicity."<sup>153</sup> Once again, we see the concurrent affirmation of the whole and the part, unity and diversity, self and other. The implication for pluralism is the possibility of reconciling opposing or contradictory truth claims through such spiritual disciplines as meditation or self-purification, which may lead to the attainment of a "synoptic view whereby all contradictions are reconciled in the experience of reality in its wholeness."<sup>154</sup>

<sup>150</sup> Drew, "Reconsidering the Possibility of Pluralism." 245

<sup>151</sup> Trapnell, "Indian Sources on the Possibility of a Pluralist View of Religions." 217

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* 215

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* 220

<sup>154</sup> Drew, "Reconsidering the Possibility of Pluralism." 257

The kind of spiritual experience Trapnell and Drew are referring to is defined by “a fundamental transformation in consciousness, the implications of which may be intimated beforehand but cannot be lived consistently prior to that transformation.”<sup>155</sup> By way of clarification, Drew presents the analogy of comprehending colour or pain, which cannot be known, let alone imagined or envisioned, without direct experience of the colour red, for example, or the pain of a wound. The spiritual (as opposed to philosophical or logical) justification of pluralism is dependent upon such directly informing experience. As Drew contends:

It is possible, through spiritual training, to transcend the epistemological limitations of one’s exclusivist framework, such that the truth of claims that were identified as contradictory at a cognitive, rational, analytic level of consciousness is experienced directly... [T]he possibility of such a transformation of consciousness supports the conclusion that pluralism does not depend on assenting to a philosophical hypothesis...<sup>156</sup>

Of course, the implication here is that such experience and transformation defy logic and belong to the realm of the ineffable and irrational. However, according to Drew this does not decrease their status as valid and informing modes of consciousness. Indeed, in contrast to the acclamation of logic in the Western attempt to understand the ‘other’ that has been continuing since the European Enlightenment, the East has long prioritised other forms of consciousness based on spiritual insight as superior. In reference to this discrepancy, Trapnell suggests “this is precisely one of the challenges consistently offered by Indian philosophers and sages, the existence of other states of consciousness..., states in which the relation between the parts (points of view) and the whole (many-sided truth) is seen more synthetically.”<sup>157</sup>

Any number of the constructivist or perspectivist or particularist critiques we have examined could be directed at such propositions. We can do no better than to return to Heim, who has argued that there may be many “religious ineffables”. Commenting upon the question of trans-religious experiences that transcend language and tradition, Heim is unable to look beyond linguistic accounts to any experiential verification:

*What is actual for them, whether in all the cases it is one and the same thing...and whether or not even those persons are in a position to be able to determine such*

<sup>155</sup> Trapnell, “Indian Sources on the Possibility of a Pluralist View of Religions.” 213

<sup>156</sup> Drew, “Reconsidering the Possibility of Pluralism.” 257

<sup>157</sup> Trapnell, “Indian Sources on the Possibility of a Pluralist View of Religions.” 234

questions, we simply do not know. Certainly, if we credit the various religious accounts of their aims, the presumption is that they are different.<sup>158</sup>

In response to suggestions that their experiential pluralism is guilty of denying religious difference, both Trapnell and Drew turn to an analysis of language to reinforce their central claim that pluralism can support both unity and diversity – the value of the other and individual commitment – at the same time. As Heim’s above comment implies, the only non-experiential, linguistic evidence of ineffable spiritual experience available for investigation is demarcated by tradition-specific language. According to the logical, philosophical theory of scholars like Heim, the lack of neutrality in linguistic expressions of the ineffable precludes the possibility of pluralism. In contention, however, Drew argues that “living out the implications of pluralism is not dependent on such neutrality. When it comes to communicating an experience, I will use my tradition-specific language, but that does not mean that the experience I describe is necessarily mediated by the categories of my own tradition.”<sup>159</sup> Elsewhere, she clarifies:

Language demarcates the limits of ordinary perception rather than the limits of what is or what can be perceived by one who has undergone radical transformation. An experience might be interpreted within a specific religious context, but that does not mean the experience is itself bound by that context.<sup>160</sup>

We may here draw reinforcement from the dialogical theory of Diana Eck, who has observed:

...to some extent all religious people are inclusivists as far as we use our own particular religious language – God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Buddha, Vishnu – and struggle with the limits and meaning of that language. As long as we hold the religious insights of our particular traditions, cast in our particular languages, to be in some sense universal, we cannot avoid speaking at times in an inclusivist way.<sup>161</sup>

Despite the limitations of language, Eck denies the necessity or possibility of establishing “some neutral terminology” to support pluralism. Pluralism requires “that we cease speaking only to ourselves and in the terms of our own internal Christian conversation.” Rather, Eck asserts, “we will speak in the context of interreligious

<sup>158</sup> S. Mark Heim, “Salvations: A More Pluralistic Hypothesis,” *Modern Theology* 10 (1994). 345

<sup>159</sup> Drew, “Reconsidering the Possibility of Pluralism.” 264

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* 262

<sup>161</sup> Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. 180

dialogue.”<sup>162</sup> Having discounted the potential of the philosophical or logical perspective, both Trapnell and Drew affirm Eck’s dialogical and experiential hypothesis of pluralism. As Trapnell concurs, while “reason cannot argue with full logical consistency, [the pluralist view] may be experienced in the interreligious encounter, in the dialogical relationship that itself constitutes a kind of ascesis.”<sup>163</sup> Indeed, in the sources from India Trapnell identifies an emphasis on “praxis, ...implying that what cannot be consistently reasoned out can in fact be lived in the context of interpersonal relationship or dialogue.”<sup>164</sup>

Much congruence and complementarity can be discerned between the propositions put forth by Trapnell and Drew and Thomas Merton’s approach to religious diversity. Indeed, Trapnell and Drew’s arguments for the experiential, spiritual expression of pluralism offered by Indian sources may help to explain Merton’s interest in the East, his grasp of ineffable transcendence in the experience of mystical union with reality, his understanding of ‘existential likeness’ between religions and the ‘inner and ultimate spiritual ground which underlies all articulated differences’, as well as his assertion of the value of the contemplative contribution to dialogue. These arguments may also clarify the dynamics of Merton’s ‘postverbal’ dialogue with Buddhism that allowed him to attest to “points where a genuinely common ground between [Buddhism and Christianity] exists,”<sup>165</sup> despite being firmly grounded in the Trappist monastic tradition. Indeed, without denying religious difference on the level of theology, doctrine, or commitment, Merton was able to affirm interreligious unity based upon self-transformation and a realised interreligious complementarity discerned through religious praxis and experience. There is no doubt that Merton’s experience of the stone statues of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa was directly influenced by the Buddhist tradition. However, it may also be interpreted as a direct encounter with that ineffable and ultimate dimension of reality, in which differences of religious form and language are reconciled in a realisation of ‘transcendent unity’. Only a week after this experience, and not long before he died, Merton gave a speech in Calcutta to an audience of fellow monastics. Here he professed,

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid. 186-7

<sup>163</sup> Trapnell, "Indian Sources on the Possibility of a Pluralist View of Religions." 233

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. 231

<sup>165</sup> Merton, "A Christian Looks at Zen." 99

...the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.<sup>166</sup>

Within this introductory chapter, we have investigated the global fact of religious diversity and the Christian response to its challenge. In so doing, we have explored the Christian theology of religions and its typology of responses, consisting of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. In our specific analysis of the position of pluralism as a valid response to religious diversity, we discerned three main models. Identist pluralism is concerned with religious unity and equates religions on the basis of a philosophical proposition of common essence or salvific goal. Differential pluralism is concerned with religious differences and equates religions on the basis of their difference but potential complementarity. Presenting a possible reconciliation of these two views is a position of experiential pluralism, which is concerned with spiritual experience and transformation, and affirms the equality of religions, their unity and diversity, on the basis of the transcendence of religious language and form and the dialogical encounter with the other within ultimate reality. While these three models are representative of Christian positions of pluralism, we have also introduced elements of a Buddhist position. As we shall now see, an application of the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism to Buddhist responses to religious diversity reveals that certain resources within Buddhism may have much to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning religious diversity and the possibility of pluralism.

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<sup>166</sup> Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. 308

## 2

**Buddhism and Religious Diversity:  
A Literature Review**

*As a Buddhist, I do not have any significant issues with religious diversity, nor do I think Buddhism historically has regarded religious diversity as anything except a normal fact of existence. Buddhism has always existed in a multi-religious context, often as a minority religion and rarely as the majority religion. But Buddhism is also the only religion to spread worldwide without a strong imperative to become the world's sole religion... I know that on some occasions, versions of Buddhism have become addicted to the notion that they are solely relevant, but this, I think, is a historical possibility for any religious perspective... I also think that basic Buddhist ideas have some resources that could prove useful in worldwide discussions of religious diversity.*

Rita M. Gross

The extent of the debate surrounding Christianity's relationship to other religions, and the resultant plethora of theological literature addressing the issue, can be explained by the nature of the tradition's origins, its approach to language, and its historical and cultural circumstances. For similar reasons, debate regarding other religions, and a related body of literature, are relatively absent from the discourse and libraries of Buddhism. By way of an introduction to this chapter, which concerns Buddhist responses to religious others, let us briefly examine the origins of these two great religions, their contrasting approaches to language, and their contextual circumstances in relation to religious diversity.

### **Christianity and Buddhism Compared**

As Thomas Merton has acknowledged, the nature of Christianity's origins in revelation, and the tradition's consequent emphasis on the value of the *logos*, has led to a preoccupation with articulation, justification, vigorous debate, and the extensive analysis and qualification of theological issues and positions. Within the historical domains of the Church, such theoretical endeavours have been prioritised, often in relation to religious experience. As Merton has explained, "for Christianity, a religion of the Word, the understanding of the statements which embody God's revelation of Himself remains a primary concern. Christian experience is a fruit of this understanding, a development of it, a deepening of it."<sup>1</sup> The nature of Christianity's origins in revelation has also been the catalyst for resolute claims to uniqueness, finality, and superiority, and the historically momentous Christian commitment to proselytism, a commitment that has been characterised by exclusive and often extreme measures. Despite this history of encounter at the perimeters of its domain, Christianity historically maintained a privileged and powerful ascendancy within singular religious environments. The modern day encroachment of religious diversity has therefore presented a serious challenge to Christianity. As we have seen, this challenge has produced the enterprise of the theology of religions. This profusion of debate and literature is, then, congruent with, and at the fore of, a long intellectual and theoretical tradition

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, "A Christian Looks at Zen," in *Thomas Merton on Zen* (London: Sheldon Press, 1976). 98

of theological reflection that has structured Christian belief, practice, and indeed, experience. This is a tradition of 'faith seeking understanding', or *fides quaerens intellectum* as Anselm of Canterbury put it. Within contemporary contexts this constitutes the great challenge of faith seeking understanding in a religiously diverse world.

In contrast, the origins of Buddhism lie not in a revelation of the Word from a divine source, but in an ineffable religious experience – one man's direct encounter with the true nature of reality and insight into the human problem necessitating salvation. As the narrative recounts, beneath the *bodhi* tree the Buddha discerned the conditioned, impermanent, and interconnected nature of reality, and the human tendency to misapprehend this nature. The Buddha's theodicy, as articulated in the Four Noble Truths, suggests that ego-centred human beings tend to perceive a world of separate entities, to mistake and reify illusory transient phenomena for permanent realities, and to thereby painfully 'mis-react' to them in line with habitual patterns of craving and aversion. The Buddha contended that this false perception of things as permanent, and the notion of a separate enduring self, is what holds humanity in the grip of suffering *samsāra*, perpetually wandering through the countless rebirths of cyclic existence. Having penetrated through the veils of ignorance, however, the Buddha was released from the suffering of *samsāra* and into the ultimate realm of the unconditioned, *nirvāna*, transcending all concepts of self, other, God, world, and indeed, concepts and words altogether.

A pervasive tension between the conceptual language of rational thought and the direct knowledge of spiritual experience appears to characterise Buddhism as a whole. Essentially, language belongs to the realm of representations and can therefore only ever approximate truth. Belonging to the realm of the relative, language also has the potential to reinforce the deluded dualistic thought processes of the discursive mind, which reify the illusion of a separate self, and thus perpetuate suffering. Language therefore does not belong to the enlightened realm

of the unconditioned, the realm of *prajñā*, or truth, which remains ineffable.<sup>2</sup> Much has been written about this specific Buddhist understanding of the status of language. Particular attention has been paid to the ‘Fourteen Undeclared Views’: fourteen philosophical and metaphysical questions which the Buddha ‘answered’ by remaining silent.<sup>3</sup> The *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra*, which tells of Vimalakīrti’s ‘thundering silence’, has also been acknowledged. So too have a number of Mahāyāna texts that reiterate the claim: “From the moment of his enlightenment to the time he passed away, the Tathāgata Buddha did not utter a single word.”<sup>4</sup> The point to be ascertained is that according to Buddhism, ultimate reality cannot be expressed in words.<sup>5</sup> Ultimate reality can only be experienced – it cannot be accurately or exhaustively expressed in language because it transcends words and speech, concepts and ideas, as the realm of the ‘signless’. Finally, any direct discourse on metaphysical nonduality is inherently self-defeating.

Despite the Buddha’s comprehension of the ineffability of ultimate reality, language is integral to the Buddhist tradition. In addition to his theodicy, the Buddha proposed a soteriology; not only did he diagnose the problem of human suffering, he also prescribed a cure – a universally available path of practice that leads towards the salvific experience of the unconditioned. Indeed, the Buddha is said to have spent forty itinerant years offering his teachings as a wandering ascetic. According to tradition, the Buddha disclaimed any divine status for himself, asserting that his teachings simply expressed the truth about the nature of things – the order of reality that exists and operates regardless of whether a Buddha appears to identify it. As such, according to the classical literature, the

<sup>2</sup> *Prajñā* is a Sanskrit term for truth, and is also translated as wisdom, insight, discriminating knowledge, and intuitive apprehension. NB. In general, Sanskrit terminology will be used within this text. Where specific terminology is required, both Pāli and Sanskrit terms will be provided. The abbreviations P and S will be used to denote Pāli and Sanskrit terms, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> See José Ignacio Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), David L. McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahayana Buddhism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), Gajin Nagao and Leslie S. Kawamura, *Madhyamika and Yogacara: A Study of Mahayana Philosophies: Collected Papers of G.M. Nagao, Suny Series in Buddhist Studies*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). For an atypical interpretation of the Buddha’s silence see T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Madhyamika System* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1960). And for a critique of Murti’s analysis see Richard Hayes, “Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism,” *Journal of Religious Pluralism* 1 (1991).

<sup>4</sup> See Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*. 171

role of a Buddha is to disclose this order, known as the Dharma, so that others may achieve liberation. As the *Samyutta Nikāya* reads:

Whether Tathāgatas arise or not, this order exists, namely the fixed nature of phenomena, the regular pattern of phenomena or conditionality. This the Tathāgata discovers and comprehends; having discovered and comprehended it, he points it out, teaches it, lays it down, establishes, reveals, analyses, clarifies it and says "Look".<sup>6</sup>

Commenting on the Buddhist reaffirmation of language as an expressive and pedagogic tool, the Buddhist scholar Leo Lefebure has observed, "Without the interplay of language and silence, we cannot distinguish the silence of the wise from the silence of the fools."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, while the Buddha's experience of insight was beyond words, language became necessary for the expression of this insight to others.

In line with the specific origins of Buddhism and its understanding of language is a structural emphasis on experience and praxis. Certainly, this emphasis has not deterred Buddhism's various traditions from producing vast amounts of scripture and commentarial literature, nor from engaging in centuries of Scholastic debate. On the contrary, the collections of Buddhist literature are vast; moreover, Buddhism possesses a highly sophisticated and ancient intellectual and philosophical heritage.<sup>8</sup> Nor has it deterred Buddhism from the endeavour of mission. Again on the contrary, the history and geography of Buddhism's expansion and cultural assimilation encompasses many countries and many cultures. However, in contrast to Christianity, praxis and experience generally form the foundation of Buddhist doctrinal formulations, philosophical expositions, and ideally also the conviction of the adherent. Indeed, the Buddha exhorted others to follow his path not out of blind obedience or veneration but on the basis of their own experiential substantiation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1959). 35

<sup>6</sup> *Samyutta-nikāya* II, 25, cited in Kalatissa Nanda Jayatilleke, "The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions," in *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul Griffiths (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990). 143

<sup>7</sup> Leo D. Lefebure, *The Buddha and the Christ: Explorations in Buddhist Christian Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993). xvii

<sup>8</sup> See Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the Buddha's advice to the Kālāmas in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* I, 189: "Come now, Kālāmas, do not accept anything on the grounds of revelation, tradition or report or because it

The particular origins of Buddhism and its experiential and praxial emphases have purportedly provided the tradition with a solid platform for the tolerance and inclusion of other religions. As the Buddhist scholar Kalatissa Nanda Jayatilleke has observed:

[Buddhism's] dispassionate and impartial but critical outlook, the causal conception of the universe and the conception of the Buddha as a being who discovers the operation of certain moral and spiritual laws and reveals them to us, may be said to be the first plank on which Buddhist tolerance rests.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Buddhism currently enjoys the reputation of being "one of the leading voices in a chorus that sings the praises of religious tolerance."<sup>11</sup> While Christianity is often cast as a crusading faith of violent coercion and oppressive colonialism, painted in dark tones of dogmatism and domination, Buddhism is generally depicted as a religion of nonviolence, tolerance, and peaceful inclusion. This depiction has been justified by the recognition that Buddhism has "repeatedly flourished in religiously plural cultures. As a consequence," David Chappell relates, "patterns of interreligious competition and mutual exclusion have been less extreme or brutal than in the West, and have often been balanced by many experiences of mutual co-existence, accommodation, and collaboration, and in some instances even of equality."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Buddhism is a religion of significant internal diversity – perhaps the most internally pluralistic of all the world religions.<sup>13</sup> In a discussion of internal ecumenics, Judith Simmer-Brown has suggested:

Inclusivism is much more common in Buddhism [than exclusivism], an approach which suggests that all forms of Buddhism have partial truth, but the most complete truth is contained in one's own scriptures, practices, and lineages of teachers...

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is a product of mere reasoning or because it is true from a standpoint or because of a superficial assessment of the facts or because it conforms with one's preconceived notions or because it is authoritative or because of the prestige of your teacher. When you, Kālāmas, realise for yourself that these doctrines are evil and unjustified, that they are condemned by the wise and that when they are accepted and lived by, they conduce ill and sorrow, then you should reject them." Cited in Jayatilleke, "The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions." 142

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 143

<sup>11</sup> Hayes, "Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism." Hayes goes on to question whether this status is deserved, in relation to the classical Buddhist texts of the Pāli canon, and finds that it is not.

<sup>12</sup> David W. Chappell, "Buddhist Interreligious Dialogue: To Build a Global Community," in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986). 6

<sup>13</sup> John Hick, "Religious Diversity as Challenge and Promise," in *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, ed. John Hick and Hasan Askari (Aldershot: Gower, 1985). 16

Besides, in Buddhism the primary realms of dispute between schools have less to do with truths and more to do with efficacy or expediency [of practices].<sup>14</sup>

We can thus conclude that the particular origins of Buddhism, its prioritisation of experience over language as the agent of truth, the universality of its salvific structure and means, its internal diversity, and its inclusive and tolerant approach, can account for the lacuna in Buddhist discourse regarding its specific responses to religious others. Due to such characteristics, the current global fact of religious diversity seems to have presented less of a challenge to Buddhism than to Christianity, and has not necessitated the articulation of its theological positionings. The eminent Japanese Buddhist philosopher Masao Abe has acknowledged this contrast:

[W]hile 'religious pluralism' is now a common challenge to Christians and Buddhists, the seriousness and nature of the challenge is not altogether equal in the two instances. In this regard, one may say that in our time, Christianity has moved from a relatively nonpluralistic situation to one radically pluralistic, whereas Buddhism has moved from the old pluralistic situation to a new pluralistic one.<sup>15</sup>

### Questioning Stereotypes

While the contrast between Christianity and Buddhism may seem self-evident, there are a few related finer points that we ought to address and qualify. Not least is the historical person and venerated being of Jesus Christ. The above analysis of Christianity as a religion of the Word and the Book is certainly not meant to deny the spiritual and soteriological agency of Jesus Christ, either as the historical figure of the Messiah, who's sacrificial passion, death, and resurrection redeemed humankind from sin, or as the ongoing living presence of the Holy Spirit, with which Christians commune through the ritual of the Eucharist, and through which they are ritually and experientially united with God. Nor is the above analysis meant to presuppose that the historical Church Fathers were mere theoreticians, bent on perfectly articulating the doctrine of the Trinity, whilst forgoing any experience of it. Indeed, Christianity, like Buddhism, has long been aware of "the

<sup>14</sup> Judith Simmer-Brown, "Pluralism and Dialogue: A Contemplation on the Dialogue Relationship," in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger R. Jackson and John Makransky (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000). 313

inadequacy of human language to communicate the reality of God in any literal, univocal fashion.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than the reiteration of tired stereotypes, our intention here has been to demonstrate the different kinds of challenge religious diversity has presented each tradition, and to account for the differences in their responses to this challenge.

We also ought to give some mention to the question of Christianity’s tolerance within the context of mission, and in comparison to Buddhist tolerance of religious others. The uniqueness of Christ within the Christian faith as the *only* incarnation of God within history and the *sole* mediator between humanity and God necessitates an inevitable degree of exclusivism and absolutism within the belief system. While the Biblical narrative of Jesus himself depicts a ministry better characterised by inclusion, love, and sanctity, an ironic incongruence between the teachings and exemplar of Jesus and the institutionalised measures of the Christian Church cannot be refuted. This incongruence is nowhere more apparent than within the recurrent occasions of religious crusade, persecution, and inquisition within the history of the Christian Church. In such instances, the potential exclusivism and absolutism of Christianity has translated into an uncompromising, violent zeal towards conversion and an extreme, dogmatic affirmation of the ultimate truth of the Christian way. Measures of suppression or eradication of the other have also greatly characterised much of the Christian missionary endeavour to preach the Word of God and provide salvation to the world. Within the mission context, the revelatory and doctrinal delineations of the Christian faith have established distinct boundaries between believers and non-believers, which become all the more reified as they claim a transcendent significance in centring on the crucial and ultimate question of salvation. In a discussion of Buddhism and Christianity, Hans Küng has recognised that such divinely sanctioned boundaries do not allow much room for religious tolerance:

On the whole, mystical religions seem to have an easier time with tolerance than do religions in which God’s prophetic word demands a decision, provokes a “crisis,”

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<sup>15</sup> M. Abe, “A Dynamic Unity in Religious Pluralism: A Proposal from the Buddhist Point of View” in Masao Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Steven Heine, Two vols., vol. I (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995). 19

<sup>16</sup> Lefebure, *The Buddha and the Christ: Explorations in Buddhist Christian Dialogue*. xix

and so virtually creates a division between those who listen and those who do not, between the chosen and the not chosen, and finally between the saved and the damned.<sup>17</sup>

While this depiction of Christianity as a zealous faith, bent on coercion and conversion, does indeed have some historical validity, it is also decidedly formulaic, and to a large degree obsolete. As we have seen, for a large number of Christians today who are conscious of the regrettable brutalities of an aggressive exclusivism, there is a deeper Christian reality. Furthermore, from a historical perspective, it should be recognised that the Church has not always been distanced from liberal movements that have taken place beyond the boundaries of politics and proselytism. Küng again:

Alongside all the horror stories of dogmatic, ecclesiastical, and political domination, alongside all the outrages of "Christian" imperialism and colonisation, is there not also a history of tolerance, of freedom of conscience, that made an epochal breakthrough, from the Church's standpoint, in the Reformation "freedom of a Christian man" and, for society as a whole, in the religious freedom of the Enlightenment (though the decisive impulses for this came from outside the Church)?<sup>18</sup>

Speaking of the contemporary shift in Christian attitudes towards other religions, Wilfred Cantwell Smith has claimed: "'Dialogue' between members of differing traditions is nowadays replacing polemics, debate, and monologue preaching of traditional missionary policy."<sup>19</sup> While this may be true, Eric Sharpe has cautioned against such blanket statements as 'monologue preaching of traditional missionary policy'. Sharpe has recognised that the "old order" of Christian attitudes "was never as universal, even in the nineteenth century, as we are sometimes lead to believe. Certainly negative attitudes towards non-Christian religions were expressed; but to suppose that because the Christian was persuaded of the theological inadequacy of some particular form of non-Christian belief he was therefore devoid of sympathy and respect for all its manifestations, is simply untrue."<sup>20</sup> In fact, Sharpe contends that the role of Christian missionaries in India

<sup>17</sup> Hans Küng, "The Buddhist Community and its Earlier History - Hans Küng: A Christian Response," in Hans Küng, ed., *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (London: Collins, 1987). 353

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (London: S.P.C.K. Press, 1978). 177

<sup>20</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, "The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *Truth and Dialogue: The Relationship between World Religions*, ed. John Hick (London: Sheldon Press, 1974). 79

was often pioneering and innovative; the encounter with the spiritual depths of alien cultures and traditions often compelled missionaries to question the rigid exclusivism of the Church.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, with regard to the missionary context, a degree of caution exercised against “the simplistic picture of an all-destroying missionising juggernaut”<sup>22</sup> is advisable.

Just as we should question one-sided depictions of Christianity, so too should we critically examine the assumption of an all-inclusive, tolerant Buddhism. While this assumption is not without some definite historical foundation, Buddhism has been accused of employing an uncritical kind of ‘over-tolerance’ that has at times involved the tradition in instances of direct intolerance. Indeed, as we have seen, tolerance is not a clear-cut concept, and is even less so when put into practice.

The popular imagining of Buddhism depicts a religion of peace and harmony, governed by a passive morality centred on nonviolence, *ahimsā*, and other non-adversarial ethics. Indeed, an admonishment against harming or killing another living being constitutes the cardinal precept of Buddhism, and as Winston King has observed, “the principle of non-killing is as near an absolute as one can get in practical Buddhist ethics.”<sup>23</sup> Such foundational ethics and precepts have played instrumental roles in the historical formation of apparently peaceful Buddhist societies. An exemplar can be found in the kingdom of Aśoka Maurya, the Buddhist emperor who created a historically remarkable ‘humanitarian welfare state’ during his reign in India (272-236 BCE). What is known of Aśoka’s ‘welfare state’ is derived from his inscriptions – rock-carved edicts which detail his ethical, social and political operative principles. Among the edicts are those that emphasise nonviolence towards animals and all living beings (Rock Edict IV), environmental preservation (Pillar Edict V), the equality of all classes (Maski Edict), the importance of the welfare of his people (Rock Edict VI), the glory of the Dharma and transcendent goals (Rock Edict XIII), meditation (Pillar Edict

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 79ff

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo: The Sri Lankan Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000). 202, n. 14

VII), and indeed, an apparent religious tolerance (Rock Edict VII and XII). Appeals to Buddhism's religious tolerance often refer to these two edicts. The Seventh Rock Edict reads:

King Priyadarśi (Aśoka) wishes members of all faiths to live everywhere in his kingdom.

For they all seek mastery of the senses and purity of mind. Men are different in their inclinations and passions, however, and they may perform the whole of their duties or only part.

Even if one is not able to make lavish gifts, mastery of the senses, purity of mind, gratitude, and steadfast devotion are commendable and essential.

And an excerpt from the Twelfth Rock Edict: "The faiths of others all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and also does disservice to that of others."<sup>24</sup>

Aśoka set the precedence as an exemplar of the Buddhist ruler, an ideal that inspired later emulation by such figures as Aniruddha of Pagan (eleventh-century) and Tilokaraja of Chiang Mai (fifteenth-century).<sup>25</sup> His 'Dharma-empire' also influenced the later evolution of Buddhist states throughout Asia. It would appear that such societies, governed within the parameters of Buddhist ethics, would have harmoniously advanced the Buddha's teachings and maintained the stability of Buddhist institutions, even in the midst of religious diversity. Indeed, the positive and peaceful co-existence of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism in China, and Buddhism and Shinto in Japan provide two exemplary models here.<sup>26</sup> However, the dynamics of acculturation and appropriation involved in the transmission of Buddhism to the East and its assimilation under the patronage of kings in China, Japan, and other South and East Asian monarchies, effectively removed the Sangha from the socio-political realm, a development with problematic

<sup>23</sup> Winston L. King, cited in Cynthia Eller, "The Impact of Christianity on Buddhist Nonviolence in the West," in *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992). 92

<sup>24</sup> Edicts VII and XII translated in and by N. A. Nikam and Richard McKeon, eds., *The Edicts of Asoka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). 51-2

<sup>25</sup> See Donald K. Swearer, "Exemplars of Nonviolence in Theravada Buddhism," in *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992). 64-66

consequences defined by an *excess* of tolerance. The Buddhist scholar and poet Gary Snyder has criticised institutional Buddhism in Asia as having been “conspicuously ready to accept or ignore the inequalities and tyrannies of whatever political system it found itself under.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, throughout the history of Buddhism in Asia it is apparent that the Sangha has made countless compromises in order to be accepted and tolerated themselves. Among commentators who have recognised and criticised this tendency towards ‘over-tolerance’ in Buddhism, the philologist Sir M. Monier-Williams claimed the tradition to be too “tolerant, liberal, and eclectic” to survive intact. Moreover, the British colonial administrator Sir Charles Eliot discerned a Buddhist-tendency towards the corruption of their tradition. Declaring Buddhism to be “dangerously tolerant,” Eliot considered that “their courteous acquiescence in other creeds enfeebles...their own.”<sup>28</sup> Within the contemporary movement of Critical Buddhism, Hakamaya Noriaki has argued that “Buddhists should not give in to a compromising and mushy ‘tolerance’ that uncritically accepts all things.”<sup>29</sup> In concord, Hans Küng has recognised the “problem of an easy, cheap tolerance in Buddhism.” In relation to Buddhism’s contemporary Western acculturation, Küng has suggested, “There is a danger of uncritical assimilation, of an opportunistic attitude of compromise, of a dangerous lack of discrimination and insufficient resistance to some highly dubious Western ‘achievements.’”<sup>30</sup>

At times throughout Asian history, such ‘over-tolerance’ has led Buddhism into contexts of intolerance that have seriously undermined the tradition. Asian history has evidenced Buddhist monastic armies, particularly in imperial China, Korea,

<sup>26</sup> See Wing-tsit Chan, “The Historic Chinese Contribution to Religious Pluralism and World Community,” in *Religious Pluralism and World Community: Interfaith and Intercultural Communication*, ed. E. J. Jurji (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969). 115-123

<sup>27</sup> G. Snyder, “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution” in Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (New York: New Directions, 1969). 90. This original article was appended and republished as Gary Snyder, “Buddhism and the Possibilities of a Planetary Culture,” in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1985). 82-85

<sup>28</sup> Both Monier-Williams and Eliot are cited in Kristin Beise Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005). 3

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Paul L. Swanson, “Why They Say Zen Is Not Buddhism,” in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism*, ed. Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997). 17

and Japan.<sup>31</sup> Buddhist support of military regimes has been most strikingly evinced by the Japanese Sangha's fervent embrace of militarism during World War II.<sup>32</sup> The Law of the Dharma is textually unequivocal about its doctrine of *ahiṃsā* (S. 'nonviolence'). The *Brahmajala Sūtra* propounds that Buddhists should not go to war, take part in rebellions or revolts, watch a battle let alone even look at an army, or give approval to killing in any way.<sup>33</sup> Despite such textual admonitions, however, B.G. Gokhale has observed that in the early texts "the horrors of war are duly recognised but no decisive or overt effort seems to be made to insist on outlawing war itself... the Buddha never advised his contemporary kings to disband their armies and beat their swords into ploughshares."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, while many have argued that Buddhism has not marred world history by enacting armed crusades in the name of the Buddha, historically there is no lack of a 'just-war' doctrine and it is evident that Buddhism's commitments to nonviolence and religious tolerance are not traditionally or culturally unanimous.<sup>35</sup> For present day confirmation, we need only look towards such countries as Sri Lanka, Ladakh, and most recently Burma, where Buddhist laity and monastics are involved in contexts of religious intolerance and war. While many Buddhists involved in these conflicts do so from a firm ethical foundation, many also have taken up arms.<sup>36</sup> Evidently, there is no single view of other religions within any

<sup>30</sup> Kūng, ed., *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*. 353-354

<sup>31</sup> See Henry O. Thompson, *World Religions in War and Peace* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1988). 96-97

<sup>32</sup> There are a number of credible books and articles dealing with the connections between Japanese Zen Buddhism and militarism. In particular, see Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), Brian (Daizen) A. Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1997), Brian (Daizen) A. Victoria, *Zen War Stories* (London ; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> *Brahmajala-sūtra*, cited in Thompson, *World Religions in War and Peace*. 102

<sup>34</sup> B. G. Gokhale cited in Ian Harris, ed., *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth Century Asia* (London: Pinter Books, 1999). 5

<sup>35</sup> For a revealing discussion of the variety of contemporary Buddhist opinions war and the question of 'just-war', see Kenneth Kraft, "New Voices in Engaged Buddhist Studies," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher S. Queen (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000). 491-3

<sup>36</sup> The situation in Sri Lanka has been extensively investigated: see Sarath Amunugama, "Buddhaputra and Bhumiputra?: Dilemmas of Modern Sinhala Buddhist Monks in Relation to Ethnic and Political Conflict," *Religion* 21, no. 2 (1991), K. M. de Silva et al., eds., *Ethnic Conflict in Buddhist Societies: Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma, International Centre for Ethnic Studies Series* (London & New York: Continuum International Publishing, 1988), Peter Schalk, "Unity' and 'Sovereignty': Key Concepts of a Militant Buddhist Organization in the Present Conflict in Sri

one tradition, and in relation to Buddhism it is apparent that we can discern any number of attitudes towards religious diversity.<sup>37</sup>

### Towards a Buddhist Theology of Religions

It has recently been observed that,

...rigorous philosophical work utilising the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism from a Buddhist perspective are extremely rare. Comparative studies on particular topics are available, as are historical studies of the relations between Buddhism and other faiths, but theoretical work analogous to Christian philosophical and theological arguments for certain approaches to religious others are not.<sup>38</sup>

Despite this lacuna, an emergent body of commentarial academic literature is beginning to fill the gap. In one of the few comprehensive investigations of Buddhist responses to religious diversity, David Chappell has discerned six attitudes towards religious others that have been espoused by Buddhists over the centuries: a separate and superior attitude, a compassionately engaged attitude, a developmental attitude, a complementary attitude, an attitude that affirms the relativity of all religious traditions, and an attitude that affirms a shared essence of religions.<sup>39</sup> While Chappell has not utilised the Christian typology, it is apparent that these approaches could be categorised as such. Indeed, a number of theorists have explicitly analysed Buddhist responses in terms of the Christian typology, including Richard Hayes, John Makransky, Kristin Kiblinger, Rita Gross, Judith Simmer-Brown, and David Chappell. Moreover, a number of contemporary Buddhist figures, such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Masao Abe, and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, have directly addressed the issue of Buddhism and religious

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Lanka," *Temenos* 24 (1989), Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka, Monograph of the World Institute for Development Economics Research (Wider) of the United Nations University*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). The recent uprising in Burma has not yet been represented by any in depth research. On the situation in Ladakh, see John Crook, "Buddhist Ethics and the Problem of Ethnic Minorities: The Case of Ladakh," in *Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society*, ed. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> As Paul Griffiths has noted: "It should be emphasised that there is no such thing as the Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic, or Hindu position on Christianity, just as there is no single Christian position on the significance of any non-Christian religious community." See Paul Griffiths, "Introduction," in Paul J. Griffiths, ed., *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes, Faith Meets Faith Series* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990). 3

<sup>38</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 2

<sup>39</sup> David W. Chappell, "Buddhist Responses to Religious Pluralism: What Are the Ethical Issues?," in *Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society*, ed. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991). 355ff

diversity. Based upon the slight but solid foundation of literature offered by these theorists, we will now attempt, in the limited space available within this chapter, to construct a 'Buddhist theology of religions'.

Before we begin, some brief words should be said about the feasibility of the typology itself, for while the terms *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism* have achieved standard status and usage within academic and theological discourse, in recent years they have also attracted some criticism. In an analysis of these criticisms, Perry Schmidt-Leukel has identified eight key areas of objection, which, it should be noted, have all issued from the realms of Christian theology. The typology has been deemed too narrow, too broad, too abstract and sterile, offensive, and pointless; its structure has been considered inconsistent, as well as misleading, for obscuring the real intention of a theology of religions, and for not taking into account the diversity of religions.<sup>40</sup> We may attest to some of these criticisms. We have already encountered D'Costa's suggestion that pluralism is an impossibility, and that there can only ever be forms of exclusivism. The objection that the typology is too broad would also seem to apply to the suggestion that the limitations of our language and tradition-defined perspective deny access to any affirmation of pluralism. On the other hand, we have also encountered the possibility that the typology may be too narrow in the argument that pluralism may be understood philosophically while manifested experientially. Indeed, many have argued for a fourth option to be amended to the typology.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the claim that the typology is too abstract and coarse, in the sense that it does not do justice

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<sup>40</sup> See Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology - Clarified and Confirmed," in *The Myth of Christian Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005). 13-27

<sup>41</sup> For example, Paul Knitter, has reconfigured the typology, renaming exclusivism "the replacement model", inclusivism "the fulfillment model", pluralism "the mutuality model", and adding a fourth called "the acceptance model". See Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002). 173-215. Furthermore, contributions from beyond Christianity have questioned the cultural universalism of the three categories. At the annual meeting of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies in 2000, scholars addressed the theme - "Beyond the Usual Alternatives in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue". A central concern was the possibility of developing a fourth alternative to the three Christian theological categories, or a different mode of utilisation, which could possibly resonate with the logic of non-Western traditions. See Edward L Shirley, "The 2000 Meeting of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies (News and Views)," *Buddhist - Christian Studies Annual* (2001). 103-4 and Virginia Straus, "Beyond the Usual Alternatives? Buddhist and Christian Approaches to Other Religions," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 22 (2002). 123-4

to the complex and nuanced reality of real theologies, is noteworthy. As we have seen, it is not a question of simply categorising an approach – the rigidity of categorisation does not take into account the possibility that a respondent could embrace all three responses at different moments or on different levels of experience.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, as we are about to see, the approach of the Buddha as represented in Buddhist literature can be classified as exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist, depending on which aspects of his teachings, which pedagogic tools, or which religious experiences we choose to examine. Despite these criticisms and related queries, however, it may still be acceptable to utilise the typology as a structural apparatus or conceptual framework in which to analyse Buddhist responses to other religions, so long as we bear in mind that such responses are generally more complex than the inherent categorisation of the typology implies.

### Buddhist Exclusivism

The search for Buddhist responses to other religions that can be defined by the paradigm of exclusivism leads us back to the historical and cultural origins of the tradition in fifth-century BCE northern India. Ancient Indian religion at this time was characterised by two contrasting and opposing movements represented by the *Brāhmaṇas* and the *Śramaṇas* (P. *Brāhmaṇas* and *Sramaṇas*). The genesis of Buddhism can be understood in relation to both these movements – in response to the former and in affiliation with the latter. The tradition emerged in the midst of and in response to the Vedic worldview of Brahmanic culture. This mainstream culture was defined by the religion of the *Brāhmaṇas*, a householder cult of sacrifice governed by the Brahmin priests and authorised by the ancient collections of the Vedic scriptures. It was a highly structured system, with the ritually and cosmologically pure governing elite – the *Brāhmaṇas* – positioned at the hierarchical apex.<sup>43</sup> In contrast to this system was the movement of renunciants – the *Śramaṇas* – whose ideology provided a radical contrast to that of the Brahmanic householder religion. As expressed in the Sanskrit studies of Greg Bailey, a “polemic” dynamic or “dialectical” relationship existed between *pravṛtti*

<sup>42</sup> See Robison B. James, *Tillich and World Religions: Encountering Other Faiths Today* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2003). 51-73

– the way of the householder, one who “participates actively in the world and embodies in his life-style all that evaluates the world and society in a positive manner”, and *nivṛtti* – the way of renunciation, which “advocates the adoption of an ascetic life-style.”<sup>44</sup> Investigating its historical origins, Bailey suggests that the ascetic ideology developed in India from the seventh to the fifth centuries BCE, in a time of socio-economic crisis that acted as an impetus for religious speculation, the development of heterodoxies, and the rise of the ideal of renunciation. In turn, the way of the householder was made explicit. From the *Mahābhārata*, Bailey gives the example of Yudhiṣṭhira, who is committed to the life of a householder, but yearns to be an ascetic.<sup>45</sup> These collectives of Śramaṇas (P. *Samaṇas*, ‘strivers’) rejected the orthodox teachings of the Brāhṃaṇas. Consequently, with regard to the ancient (and also modern) Indian social structure, the Śramaṇas were considered to be socially ‘dead’. Having renounced the obligations of family, economic production and ritual duty, the Śramaṇa went forth into a homeless mendicant life in search of liberating truth. The soteriological concerns of the Śramaṇas lead to austere practices and meditative extremes in the endeavour to transcend the cycle of rebirth with the attainment of salvific knowledge. In contrast to the rigidity of the Brahmanic system, the amorphous community of Śramaṇas typically collected around a particular teacher or leader in small groups. Among such teachers were Makkhali Gosala who founded the prominent sect called the Ājīvakas, Mahāvīra, the leader of the Jains, and the Buddha, or as he is frequently referred to in the Pāli canon, ‘the samaṇa Gotama’.

The contrast between the unorthodox Śramaṇas and the orthodox Brāhṃaṇas, and the tension between the ideologies of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*, are represented within the narrative of the Buddha’s life, particularly his renunciation. The Buddha’s renunciation can be understood within the greater context of the Śramaṇa tradition of the inward spiritual quest for salvific knowledge. This notion of the spiritual quest finds particular expression in the Upaniṣads. Forming one division of the

<sup>43</sup> The term *Brahmin*, referring to a member of the priestly class of Hinduism, is the anglicisation of the Pāli and Sanskrit term *Brāhṃaṇu*.

<sup>44</sup> Greg Bailey, *Materials for the Study of Ancient Indian Ideologies: Pravṛtti and Nivṛtti* (Torino: Pubblicazioni di 'Indologica Taurinensia', 1985). 10

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 12

Vedic scriptures, the Upaniṣads present an esoteric interpretation of the meaning of the Vedic sacrifices, affirming the identification of the microcosmic sacrifice with the macrocosmic universe. The culmination of the Upaniṣadic teachings reveals the ultimate identification of self (S. *ātman*), the true unchanging core or essence of one's being, and *Brahmā*, the true, unchanging core or essence of the universe. As the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states:

If a man knows 'I am brahman' in this way, he becomes the whole world. Not even the gods are able to prevent it, for he becomes their very self (*ātman*). So when a man venerates another deity, thinking 'He is one, and I am another', he does not understand...

It is his self (*ātman*) alone that a man should venerate as his world. And if someone venerates his self alone as his world, that rite of his will never fade away, because from his very self he will produce whatever he desires.<sup>46</sup>

The question of whether the Buddha was aware of the Upaniṣads, and if so, the degree to which they influenced him, has been the topic of much scholarly debate. Most recently, Richard Gombrich has argued:

[T]he central teachings of the Buddha came as a response to the central teachings of the old Upaniṣads, notably the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. On some points, which he perhaps took for granted, he was in agreement with the Upaniṣadic doctrine; on others he criticised it.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, we have already discussed the Buddha's understanding of the illusory nature of the self, and his teachings of non-self (P. *anattā*; S. *anātman*). According to Gombrich, the early Buddhist texts present a destabilising, confrontational, and mocking critique of the teachings of the Upaniṣads. As such, Gombrich's account draws attention to early instances of exclusivism.

In an investigation of Buddhism and pluralism, Richard Hayes has also recognised a pervasive tone of mockery within the early texts. Responding to a perceived tendency among modern scholars to interpret original Buddhism as supportive of pluralism, Hayes' study provides textual evidence to attest to the fact that Gotama Buddha was decidedly 'anti-pluralist'. According to Hayes' analysis of the literature, the Buddha was distinctly derisive and critical of the Brāhmanas:

<sup>46</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1: 4: 10/15) in *Upaniṣads*, trans. P. Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15&17

<sup>47</sup> Richard Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (London & Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Athlone Press, 1996), p. 31

In the Pali literature the principal object of ridicule is the Brahman, who is often caricatured as a self-serving, undisciplined, unprincipled bungler, who somehow manages, despite his many obvious shortcomings, to think of himself as superior to all other people.<sup>48</sup>

Hayes questions whether classical Buddhism was supportive of a teleological plurality (many goals), an orthopractical or pragmatic plurality (many methods), and a doctrinal or cosmological plurality (many belief-systems). Based upon the literature, his answers are conclusively negative. According to such texts as the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* ('Discourse on the Noble Quest') in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, there is only one goal – the quest for *nirvāṇa* (P. *nibbāna*), "the ultimate security against bondage." As Hayes explains, "Compared to this goal, other goals are regarded not only less than ultimate, but also as ultimately ignoble and unworthy."<sup>49</sup> Hayes continues to demarcate "the Buddha's attitude towards the bootlessness of all methods but one,"<sup>50</sup> this being renunciation, right conduct, and the meditative endeavour to overcome the tendency to identify with mind and body. In contrast, in the *Tevijja Sutta* in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Buddha defines the Brāhmaṇas as:

...those who are bound by the chains of sensuality, ill-will, laziness, anxiety and doubt, who are encumbered with family possessions, and who are impotent (*avassavatti*) owing to their lack of discipline. It is impossible that Brahmans such as this will see Brahmā face to face either during the present life or after the breakup of the body. Therefore the knowledge contained in the Vedas is like a desert (*īriṇa*), a wilderness (*vipina*) or a wasteland (*vyasana*).<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, regarding those Brāhmaṇas who claim to have directly encountered Brahmā, the Buddha considered their teachings "risible (*hassaka*), empty (*rittaka*) and vain (*tucchaka*)."<sup>52</sup> Finally, Hayes examines the Buddha's approach to doctrinal plurality, focusing on the Buddha's refusal to answer speculative questions about such issues as the size of the world or life after death. As Hayes explains, this was because "doctrines concerning questions of cosmology, psychology and thanatology do no good in a person's search for imperturbable

<sup>48</sup> Hayes, "Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism." 18

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 12

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 13

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

mental freedom.”<sup>53</sup> While some doctrines may be unhelpful with regard to progress on the spiritual path, others may also be harmful. According to Hayes’ analysis of the *Sutta Nipāta*, the Buddha here contends that “beliefs in the efficacy of rituals not only leads to the unnecessary suffering and destruction of innocent beings but also reinforces the greed for sensual pleasure that impedes the attainment of nibbāna.”<sup>54</sup> As Hayes explains, this is due to the capacity for doctrines, and attachment to their outcomes, to reinforce deluded patterns of thought:

[A]ccording to classical Buddhism, most religious doctrines arise either out of ignorance, or fear, or vested interests, or an unwillingness to face unpleasant realities. Religious doctrines, in other words, are seen as arising out of superficial thinking of the sort that accompanies the habit of identifying oneself with the body and mind. And having thus arisen, most religious doctrines are said to have the effect of supporting the survival of the very kind of dysfunctional thinking that gave rise to them in the first place. Such an attitude towards religious doctrines and their accompanied practices can hardly be called a form of religious pluralism.<sup>55</sup>

John Makransky has also examined these kind of exclusive moves and critiques in the early Buddhist texts. According to Makransky, the Buddha judged the doctrines and methods of other religious systems according to their efficacy in penetrating deluded patterns of thought, dismantling reifications of self, and realising impermanence and nonattachment. In other words, the Buddha judged other religious systems in relation to the structures of truth and soteriological goals that are represented in the Four Noble Truths. Makransky cites the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (‘Discourse Concerning the Net of Brahmanic Opinions’) from the *Dīgha Nikāya* in which the Buddha rejects sixty-two types of ‘speculative opinion’ or ‘view’ (P. *ditṭhi*; S. *dr̥ṣṭi*) prevalent in ancient India, including the notions of *ātman* and a ‘creator-God’.<sup>56</sup> According to the Buddha’s theodical diagnosis, the *dr̥ṣṭi* of a creator-God, understood as a separate, inviolable,

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 16

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> The *Dīgha Nikāya* also contains the *Soṇadunḍu Sutta* and the *Sūmaññaphala Sutta*, in which the Buddha again discusses Brahmanic views as well as the doctrines of other religious systems of his time. The *Brahmajāla Sutta* not only rejects the *dr̥ṣṭi* of *ātman* (*satkāya-dr̥ṣṭi*, ‘personality belief’), but also the belief that the self is eternal (*śāśvata-dr̥ṣṭi*) and the belief that the self is destroyed at death (*uccheda-dr̥ṣṭi*). The two ‘extreme views’ of eternalism (*śāśvata-vāda*) and annihilationism (*uccheda-vāda*) were both condemned by the Buddha. According to the principle of the Middle Way (*madhyamā-pratipad*), the ‘self’ is neither eternal nor annihilated at death but passes within a dynamic continuity of the individual from one life to the next.

omnipotent bestower of salvation, is a product of the deluded mind. In ignorance of the conditioned nature of all phenomena and ideas, the mental construction of 'God' becomes absolutised in the unenlightened mind as an object of attachment. This reinforces the illusion of a separate self but removes the locus of liberation from the individual mind, directing religious efforts towards an ostensible divine power. This kind of wrong perception obscures the conditioned nature of suffering inflicted by attachment or aversion, and thus perpetuates suffering. It was on this basis that the Buddha denounced the theistic Vedic belief in the supreme Brahmā as the creator of all other gods, and as the core essence of the universe. As John Makransky has explained:

In the very moment that one thinks about God as the seemingly external cause of all being and experience, one is not looking directly in that moment into the causal genesis of clinging and aversion in one's own mind, nor seeing through them to the unconditioned dimension that transcends them.<sup>57</sup>

The early Buddhist critique of the reification of conceptual constructs, such as God or selfhood, has its doctrinal foundations in the teaching regarding the causation and ontological status of phenomena – co-dependent origination (P. *paṭicca-samuppāda*; S. *pratītya-samutpāda*). The important corollary of this teaching is that there is nothing that comes into being through its own power or volition; there are therefore no entities or metaphysical realities, such as God or self, that transcend the causal nexus or exist in separation. In relation to others religions, the Buddha accordingly considered any non-Buddhist tradition that absolutised their religious objects, establishing a *dr̥ṣṭi* and reinforcing the notion of a separate self, an inadequate means of achieving salvation. It is important to note that the Buddha, as represented in the classical texts, did not deny the existence of God, or gods, or the possibility of a direct encounter with them; on the contrary, the Buddha claimed such an experience for himself. It was the deluded mental processes by which a notion of 'God' becomes reified and absolutised, and the conception of this 'God' as an omnipotent power or absolute that exists separate to the self, which the Buddha rejected. Any speculative approach to reality which reified dualistic constructions of self, other, God, or

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<sup>57</sup> John Makransky, "Buddhist Perspectives on Truth in Other Religions: Past and Present," *Theological Studies* 64, no. 2 (2003). 346

world, thereby absolutising them as objects of clinging and aversion, perpetuating delusion and suffering, and obscuring rather than disclosing *nirvāṇa*, was thus revoked.

A number of theorists have examined the contexts and historical developments of the early Buddhist critiques of theism. Richard Hayes and John Makransky have both recognised that Buddhist critiques of theism are but one aspect of Buddhism's greater concern to deconstruct any conceptions of unity, permanence, or enduring substance that perpetuate suffering and obscure unconditioned reality. Over time, however, such arguments against theism developed into systematic exclusivist critiques. These critiques sought to affirm the Four Noble Truths as the ultimate ontological, theodical, and soteriological explanation against any absolute notion of God. Hayes specifically focuses on the fifth-century CE Indian Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu, who refuted the concept of a single, undivided, unchanging and perfect God. As Hayes demonstrates, Vasubandhu questioned how such a 'creator' could be sufficient cause for the diversity of minds, bodies, and worlds changing within time. Vasubandhu also addressed the problem of evil, questioning why such a God deserves worship if he is the creator of so much suffering in the world.<sup>58</sup> In a study of the critique of theism presented by the seventh-century Indian Buddhist logician Dharmakīrti, Roger Jackson has recognised that Buddhism's refutation of theism *in toto* was part of a larger theist-atheist controversy that pervaded the history of the Indian philosophical tradition. Jackson also examines the extensive history of the debate within the Buddhist tradition itself, following its progression from the *nikāya* literature, through to the first-century writings of Aśvaghōṣa and Nāgārjuna, the Ābhidharmika literature of succeeding centuries, including Vasubandhu and Asaṅga (fourth-century), and finally Bhāvaviveka (sixth-century).<sup>59</sup> Jackson presents Dharmakīrti's anti-theistic arguments as the culmination of Buddhist atheism, acclaiming them for their

<sup>58</sup> Richard Hayes, "Principled Atheism in the Buddhist Scholastic Tradition," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 16 (1988).

<sup>59</sup> Roger R. Jackson, "Dharmakīrti's Refutation of Theism," *Philosophy East and West* 36, no. 4 (1986). To Jackson's list we could also add the earlier figure of Āryadeva, whose anti-theist arguments are presented in his *Caṭuḥśataka* (second-century CE), and the later works of Śāntarakṣita and his student Kamalaśīla (eighth-century CE). See D. Seyfort Ruegg, *The Literature*

philosophical and logical sophistication. Jackson examines Dharmakīrti's refutation of the *īśvara* doctrine, which asserts a cosmological creator entity. As Jackson demonstrates, Dharmakīrti rejected its authority, its syllogism, and its status as an agent of causality. Following an overview of developments post-Dharmakīrti, Jackson concludes "the assertion of an omniscient, permanent, independent, unique cause of the cosmos is rejected throughout the length and breadth of the Indian Buddhist tradition."<sup>60</sup>

Exclusive Buddhist atheism has persisted, finding its most apparent contemporary expression within Buddhist critiques of Christianity. The question of congruence between Buddhism and Christianity regarding the nature and existence of God provides a pivotal point for much contemporary Buddhist-Christian and Buddhist-Jewish dialogue. Indeed, many exchanges between the theistic religions and Buddhism have revealed degrees of consonance and complementarity between certain Judeo-Christian conceptions of God and such Buddhist teachings as emptiness (*P. suññattā*; *S. sūnyatā*).<sup>61</sup> Even so, as the contemporary Buddhist scholar Rita Gross explains, the "essence of theism", or the idea of an "external saviour who confers or bestows liberation on another... [is] the most puzzling and unrealistic doctrine of Christianity to a Buddhist."<sup>62</sup>

The work of Sri Lankan apologist Gunapala Dharmasiri provides a good example of contemporary Buddhist atheistic exclusivism. Dharmasiri's principal work, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God*, addresses and discounts the

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of the *Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981). 52 & 62-3

<sup>60</sup> Jackson, "Dharmakīrti's Refutation of Theism." 319

<sup>61</sup> The exemplars of this dialogical field are the Japanese philosopher from the Kyoto School Masao Abe, and the American Christian theologian John B. Cobb Jr., who together established the Theological Encounter with Buddhism Group. This group has brought together numerous Christian theologians and many representatives from various Buddhist traditions. Since 1984, most of its meetings have been reported in the University of Hawai'i journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. See also Masao Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue: Part One of a Two-Volume Sequel to Zen and Western Thought*, ed. Steven Heine, Two vols., vol. 1 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), John B. Cobb, Jr., "Buddhist Emptiness and the Christian God," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45, no. 1 (1977). And Roger Coreless and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity: Essays and Explorations* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1990). More recently, the group has initiated dialogues with Judaism. See John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives, eds., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation, Faith Meets Faith Series* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990).

Christian belief in the soul as an eternal entity, and the correlated belief in an eternal creator-God.<sup>63</sup> Upon a methodological foundation of empiricism and verificationism, Dharmasiri presents the Buddhist argument against an enduring self or soul and thereby challenges the Christian conception of God. If the notion of an enduring self can be disproved and realised as an illusion detrimental to moral or spiritual progress, then, because of the Christian connection between the notion of soul and belief in God, so too can the notion of an enduring God. As he explains, "a Buddhist would not find soul a morally and spiritually edifying concept. Therefore, in that sense, he would maintain that the soul cannot be a good analogy to a morally and spiritually perfect God either."<sup>64</sup> Essentially, Dharmasiri confronts the Christian metaphysical assertion of God via the Buddhist philosophical deconstruction of enduring substances and reified entities, and its empirical affirmation of complete causality. In doing so, Dharmasiri presents an uncompromising exclusivism.

From this overview of instances of Buddhist exclusivism, we may agree with David Chappell that "only rarely have Buddhists acknowledged that Buddhism was equally conditioned and as fallible as others, or accepted other religions as equally able to save... The usual Buddhist view of other religions was negative. Doctrinally other religions were sometimes depicted as good but usually as inadequate, distracting, distorted, or evil."<sup>65</sup> Indeed, it would be difficult to argue for an absence of exclusivism in any religious tradition, particularly if we examine their origins. As Hayes has acknowledged:

[V]ery few of the major religious traditions have espoused the notion that more than one claim to ultimacy can be valid. On the contrary, most of the historical religions are based in some way either on an explicit rejection or denigration of another religious tradition or traditions or on aristocratic claims of ethnic or racial supremacy. Examples of religions based on the denigration of other religions are original Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam... That all these religions are traditionally triumphalist and not pluralistic is simply something that must be acknowledged; it would be ideologically anachronistic and intellectually dishonest to try to find anticipations of a now fashionable way of thinking [i.e.

<sup>62</sup> Rita M. Gross, "This Buddhist's View of Jesus," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 19 (1999). 70

<sup>63</sup> Gunapala Dharmasiri, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God* (Colombo: Lake House Investments Ltd., 1974).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 23

<sup>65</sup> Chappell, "Buddhist Interreligious Dialogue: To Build a Global Community." 5 & 6

pluralism] in traditions that evolved in a social and political setting entirely different from that of the present world.<sup>66</sup>

### Buddhist Inclusivism

Despite evidence of exclusivism within early Buddhism, its philosophical developments, and its contemporary apologetics, many Buddhist approaches to religious others can be classified by the paradigm of inclusivism. The Indologist Paul Hacker has recognised that the term 'inclusivism' and philosophical articulations regarding its meaning are lacking within Indian contexts.<sup>67</sup> In response to this lacuna, a number of scholars have taken up the task of locating instances and excavating the dimensions of Buddhist inclusivism. Once again, these sources lead us back to the origins of Buddhism and the figure of the Buddha. Examining early textual representations of the Buddha's pedagogic methods, his approach towards religious identity, and his teachings regarding religious doctrines, these scholars have revealed the foundations of Buddhist inclusivism. They have also explored certain doctrines that emerged with the evolution of Mahāyāna Buddhism and provided further resources for the development of Buddhist inclusivism, particularly in relation to the cultural transmission of Buddhism from India into Asia throughout the first millennium CE. Throughout this transmission, Buddhism encountered, incorporated, and very often converted a variety of religious others through a variety of inclusive strategies.

Referring to the early literature, John Makransky has identified both exclusive and inclusive elements within the Buddha's approach:

On one hand, non-Buddhist traditions came under the Buddha's critique insofar as they might contribute to the very problem he had diagnosed, by absolutising their religious objects and concepts of self as objects of clinging or aversion...

On the other hand, the Buddha was skilled at speaking his truths in remarkably accessible ways, often communicating them to others through their own (non-Buddhist) modes of thought.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Hayes, "Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism." 19

<sup>67</sup> Paul Hacker, cited in Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 2

<sup>68</sup> Makransky, "Buddhist Perspectives on Truth in Other Religions: Past and Present." 335

Makransky defines this latter approach as an inclusive paradigm, in which the symbolic systems and modes of discourse of religious others are recognised as communicating, in their own ways, aspects of the Buddha's salvific truth, or contributing, albeit incompletely, to the revelation and realisation of the Buddhadharmā. This inclusive approach is demonstrated in the early texts within various dialogues between the Buddha and followers of non-Buddhist philosophical or religious traditions. These dialogues reveal a central element of the Buddha's pedagogy – his 'skilful means' (*S. upāya-kauśalya*) – through which he established a new 'religio-philosophical' discourse in order to communicate the Dharma. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged within the tradition that the Buddha adapted his teachings to suit the cultural conditions and spiritual level of those being taught. He also insisted that his teachings be conveyed in vernacular languages, rather than the elite Sanskrit of the Brāhmanas. Through this approach, the Buddha retained and utilised religious terminology from Vedic culture, which grounded his teachings in tradition. Yet he also reinterpreted such terminology in order to express his innovative ideas and, as the dialogues demonstrate, skilfully encourage his interlocutors to critically analyse their beliefs, an approach which often led to conversion. As Makransky explains, because the Buddha's skilful discourse was formed by "reinterpreting inherited Indic terms," it was "engaging enough to attract traditional Brahmins and rigorous enough to guide his followers in the distinctive practices of his path."<sup>69</sup> As Chappell confirms, this approach of redefinition enabled the inclusion of the other, because "Buddhists could accept the inherited religious traditions of others, but would actively redefine their key concepts in a way that would be consistent with the vision of the Buddha."<sup>70</sup> Let us address a few examples.

From the *Dīgha Nikāya*, Makransky offers the example of the Buddha's dialogue with Vasettha, a Brāhmana priest and devotee of the supreme creator-God Brahmā. A number of different Vedic traditions taught a path towards union with Brahmā, and in the dialogue Vasettha asks the Buddha which of the paths he considers to be correct. In reply, the Buddha asks Vasettha two questions: 'Have

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 344

<sup>70</sup> Chappell, "Buddhist Responses to Religious Pluralism: What Are the Ethical Issues?." 358

any on these teachers seen God face to face?’ and ‘Are any of these teachers, like Brahmā, unencumbered by attachment, hatred, ill-will, an impure heart, or a lack of discipline?’ Vasettha answers in the negative on both counts. Consequently, the Buddha questions, ‘How can a teacher who does not know God, has not seen God, or, being encumbered, has nothing in common with God, teach a path to union with God?’ According to the Buddha, this is not possible. Vasettha then asks if the Buddha knows the way to union with God, and the Buddha replies in the affirmative. The Buddha details four contemplative practices to manifest and emit to all beings boundless love, compassion, equanimity, and sympathetic joy.<sup>71</sup> According to the Buddha, one who practices in this way is unencumbered by hatred, ill-will, an impure heart, or a lack of discipline. Having much in common with ‘God’, “such an unencumbered monk, after death, ... should attain to union with the unencumbered God – that is possible.” As Makransky explicates, within this dialogue, by skilfully utilising the notion of God within his pedagogic discourse, the Buddha is able to deconstruct this very notion within Vasettha’s mind. The Buddha does not deny the reality of God, but encourages a direct experience of this God through the cultivation of the qualities ‘He’ is thought to manifest. The meditative cultivation of the qualities of ‘God’ within the ‘self’ is intended to deconstruct the duality between self and God, gearing Vasettha’s mind to become more receptive to the nonduality of unconditioned reality beyond attachment to all thought constructs of self and God. Ultimately, the Buddha contends that direct experience should form the foundation of belief, rather than religious authority, and he invites Vasettha to affirm this for himself. Indeed, Buddhaghosa’s fifth-century CE commentary on this text, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, reveals that Vasettha became ordained as Buddhist monk and eventually attained enlightenment.<sup>72</sup>

In one of the most comprehensive studies of Buddhist inclusivism, Kristin Kiblinger provides a further example, again from the *Dīgha Nikāya*, of the Buddha’s skilful means employed in inclusive dialogue with religious others. In

<sup>71</sup> These four practices are known as the *Brahma-vihāras*, or the ‘Abodes of Brahma’. Also known as the ‘Four Immeasurable Minds’ and the ‘Four Pure Abodes’.

<sup>72</sup> Makransky, “Buddhist Perspectives on Truth in Other Religions: Past and Present.” 342-3

the *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, the Buddha induces doubt in the mind of the Brāhmaṇa Kūṭadanta about the value of sacrifice by proposing the comparative benefits of making an offering of virtue, sincere generosity, upholding the moral precepts, taking refuge, stability of attention, penetrating insight, and the cessation of distorted emotional habits. As Kiblinger explains, in this instance the Buddha reinterprets the Vedic sacrifice according to Buddhist morality and practice.<sup>73</sup> Kiblinger offers a further example of ethical reinterpretations of Vedic practices in the *Aggi Sutta*. Here the Buddha denounces the ritual of fire sacrifice because it involves killing animals, but he also suggests new ways of conceiving of the fires as symbolic of people, and thus worthy of respect and devotion. Commenting on the inherent inclusivism within these strategies, Kiblinger has explained that such texts “are not subordinating sacrificial rituals under higher level Buddhist practices; rather, they are replacing metaphysics with ethics.”<sup>74</sup> A final example of this kind of inclusivism based on reinterpretation can be found in the *Sigālaka Sutta*. Here the Buddha reinterprets the traditional householder practice of paying homage in the six directions. The Buddha proposes to the householder Sigālaka that a more constructive way to make homage would be to practice virtue in six types of relationships: with respect to one’s mother and father (east); teachers (south); wife and children (west); friends (north); servants (nadir); and ascetics and priests (zenith).<sup>75</sup> Evidently, the Buddha’s ontological and soteriological emphasis is upon the individual cultivation and practice of virtue and insight; depending upon his interlocutor’s ethical and spiritual capacities, the Buddha’s attitude is inclusive, regardless of the individual’s religious affiliation. As Makransky has perceived, in such early textual instances of inclusivism and skilful means, the Buddha’s interlocutors are very often “moved to adopt practices taught by the Buddha as the very way to fulfil their own traditions deepest intent for virtue, salvific truth, and freedom.”<sup>76</sup>

While the Buddha’s dialogues of inclusivism often result in conversion, there are occasions within the early texts when the possibility of salvation beyond

<sup>73</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 41-2

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 42

<sup>75</sup> Makransky, “Buddhist Perspectives on Truth in Other Religions: Past and Present.” 344

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

Buddhism is affirmed. In such instances, the Buddha acknowledges the equivalence of other practitioner's paths to liberation. As David Chappell has recognised, this acknowledgement was given doctrinal status in two ways. Firstly, through the recognition of the existence and salvific agency of past and future Buddhas. And secondly, through the recognition of *pratyekabuddhas* (P. *paccekabuddhas*) – highly spiritually accomplished practitioners who were not considered part of the Buddhist fold. While later Mahāyāna texts tend to debase the 'Way of the Pratyekabuddhas' (*Pratyekabuddhayāna*) in relation to the *Śrāvakayāna* ('Way of the Hearers or Arhats') and the *Bodhisattvayāna* ('Way of the Bodhisattva'), as Chappell notes, "in the early texts there is a clear kinship between these figures and the Buddhist community." Chappell continues to explain the cultural context that supported this kind of inclusivism:

Gautama Buddha and his followers were just one group among many others who were part of a larger ascetic, *śramaṇa* movement that evolved in opposition to the ideas and practices of the established hereditary brahmin priesthood. Questioning the authority of the Vedas, rejecting animal sacrifices, and denying the ultimate sufficiency of the gods, these groups affirmed the spiritual capacities of individuals as not limited to caste birth, while emphasising the importance of personal ascetic practice and contemplative realisation.<sup>77</sup>

Indeed, on one occasion, the Buddha went so far as to openly accept 'multiple religious identity'. In the *Upāli Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha advises Upāli, a recognised lay member of the Jaina community, that if he should take refuge in the Buddha his allegiance to the Jains would not need to be severed. Commenting on this passage, Kiblinger has observed that this move indicates the Buddha's concern for the continued patronage of other religious communities, and thus presents an affirmation of their value. Furthermore, according to Kiblinger the passage demonstrates the Buddhist inclusivist assertion that some traditions may be suitable to, or helpful for, the needs, disposition, and spiritual stage of development of some practitioners, more so than Buddhism.<sup>78</sup> Jayatilleke has also recognised this kind of inclusive tendency within the early Buddhist texts, referring to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, which claims that "the Dhamma is to be preached to all beings though all beings may not profit by it, just as much as all

<sup>77</sup> Chappell, "Buddhist Interreligious Dialogue: To Build a Global Community." 7

<sup>78</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 35

sick people are to be treated although some may get well or succumb to their illnesses despite the medicines given.”<sup>79</sup>

This capacity for the affirmation of other religious paths and multiple religious belonging is dependent upon a specific understanding of religious identity. It is apparent that the terminology ‘multiple religious identity’ issues from the lexicon of modernity and finds no equivalent expression in the early Buddhist texts. This can most easily be explained by the fact that the phenomenon would have been a given norm in the religious life of ancient India. As Paul Williams has discerned:

When householders in ancient times met and were impressed by the Buddha and ‘took refuge’ in him, we need not assume that they thereby ceased entirely to make offerings to other teachers or gods... The only problem with all this would come if a Buddhist took refuge in a god, implying that the god had the key to final liberation. The gods concern only the worldly (Sanskrit: *laukika*). The Buddhas are beyond the world (*lokottara*), both in terms of their own status and also in terms of their final concerns in helping others. Thus whereas one would not expect to see an orthodox Christian making offerings to Hindu gods, prostrating to them, making requests of them, or going into trance and being possessed by them, there is no contradiction to Buddhism in Buddhists doing this. To be a Buddhist for Buddhists is not the same sort of phenomenon as being a Christian is for Christians. Allegiance in different religions does not have the same sort of exclusivity. This is not an example of ‘Buddhist syncretism’, or ‘popular Buddhism’, or even ‘Buddhist tolerance’.<sup>80</sup>

Evidently, religious identity, as understood in the early texts and contexts of Buddhism, was defined by the praxial actualisation of specific qualities of spiritual attainment, rather than by a label or specific allegiance. Chappell has recognised that such qualities “involve fully understanding attachments and going beyond all forms, both intellectual and ritual.” Evidently, these qualities are defined by the measures of the Buddhism system. Indeed, it is important to note that this approach still implies inclusivism rather than pluralism, as the others’ spiritual or soteriological goals that are affirmed by Buddhism are done so because they conform to Buddhist soteriological and spiritual goals. Nevertheless, according to the Buddha, the efficacy of practice, rather than the specificity of doctrines or the confines of commitments, determined one’s salvation, and also thereby the Buddha’s inclusion. Chappell continues: “What was important was not

<sup>79</sup> *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (1:120-21), cited in Jayatilleke, “The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions.” 144

membership in a group, nor belief in certain doctrines, but following a certain kind of practice that urged non-attachment to the kinds of distinctions that separated religious groups.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, while divergence of beliefs and practice was extensive among the heterodox communities of Śramaṇas, it is apparent that these groups were united in their shared emphasis upon personal ascetic practice and meditative realisation, and their collective position of opposition towards the hereditary establishment of the Brāhṃaṇas. Thus, in the *Sutta Nipāta*, the Buddha attests to the liberation of sages and priests beyond the refuge of the Buddhadharmā:

I do not say that all religious teachers and Brahmins are wrapped in the shroud of birth and ageing', said the Buddha. 'There are some who have let go of world-views, of teaching traditions of thoughts. They have let go of religious practices and rituals, they have left all the different forms behind and they have a total understanding of attachments. For them, there are no inner poison drives. These, truly, are the ocean-crossers.'<sup>82</sup>

The pragmatic, non-reified, and non-attached approach towards religious identity that is demonstrated in the early texts is also applied to religious doctrines. In the *Sutta Nipāta*, the Buddha advises, "To be attached to one view (i.e. *dr̥ṣṭi*) and to look down upon other views as inferior – this the wise men call a fetter."<sup>83</sup> Indeed, asserting the primacy of practice and the actualisation of qualities over the limitations of identity and the metaphysics of religious doctrines, the Buddha extended his prescription against attachment to include nonattachment to his own teachings. This is most aptly demonstrated by the analogy of the Raft.<sup>84</sup> Upon reaching a certain stage upon the spiritual path, the practitioner becomes known as a 'Stream Enterer' who then journeys across the waters of suffering to 'the other shore' of enlightenment upon the 'raft' of the Buddha's teachings.<sup>85</sup> Once the practitioner has reached the other shore, the raft is to be abandoned, as it is no longer necessary. In the words of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, "the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping...

<sup>80</sup> Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). 6 & 5

<sup>81</sup> Chappell, "Buddhist Interreligious Dialogue: To Build a Global Community." 7-8

<sup>82</sup> *Sutta-nipāta* 1082, cited in *Ibid.* 7

<sup>83</sup> *Sutta-nipāta* 798, cited in Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught.* 53

<sup>84</sup> The first occurrence of this renowned simile is found in the *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 134-5

<sup>85</sup> See R. M. L. Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening : A Study of the Bodhi-Pakkhiya Dhamma*, Brill's Indological Library, V. 7. (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1992). 116 & 206

You, bhikkhus, by understanding the Parable of the Raft, should get rid even of (right) mental objects, all the more of wrong ones.”<sup>86</sup> Commenting on this parable, Kiblinger has explained its importance for Buddhist inclusivism:

According to inclusivists, Gautama is saying that if another tradition can get you [across the river], or somehow assist you in your journey, then its value can be accepted... Religions, in this mode of argument, are to be evaluated according to their fruits and according to whether they serve a function sanctioned by Buddhism. Beyond a religion’s usefulness, no special loyalty or attachment to it is desirable, not even to Buddhism in relation to other faiths.<sup>87</sup>

The early Buddhist pragmatic and instrumental approach towards religious doctrines was further developed by the evolution of Mahāyāna Buddhism. A quintessential Mahāyāna text – the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*<sup>88</sup> – reiterates the symbolic meaning of the ‘raft’ in the pronouncement: “All the Buddha’s teachings are a finger pointing to the moon”. According to this teaching, the finger directs the practitioner towards the moon, but the two must not be identified. When the finger is mistaken for the moon, the practitioner no longer looks in the direction the finger is pointing; they no longer seek the moon and become attached to the finger, and any direct enlightening experience of the moon, or truth, is obfuscated. In other words, the teachings are to be understood as secondary in salvific importance to the efficacy of the practices and the manifestation of praxial goals. From this Mahāyāna perspective, Buddhism locates its doctrines within the realm of skilful means, *upāya*, rather than experience, truth, wisdom, or *prajñā*.<sup>89</sup> This approach has had direct implications for Buddhist inclusivism and pluralism.

In a comprehensive study of skilful means, Michael Pye observes that “The Mahayanists saw the whole Buddhist religion as a vehicle for ‘crossing over’... In short, Buddhism is skilful means.”<sup>90</sup> According to Pye, this understanding of the

<sup>86</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* cited in J. Hick, “Religion as “Skilful Means”: A Hint from Buddhism,” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 30, no. 3 (1991). 142

<sup>87</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 37

<sup>88</sup> Also known by its longer title – *Mahāvaiṣṭyapurna-Buddhāvataṣṭaka Sūtra* – “The Great and Vast Buddha Garland Sūtra”.

<sup>89</sup> See Gross, “This Buddhist’s View of Jesus.” 66. And Rita M. Gross, “Excuse Me, but What’s the Question?: Isn’t Religious Diversity Normal?,” in *The Myth of Christian Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005). 82-86

<sup>90</sup> Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept of Mahayana Buddhism* (London: Duckworth, 1978). 159

nature of doctrines enabled Buddhism to adapt itself to new cultural contexts throughout its transmission into Asia during the early centuries CE. Indeed, as Buddhism encountered new cultures and traditions, the provisional understanding of doctrines allowed them to use the symbols, languages, and worldviews of religious others as skilful means in order to teach and adapt the Buddhadharmā. Buddhism was able to absorb and include alien religious forms, whilst altering and adapting its own. As Pye confirms, “The concept of skilful means has to do with the status of religious language and symbols of all kinds.”<sup>91</sup> Indeed, throughout the first millennium CE, the doctrine of skilful means functioned as a powerful missionary agent of inclusivism and conversion, enabling the development of a plural world-view in which religious others were encompassed via various inclusive moves and thereby seen as co-participants in the salvific work of the Buddha.

Makransky has also analysed the role of skilful means in the emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, its transmission into Asia, and its consequent contributions to the development of Zen, Pure Land, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. In particular, Makransky investigates the skilful means of the Bodhisattva:

It is the Bodhisattva’s wisdom that discerns what form the message of liberating truth must take for others to catch on to it, to release their grasping. That skillfulness at imparting salvific truth and practice... hearkens back to Gautama Buddha’s skilful means for triggering liberating insight in his interlocutors.<sup>92</sup>

The Mahāyāna understanding of the Bodhisattva’s use of skilful means enabled this new movement to inclusively view non-Buddhist teachers and even secular leaders as ‘anonymous’ Bodhisattvas or Buddhists. The Bodhisattva exemplar was thereby established as a trans-religious agency of universal salvation. As Makransky has explained, this approach was dependent upon further doctrinal developments including the Mahāyāna understanding of *nirvāṇa*. The latter was re-envisaged by the Mahāyāna as “the empty, radiant nature of life, of this very mind, body, world, directly encountered” in the present moment of ordinary

<sup>91</sup> Michael Pye, “Skilful Means and the Interpretation of Christianity,” *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 10 (1990), 19

<sup>92</sup> Makransky, “Buddhist Perspectives on Truth in Other Religions: Past and Present.” 348

samsaric reality. The principal implication of this new conception of *nirvāṇa* was “that any aspect of the experienced world can function as skilful means, sacramentally expressing the nirvanic nature of ordinary things, to whoever is prepared to perceive it” – be it a blade of grass, a soup bowl, or a spiritually realised practitioner from a non-Buddhist tradition.<sup>93</sup> As Makransky relates, in some textual instances the exemplar of the Bodhisattva, armed with skilful means, conjoined with the reconceived *nirvāṇa* to produce occasions of “theological inclusivism”. Such occasions occur in the depiction of venerable teachers of non-Buddhist religions “as if they were Bodhisattvas, embodiments of nirvana, who use non-Buddhist means to prepare their followers for the Buddhist path to liberation.” Makransky cites the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra*, which claims that “[Bodhisattvas], by devoting themselves... to all the strange sects of the world, develop all beings who have attached themselves to dogmatic views.”<sup>94</sup> He also refers to the passage which sees Bodhisattvas manifesting as “chieftains, captains, priests, ministers, or even prime ministers” in their salvific and altruistic quest to help all sentient beings. According to Makransky, within this kind of inclusivism,

Buddhahood communicates through holy persons of any tradition who impart elements of the path to freedom as understood by Buddhists: virtue, generosity, compassion, and wisdom penetrating self-grasping patterns of thought and action.<sup>95</sup>

Kiblinger has also investigated Mahāyāna doctrinal and cosmological developments that have had direct implications for Buddhist inclusivism. As Kiblinger relates, such teachings as the *trikāya* (S. ‘three bodies’) doctrine, the doctrine of universal Buddha-nature, and *ekayāna* (S. ‘the One Way or Vehicle’) theory, have all been used in the service of inclusivism. The *trikāya* doctrine presents a tripartite configuration of Buddhahood and the cosmos. Within this configuration the wisdom-mind of the Buddhas which pervades all existence (S. *dharmakāya*) is communicated through visionary dimensions of being (S. *saṃbhogakāya*), through nature, and through persons (S. *nirmāṇakāya*).<sup>96</sup> Thus, the Buddha is believed to have ‘three bodies’, or ways of emanating and

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 349

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> See Chapter 13, John Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet, Suny Series in Buddhist Studies*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

communicating the Dharma. Providing a contemporary example, Kiblinger cites D. T. Suzuki, who has suggested that non-Buddhist religious teachers can be understood as *nirmāṇakāya* embodiments, manifesting in particular contexts in order to suit the needs and dispositions of particular cultures.<sup>97</sup> Evidently, this kind of inclusivism may be defined as ‘anonymous Buddhism’, in which the truth or virtue of non-Buddhist teachers is affirmed but subsumed to a Buddhist worldview.

The inclusive use of the *trikāya* doctrine has been reinforced by the elaboration of the doctrine of universal Buddha-nature. This doctrine arose in response to the question of whether all people can and will, eventually, achieve enlightenment. Answering in the affirmative, Mahāyāna Buddhism asserts that the true inherent nature of all sentient beings is Buddha-nature (S. *buddhatā*, *buddhadhātu*), and thus all people are potential Buddhas. While on the surface people may exhibit ignorance, greed, fear, or selfishness, beneath these defilements every being’s essential nature is the compassionate and wise nature of a Buddha. The classic Ch’an text, the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, compares inherent Buddha-nature to the moon covered by clouds – when the wind blows the clouds away, the moon is revealed. While this doctrine originally functioned ecumenically, that is, in relation to the various traditions of Buddhism, it came to be understood and utilised in an interreligious, inclusive, and even pluralistic fashion. Because all beings are understood as ‘Buddhas to be’, they can also be understood as ‘anonymous Buddhists’.<sup>98</sup>

As Kiblinger has recognised, the doctrine of universal salvific Buddha-nature has often been used in conjunction with the *ekayāna* or ‘One-Vehicle’ doctrine. As represented in such texts as the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanāda Sūtra*, *ekayāna* theory teaches that the three ways (S. *triyāna*) of the *Śrāvakayāna*, the *Pratyekabuddhayāna*, and the *Bodhisattvayāna*, rather than being equal paths to

<sup>97</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 53

<sup>98</sup> See also Sallie King’s comments on the pluralistic application of Buddha-nature in Sallie B. King, “A Pluralistic View of Religious Pluralism,” in *The Myth of Christian Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005). 90-92

salvation, are in fact provisional and are ultimately resolved into the single way of Mahāyāna. This teaching is most aptly represented in the well-known parable of the Burning House from the *Lotus Sūtra*, in which a father rescues his trapped children with promises of various kinds of ‘carts’ but then rewards them all with the one same splendid ‘cart’ once they have been lured to safety. According to this teaching, Buddhahood is the one and only truly efficacious soteriological goal and all beings will eventually attain it through the Mahāyāna vehicle. This appears to be a fulfilment type of inclusivism in which “non-Mahāyāna others are included but only by positing that they are inevitably aids for or stages advancing towards the Mahāyāna. Multiple ways are merged into a single path along which only the Mahāyāna vehicle can take you the whole way.”<sup>99</sup>

Once again it should be noted that this kind of one-vehicle inclusivism was initially ecumenical in practice, relating to the relationship between the Mahāyāna tradition and earlier schools of Buddhism. However, as Kiblinger argues, this mode of relating “set a pattern for Buddhist treatment of *non-Buddhist* others as well.”<sup>100</sup> The same can be said of the doctrine of skilful means. Initially, this doctrine allowed the Mahāyāna to comprehend apparent contradictions and divergences in the Buddhist teachings. For example, the early representation of *nirvāṇa* and the mundane world (P. & S. *saṃsāra*) as separate realms was explained by the Mahāyāna as the Buddha’s way of imparting truth to practitioners at a lower level of spiritual development, and gradually preparing them for the ‘higher’ truth of *śūnyatā* (S. ‘emptiness’) in which *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are united. This hierarchical ecumenical approach paved the way for later fulfilment inclusivism in relation to religious others.

David Chappell has observed this kind of fulfilment inclusivism, or what he defines as a “developmental model”, within the context of China. The introduction of Buddhism into China involved an encounter with Taoism and Confucianism. While the three religions allegedly co-habited harmoniously under the banner “the

<sup>99</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 46-7

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 44

three religions are one” (*san-chiao ho-i*), according to Chappell they also functioned within a hierarchy of practices. Chappell explains:

Other paths, such as Confucianism and Taoism, have some validity as preliminary stages of spiritual development... However, Confucianism and Taoism are only ‘provisional’ teachings, whereas Buddhism is both ‘provisional’ and ‘ultimate’. As people grow spiritually it is expected that they will move beyond the limited provisional practices based on morality and merit, and will advance to higher stages found only in Buddhism.<sup>101</sup>

In all the above instances of Buddhist inclusivism – the Buddha’s conversion and inclusion of religious others through his skilful means, the veneration of non-Buddhist teachers as Bodhisattvas, the understanding of Buddhahood as a pervasive universal power, blessing and inspiring all beings to its ultimate realisation, and the recognition of the Buddha’s salvific truth disclosing itself in immeasurably diverse ways and through diverse cultures and religions – it is apparent that Buddhism maintains a superior position atop the religious hierarchy. Indeed, this is the mark of inclusivism. Buddhist inclusivism appears to have had much historical precedence, and the resources it incorporates within this kind of approach have found continued contemporary usage as Buddhism continues its transmission into new cultures, particularly, as we are witnessing today, into Western cultures. However, in many contexts the contemporary confrontation with religious diversity has initiated the further application of many inclusive resources towards the paradigm of pluralism. While it is lacking in explicit historical precedence, pluralism, as we shall now see, is emerging as a Buddhist response to religious others.

### **Buddhist Pluralism**

The conjunction of the contemporary fact of religious diversity, and the globalised status of Buddhism, has created an opportunity, some would say an imperative, for the Buddhist tradition to articulate an essentially unprecedented position of religious pluralism. By way of clarification, let us briefly reiterate the meaning of pluralism as a theological position. The principle of pluralism proposes direct engagement with an equality of religions via the deconstruction of any claims to absolutism or superiority on the part of one’s own religious position. Or, in other

words, a pluralist does not consider their religion to be superior to all others as the only true faith or path to salvation, and engagement with other religions is done so upon this foundation of equivalence. Despite this concordant approach, pluralism still maintains the value of particular commitments in its assertion of the value of plurality itself, or the value of religious difference. While some pluralists contend that the parity of religions is determined by uniting the divergent traditions on a *common ground* or through a *common essence*, others assert that affirming the equal value of the religions in their *difference* is the only viable option. While some commentators deem pluralism a philosophical and logical impossibility, others propose that each religion contains the resources within its traditions, doctrines, and practices, to support the position of pluralism. Indeed, supporters of pluralism consider that humanity has “reached a point in its cultural and geopolitical development where it is possible, even necessary, to move beyond ‘better than thou’ assertions.”<sup>102</sup>

Pluralistic approaches do not find much historical precedence within the traditions of Buddhism. However, this is not surprising given the fact that pluralism is a specifically modern phenomenon, which has evolved in order to deal with modern contexts of religious diversity.<sup>103</sup> Within the small but comprehensive body of relevant literature, a number of Buddhist ‘theologians’ have argued that anything other than pluralism would constitute an inauthentic Buddhist response to contemporary contexts of religious diversity. This assertion is based upon the contemporary application and radical understanding of certain key doctrines, such as emptiness (P. *suññattā*; S. *śūnyatā*) and the theory of two truths (S. *satya-dvaya*). It is also based upon certain traditional doctrinal prescriptions and dictates, the implicit implications of which have been fully articulated and explicated in relation to specific modern contexts. These doctrinal elements include Buddhism’s inbuilt measures against absolutism, and the use of ethical criteria of judgement, rather than metaphysical, to determine religious value and

<sup>101</sup> Chappell, “Buddhist Responses to Religious Pluralism: What Are the Ethical Issues?,” 358

<sup>102</sup> Paul F. Knitter, “Introduction,” in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), vii

establish common ground. These Buddhist resources – the doctrines of emptiness and the two truths, non-absolutism, and using ethical criteria of evaluation – are but four examples from an expanse of different approaches used in the support of pluralism. However, because they are widely acknowledged within the literature they can be considered as comprehensive in representing Buddhist pluralism and we shall therefore examine them as such. Our investigation will address some criticisms that have been laid against these aspects of Buddhist pluralism; it will also reveal how these pluralistic moves have informed Buddhist modes of interreligious dialogue.

One of the earliest narrative representations of a Buddhist response to religious diversity is found in the parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant.<sup>104</sup> In this story, a group of blind men surrounds an elephant, each grasping at one part of the animal and attempting to define it. One decides it is a tree trunk, another a rope, and another still a snake. Because each man reaches a different conclusion about the nature of the elephant, and because they are each blind to the perceptions of the others, the men argue whilst attempting to assert their individual understandings as superior and ultimate. In contrast, surveying the scene through his enlightened vision, the Buddha is able to see the entirety of the elephant, the whole truth, and can therefore transcend the dispute.

Like many Buddhist resources for dealing with religious diversity, this parable can be used in the service of both inclusivism and pluralism; in both contexts each of the men represent religions other than Buddhism and the elephant represents ultimate reality. With regard to inclusivism, the implication is that while the men may have a grasp on a partial aspect of truth, their ‘blindness’ (which may represent blind or non-empirical belief or absolutism) limits their views, and their means can only ever be considered as provisional in relation to Buddhism. When the parable is interpreted in relation to pluralism, however, we get a somewhat

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<sup>103</sup> As Richard Hayes has acknowledged, “pluralism is a distinctly modern ideology that, like all ideologies, has evolved to help people deal with the problems of a particular age in history.” See Hayes, “Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism.” 18

different picture. Here the implication is that the enlightened vision of the Buddha can perceive the relativity and therefore equality of all religious positions as different perceptions of ultimate reality. Within this depiction, however, it could be argued that the Buddha's position is posited as one of superiority or neutrality – a 'God's eye view' from which he surveys the scene. According to Buddhist pluralists, however, the Buddha's position is de-absolutised, 'emptied' of ultimacy, and thereby embodies what has been called a 'positionless position'.

Many theorists have referred to the notion of a positionless position. Diana Eck has observed that "some Buddhists may insist that the 'positionless position' of a nondogmatic Buddhism is what clears the ground for pluralism."<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, in an examination of the implications of the doctrine of emptiness for dialogue, Judith Simmer-Brown has applied the traditional Madhyamika form of logic (*S. catuṣkoṭi*) to the various possible dialogical positions. Revealing the problematics involved in regarding the other's view as the same, totally other, both, or neither, she arrives at a conclusive "positionless position which has been given the label, *śūnyatā* [emptiness]."<sup>106</sup> Finally, Masao Abe's explorations into Buddhist-Christian dialogue have applied emptiness to religious pluralism and unearthed a "positionless position, in which both the diversity and the unity of the world religions are fully and dynamically realised."<sup>107</sup> Essentially, the positionless position is the outcome of utilising the doctrine of emptiness in the service of Buddhist pluralism. In order to understand this position, we should first outline the notion of emptiness itself.

The pivotal doctrine of emptiness (*P. suññatā*; *S. śūnyatā*) evolved out of the early doctrine of co-dependent origination (*P. paṭicca-samuppāda*; *S. pratītya-samutpāda*) within the philosophical schools of the Mahāyāna, particularly the

<sup>104</sup> This parable is found in the *Tittha Sutta* in the *Udāna* (68-69), however it is not uniquely Buddhist. The parable appears in Hindu, Jain, and Islamic works, so its original source is much debated.

<sup>105</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). 187

<sup>106</sup> Simmer-Brown, "Pluralism and Dialogue: A Contemplation on the Dialogue Relationship." 320

<sup>107</sup> Masao Abe, "There Is No Common Denominator for World Religions": The Positive Meaning of This Negative Statement," in *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Steven Heine (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995). 42

Madhyamika followed by the Yogācāra. Elucidated by the great Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna in the second-century CE, the philosophy of emptiness challenged the Abhidharma system of dharmas. According to Nāgārjuna, this essentialist philosophy seemed to assert that all things, *dharmas*, were possessed of an inherent nature, or self-essence (S. *svabhāva*), a contradiction of the Buddha's teaching of *anātman* (P. *anattā*, 'selflessness'). Nāgārjuna's 'correction' affirmed that all things are in fact 'empty' of *svabhāva* and exist within a causal network of interdependence. For Nāgārjuna, the notion of independent self-existence or enduring substance, applied even to the teachings of the Buddha, leads only to absurdity and contradiction. Nāgārjuna's famous dictum reads: "The *pratītya-samutpāda* we call *sūnyatā*; this apprehension, i.e. taking into account all things, is the understanding of the Middle Way."<sup>108</sup> In other words, the correct understanding of *pratītya-samutpāda* (P. *paṭicca-samuppāda*), the doctrine of the interrelatedness of all things, reveals that *everything* has its being by virtue of other things, and is therefore ultimately 'empty' of any inherent abiding self-nature or enduring substance. Thus, the doctrine of *sūnyatā* affirms that all things, including the five aggregates that constitute the self, are 'empty' of independent existence; that the true nature of reality is nondual; that all things are interconnected, interdependent, and arise simultaneously in mutual constant co-production and in constant change. According to tradition, Nāgārjuna received his name by virtue of being presented with the earlier texts of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* by the King of the Nāgas, a mythical race of serpents. Nāgārjuna's philosophy was directly informed by the proposals of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, the authors of which (whoever they may have been) were principally concerned with the doctrinal theme and metaphysical fact of *sūnyatā*. A quintessential text, the *Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra*, is famous not only for its paradox "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," but also for its strategic emptying of the foundational tenets of Buddhism – the Four Noble Truths. Indeed, the chief corollary of Nāgārjuna's philosophy is that not only are thought constructs of self, other, God, or world to be deconstructed, but also words themselves, the substance of doctrines, including *sūnyatā* itself. Even the notions of 'Buddhism' and 'the

<sup>108</sup> Nāgārjuna, *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikās* 24:18, Frederick Streng's translation in Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study of Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967). 213

Buddha' need to be relinquished as objects of attachment if one is to achieve enlightened experiential insight into the ultimate empty nature of true reality.

A number of contemporary Buddhist scholars have discerned the importance of the doctrine of emptiness in relation to religious diversity and have recognised various instances where it has formed the foundation of pluralistic positions. As Simmer-Brown has observed,

...exclusivism, and probably inclusivism as well, are contrary to a Buddhist understanding of things as they really are. The Buddhist view of an absolute cannot be the exclusive property of any teacher, community, or lineage, for a radical understanding of *śūnyatā* carries with it an appreciation of the variety of forms and practices which arise.<sup>109</sup>

While she is evidently speaking on ecumenical terms, Simmer-Brown's insights could be equally related to an interreligious context. From such a perspective, a radical understanding of *śūnyatā* implies an appreciation of the diversity of religions, and thus the deconstruction of any exclusive Buddhist claims to truth, and the inevitable adoption of pluralism. David Chappell has acknowledged this kind of employment of emptiness in the service of asserting a shared essence of religions:

It has been common in Mahāyāna, especially in the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñā-pāramitā*) tradition, to emphasise the emptiness of all conventional distinctions, and even to affirm the nonduality of things... Having removed our own false mental distinctions (*nirvikalpa*) that divide ourselves and other traditions, this nondual attitude affirms non-difference among world religions. This Buddhist idea of nonduality does not gloss over differences, but acknowledges them. Then it affirms that their true nature is the shared mark of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).<sup>110</sup>

Perhaps the most developed employment of emptiness towards comparative and interreligious concerns can be found in the work of Frederick Streng, particularly in his influential work *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (1967).<sup>111</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Simmer-Brown, "Pluralism and Dialogue: A Contemplation on the Dialogue Relationship." 313

<sup>110</sup> Chappell, "Buddhist Responses to Religious Pluralism: What Are the Ethical Issues?." 361

<sup>111</sup> While this work constitutes a translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, it should be noted that Streng is mentioned in the above context not as an exemplar of Nāgārjunian philology but for the import of the interreligious theological points he raises in his commentary. Among the most acclaimed current translations of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* are Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), David J. Kalupahana, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), and Kenneth K. Inada, *Nāgārjuna: A translation of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with an Introductory Essay* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1970). For comprehensive discussion see also Andrew P. Tuck,

Drawing upon the Madhyamika tradition, Streng takes emptiness beyond its traditional boundaries and applies it as a way of understanding the equivalence of religions. He states: "There is, according to Nāgārjuna, a universally valid means for avoiding all claims to ultimacy, and this is the awareness of their emptiness."<sup>112</sup> In confirmation, John Keenan has deemed the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness as "the most radical deconstructive tool of doctrinal thinking."<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Streng uses emptiness as a trans-religious agent for dismantling all assertions of propositional absoluteness. This approach is based upon Nāgārjuna's revelation of the conventional status of all religious doctrines, or "the recognition that religious statements are fundamentally a 'means' of apprehending truth." According to Streng, this observation "has implications not only for a workable definition of what is 'religious' but also for understanding different religious expressions."<sup>114</sup> John Keenan, who has investigated and developed Streng's use of emptiness as a paradigm for understanding world religions, can offer some explanation here:

The notion of emptiness does indeed have a universal scope, for it focuses strongly on criticising not just the objective content of religious discourses but also, with even more insistence, the manner in which all such discourse is engendered and carried forth. Emptiness entails a shift to a new mode of understanding, wherein language does not capture the inner essence of religious meaning, either through dialectical clarity or through any mystical or intuitive grasp. Rather, emptiness functions as a conventional dispeller of attachment to views taken as representative of reality. All language is conventional and none privileged as anything more than conventional.<sup>115</sup>

Streng justifies his argument on the basis of Nāgārjuna's insistence on the extension of his philosophy to include the doctrine of emptiness itself, and his claim that this 'emptying of emptiness' involves the experiential realisation of emptiness. Streng refers to this as the "religious meaning of emptiness", emphasising the essential import of emptiness as an agent of transformation, and thus salvation. Indeed, emptiness is not to be understood as descriptive of a transcendent perspective on the world or some kind of objective reality beyond

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*Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>112</sup> Streng, *Emptiness: A Study of Religious Meaning*. 169

<sup>113</sup> John P. Keenan, "Emptiness as a Paradigm for Understanding World Religions," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 16 (1996). 62

<sup>114</sup> Streng, *Emptiness: A Study of Religious Meaning*. 178

<sup>115</sup> Keenan, "Emptiness as a Paradigm for Understanding World Religions." 58

appearances; such conceptions of emptiness would only reinforce the potentiality for attachment and thereby the continuation of suffering. Rather, it is best understood as an experiential process of 'emptying' that transforms consciousness. Commenting on this aspect of Streng's argument, Randall Nadeau has explained, "Emptiness is transformative, and Streng uncovers the soteriological thrust of Nāgārjuna's works – 'the meaning of living in the world for one who knows that all things are empty.' A transformed consciousness recognises the dependent co-origination of things and ideas and experiences the freedom and dynamism of relational existence."<sup>116</sup> Streng analyses the relationship between the religions from the perspective of this transformed consciousness, proposing that the distinct traditions can be understood on the conventional level of particularity and diversity – in the context of their "specific historical practices and ideas." Yet, they can also be perceived as unified in emptiness, from the perspective of "the 'ultimate context' or 'depth awareness' which both transcends and participates in the concrete forms of religious life."<sup>117</sup>

The endeavour to use the experiential realisation of emptiness as a means of reconciling the diversity of religions without undermining their differences has also been attempted by Marco Pallis, a Buddhist scholar from the school of Traditionalism. Pallis' suggestion issues from a different perspective to Streng's, but is worth noting here as it may shed further light on this pluralistic stratagem. Based on an understanding of the esoteric-exoteric relationship that is a central concern of Traditionalism, Pallis proposes the construct of *Dharma* and the *dharmas* as a means of reconciling the separate, exoteric religions forms within a unitive, esoteric vision of reality. Pallis suggests that "the range of ideas [that *dharma*] stands for, must needs be found, at least implicitly, in the substance of every religion," and he calls for "a recognition of the dharmic principle as applying to interreligious relationships."<sup>118</sup> Justification for these arguments is

<sup>116</sup> Randall Nadeau, "Frederick Streng, Madhyamika, and the Comparative Study of Religions," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 16 (1996). 67

<sup>117</sup> Frederick J. Streng, "Understanding Christian and Buddhist Personal Transformation: Luther's Justification by Faith and the Indian Buddhist Perfection of Wisdom," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 2 (1982). 15

<sup>118</sup> Marco Pallis, "Dharma and the Dharmas as Principle of Inter-religious Communication" in Marco Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980). 102

once again found in the doctrine of *sūnyatā*, which is equated to the singular conception of Dharma; this serves as a metaphysical principle of formlessness that subordinates (though does not annihilate) the exoteric dogmatism of religious forms, which are equated with the plural conception of the Dharmas. Pallis explains:

Dharma, in its pristine immunity to any trace of restrictive distinction, is properly describable as void (*shunyata*), while comprising *rupa*, form, among the indefinitely varied aspects and consequent relations to which its own non-duality gives rise, though without the least addition to, or subtraction from, its own imperturbable reality.<sup>119</sup>

Upon this foundation, Pallis presents his argument:

Dharma and the dharmas, unitive suchness and the suchness of diversified existence: here is to be found the basis of an inter-religious exegesis which does not seek a remedy for historical conflicts by explaining away formal or doctrinal factors such as in reality translate differences of spiritual genius. Far from minimising the importance of these differences in the name of a facile and eventually spurious ecumenical friendliness, they will be cherished for the positive message they severally carry and as necessities that have arisen out of the differentiation of mankind itself.<sup>120</sup>

A final example of this kind of *sūnyatā*-based pluralism can be found in the philosophy of Masao Abe, an eminent Japanese philosopher from the Kyoto School, particularly as represented in his work *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue* (1995). Abe is concerned with the imperative to realise the “Oneness of ultimate reality” as a means of opening “a dimension in which positive tolerance and peaceful co-existence are possible among religions.” However, he is conscious that assertions of oneness usually entail “exclusiveness, intolerance, and religious imperialism, which [can cause] conflict and dissension not only within a given religion but also between the various religions.” Therefore, Abe articulates a specific kind of oneness – “nondual oneness or unity” – and proposes that it “may provide a real common basis for the contemporary pluralistic situation of world religions.”<sup>121</sup> According to Abe, nondualistic oneness or “dynamic *sūnyatā*” is a view from a “positionless position” – an ostensibly neutral viewpoint that is

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 103

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 109-10

<sup>121</sup> Masao Abe, “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Its Significance and Future Task,” in *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue: Part One of a Two-Volume Sequel to Zen and Western Thought*, ed. Steven Heine (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995). 10-11

“inherently non-dogmatic and free from one-sidedness or bias.” It is, he explains, “a position which is completely free from any particular position that is surreptitiously taken as the absolute or universal standpoint.” Furthermore, it is a view of emptiness that does not “admit one absolute, ultimate Reality because it realises...the non-substantiality of everything.” Finally, Abe claims that within the Buddhist tradition “there is no criterion... [Buddhism] tries to overcome any and all discrimination in order to attain non-discrimination, that is, complete equality.”<sup>122</sup> The justification for Abe’s assertions is once again found in the tenet that true *śūnyatā* can only be realised through the experiential ‘emptying of emptiness’, or what Abe calls “double negation”. In a discussion of the critical question of a common denominator that unites the world religions, Abe elucidates:

If we realise ‘no-common-denominator’ in all religious traditions thoroughly, by overcoming both the affirmative view of the presence of a common denominator and the negative view of its absence, then a complete emptiness is opened up. This is a positionless position, a standpoint that is free from any standpoint. This horizon of emptiness or positionless position is reached for us at the end of the double negation of the affirmative and the negative views of a common denominator for all religions; however, being free from all human presuppositions and conceptualisations, it manifests itself as the reality in terms of the standpoint at the basis of all religions. The clear and complete realisation of ‘no-common-denominator’ for all world religions will serve as the common basis for the pluralistic situation of world religions.<sup>123</sup>

A plethora of criticisms have been levelled at Abe’s apparent pluralism. In particular, such criticisms are concerned with the use of emptiness to establish an ostensibly neutral position; such a position, it is argued, is in fact tradition-specific. Indeed, such reproach could be made against all our examples of *śūnyatā*-based pluralism. Akin to the criticisms of identist pluralism, which we encountered in Chapter One, the critical issues are the assumption of imperialism and the debasement of difference. From the movement of Critical Buddhism, Jamie Hubbard has observed that Abe’s strategy “seeks to include all differences within a linguistically transcendent or epistemologically prior experience of ‘reality’.” According to Hubbard, such an approach “tends to downplay or even deny the reality of actual historical differences” by claiming that “such

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<sup>122</sup> Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue: Part One of a Two-Volume Sequel to Zen and Western Thought*. viii, 13, 23-4, and 100-1

<sup>123</sup> Abe, “‘There Is No Common Denominator for World Religions’: The Positive Meaning of This Negative Statement.” 47

conceptualisations and discriminations are precisely the source of suffering.”<sup>124</sup> Focusing more specifically on the use of emptiness to create a positionless position, Kristin Kiblinger has argued that “Buddhists often see emptiness, or *śūnyatā*, as an antidote to all positions (rather than itself another position), so that Buddhism becomes not just one religion among others but stands above all, transcending religion with a qualitative leap. Buddhists claim that their religion represents a non-view or special, exceptional view that, by its very nature, trumps all particular ones.”<sup>125</sup> On these grounds, and arguing from her position of ‘alternative-ends-recognising inclusivism’, Kiblinger claims that Abe

...is guilty of a problematic use of Emptiness that leads him to hope for one universal end... he develops his own Buddhist end as if it floats above all systems as a criterion valid for all. Although the notion of interdependence that is at the heart of Buddhism is a rich potential resource for valuing diversity, instead Abe uses Emptiness to suffocate otherness.<sup>126</sup>

Another critique of Abe has issued from Thomas Dean, who suggests that within Abe’s work, “there would seem to be a logical inconsistency between maintaining that one is not engaged in judging which system is superior while noting that one’s judgements are being made from the standpoint of one’s own tradition.”<sup>127</sup> Abe has articulated a direct response to Dean, which may also refer to the other critiques. Here, Abe insists that his philosophical propositions are intended to form a foundation for dialogue, and this is how they should be understood:

The basic standpoint of my comparative work is but *śūnyatā*... Being itself empty and nonsubstantial, *śūnyatā* lets every other position stand and work just as it is. Naturally, Zen Buddhism does not exclude other faiths as false but recognises the relative truths they contain. This recognition, however, is a starting point, not the end, for Buddhist life. Properly speaking, Zen Buddhism starts to work critically and creatively through this basic recognition of the relative truths contained in other positions, hoping for productive dialogue and cooperation with other faiths.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Jamie Hubbard, “Topophobia,” in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism*, ed. Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997). 81-112

<sup>125</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 52

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* 111

<sup>127</sup> Thomas Dean, cited in Donald W. Mitchell, ed., *Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1998). 397

<sup>128</sup> Abe in *Ibid.* 398. Because my area of focus here has been the specific use of emptiness as a pluralistic resource, I have not entered into discussion of Abe’s well-known and much debated proposal of the congruence between *śūnyatā* and kenosis, or divine emptying. For related studies see: Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue: Part One of a Two-Volume Sequel to Zen and Western Thought*, Cobb, “Buddhist Emptiness and the Christian God.” Coreless and Knitter, eds., *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity: Essays and Explorations*. And Cobb and Ives, eds., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*.

Indeed, the doctrine of emptiness has some significant implications for the practice of interreligious dialogue, which have been recognised by a number of commentators. Hans Waldenfels has investigated the question of whether the non-linguistic experience of *śūnyatā* can be shared across religious traditions through the linguistic medium of dialogue. Although conscious of the perils of addressing *śūnyatā* in such a universal way, and aware of the possibility that an experience of *śūnyatā* may only be possible within a Buddhist context, Waldenfels sees connections between the experience of *śūnyatā* and 'sharing' in general. He concludes by proposing that *śūnyatā* may be realised through the act of sharing itself:

'Sharing' as such is an experience which is not restricted to an exchange of ideas, reasons, and arguments... 'Sharing,' therefore, cannot be reduced to pure knowledge... Within the context of Buddhist thought, 'sharing' demands participation in *prajñā* 'wisdom,' and *karuṇā* 'sympathy and selfless love.' 'Sharing' in this sense calls for an exchange of arguments and ways of understanding, on the one hand, and for the practice of selfless love, on the other... In a way, we might even say that any true kind of 'sharing is itself a kind of self-emptying. 'Sharing' in general and the experience of *śūnyatā* are in this sense more thoroughly connected than we might have imagined.<sup>129</sup>

In a similar vein, Simmer-Brown concludes her discussion of pluralism and dialogue by acknowledging the role of realising emptiness in breaking down barriers between self and other. She explains:

Authentic exchanges dawn when the presuppositions concerning the relationship begin to break down... In Buddhist language, pluralism is an expression of discovery of *śūnyatā*, the recognition that there is no way to grasp conceptually what the relationship is with the dialogue partner. Out of this positionless position, tremendous warmth and interest arises naturally. In environments such as these, attempts to appropriate, categorise, or subjugate the partner have been given up and genuine interest in communication has dawned. When we have this kind of interest, we appreciate that the truth of the other person is his or her own, and we might learn from the partner's truth.<sup>130</sup>

A second doctrinal resource that has been used to substantiate Buddhist pluralism is the doctrine of two truths (*S. satya-dvaya*). This theory is extant in the Abhidharma tradition but also finds clear articulation in the Madhyamika tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is also related to the doctrine of emptiness, but has

<sup>129</sup> H. Waldenfels, "Can Sunyata Be Shared? Religious Experience in Dialogue," in *On Sharing Religious Experience: Possibilities of Interfaith Mutuality*, ed. Jerald D. Gort, et al. (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1992). 207

been used in a somewhat different way, and not so extensively, within the domain of religious diversity. The doctrine divides truth or reality into two levels, which are known as relative or conventional truth (*S. saṃvṛtī-satya*) and absolute or ultimate truth (*S. paramārtha-satya*). Originally, this doctrine had epistemological and ontological relevance within the Madhyamika system. However, when used in the contemporary context of Buddhist pluralism, *satya-dvaya* has clear theological relevance. When applied to religious diversity, the doctrine suggests that differences between religions can be understood on the linguistic, conceptual, and discursive level of form – the level of conventional or relative truth. On the non-linguistic, non-conceptual level of the formless—the level of absolute or ultimate truth – distinct entities are realised as substantially empty and so differences between the religions are transcended.

Among Buddhist pluralists, a twentieth-century Theravāda monk from Thailand, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993), has incorporated the distinction between these two perceptions of reality within his approach to religious diversity. As a monk, an ascetic, a philosopher, a social activist, and an interreligious dialogist, Buddhadāsa has been extremely influential in Thailand, though also controversial. During the 1950s he began to call for mutual understanding and cooperation among religions and he became an important voice within the movement of Interreligious Exchange in Siam. Essentially, Buddhadāsa saw all religions as united by their endeavour to eliminate selfishness, and their consequent common enemy – materialism. Thus he considered that religions should work together for the welfare of all humanity. His 'Three Resolutions' (*S. panidhana*) demonstrate this theme:

1. To help everyone realise the heart of their own religion;
2. To help bring about mutual good understanding among religions;
3. To work together to drag the world out from under the power of materialism.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Simmer-Brown, "Pluralism and Dialogue: A Contemplation on the Dialogue Relationship." 327

<sup>131</sup> *The Three Resolutions of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu*, cited in Santikaro Bhikkhu, "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness," in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996). 184

A further element to Buddhādāsa's approach to religions is encompassed within his delineation of the three levels of meaning within religious discourse. On an outer level, religions appear dissimilar in their representations. This level corresponds to the level of conventional or relative truth, *saṃvṛti-satya*. On an intermediary inner level, religions are united in their common humanistic goal to eliminate selfishness and to foster an inner spirit of freedom, love, and humility. According to David Chappell, on this level Buddhādāsa affirms the "shared essence" of religions.<sup>132</sup> On the inmost level, historical religions are perceived as empty of substantial independent existence, as temporal linguistic constructs that attempt to represent the ineffable, unconditioned emptiness of true reality. This level corresponds to the dimension of absolute or ultimate truth, *paramārtha-satya*. At this level, Buddhādāsa proposes that even the concept of 'religion' disappears.

Buddhādāsa uses two different analogies to represent his analysis – an analogy of water and an analogy of language. The analogy of water initially depicts the various kinds of water, which may come from different sources and contain different minerals or pollutants – rainwater, ditch water, or the ocean, for example. This represents the relative level of conventional truth where things exist in their distinct forms and religions are perceived as different historically and culturally conditioned entities. On the inner level, however, where all minerals and pollutants are removed, the various 'waters' are realised as simply pure water. Here the religions are perceived as having the same substance or essence and are accordingly unified. Finally, at the innermost level, water is deeply experienced and realised to be made up of hydrogen and oxygen – thus, the very concept of 'water' disappears. As Buddhādāsa explains:

In the same way, one who has attained to the ultimate truth sees that there is no such thing as religion! There is only reality... Call it what you like – dharma or truth – but you cannot particularise that dharma or truth as Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam... The label 'Buddhism' was attached only after the fact, as it was with Christianity, Islam and every other religion. None of the great religious teachers ever gave a name

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<sup>132</sup> Chappell, "Buddhist Responses to Religious Pluralism: What Are the Ethical Issues?." 363-4

to their teachings; they just went on teaching throughout their lives about how we should live.<sup>133</sup>

Buddhadāsa's analogy of language presents two kinds of language. The first is "conventional language" and it corresponds to the level of relative truth – it affirms difference and functions in the world of discrete entities. The second kind of language corresponds to Buddhadāsa's middle level, where water is realised in its purity and the different religions share the same essence. Buddhadāsa calls this the "language of Dhamma," and defines it as "a special kind of religious language embodying the 'inner world', the culture of mind, of the heart." When the different religions are understood through the 'language of Dhamma' they are de-absolutised, and agreement and correspondence can be realised "by keeping in mind the truth hidden in between the letters or behind the sound of speech." This truth is of course the truth of emptiness, which is perceived on the innermost level, where words dissolve and the reality beyond religious constructs is directly apprehended. Buddhadāsa applied this theory of language and doctrinal constructs to a comparative analysis of Buddhism and Christianity:

In the language of Dhamma, God and the 'Law of Karma' are one and the same thing. Such being the case both religions can well go together as far as the essential is concerned... [W]hich term is used depends upon how we were taught to label things or how we were brought up.<sup>134</sup>

Kristin Kiblinger has critiqued Buddhadāsa's approach not as pluralist but as inclusivist; she claims that he uses the analogy of language "as a convenient way...to subordinate other religions to his form of Buddhism." According to Kiblinger, Buddhadāsa links his application of the two truths with a "common core theory of religions" and assumes an "experientialist theory of religious teachings," which all together impose a Buddhist soteriological structure on other religions and effectively undermine their uniqueness and distinction.<sup>135</sup> In contrast, John Makransky has suggested that "Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's way of anchoring his theological pluralism within emptiness makes an interesting contrast

<sup>133</sup> Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, "No Religion," in *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, ed. Donald Swearer (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989). 146-7

<sup>134</sup> Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism: Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture* (Bangkok: Karn Pim Pranakom Partnership, 1967). 32, 66

<sup>135</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 50-1

to those Western theological pluralists who understand diverse religions to refer ultimately to one God.”<sup>136</sup>

The principle of justification behind most instances of Buddhist pluralism based on *śūnyatā* or *satya-dvaya* refers to the traditions inbuilt self-corrective methodology, which functions as a kind of ‘ejector seat’ that brings any flyaway claims to absolutism or ultimacy back down to earth. On level ground, Buddhism de-absolutises itself and locates itself within the realm of relativity, within the causal nexus of interdependence, where it exists alongside other religious traditions as simply one more linguistic system that needs to be relinquished for salvation to occur. Among contemporary scholars concerned with this aspect of Buddhism and its relation to religious diversity, a small handful, including Rita Gross and Sallie King, has specifically examined the Buddhist perception of religions as relative language systems. They have also acknowledged two principal consequences of this approach: one constitutes a mode of interreligious judgement based on ethical and praxial criteria, and the other presents a particular form of humanistic interreligious dialogue centred on social engagement and the pursuit of global community and peace. We will here examine the theories of pluralism presented by Rita Gross and Sallie King. We will also give some mention to the specific approach of His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama XIV, who, alongside the venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, exemplifies the approaches of contemporary Buddhist pluralism and dialogue. Finally, we shall refer to David Chappell’s comments on the emergent mode of Buddhist interreligious dialogue.

The contemporary Buddhist scholar Rita Gross has presented a clear and insightful analysis of the position of Buddhist pluralism, focusing specifically on the problem of absolutism and the possibility of employing ethical criteria for the evaluation of religions. Rather than discerning a predicament regarding religious diversity, Gross begins from a perspective of acceptance. According to Gross, religious diversity is a normal fact of human existence; she advocates celebration of such diversity, and mutual learning between religions, as opposed to the endless

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<sup>136</sup> Makransky, “Buddhist Perspectives on Truth in Other Religions: Past and Present.” 356

search for theological validations.<sup>137</sup> Gross's primary concern is why religious diversity poses such a problem for some religions. The answer to this question, according to Gross, is represented by the connections between monotheism, imperialism, and absolutism, which together have generated exclusivism and, as she puts it, "suffering, not salvation."<sup>138</sup>

In response to the fact (not the problem) of religious diversity, Gross presents two main resources: the view of religions as method, rather than truth, and the use of ethical, rather than metaphysical, criteria of judgement. Discussing the nature of religions, Gross relates:

Religions are language systems, and no language is universal and absolute. End of problem. In one fell swoop, as we concede the relativity of all our language games, we also recognise that more than one language could be 'valid,' whatever that might mean. There is no reason to assume that all people speak my language and it would be illogical to claim that people who don't speak my language are deficient. The worth and utility of my language is in no way diminished because it is not the only language in the world. Language is a tool through which we communicate, and any language could be a useful tool, so long as we don't endow it with universal relevance, more freight than it can bear.<sup>139</sup>

When religions are understood as linguistic expressions that attempt to represent an ineffable absolute, each religion can further be perceived as culturally specific and contextualised, and therefore relativised rather than universal. Continuing with her analogy of language, Gross explains that "Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, and English are not universal languages, and only extreme hubris could claim the Formless Absolute speaks my language, not yours. Thus, even if religions owe their genesis to some transcendent, nonhistorical source, they can be codified and captured only in a relative manner, in English or in Arabic, for example, and in the specific cultural institutions and limitations associated with those languages."<sup>140</sup> In other words, religious doctrines should be valued for their "verbal utility" rather than for their "verbal truth", and from this de-absolutised but not de-valued perspective, foreign symbol systems that may be incompatible with one's own can still be appreciated rather than deemed 'incorrect'. Gross uses a different analogy

<sup>137</sup> Gross, "Excuse Me, but What's the Question?: Isn't Religious Diversity Normal?" 76

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. 80

<sup>139</sup> Rita M Gross, "Religious Identity and Openness in a Pluralistic World," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 25 (2005). 15

of aesthetic preference to further explain her theory; from this perspective, “a religious myth or symbol would be regarded as a poem rather than a historical or scientific statement.” She explains:

Generally, people are much more flexible and nonexclusive about aesthetic judgements than about historical or scientific claims. No one would want to abolish all poetry in the world except for one’s favourite poem, nor even expect everyone to agree that this is the most wonderful poem ever written. Why should it be different with religious doctrines, which are ultimately mythopoetic, not discursive, in their mode of discourse?<sup>141</sup>

With regard to the nature of the absolute, an issue that has plagued many Christian pluralists, Gross is unconcerned. She states:

There may or may not be a formless absolute that grounds all finite existence. All religions assert that there is, whether as a being or an experience. But beyond that assertion nothing can be determined because all such assertions must be expressed in language or some other limited expression – an expression in form. There is no other option. Much as we might long to transcend expression in form and leap into mind-to-mind transmission, in a public medium that is not possible... And so we are stuck with our myriad expressions of a formless, transcendent absolute and cannot even determine for sure if we are talking about the same thing when we try to express the inexpressible.<sup>142</sup>

Thus, religious doctrines remain fingers pointing to the moon, and while there are many fingers, which may point to a moon in the sky, a moon reflected in water, or a picture of the moon, as long as they don’t try to grab the moon, there is no danger of any finger thinking its better than any other.<sup>143</sup> In other words, as long as the limitations of language, as the medium of doctrines, are recognised, and thus the relativity of religions is affirmed, there can be no danger of absolutism.

Just as Gross concedes to the limits of language, she also asserts the necessity of establishing the limits of pluralism. Indeed, as Richard Hayes has acknowledged, “the perennial dilemma for anyone endorsing pluralism is whether one must be open even to those who are hostile to openness.”<sup>144</sup> While the position of pluralism, and Buddhism also, would seem to suggest that pluralism should be

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 16

<sup>141</sup> Gross, “This Buddhist’s View of Jesus.” 67

<sup>142</sup> Gross, “Religious Identity and Openness in a Pluralistic World.” 15

<sup>143</sup> Gross, “Excuse Me, but What’s the Question?: Isn’t Religious Diversity Normal?” 84-5

complete in its acceptance of diversity, Gross contends that "Pluralists are relativists in the sense that we claim that all religious symbol systems are relatively, rather than absolutely, true. But we are not relativists in the sense that we make no judgements at all about religious beliefs and symbols."<sup>145</sup> Gross answers this dilemma in reference to morality and the basic Buddhist concern with suffering and transformation. This constitutes judging religions by their ethical guidelines and the fruits of their practice, rather than the validity of their claims to truth. Aware of the potential accusation that could be levelled against her approach – that she is "merely substituting one absolute – pluralism – for another," Gross explains that she is suggesting an ethical absolute and a methodological absolute, not a doctrinal absolute.<sup>146</sup> This emphasis on the morality and utility of a religious doctrine, Gross argues, is critical and essential for the positive interaction of world religions today. She explains:

If people are kind and compassionate to one another, to strangers, to animals, and to the environment, why should I worry about whether or not they believe in Jesus Christ as their only saviour, regard the Qur'an as the deity's final revelation to humanity, or meditate correctly on emptiness?... Let us put aside, once and for all, the question of truth in our discussion of the basis for a pluralistic theology of religions. Let us centre on questions of ethics not metaphysics; let us focus on the impact our theologies have on our lives rather than searching for a generic theology we can all live with or some wriggle room in our own doctrines that allow for the legitimacy of other religions. It is more important that we learn how to live together than that we all think alike religiously. And since we are never all going to think alike religiously, we must not pin peace and security on theological agreement. Theological agreement is irrelevant to building a better, more peaceful world.<sup>147</sup>

The Buddhist scholar Sallie King's approach is very much in accord with Gross's position. King has approached the position of Buddhist pluralism from the perspective of her openly confessed dual religious identity as a Quaker and a Buddhist. King understands her dual religious identity in relation to the different but equally effective measures in both Quakerism and Buddhism that guard against absolutism. Both religions comprehend the separation of their representations from the absolute, and both are equally mindful of their own

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<sup>144</sup> Richard Hayes, "Pluralistic Dharmacentricity" (paper presented at the Interfaith Perspectives on Justice and Universality: Textual Precepts Versus Practices, Montreal, Quebec, September 20 2004). 1

<sup>145</sup> Gross, "Religious Identity and Openness in a Pluralistic World." 18

<sup>146</sup> Gross, "This Buddhist's View of Jesus." 68

<sup>147</sup> Gross, "Excuse Me, but What's the Question?: Isn't Religious Diversity Normal?." 82

relativity and non-ultimacy. King affirms the differences between Quakerism and Buddhism as methods, forms, or vehicles to truth, but also explains that “neither is bound to claim for itself ‘possession of ultimate Truth, much less exclusive possession of ultimate Truth.’”<sup>148</sup> Truth, rather, as Quakerism and Buddhism both profess, is “experiential, not doctrinal or dogmatic, much less creedal.”<sup>149</sup> In other words, truth is “epistemically transcendent” – it is beyond conceptual knowledge, language, and culture, and real spiritual knowledge cannot be mediated through beliefs, tradition, or authority, but through one’s religious experiences. As King relates, these elements of both Quakerism and Buddhism underscore her dual religious identity and have direct implications for pluralism:

With respect to religious pluralism, if religious truth is experiential, rather than doctrinal, then there will be no impulse to identify the particular verbal teaching of a particular religion as truth itself, or believe in it as necessary for salvation. If religious truth is experiential, and especially if that religious experience is universally available, then it is not the possession of any religion and not under any religion’s control. It is outside of all that, something that is available to human beings simply by virtue of our being human.<sup>150</sup>

Despite clear areas of congruence between Quakerism and Buddhism, King maintains and asserts the value of their difference:

I am a Quaker and a Buddhist, but I do not want to say that these religions ‘say the same thing’. They do not say the same thing; their forms – their languages, ceremonies, and so forth – are quite different. They are different life-worlds, internally quite consistent but, as forms, far apart.<sup>151</sup>

Nevertheless, these two systems, according to King, do not contradict each other, and have much to learn from one another. This is due to their congruent understandings of religious experience and their equal emphasis on judging a religion by its fruits, which King defines as: unconditional love, selflessness, nonviolence, gentleness, kindness, and an avoidance of rigid dogmatism.<sup>152</sup>

The Dalai Lama takes a similar approach. Because we have already had occasion to discuss the Dalai Lama’s approach to religious diversity, our comments here

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<sup>148</sup> King, “A Pluralistic View of Religious Pluralism,” 90

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* 93

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* 95

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* 99

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* 100

will be brief in their intention to confirm the position of Buddhist pluralism from the perspective of an active dialogist and monastic. The Dalai Lama is renowned for his tolerant, pragmatic, and humanistic approach to other religions, and has been acknowledged for his concordant view of the diversity *and* unity of religions. As Jane Compson has recognised, the Dalai Lama's "acceptance of other religions is enabled precisely by his adherence to the teachings of dGe Lugs Buddhism as ultimate."<sup>153</sup> Nevertheless, as we have seen, the Buddhist capacity to de-absolutise itself reconciles this apparent paradox and validates the Dalai Lama's pluralism. Indeed, as E. K. Dargyay has recognised, based on their Madhyamika philosophy, "the Tibetans have something to contribute to the debate about the validity of truth-claims... As a philosophical view which rejects any system of thought, because the systemisation of thought restricts the universality of reality, Madhyamika [can] be helpful in reconciling conflicting truth-claims without reducing them to a counterfeit of one's own position."<sup>154</sup>

Based upon the Madhyamika system, the Dalai Lama has recognised the inherent relativity, and therefore non-ultimacy, of the notion of truth:

We can have a conception of truth that is multidimensional. This is the case especially from the Madhyamika philosophical standpoint, in which even the very notion of truth has a relative dimension. It is only in relation to falsity, it is only in relation to some other perception that anything can be said to be true. But to posit a concept of truth that is atemporal and eternal, something that has no frame of reference, would be quite problematic.<sup>155</sup>

Because of his comprehension of the multidimensional, relative notion of truth, the Dalai Lama is able to affirm the diversity of religions and evaluate them according to their contexts and utility. In this sense, he relates the religions to medicines: "Different medicines are prescribed for different diseases, and a medicine which is appropriate in one situation may be inappropriate in another.

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<sup>153</sup> Jane Compson, "The Dalai Lama and the World Religions: A False Friend?," *Religious Studies* 32, no. 2 (1996). 279

<sup>154</sup> E. K. Dargyay, "The Response of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Community in the Indian Exile," in *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. Harold G. Coward (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1987). 326

<sup>155</sup> Dalai Lama XIV (Tenzin Gyatso), *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (London: Rider, 1996). 81

Thus, I cannot say of Buddhism very simply, 'This medicine is best'.<sup>156</sup> In affirming difference, the Dalai Lama acknowledges that some metaphysical and doctrinal divergences cannot be reconciled. Indeed, in relation to Buddhism and Christianity he warns that an uncritical combination of the traditions would be like putting a yak's head on a sheep's body!<sup>157</sup> Nevertheless, in the Dalai Lama's strategy, practice and morality are prioritised over philosophy:

Philosophical teachings are not the end, not the aim, not what you serve. The aim is to help and benefit others, and philosophical teachings to support those ideas are valuable. If we go into the differences in philosophy and argue with and criticise each other, it is useless. There will be endless argument; the result will mainly be that we irritate each other – accomplishing nothing. Better to look at the purpose of the philosophies and to see what is shared – an emphasis on love, compassion, and respect for a higher force.<sup>158</sup>

Indeed, the Dalai Lama asserts that the practice of morality is of prime importance, and that "on this level there is hardly any difference between Buddhism, Christianity, or any other religion."<sup>159</sup> Therefore, the Dalai Lama does not advocate conversion but encourages practitioners to attempt to implement the teachings of their respective traditions, which would be of benefit to all. As he explains:

I am not interested in converting other people to Buddhism but in how we Buddhists can contribute to human society, according to our own ideas... The motivation of all religious practice is similar – love, sincerity, honesty – each type of system seeking in its own unique ways to improve human beings. If we put too much emphasis on our own philosophy, religion, or theory, are too attached to it, and try to impose it on other people, it makes trouble.<sup>160</sup>

Essentially, the Dalai Lama contends that religions share a common goal, and he suggests that this should form the foundation of interreligious dialogue. He proposes, "The teachings of tolerance, love, and compassion are the same [in all religions]. A basic goal is the benefit of humankind... Most important is that we respect each other and learn from each other those things that will enrich our own

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<sup>156</sup> "Religious Harmony" in Dalai Lama XIV (Tenzin Gyatso), *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*, trans. Jeffrey Hopkins (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1984). 49

<sup>157</sup> Dalai Lama XIV (Tenzin Gyatso), *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*. 81, 103

<sup>158</sup> Dalai Lama XIV (HH Tenzin Gyatso), "'Religious Harmony' and Extracts from the Bodhgaya Interviews," in *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990). 164

<sup>159</sup> Dalai Lama XIV (Tenzin Gyatso), *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*. 13

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* 49

practice.”<sup>161</sup> Evidently, the Dalai Lama views religious diversity and interreligious dialogue from the perspective of global harmony and the need for cooperation and peace, rather than violence and conflict. While this approach is firmly grounded in the ancient heritage of the Buddhadharma, it can also be attributed to the tragic context of the Chinese occupation of Tibet. In the endeavour to overcome exclusive barriers and ignorance, which can create such extreme destruction and suffering, the Dalai Lama has championed the critical value of dialogue as the essential medium for interreligious exchange and interspiritual understanding. He has made the observation that it is good

...to meet genuine practitioners of different religions. Here you cannot really say ‘no’ to the value of other religious traditions. According to my own religious experience and through personal contacts, my appreciation and knowledge about the deeper value of Christianity grew. These kinds of meetings can give a really powerful understanding about the value of other religious traditions.<sup>162</sup>

In one of the few specific analyses of Buddhist interreligious dialogue, David Chappell confirms the Dalai Lama’s approach in an exploration of contemporary forms of Buddhist exchange. Chappell recognises that due to “various social factors, including the state control of Buddhism, colonialization (*sic*), and war, as well as its own religious cultivation of emptiness and meditation,” Buddhist interreligious dialogue has evolved differently from Western and Christian models. In reference to Eric Sharpe’s identification of four main types of dialogue – discursive, human, secular, and interior/spiritual dialogues<sup>163</sup> – Chappell defines Christian interreligious dialogue as predominately *discursive*: its focus is largely theological, concentrating upon the conflict and concord of doctrines and the central issue of salvation. While an attitude of empathy and openness to transformation are ideal to Christian interreligious dialogue, Chappell argues that the communion of shared spiritual practice and the notion of interfaith humanistic union and action are secondary to the intellectual exploration of philosophical and doctrinal interface. Turning to Buddhism, however, Chappell discerns that the dominant form and rationale of contemporary Buddhist interreligious dialogue

<sup>161</sup> Dalai Lama XIV (HH Tenzin Gyatso), “‘Religious Harmony’ and Extracts from *the Bodhgaya Interviews*.” 166

<sup>162</sup> Dalai Lama XIV (HH Tenzin Gyatso), “Dialogue on Religion and Peace,” in *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace*, ed. David W. Chappell (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999). 191

cannot be defined by any of Sharpe's categories. In contrast, Chappell identifies an emphasis on "global mission":

When there is serious interreligious dialogue by modern Buddhists, it is often based not on intellectual curiosity but on moral values in an effort to deepen the spiritual life of society, to remove discrimination and exploitation, and to nurture a sense of global community in a divided world.<sup>164</sup>

According to Chappell, the principal motivation behind much contemporary Buddhist dialogue is "a moral commitment to build a global community of peace through interreligious collaboration, even if that means temporarily suspending or subordinating the distinctive features of their own religious traditions."<sup>165</sup> In other words, peace, global unity, and interreligious harmony are more important than religious identity. This unique dialogical emphasis stands in sharp contrast to "the more intellectual view of dialogue that has evolved within the privileged elite of Western Christians,"<sup>166</sup> a difference which Chappell attributes to the two tradition's relative global and political power relations. As Chappell explains, due to the contexts of political suppression, colonialism, and prevalent warfare in the majority of Asian Buddhist countries, the theological dimensions of discursive dialogue, such as the exchange of knowledge, objective discussion, and doctrinal debate, are considered less important to Buddhist dialogists than the pressing need for the world's religions to realise a shared humanism and cultivate spiritual and communal values so that everyone, regardless of religious affiliation or belief, may be 'saved' from war and conflict, economic exploitation, and social injustice.<sup>167</sup>

In conclusion, it can be acknowledged that although the body of literature that deals with Buddhist responses to religious diversity is small in comparison to its Christian counterpart, it is comprehensive and informative. Indeed, we have been profitable in our attempt to construct a 'Buddhist theology of religions', and to thereby review this body of literature, demonstrating the diversity of responses to religious diversity that have emerged, within historical and contemporary

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<sup>163</sup> See Sharpe, "The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue." 77-95

<sup>164</sup> Chappell, "Buddhist Interreligious Dialogue: To Build a Global Community." 4

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.* 22

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.* 24

contexts, from the Buddhist tradition. In particular, our investigation of resources that have been used in the service of a Buddhist position of pluralism is of significance. It is apparent that the Buddhist response contains some valuable points for contribution to the contemporary debate that continues to drive circles of Christian theology. Not least is its emphasis on the imperative for de-absolutism and the recognition of the relativity of religions. Nor its proposal of an ethical foundation based on the utility of doctrines, as opposed to a metaphysical foundation based on doctrinal truth-claims, for the value judgements of other religions. Furthermore, Buddhism's capacity to affirm both diversity and unity, 'form and emptiness', could offer some valuable suggestions for the debate that continues to wage between identist and differential pluralists. Our investigation of Buddhist pluralism has also been significant as in Part II we shall be relating its various strategies and perspectives to the approach taken towards religious diversity by Thich Nhat Hanh. Before we can undertake this task, however, we must first lay bare the specific methodological tools and discourses that will underscore and inform our endeavour, and it is to these that we now turn.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid. 23-24

## 3

**Hermeneutics, Orientalism, and Buddhist Theology:  
Methodological Considerations**

*Man cannot live without hope; that is the only proposition which I would gladly continue to defend without qualification.*

Hans-Georg Gadamer

*Buddhism is a major intellectual and spiritual force in the messy contemporary world of political chaos, environmental degradation, and social-economic injustice, not merely a set of philosophical texts and artefacts from times past. Therefore, the study of Buddhism need not be limited to historical and philological questions, as if Buddhism were irrelevant in the contemporary world and its confusion and pain, or did not participate in them. Given the profundity of the Buddhist tradition historically and its impact on world history as a whole and on major cultures, it is strange to imagine that exploring what that tradition might have to offer today is deemed 'off limits' by some who make claims about what should and should not be discussed by contemporary Buddhist scholars.*

Rita M. Gross

Within the broad conceptual framework of Buddhism and religious diversity, the specific investigative focus of this thesis concerns the classification and analysis of Thich Nhat Hanh's particular approach to other religions. I have chosen to focus on this area of Nhat Hanh's discourse because, in comparison to his teachings on Engaged Buddhism, it is a largely unexplored realm. Moreover, what research has been undertaken in this field has mainly been done so from the methodological perspective of Christian theology, and on the basis of theories regarding religious diversity which have been presented by Christian theologians. As we have seen, Buddhism and Christianity have comprehended the issue of religious diversity from different perspectives and have articulated quite different theological responses. Therefore, I would suggest that using Christian theory to examine a Buddhist response may present only one side of the story; while such an approach may be adequate within the dimensions of its intentions and acceptable in relation to its audience, it may not, I would contend, present an integrated depiction of Nhat Hanh's position. In contrast, I intend to undertake an analysis of Nhat Hanh from the methodological perspective of Buddhist Studies and the tradition of Buddhism itself. This analysis, which will take place in Part II, will interpret Nhat Hanh within the context of the Buddhist theology of religions, which was established in the previous chapter, and particularly in relation to Buddhism's contemporary articulation of pluralism. Furthermore, it will interpret Nhat Hanh in relation to the philosophical categories and internal dynamics of his tradition, as well as his cultural-historic context. This chapter is intended to lay bare the methodological bones behind what will be the body of my thesis.

By way of an introduction to this chapter, I shall outline the main elements and lines of argument that constitute my methodological skeleton. The reasoning behind my intention to examine Nhat Hanh in relation to Buddhist Studies and Buddhism itself will initially be substantiated in relation to a critique of an established analysis of Nhat Hanh's position, which has issued from the domain of Christian theology. It will also be based upon an acknowledgement of certain hermeneutic propositions concerning the dynamics of interpretation, namely the 'hermeneutic circle', Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of prejudices, and Paul

Ricoeur's proposal of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' versus the 'hermeneutics of trust'. My methodological emphasis on contextuality will then be reinforced through an examination of recent methodological debates within the discipline of Buddhist Studies that have initiated a shift from the traditional textual approach towards a more comprehensive contextual approach. I want to suggest that just as we should analyse a Buddhist response to religious diversity in relation to the theories of a Buddhist theology of religions, so too should we take into account the historical and cultural context out of which that response has emerged.

A final element of my methodology concerns my specific stance as a scholar of religion, and of Buddhism in particular. My proposal to examine Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity in relation to his cultural-historic context suggests I am a student of the history of religions, or perhaps cultural studies. However, my interest in theology and pluralism suggests more normative concerns. By way of clarification here, I would like to propose that much of what we have learnt so far regarding Theologies of Religion and religious diversity can be applied to the academic study of religion. In particular, the arguments of perspectivism or constructivism, which assert that there are no value-free perspectives within the domain of theology, reveal the fallacy of methodological neutrality or objectivity within the domain of scholarship. Furthermore, the general increase in cross-cultural awareness and knowledge, generated by the global fact of religious diversity, has instigated further growth and development within the field of Religious Studies. However, it has also created a greater need for serious reflection on the nature of religion in the modern world and its purpose and meaning in the global village. Conscious of these issues and developments, I do not consider that choosing either *Religionswissenschaft* or theology is viable. Instead, I have chosen to adopt what Rita Gross has called a "method of inseparability." One half of this methodology encompasses an objective approach devoid of "partisan apologetic loyalties" and in employment of the critical apparatus of academic scholarship. The other half constitutes a more subjective, normative, and hermeneutic approach, which will facilitate direct engagement with my topic, theological reflection, and the ability to make constructive

propositions.<sup>1</sup> In addition to Gross's suggestions, such a methodological approach has been articulated within the emergent discourse of Buddhist theology.

Regarding both the dimensions of this combined approach, I would like to mention a further relevant theological element that was revealed in our investigation of Buddhist pluralism – the issue of absolutism. Following on from Buddhist pluralism's advocacy of the need to recognise the relativity and therefore non-absolute status of religions, I would suggest that such a recognition should also apply to the objective/analytical and subjective/normative study of religion. In applying non-absolutism to my own approach, I would like to state that this thesis does not intend to claim any solutions regarding religious diversity, any definite answers regarding the debate surrounding pluralism, nor any ultimate conclusions concerning the investigation of Thich Nhat Hanh. On the contrary, my intentions are much more humble and purport only to further the exploration of the possibilities of pluralism, to offer an alternative perspective on Nhat Hanh's position regarding religious diversity than has already been presented, and to suggest that his approach contains some valuable dimensions and elements that could contribute to the ongoing and necessary task of reconciling interreligious relations in the late modern world.

Essentially, this chapter will demonstrate what I intend to do, and how I intend to do it. It will begin by presenting an analysis of Thich Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity that has been offered by the Buddhist scholar Kristin Kiblinger, and will follow with a critique of this analysis. My critique will lead us towards one of the principal propositions underlying this thesis – the imperative for Nhat Hanh's approach to be interpreted in relation to his tradition and his cultural-historic context, both of which underlie his approach to other religions. This proposition is informed by certain theories issuing from modern hermeneutics, as well as a 'methodological shift', which is continuing to define new modes of investigation within the field of Buddhist Studies. We will examine this shift in

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<sup>1</sup> See Rita Gross, "Appendix B – Religious Experience and the study of Religion: The History of Religions" in Rita M Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993). 305-317

relation to the history of Buddhist Studies itself, and developments following the critique and demise of Orientalism. Up to this point, the elements of my methodology constitute the side of objective, non-apologetic, academic scholarship. The final element, however, turns to the other side, where *Religionswissenschaft* is balanced by theology. Here we will examine Rita Gross's suggestions regarding the "method of inseparability", and the emergent discourse of Buddhist theology. In its entirety, I would suggest that my proposed methodology constitutes an adequate and feasible means for undertaking a comprehensive analysis, and achieving an integrated perspective, of Thich Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity.

### Kiblinger's Analysis

In recent years, a number of doctoral dissertations have emerged from Europe and the United States addressing the theme of Nhat Hanh's approach to other religions, and they have all done so from the perspective of Christian theology. Indeed, the Christian faith has formed the reigning discourse and focal point of these dissertations. Areas of investigation have included, for example, the application of Nhat Hanh's analysis of Christianity towards the construction of a late modern Christian spirituality,<sup>2</sup> and the impact of Nhat Hanh's analysis of Christianity upon Christian self-understanding and identity, and its implications for developing Christian practice.<sup>3</sup> A number of further dissertations and some published works have also examined Nhat Hanh in comparison to major Christian figures. In these instances, Christianity has continued to hold centre stage; Nhat Hanh has been utilised as a reference point, or point of comparison, rather than a central topic of investigation. Nhat Hanh has been compared to Sri Lankan Christian theologian Aloysius Pieris, Catholic activist Dorothy Day, the Quaker founder George Fox, medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart, and Father Thomas Merton.<sup>4</sup> Curiously, only one scholar has attempted any thorough analysis

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Elisabeth Alden, "Religion in Dialogue with Late Modern Society: A Constructive Contribution to a Christian Spirituality Informed by Buddhist-Christian Encounters" (Doctor of Philosophy: Theology, Lunds Universitet (Sweden), 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Laju M. Balani, "Thich Nhat Hanh on Buddhist-Christian Dialogue" (Doctoral of Philosophy: Religion, Baylor University (U.S.), 2005).

<sup>4</sup> In order, see Phuoc Thinh Nguyen, "Two Different Journeys and a Convergence: Buddhist-Christian Dialogue through the Works of Thich Nhat Hanh and Aloysius Pieris" (Doctor of

of Nhat Hanh's approach to other religions from the perspective of the three-fold typology of theological classification. Kristin Kiblinger's dissertation of 2002, titled *A Critical Analysis of Buddhist Inclusivism towards Religious Others*,<sup>5</sup> presents a philosophical critique of Nhat Hanh's approach within a wider discussion of Buddhism and inclusivism. Kiblinger's work, which has been published under the title *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes towards Religious Others*, has been a significant springboard for the construction of some of the arguments presented in this thesis. Indeed, Kiblinger's research is incisive, provocative, and above all commendable. However, in critique of Kiblinger, I would like to discuss some reservations I have regarding her methodology, which, I contend, generates a one-sided, un-integrated analysis of Nhat Hanh's position. In doing so, I hope to further define my own chosen method.

In recognition of the lacuna within contemporary Buddhist Studies and Buddhism itself regarding articulated responses to religious diversity, Kiblinger's principal aim is to construct a tenable form of Buddhist inclusivism. The inspiration for this project, Kiblinger reveals, issues from the Christian theology of S. Mark Heim, whom we have already encountered, and his invitation to assess the application of his theory to non-Christian religions.<sup>6</sup> To recall, Heim has argued against the position of identist pluralism, which posits a common ground upon which all religions may unite. Such ground, argues Heim, is non-existent, as all perspectives are value-laden or tradition-specific, and the only viable way to approach religious others is therefore on the basis of recognising religious difference. Following on from Heim, Kiblinger argues for a "preferred" type of inclusivism, which she calls "alternative-ends-recognising inclusivism" or "multiple-ends inclusivism". This is

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Philosophy, Graduate Theological Union, 2002). Sallie B. King, "Transformative Nonviolence: The Social Ethics of George Fox and Thich Nhat Hanh," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 18 (1998), Janet W. Parachin, "Educating for an Engaged Spirituality: The Union of Spiritual Nurture and Acts of Compassion and Justice in the Lives of Dorothy Day and Thich Nhat Hanh" (9931775, School of Theology at Claremont, 1999), Brian J. Pierce (OP), *We Walk the Path Together: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh and Meister Eckhart* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005). And Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalisation* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Kristin Anne Beise, "A Critical Analysis of Buddhist Inclusivism Towards Religious Others" (Doctor of Philosophy: Divinity School, The University of Chicago, 2002). Note that Beise was Kristin Kiblinger's maiden name.

<sup>6</sup> Kristin Beise Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005). 129

attributed to Heim's theory, as well as Paul Griffiths' construction of "open inclusivism," as opposed to "closed."<sup>7</sup> Alternative-ends recognising inclusivism does just that – it recognises that there may be a variety of different ends or salvific goals among religious traditions. More specifically, it is inclusive towards other religions in that it may acknowledge aspects of partial truth in another tradition's doctrines and practices, as well as granting its distinctive aims or ends, yet it still prioritises and privileges the truth and ends of the home tradition.

This proposition is constructed in opposition to "single-ends inclusivism," which generally utilises "common core" and "experiential" theories of religion. This "problematic" type of inclusivism seeks to identify similarities and overlap between traditions, rather than distinct differences. It therefore inevitably involves the imposition of "anonymous religiosity." The "experiential-expressivist" understanding of doctrines is common to this kind of inclusivism. According to Kiblinger, this perspective sees doctrines as inexact expressions of feelings and experiences, and because they cannot express the experience perfectly, doctrines are de-emphasised in favour of the ineffable to which they point. This view is often reinforced, explains Kiblinger, by common core theory, which claims that all religions share a common essence but vary due to cultural and historic circumstance.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, we have already encountered elements of these perspectives in our examination of Buddhist responses to religious diversity. According to Kiblinger, these kinds of perspectives would seem to make inclusivism easy: "One can accept an element from an alien system by simply – some might say charitably – assuming its agreement with the home system on a 'deeper' or experiential level." However, Kiblinger argues:

This type of inclusivism... is superficial, for it sees the home system in the other system rather than seeing the other system clearly on its own terms. By nature, it imposes and presumes. If there are major differences between the home community and the alien community, they are overlooked in favour of the common essence that is presumed *a priori*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 16-17

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 17

It is upon these foundational arguments that charges are laid against Thich Nhat Hanh. Nhat Hanh is accused of employing experientialism in conjunction with common core theory, on the basis of which he supposedly attempts to reconcile doctrinal differences between Buddhism and Christianity in relation to “some shared foundational experience”. He is accused of “articulating unhelpful, ridiculously broad similarities,” such as “highlighting as shared ‘elements of stability, joy, peace, understanding, and love’.” Nhat Hanh’s use of such doctrinal resources as two truths theory, universal Buddha-nature, skilful means, and emptiness are deemed problematic and flawed. Kiblinger denounces his “refusal to absolutise traditions”, which “enables him to accept multiple religious allegiances.” According to Kiblinger, this leads to a problematic religious identity, which in turn inspires him to “take liberties with his interpretation of Christianity.” These liberties are evidenced in his application of anonymous Buddhist moves to an understanding of baptism, the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist, as well as the Jewish Passover Seder, which both “blatantly” and indeed “violently” interprets Christianity “through Buddhist lenses.” Finally, Kiblinger directs the critique of the “positionless position” at Nhat Hanh’s ostensible attempt to elevate Buddhism to a level “not on par with other religions.” She states:

[T]he goal of striving for non-attachment from all views is itself a view; it arises from the very Buddhist presuppositions that it supposedly transcends... The aim of such a mystical or intuitive breakthrough, especially for those who have yet to achieve that aim, cannot free Buddhism from the conflicts involved in being one religion alongside others.<sup>10</sup>

While Kiblinger does recognise some elements of Nhat Hanh’s discourse that “at least pay lip service to real differences,” ultimately, he does not conform to her proposed model of inclusivism. Kiblinger explains that “while alternative-ends-recognising inclusivists would argue that similarities can be seen at the surface level but that deeper down differences become more significant, Nhat Hanh argues the reverse.” Thus, finally, Nhat Hanh’s “anonymous Buddhism and his habit of seeing a common core to all world religions – a core that seems to be

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 100

Buddhist – dissolve the distinctiveness of the other and absorb the other into his own Buddhism.”<sup>11</sup>

Evidently, Kiblinger’s chief concern is with doctrinal and formal differences between religions, and the degree to which Nhat Hanh accepts and confirms these differences. This is the starting point, and the end point, of her argument. Kiblinger eschews the experientialist view of religions in favour of a “rule-theory” of doctrines and truth, so that she can further demarcate the distinctions between traditions.<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, religious traditions appear to be separate, discrete entities. Indeed, she is not concerned with dialogue or the possibilities of any kind of transformative interreligious exchange, nor is she interested in the dimensions of religious practice, which do not come into clear focus anywhere in her book. Rather, she logically and systematically attempts to define a philosophically sound means of articulating inclusivism, and then offers it to Buddhists as the best model.

Within the scope and framework of her proposal – in relation to her motivations and goals – Kiblinger’s research seems to be watertight. However, what is problematic about Kiblinger’s study, and what ultimately undermines her results, is not the dimensions of her argument, the likes of which we have heard before, but the methodology that supports it. I have arrived at two main interrelated areas of concern regarding Kiblinger’s methodology, a method that, I contend, is misrepresentative of Thich Nhat Hanh. My first concern is related to the issue of context, and the notion of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ of interpretation. My second concern is related to the ‘insider/outsider’ debate within Religious Studies, and the hermeneutic notion of the location and subjective agency of the interpreter.

In addition to her emphasis on difference, Kiblinger is also insistent about the importance of perspective and context. In reference to the postmodern theory of such philosophers as George Lindbeck and Alasdair McIntyre, and the contemporary theology of S. Mark Heim and Joseph DiNoia, Kiblinger

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 5 – “Case Studies of Two Prominent Buddhist Inclusivists” in *Ibid.* 91-102

<sup>12</sup> This “rule-theory” is derived from the theory of George Lindbeck. See *Ibid.* 18

acknowledges the inevitability of perspectivism and the consequent imperative for interpretation to occur in relation to context. At a recent conference in Salzburg, Kiblinger clarified her criticisms of Nhat Hanh in relation to these themes. According to Kiblinger, such “inclusivist types” as Nhat Hanh, tend to “take aspects of the other systems out of their contexts and interpret them within the context of the home tradition, when in fact, *aspects can be meaningful only within their own contexts*. These methods can lead to massive reinterpretations...”<sup>13</sup> It is apparent that Kiblinger’s main concern is with the misrepresentation and distortion of the unique form of Christianity. However, in the process of arguing against such ostensible distortion, I would suggest that she herself misrepresents and distorts Thich Nhat Hanh by not interpreting *him* in relation to *his* context. That is, she fails to comprehend Nhat Hanh’s approach to other religions in relation to his complete body of written work, in particular his teachings of Engaged Buddhism, and also the cultural-historic context out of which these writings and teachings first emerged, this being the traditional Buddhist culture of Vietnam and the Vietnam War. Furthermore, Kiblinger does not interpret Nhat Hanh in relation to the dimensions of religious practice, which are so integral to his teachings, or the dynamics and arena of dialogue, which are where Nhat Hanh’s interreligious teachings are directed.

Kiblinger’s focus is on the issues of doctrines, truth, and salvation, which, we have seen, are central to the Christian theology of religions. However, as we have also seen, doctrines, truth, and salvation are not accorded an equivalent status within a Buddhist theology of religions. Here, doctrines are understood to be non-absolute methods, or skilful means, and are not valued for their verbal truth but their verbal utility. Furthermore, truth is considered to be experiential, not doctrinal, and experience is understood as the only real basis for salvific spiritual knowledge. Therefore, it can be suggested that Kiblinger judges Nhat Hanh’s approach to other religions against a model of Buddhist inclusivism that is based upon Christian theological presuppositions and concepts. Furthermore, her chosen

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<sup>13</sup> Kristin Beise Kiblinger, “Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions: An Overview” (paper presented at the Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions - Seventh Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies, University of Salzburg, Austria, 2007). Unpublished. Podcast available at <http://www.buddhist-christian-studies.org>

model of Buddhist inclusivism is rigidly academic and intellectual, rather than theological and religious, and would therefore seem to be an inadequate means by which to interpret the position of a monk. Indeed, Kiblinger admits as much when she states, "I must stress that Nhat Hanh is not an academic, and his position on other religions is not developed systematically." Thus, she explains, she has "gathered his scattered statements in order to condense them into a cohesive position."<sup>14</sup> In doing so, I would suggest that she has taken his statements out of context and tried, but failed, to fit them into her chosen model of inclusivism. In the end, this constitutes nothing less than the imposition of an academic, Christian-based model of inclusivism onto an authentic Buddhist response to religious diversity. Is it any wonder Nhat Hanh's position does not fit? Admittedly, in relation to her specified task and its particular framework, it would appear that Kiblinger's criticisms hold weight and that her analysis is correct. However, this task and its framework are essentially inadequate and their imposition onto Nhat Hanh ultimately de-contextualises and thus misrepresents his position, generating a myopic, biased view. Essentially, Kiblinger accuses Nhat Hanh of doing to Christianity what she in fact does to him.

The above acknowledgement of Kiblinger's Christian bias leads to my second area of methodological concern, which relates to the insider/outsider debate within the context of the discipline of Religious Studies. In a review of Kiblinger's book, Terry Muck observes that her methodological stance is "more than phenomenologist, definitely not theologian, yet not quite buddhologist... She writes as an outsider taking the voice of an insider."<sup>15</sup> In another review, Amos Young states: "Kiblinger does not self-identify religiously as a Buddhist even while she is attempting, in this work, to take this particular conversation to the next level among Buddhologists and Buddhist intellectuals."<sup>16</sup> Thus, as these critics explain, Kiblinger is attempting constructive, normative, theological work within a tradition to which she holds no commitment, and of which she has no

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<sup>14</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 92

<sup>15</sup> Terry C. Muck, "Review - *Buddhist Inclusivism: Buddhist Attitudes Towards Religious Others* by Kristin Kiblinger," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 27 (2007). 171, 169

<sup>16</sup> Amos Yong, "Review - *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others* by Kristin Kiblinger," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 33, no. 1 (2006). 214

experiential knowledge. Kiblinger does refer to arguments put forward by José Cabezón, which suggest that 'Buddhist theology' requires an experiential and praxial foundation, as well as a degree of authentication in tradition. She states, "There is something to be said for Cabezón's claim that theologians of Buddhism are, at least in some ways, aided by having practiced Buddhism and experienced the rewards of that practice." However, she continues to express her opinion that "while such first-hand experience may be helpful, it is not necessary." Rather, she argues, an outsider-scholar can become sufficiently adept in the grammar of another religion so as to be equipped to do constructive work within that tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Terry Muck has argued for an implicit inclusivism within Kiblinger's methodology itself. According to Muck, she proposes that "there are good, better, and best forms of inclusivism, and she then chooses one of those positions as the best for Buddhists."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Kiblinger specifically focuses on the doctrine of *triyāna* (S. 'three bodies') to support her model of inclusivism.<sup>19</sup> However, in doing so she critiques and discards an array of other Buddhist strategies of inclusivism that have been used extensively within the Buddhist tradition. Furthermore, not only Nhat Hanh but other eminent Asian Buddhist philosophers such as Masao Abe and Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu, do not fit Kiblinger's mould of preferred inclusivism and are accordingly disclaimed, while the strategies of such academically-trained American Buddhist scholars such as John Makransky and Sallie King are acclaimed.<sup>20</sup> Despite the comprehensiveness of Kiblinger's research, which is indeed commendable, I would suggest that areas of potential bias within her methodology, and confusion regarding her methodological stance, tend to undermine her conclusions.

<sup>17</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 70

<sup>18</sup> Muck, "Review - *Buddhist Inclusivism: Buddhist Attitudes Towards Religious Others* by Kristin Kiblinger." 171

<sup>19</sup> See Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 78-82. See also Kristin Beise Kiblinger, "Using Three-Vehicle Theory to Improve Buddhist Inclusivism," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 24 (2004).

<sup>20</sup> See Kiblinger, "Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions: An Overview". Podcast available at <http://www.buddhist-christian-studies.org>

### Philosophical Hermeneutics: Some Suggestions

It ought to be clarified that in the above examination of Kiblinger I do not mean to suggest that scholars from one tradition should not attempt to interpret another tradition from their own specific perspective. On the contrary, this is what cross-cultural and interreligious understanding is all about. As we have seen, our traditions and their languages and ideologies shape and inform our perspectives, our experiences, and our world-self-other understandings, in myriad invaluable ways. My principal concern with Kiblinger's approach is that her particular perspective is undisclosed, or not openly professed, and yet its presuppositions, structure, and concepts define her methodology and therefore also her conclusions. Kiblinger's methodology constructs Buddhology through the unprofessed lens and with the undisclosed tools of Christian theology, and this would seem to be problematic. Like Kiblinger, I am also concerned with context and perspective. Yet, I am concerned with both the context of the object being interpreted, *and* the subjective context of the interpreter. To provide some foundation and clarification to these concerns, let us briefly address some suggestions offered by the contemporary school of Philosophical Hermeneutics. In particular we will mention, in a necessarily but regrettably simplified manner, Schleiermacher's understanding of the 'hermeneutic circle', Gadamer's affirmation of 'prejudices' as inevitable and constructive, and Ricœur's notion of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' as opposed to the 'hermeneutics of trust'.

It is widely acknowledged that the field of modern hermeneutics begins with the German philosopher and Protestant theologian Frederick Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Schleiermacher is known for his proposal of a general hermeneutics that could be applied to all forms of interpretation, not just to the classical domain of biblical exegesis. One of the main elements of Schleiermacher's discourse that is of particular relevance to our discussion here is the notion of the 'hermeneutic circle'. While this notion featured in the rhetoric of classical hermeneutics, it becomes emblematic of Schleiermacher's theory of interpretation. An example of Schleiermacher's treatment of the circle explains the existence of

...an opposition between the unity of the whole and the individual parts of the work, so that the task [of interpretation] could be set in a twofold manner, namely to

understand the unity of the whole by the individual parts and the value of the individual parts via the unity of the whole.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, within the act of interpretation, understanding the 'parts' of a text depends on understanding the 'whole' of the text, and *vice versa* – the movement is circular. A significant implication of this view that was emphasised by Schleiermacher is that this circularity is also reflected in the interaction between an author of a text, and their entire opus of writings and their cultural-historic context. Indeed, Schleiermacher was particularly interested in the mind of the author. This idea is particularly indebted to Romanticism, which emphasised the resonance between an instance of expression and its wider cultural context or 'spirit' (*Geist*). Michael Inwood has explained Schleiermacher's view of a constantly expanding hermeneutic circle, in which meaning becomes relative to context:

At each level of interpretation we are involved in a hermeneutic circle... We cannot fully understand the text unless we know the author's life and works as a whole, but this requires knowledge of the texts and other events that constitute his life. We cannot fully understand a text unless we know about the whole culture from which it emerged, but this presupposes a knowledge of the texts and so on that constitute the culture.<sup>22</sup>

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a later German hermeneutic philosopher, is renowned for initiating the phenomenological and existential turn in modern hermeneutics. This turn encompassed the universalisation of hermeneutics, or the expansion of the domain of interpretation and understanding to include all facets and events of human existence (*Dasein*).<sup>23</sup> Heidegger developed the notion of the hermeneutic circle in relation to this ontological perspective. He discerned an underlying 'fore-structure' of understanding – a foundation of assumptions, expectations, and categories that is granted and inherited by one's cultural and historic context, and is pre-reflectively projected onto one's experiences, thereby

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<sup>21</sup> Andrew Bowie, ed., *Frederick Schleiermacher: Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). 109.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Inwood, "Hermeneutics," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig and L. Floridi (London: Routledge - <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/P023SECT2>, 1998). See also Richard L. Corliss, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutic and Its Critics," *Religious Studies* 29, no. 3 (1993).

<sup>23</sup> See David Couzens Hoy, "Heidegger and the Hermeneutic Turn," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). 170-194

determining one's interpretation and understanding. In other words, Heidegger's hermeneutic circle spins upon an axis that traces pre-understanding, interpretation, and understanding. As he explains in his magnum opus *Being and Time*, "Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding must already have understood what is to be interpreted."<sup>24</sup> The principal corollary of Heidegger's analysis is that a presupposition-less interpretation or a context-less understanding is an impossibility.

A student of Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), further emphasised the inevitability of presuppositions. Moreover, Gadamer clarified that the existence of presuppositions, or the 'embedded-ness' in context, applies both to the object being interpreted, and the subjective interpreter. Indeed, according to Gadamer, the interpreter is directly implicated in the 'event' of meaning, or the instance of interpretation.<sup>25</sup> As represented in the title of his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argued that *truth* is not simply a matter of scientific objectivity or rational *method*, but it involves the subjective agency – its cultural reference points and its 'prejudices'. Within this work, which constitutes a direct critique of the Enlightenment, Gadamer argues that prejudices are at the foundation of all understanding. Rather than functioning as disabling, distorting biases, prejudices are in fact what make understanding possible – they are where interpretation begins and do not, therefore, need to be hidden or discarded. Within the dynamics of interpretation, the interpreter approaches the object of interpretation from the professed perspective of their prejudices, and encounters the object at the edge of its 'horizon of meaning'. What ensues is a 'fusion of horizons' – Gadamer's term for the activity of understanding, which, being suggestive of more than simply gaining knowledge, involves negotiation, agreement, and even transformation. As Gadamer explains:

The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). 32

<sup>25</sup> For interesting and comprehensive discussions of these elements of Gadamer's philosophy, see Anders Odenstedt, "Gadamer on Context-Dependence," *The Review of Metaphysics* 57, no. 1 (2003). And Rudolf Bernet, "Gadamer on the Subject's Participation in the Game of Truth," *The Review of Metaphysics* 58, no. 4 (2005).

of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons... Understanding... is always the fusion of these horizons...<sup>26</sup>

According to Gadamer, the process of interpretation and understanding is dialogical, rather than rational or methodological, and the truth that is arrived at is never finalised or definite. Chris Lawn has clearly explained this hermeneutic dynamic:

The interpreter projects provisional meanings but these are disturbed and re-defined when the interpreter's own prejudices are questioned by the horizon of the text or the partner in dialogue. Ultimately, Gadamer claims, meanings can never be complete.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, Gadamer emphasises the importance of acknowledging one's prejudices: "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings."<sup>28</sup>

If we were to apply these hermeneutical insights to Kiblinger's analysis of Thich Nhat Hanh, her methodology would be found to be lacking. Firstly, Kiblinger fails to interpret Nhat Hanh in relation to the context of his whole body of written works, nor in relation to his cultural-historic context. Thus, the hermeneutic circle is incomplete. Secondly, Kiblinger's own context – the presuppositions and prejudices of her own subjective agency as interpreter – remain undisclosed in her attempt to assume the objective stance of an outsider. Ironically, this situation remains even while she argues for the necessity to account for context and perspective. As she attempts to undertake 'insider' work, her prejudices and presuppositions continue to function. Therefore, what eventuates is not a dialogical 'fusion of horizons' but the imposition of one closed horizon onto the other. These methodological shortcomings, I would suggest, generate a dislocated and, to a degree, distorted interpretation of meaning.

If we are to accept the analyses of these hermeneutic philosophers as valid and informative, our methodology ought to encompass, firstly, a contextualised

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<sup>26</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. William Glen-Doepel, 2nd ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979). 269, 273

<sup>27</sup> Chris Lawn, *Gadamer* (London: Continuum, 2006). 3

<sup>28</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. 238

interpretation – an understanding of Nhat Hanh within the ‘hermeneutic circle’. Secondly, my own subjective location as the interpreter ought to be clearly stated and ‘brought to the dialogical table’. An acceptance of these directives of interpretation can be reinforced and validated in reference to methodological arguments issuing from the domain of Buddhist Studies. However, before we examine these arguments, I would like to mention a further hermeneutic resource that may aid our endeavour.

Despite the fact that Gadamer’s opus constitutes a direct attack on the Enlightenment project and its “prejudice against prejudice itself,”<sup>29</sup> as well as the structures of modernity, particularly the Cartesian inheritance of scientific rationalism, he does not easily fit into the postmodern mould. Indeed, in opposition to discourses of alterity and difference, which continue to flourish in the wake of deconstructivism and influence such scholars such as Kiblinger, Gadamer affirms the possibilities of commonality and unity, defined by the universal potential for understanding. From Gadamer’s perspective, “the way that we experience one another, the way that we experience historical traditions, the way that we experience the natural givenness of our existence and of our world, constitutes a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened.”<sup>30</sup> Gadamer’s positive emphasis on the dialogical structure of interpretation affirms that communication in some form is always possible, regardless of initial divisions. As Lawn has observed, “The ‘fusion of horizons’ ensures that some measure of clarity of understanding is always under way if never finally concluded. Gadamer speaks of a necessary *trust* in communication, a trust in the willingness of the other in dialogue to reach out, in good faith, to reach understanding.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Gadamer exhibits what has been called a ‘hermeneutics of trust’, in reference to the French hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricœur’s conception of the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 240. For a discussion of this element of Gadamer’s theory see L.M. Palmer, “Gadamer and the Enlightenment’s ‘Prejudice against All Prejudices,’” *CLIO* 22, no. 4 (1993).

<sup>30</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. xiv

<sup>31</sup> Lawn, *Gadamer*. 129

“hermeneutics of suspicion.”<sup>32</sup> Not surprisingly, Gadamer’s hermeneutics of trust have attracted the criticisms of a number of postmodern theorists, most prominently Jacques Derrida. Coming from the perspective of a hermeneutics of suspicion, Derrida has perceived too much trust and goodwill in Gadamer’s propositions. Indeed, Derrida’s deconstructive method suspects all understanding to be an act of appropriation, a seizure of the other and its otherness, whether implicit or explicit, rather than interpretation.<sup>33</sup> It seems apparent to me that Kiblinger’s analysis of Nhat Hanh rests upon such an anti-dialogical hermeneutic of suspicion. In contrast, I intend to embrace a hermeneutics of trust, following in the path of Gadamer, who has suggested, “The soul of hermeneutics lies in the fact that the other can be right.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Buddhist Studies, Orientalism, and the Methodological Shift**

The hermeneutical emphasis on context has recently been the catalyst for methodological developments within the academic discipline of Buddhist Studies. In response to the pervasive recognition among Buddhist scholars of the internal diversity of the Buddhist tradition, this new methodological perspective advocates the contextual analysis of each cultural manifestation of the Buddhadharma. Such an approach stands in contrast to the philological methods of traditional Buddhist Studies, and as such it calls into question the legacy of Orientalism within the discipline. While some scholars such as Donald Lopez, have approached these developments from a ‘suspicious’ postmodern perspective of critique, others, such as José Cabezón, discern a movement towards a more integrated approach to the study of Buddhism. In support of my intention to investigate Thich Nhat Hanh from textual, contextual, and theological perspectives, it would be worth our while to examine the dimensions of this ‘methodological shift’.

The initial proposal within the argument that supports this methodological movement refers to the term ‘Buddhism’ itself. According to the argument, the

<sup>32</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970). 32-35

<sup>33</sup> See Richard E. Palmer and Diane P. Michelfelder, *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, *Suny Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

term Buddhism is an encompassing, panoptic word that signifies a wide array of religious manifestations. Indeed, as mentioned in our previous chapter, the first-centuries CE witnessed the expansion of Buddhism, from India and into East Asia, South East Asia, and Tibet, and its assimilation into a diversity of cultures. Within this process of cultural transmission, indigenous elements were absorbed and radical transformations of doctrine and practice transpired. The result was a variety of *Buddhisms*. To illustrate this fact, Lopez has referred to the diversity of names used to signify 'Buddhism' in its various cultural contexts: in Sri Lanka it is known as the *sāsana*, Pāli for the 'teaching'; in Tibet it is referred to as *nang pa'i chos*, the 'religion of the insiders'; in China, it is *fo jiao*, the 'teaching of the Buddha'; and in Japan, it is *butsudō*, the 'way of the Buddha'. Asserting the significance of this diversity, Lopez claims:

In the history of the Buddhist traditions in Asia, there has been a consistent recognition of (and nostalgia for) India as the birthplace of the Buddha, embellished by myths that he also visited other lands, like Sri Lanka and Burma. Apart from this, the cognizance and acknowledgement that the various local forms of Buddhism together constitute or derive a single entity called Buddhism has waxed and waned and waxed again over the course of Asian history.<sup>35</sup>

According to Lopez, therefore, the term Buddhism implies a singular faith and a degree of uniformity which in actuality is a conceptual myth. Rather, the word Buddhism is an inclusive referent, containing a multiplicity of beliefs and practices that have manifested in an expanse of different regions, linguistic contexts, dynasties, and times. In recognition of such diversity, many scholars are today calling for the necessity to study 'Buddhisms' in relation to their cultural contexts. Such a methodology differs from the traditional textual and philological modes of Buddhology. While some scholars consider that old methods may be combined with new, others, such as Lopez, argue that the old methods are problematic due to their involvement in the dubious history of Western Buddhist Studies and its apparent construction of a single Buddhism.

<sup>34</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, in Jean Grondin, "Gadamer's Hope," *Renascence* 56, no. 4 (2004). 288

<sup>35</sup> D. Lopez, "Introduction: Impressions of the Buddha" in Donald S. Lopez Jr., ed., *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism, Buddhism and Modernity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). 6

This leads to a second related aspect of the argument, which concerns the recognition of the “late vintage”<sup>36</sup> of the term ‘Buddhism’ and its status as an *ism*, apparently formulated within the discourses of European scholarship to represent a pan-Asian tradition and an object of inquiry. The contemporary Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor has emphasised this point, stating: “There are as many kinds of Buddhism as there are ways the fragmented and ever-changing European mind has to apprehend it.”<sup>37</sup> Batchelor is here referring to the many ways – Rationalistic, Romantic, Orientalist – that the West has attempted to comprehend the object of fascination that is Buddhism. Likewise, Lopez has observed that Buddhism has been variously represented in the West as “a form of idolatry, as a religion of reason, as a religion of science, and as no religion at all.”<sup>38</sup> Lopez has further explored the origins of this Western construction of Buddhism, which he locates at the end of the eighteenth-century. At this time, Lopez explains, European scholars and missionaries began to realise that:

...the religions observed in Burma, Siam, Ceylon, Tartary, Japan, and Cathay were somehow the same, that the idols encountered by travelers – whether it be the Godama of Burma, the Sommona Codom of Siam, the Fō of China, the Khodom of Bali, or the Boodhoo of India – were somehow the same person.<sup>39</sup>

Thus began the projection and reification of a pan-Asian entity called *Buddhism*. At this time, European colonial powers dominated much of Buddhist Asia. According to Lopez, the founding Buddhologists of the emergent field of Buddhist Studies conceptualised ‘Asia’ and ‘Buddhism’, claiming interpretative authority, in an alliance (whether explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious) with colonial political agendas and Western structures of elitism. As such, the Western construction of Buddhism was highly influenced by the strategies of domination and misrepresentation inherent in the discourse of Orientalism.

The Western tradition of intellectual and existential engagement with the East – also known as Orientalism – has been continuing since the days of antiquity. However, the 1960s saw the emergence of a searing critique that deemed

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 7

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994), 274

<sup>38</sup> Lopez, “Introduction” in Lopez Jr., ed., *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*. 1.

Orientalism a highly problematic domain of scholarship, an agent of Western imperialism and cultural vandalism. Through the work of such scholars as Anouar Abdel-Malek, A.L. Tibawi, Bryan Turner, and most prominently, Edward Said,<sup>40</sup> a tide of anti-Europeanism, anti-colonialism, and anti-elitism denounced the past achievements of the Orientalists as obsolete and iniquitous. According to the critique, Orientalism attempted to construct and hold authority over the 'Orient' in an alliance with European colonialism. Purportedly, in relegating 'the oriental' to a realm of 'otherness' – the irrational, the aberrant, the backward and the inferior – the discourses of Orientalism have contributed to the construction of Western hegemony. Ostensibly, Orientalism falsely represented the East, deprived whole populations of genuine self-representation and self-definition, and reinforced the processes of alienation and subjugation inherent in colonialism.

Since the emergence of the critiques of Orientalism, post-colonial theorists have been continuing to question the discourses of domination inherent in what Said calls this particularly 'narcissistic' tradition of European scholarship, based as it was on 'colonising knowledge' and the urge for power. In reference to Marxist analysis of Colonialism and Capitalism, as well the French high theory of postmodernism, in particular Foucauldian discursive theory, Said's initial main area of interest was the Western perception and subjugation of the Islamic world of the Middle East. Said's thesis was eventually extended to include European interactions with the Asian continent *in toto*. This has given occasion for Buddhist scholars to draw out the implications of the critique of Orientalism for the domain of Buddhist Studies.<sup>41</sup> Among these, Lopez has examined contributions made by the founders of Buddhist Studies to the critiqued Orientalist discourse. These he locates in:

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<sup>39</sup> D. Lopez, "Buddha" in *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>40</sup> See Anouar Abdel-Malek, "Orientalism in Crisis," *Diogenes* 44, no. Winter (1963). A. L. Tibawi, *English Speaking Orientalists* (London: Luzac, 1964; reprint, Reprinted in A.L. Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader*, p. 57-78). B. S. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979). Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

<sup>41</sup> Based on a panel titled "Buddhism and Orientalism at the Turn of the Century" presented at the American Academy of Religion meeting in November 1991, Lopez's edited book *Curators of the Buddha* is the first collection of studies concerning the impact of the European colonial experience on the Western academic interpretation of Buddhism. See Donald S. Lopez Jr., ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

...the creation of a reified entity called "Buddhism" and the writing of its history, as well as in the creation of a biography of the Buddha, who would come to be both exalted and condemned as the paradigm of an Oriental mentality. This "Buddhism" and this Buddha played a specific role in what Said calls "Romantic Orientalism," with its fantasies of lost wisdom, its constructions of classical ages long past, its search for the languages of Eden, and its degradation of the Oriental modern.<sup>42</sup>

Further, Lopez adds that European Indologists denigrated the 'Oriental' by consistently privileging the written text over the word of the native informant, a process that strengthened the reification of Buddhism as a static, essentialised entity. Commencing with Brian Houghton Hodgson's delivery of a number of Sanskrit manuscripts to Eugène Burnouf in 1837, European scholars began to collect Buddhist texts and commenced philological projects of translation and the creation of the object of 'Buddhism'. As Phillip Almond has explained, this object existed "over and against the various cultures which can now be perceived as instancing it, manifesting it, in an enormous variety of ways."<sup>43</sup> In their representation of Buddhism to the West, European scholars constructed this 'classical' Buddhism based upon what Lopez has called a "tradition of high textuality,"<sup>44</sup> in which the text was continuously removed from its context of production, philosophic meaning, or ritual usage. Said has deemed this process of Western scholarly preservation and cultural stewardship of the Orient to be a "paradigmatic fossilisation" based upon the "finality and closure of antiquarian or curatorial knowledge."<sup>45</sup> Thus, the European creation of the object of 'Buddhism' became more real than its cultural existences, and against this unitary 'primitive', 'pure' and 'original' artefact, the varieties of living cultural expressions of the Buddhadharma – the many *Buddhisms* of Asia – have continuously been judged by Western scholars, and found lacking.

Critiques of the thesis against Orientalism justifiably abound. Indeed, I feel it necessary to express my own reservations regarding many aspects of Said's thesis. Not least is the denial of any positive elements of Orientalism. The blanket

<sup>42</sup> D. Lopez, "Introduction" in *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>43</sup> Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). 12.

<sup>44</sup> Lopez, "Introduction" in Lopez Jr., ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism.* 7.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Race and Class* 27, no. 2 (1985). 5, 14.

condemnation of Orientalism as allied with the endeavours of Western imperialism effectively undermines the vast achievements of the Orientalists. Here I am in agreement with J.J. Clarke, who has asserted:

Orientalism...cannot simply be identified with the ruling imperialist ideology, for in the Western context it represents a counter-movement, a subversive entelechy, albeit not a unified or consciously organised one, which has in various ways often tended to subvert rather than to conform to discursive structures of imperial power.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, it would appear that the employment of secular strategies and modernist values within 'post-Orientalist' discourse constitutes an approach that is just as subjective and prejudiced as the next. However, such strategies and values remain unacknowledged. While not necessarily disputable in themselves, when applied to the domain of religion and the spiritual lives that inhabit the traditions, these strategies and values inevitably lead to reductionism. As such, it is apparent that 'post-Orientalist' discourse is dominated by the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. In contrast, Mircea Eliade has recognised:

We have indeed pillaged other cultures. Fortunately, however, there have been other Westerners who have deciphered the languages, preserved the myths, salvaged certain artistic masterpieces. There have always been a few orientalists, a few philosophers, a few poets striving to safeguard the meaning of certain exotic, extra-European traditions.<sup>47</sup>

And in confirmation, Harry Oldmeadow has observed:

Whilst their work [i.e. the Orientalists] was no doubt often contaminated by mixed motives and... sometimes turned to dubious ends, the scholarly enterprise in itself was a noble one and their heroic labours ought to elicit our admiration and gratitude rather than opprobrium. This is especially the case amongst those writers who, far from aiding and abetting colonial regimes or reinforcing racist and progressivist ideologies, were inspired by a sense that the East had philosophical, artistic and spiritual riches which could be shared by a Western world which had lost its religious bearings.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 9

<sup>47</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 68

<sup>48</sup> Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004), 13. For further critiques of Said's thesis, see Sadik Jalal al 'Azm, Bernard Lewis, and Sheldon Pollock in A. L. Macfie, ed., *Orientalism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). For feminist critiques see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1991), Billie Melman, *Women's Orient* (London: Macmillan, 1992). And Rosane Rocher, "British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*,

Critiques of Lopez's application of 'post-Orientalism' to his analysis of Western Buddhist Studies have also received warranted criticism. Indeed, Lopez's deconstruction of Buddhism as a unitary entity is suspect for its apparent elimination of any kind of cohesion with regard to the Buddhist tradition. In the case of Lopez, it would appear that the postmodern endeavour to dismantle the grand narratives has gone too far. If Buddhism is simply a Western construct, invented as a means of administering hegemony, or simply for the sake of scholarly pursuits, what meaning is left for the Buddha and his experience of enlightenment, the salvific agency of the Dharma, and the fellowship of the Sangha? Indeed, while Buddhism is a highly diverse tradition, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha remain the place of refuge for all Buddhists, the nucleus of all traditions, providing unity and identity, community and faith, moral and spiritual guidance for a vast number of people around the world. While it is unquestionable that the diversity of Buddhist traditions demand contextualised interpretations, this should not be enforced, I would suggest, at the expense of the integrity of the Buddhist tradition itself.

With further regard to his methodological suggestions, Jan Nattier has written an extensive review of Lopez's edited collection *Curators of the Buddha*. She raises some important queries regarding Lopez's argument, particularly questioning the validity of its underlying assumptions. These include: 1) that those whose work focuses on written texts necessarily have as their object a reified entity called Buddhism, and 2) that such scholars have as their ultimate aim the sinister and arrogant issuing of a pronouncement, binding upon scholars and Buddhists alike, about the true nature of this supposed entity. This, Nattier argues, is not an adequate portrait of Western Buddhist Studies as a whole. She also argues that in his denouncement of the "bibliophilia" of Western Buddhist Studies, or the supposed extreme focus on written sources and the concomitant assumption of interpretative authority, Lopez is holding a "partisan position", or in traditional

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ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University, 1993). See also James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1988). Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London: Routledge, 1999). And Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1998).

Buddhist terms, an “extreme view”. In other words, Nattier contends that to value written works over the oral tradition, or vice versa as Lopez does, is methodologically suspect. In response, Nattier calls for a more balanced approach.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the shortcomings of Lopez’s arguments, the ‘post-Orientalist’ deconstruction of a reified notion of ‘original Buddhism’ as an authentic historical artefact that can be textually distilled, and the concurrent recognition of the multiplicity of ‘Buddhisms’ in the world, have encouraged a methodological shift within contemporary Buddhist Studies. The text-critical philological model of traditional Buddhology continues to define contemporary Buddhist Studies. However, the discipline is currently bearing witness to the adaptation, renewal and reinvention of its scholarship, with the development of methodologies that emphasise the *contextual* over the *textual*, and explore the interface between Buddhism and its cultural contexts. Buddhist Studies is thereby becoming a multidisciplinary and comparative endeavour which is accepting and incorporating new kinds of source material and new modes of discourse.

This new methodological school reaches perhaps its most extreme expression in the work of Gregory Schopen, who, like Lopez, has presented an extensive argument against textual analysis. Schopen has criticised a methodological narrowing which has ostensibly prevented many scholars from using approaches other than philology, deeming this bias a “Protestant presupposition.”<sup>50</sup> According to Schopen, textual material is an inadequate source as it was intended to “inculcate an ideal,” in that it “records what a small, atypical part of the Buddhist community wanted that community to believe or practice.” Schopen champions other sources such as archaeological and epigraphical material, which purportedly “record or reflect at least a part of what Buddhists – both lay people and monks –

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<sup>49</sup> Jan Nattier, “Buddhist Studies in the Post-Colonial Age,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 2 (1997), 469-485

<sup>50</sup> Gregory Schopen, “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (1991), 19ff

actually practiced and believed.<sup>51</sup> Schopen's emphasis is on the contextual meaning and function of Buddhism as a living religion. However, like Lopez, he can be accused of holding an 'extreme view'. In contrast to Schopen and Lopez, and in a similar vein to Nattier, José Cabezón has articulated a more balanced view of the methodological shift, which may provide us with some concrete guidance:

There is today a call for the increased investigation of alternative semiotic forms – oral and vernacular traditions, epigraphy, ritual, patterns of social and institutional evolution, gender, lay and folk traditions, arts, archaeology and architecture... The critique is really a call for greater balance and holism within the field; it is not only a demand that equal recognition be given to new areas of research, but a call for an integrated and mutually interpenetrating research program aimed at the understanding of Buddhism as a multifaceted entity.<sup>52</sup>

Cabezón has argued extensively for the evolution of new methodological approaches in the field of Buddhist Studies. While he maintains the value of the "rigorous text-critical work" that is the "legacy of Buddhology," he has also made a significant claim for "a form of normative discourse, self-avowedly rooted in tradition, with certain formal properties" that has come to be known as Buddhist theology.<sup>53</sup> While the deracinating theories of postmodern scholars like Lopez continues to deconstruct Buddhist Studies from the hermeneutical perspective of suspicion, a collective of Western Buddhist scholars who are openly Buddhist have begun to develop this theological approach, thereby providing a positive slant to the methodological shift. We will now examine the dimensions of this emergent discourse, which has suggested the possibility of formulating a truly plural methodology for my study of Thich Nhat Hanh, one that incorporates textual/descriptive, contextual/historic, and constructive/theological approaches.

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<sup>51</sup> Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India, Studies in the Buddhist Traditions*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997). 1

<sup>52</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, "Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18, no. 2 (1995). 262-3

<sup>53</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, "Buddhist Theology in the Academy," in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger R. Jackson and John Makransky (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000). 29, 25

### Buddhist Theology

José Cabezón recently commented upon a prevalent divisive rhetoric within the discipline of Religious Studies:

...in the interest of portraying itself as objective – the legacy of the Enlightenment – we find in much of the work of the religious studies academy today a rhetoric whose goal is to distinguish between scholarship and religious discourse, considering the two incompatible. The former is portrayed as rigorous, objective, unbiased; the latter as pietistic, fideistic, and plagued by religious partisanship; or alternatively, as a form of discourse that is to be shielded from any public scrutiny.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, the field of *Religionswissenschaft* has historically been attentively distanced from the normative concerns of Christian theology. While Christian theology has maintained a distinguished position in the Western academy, the study of non-Christian religions has remained confined within the 'objectivity' of a pseudo-scientific methodology. However, in recent years such disciplines as Buddhist Studies have witnessed Buddhist scholars turning their attentions to their own tradition, armed with the tools of critical analysis but conscious of, and curious about, the normative and contextual meanings of Buddhism as a living religion. Speaking from within Buddhist traditions as committed Buddhists, such scholars have begun offering critical perspectives on aspects of Buddhism in the modern world. The methodology of such scholars can best be described as 'theological' and the emergent field has been titled 'Buddhist theology'. Representative of the recent methodological developments within Buddhist Studies, Western Buddhist theology can be understood as the examination of various forms of Buddhism in Western cultural contexts and how they relate to these contexts. This enterprise consists of an amalgamation of various forms of scholarship. The critical apparatus of academic scholarship are used to present prescriptive, normative, interpretative discourses intended to advance understandings of the meanings of Buddhism within late-modern Western contexts.

Within the representative volume *Buddhist Theology*, Roger Jackson has explored the history and evolution of this methodologically religious discourse. As Jackson

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<sup>54</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, "Scholarship as Interreligious Dialogue," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 18 (1998). 90

recognises, since the time of the 'original' Buddhist theologian, Śākyamuni himself, Buddhists have consistently reflected intellectually on their tradition, particularly within monastic contexts.<sup>55</sup> This modern enterprise is therefore not historically unprecedented. Buddhist monasteries, particularly in the Indo-Tibetan traditions, have consistently combined meditative practice with intellectual philosophical endeavours. However, as Jackson notes, following the incursion of Western modernity into Asia the Buddhist practice of theology moved beyond the monastic walls to become more lay and academically oriented. Within these new modern contexts, Jackson explains, Asian Buddhist theologians have worked "at the crossroads where tradition and modernity meet, reinterpreting Buddhism in the face of the perplexities and challenges of the brave new world in which they, and their audience, find themselves."<sup>56</sup> As Western academic and popular interest in Buddhism has progressed, Buddhist theology has continued the task of "reinterpreting authoritative tradition in changing circumstances."<sup>57</sup> As Jackson recognises, this emergent field of Western Buddhist theology is today gaining credence alongside Christian theology in the Western academy.

One of the principle concerns of this emergent academic field is the appellation of 'Buddhist theology' itself. Many Buddhist theologians have noted the potential 'oxymoronic' status of this term, as have a number of critics. In his review of Jackson and Makransky's volume, Paul Griffiths (decidedly *not* a Buddhist theologian) has disparagingly deemed the "phrase" to have "an exotic and awkward sound." As Griffiths queries, "'Theology,' after all, is a technical term from the lexicon of Christianity, and it means, etymologically and also practically, 'reasoned discourse about God.' In what sense is there a Buddhist version of this enterprise?"<sup>58</sup> Despite such attempts to undermine the use of the term, however, a number of Buddhist theologians have made convincing claims for its use, as well as for the discourse itself.

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<sup>55</sup> See Jackson, Roger R. & Makransky, John J. (eds.) *Buddhist Theology – Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, Curzon, Richmond, Surrey, 2000, 5

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 7

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Paul J. Griffiths, "Review - *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* Edited by Roger Jackson and John Makransky," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 1 (2000). 56

For example, Jackson has defined, and responded to, three possible points of objection to the use of the term. Firstly, he recognises that Buddhism's "fearless abjuration of all presuppositions" would seem at odds with the practice of theology as "intellectual reflection." In response, he observes,

...for every Buddhist text that employs a rhetoric of unfettered inquiry, there are probably ten more that are frankly rooted in religious presuppositions and purposes, and... furthermore, even texts that claim to eschew all presuppositions often invoke them unconsciously. Thus, theology is probably at work even where it appears to be absent.<sup>59</sup>

A second possible objection could be that in relation to Buddhism's emphasis on non-rational experientialism, "theology, even if it exists in Buddhism, is beside the point, a merely conventional and provisional exercise at best." In response, Jackson refers to Buddhism's huge corpus of written works, which attests to "a vast legacy" of "intellectual reflection."<sup>60</sup> Finally, Jackson voices the potential objection that:

...there is not and never has been any such thing as 'Buddhist theology' for the simple reason that the term is an imported one, with no precise equivalent in any Asian language, and that in using it, therefore, we gloss over a variety of important distinctions that Buddhists themselves have made in reflecting intellectually on their tradition.<sup>61</sup>

Most contemporary Buddhist theologians have addressed, in some way, this critical point concerning the Western and Christian origins of the term 'theology'. Jackson refers to David Tracy, who has argued that originally theology delineated discourse (*logia*) about the divine (*theo*), which may have been, and may still be, conceived as one God, many gods, or some notion of ultimate reality. Jackson also appeals to the term's "broad cross-cultural applicability," suggesting that "for purposes of conversing with members of other traditions, it would be useful for Buddhists to admit that 'theology' (at least in Tracy's sense) is something that they do and have done."<sup>62</sup> Cabezón, too, has addressed the issue, insisting that "Buddhist theology is not an oxymoron." Cabezón proposes that while 'theology'

<sup>59</sup> Roger R. Jackson, "Editor's Introduction," in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger R. Jackson and John Makransky (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000). 2

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 1, 3

understood etymologically would seem to have no bearing for an “atheological” tradition like Buddhism, if our understanding of the word is reconfigured, it may suggest meaning:

Understood *rhetorically*, ... as a kind of discourse with certain formal properties, and *functionally*, as having certain applications and purposes in the context of culture, “theology” can be meaningfully modified by the adjective “Buddhist”.<sup>63</sup>

And finally, Rita Gross has suggested two validating reasons why the term theology should be used to define this discourse. Firstly, the term is “well-known and at least reasonably well understood by the audiences to which we write and speak as professional academics who think about religion.” This is important, Gross explains, because such audiences are not always made up of just Buddhists or Buddhologists. Thus, the term has practical purpose and value within the wider academic sphere of Religious Studies. Secondly, the term is definitive of the subjective location of the scholar, as it “clearly connotes that we are thinking within the confines of a specific tradition, not as free agents, and we place ourselves under the authority of that tradition. Of course,” Gross continues, “this does not mean that we accept the received tradition lock, stock, and barrel without suggesting contemporary interpretations of that received tradition. That is why we are ‘theologians,’ not only historians or philologists.”<sup>64</sup> In relation to our earlier examination of hermeneutics and the suggestions of Gadamer concerning the subjective agency of the interpreter, Gross’s final point is significant. Cabezón has also recognised this critical point of the “subjectivity of the Buddhist theologian.” He states:

A Buddhist theologian is, first of all, a Buddhist. This is not a banal observation, given that in today’s theological climate there are many theologians who would claim that it is possible to engage in their task without allegiance to a religious tradition... Buddhist theologians are individuals who have themselves tasted the emancipatory power of Buddhist doctrine, and who therefore speak out of experience.<sup>65</sup>

In fact, it is these very lines that Kristin Kiblinger cites, and subsequently refutes, in defence of her chosen methodology. In contrast, I shall take heed. Indeed, in my

<sup>63</sup> Cabezón, “Buddhist Theology in the Academy.” 25

<sup>64</sup> Rita M. Gross, “Buddhist Theology?,” in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger R. Jackson and John Makransky (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000). 57

endeavour to apply the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh towards the potential construction of a Buddhist position of pluralism, the kind of 'religious scholarship' advanced by Buddhist theology is appropriate. Such an approach will enable me to combine descriptive and analytic, historical and contextual, and constructive and prescriptive methodologies in the service of a deeper understanding of pluralism from the perspective of Buddhism. This is something that I feel strongly about, both as a scholar of religion and a practitioner of Buddhism. To here attest to my own subjective agency, I would like to state that I approach the study of Buddhism from the perspective of personal belief, a belief that is underscored by a liberal Protestant and Quaker upbringing, but has been nurtured by the teachings and practices of Buddhism itself. At the same time, however, I do not make any claims to mastery, neither intellectual nor spiritual, and so I will agree with Cabezón that mine "is at most a psuedo-theology, born perhaps from minimal competence and good intentions, but in any case not sufficiently immersed in the rich waters of transformative praxis."<sup>66</sup>

### Gross's Method of Inseparability

Among Western Buddhist scholars, Rita Gross is considered an academic pioneer of the theological approach to studying Buddhism. In particular, she is noted for engaging in a "feminist revalorization of Buddhism" and thereby establishing a feminist theological approach to Buddhist Studies.<sup>67</sup> Conscious of the fact that her research covers new ground and stakes claims in uncharted territory, Gross has devoted time to articulating and explaining her chosen methodological vision. Defining herself as an "engaged historian of religions," Gross summarises her approach as "the simultaneous or inseparable practice of theology and of the history of religions."<sup>68</sup> As I have already stated, my methodological approach to studying Thich Nhat Hanh will incorporate textual, contextual, and theological elements. As this approach has been informed by Gross's methods, it would be expedient to examine some of her suggestions here.

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<sup>65</sup> Cabezón, "Buddhist Theology in the Academy." 41

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 41-2

<sup>67</sup> See Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*.

As Gross has observed, the contemporary study of religion is hindered by a “division of labour” – scholars either opt for the historic-descriptive method of objective research, or the constructive-normative approach of the theologian. To choose either approach, Gross argues, is limiting and constrictive. Rather, she suggests that *both* approaches should be engaged in the study of religion, as each can inform and complement the other. As we discovered in our previous chapter, Gross is particularly concerned to establish the de-absolutism of religions. According to Gross, the cross-cultural study of religions can aid this process of de-absolutisation, and can offer such a perspective to the theologian. This perspective, argues Gross, constitutes the value of objective scholarship. She suggests:

[T]o regard the de-absolutisation of one’s worldview as a negative discovery is a rather limited and spiritually immature response to the contemporary situation. Free of the impossible burden that they be universally relevant, as well as scientifically and historically true, symbols and myths can shine more preciously in their culturally conditioned matrices. When we learn to hear their claims and demands as symbols embedded in and growing out of a specific and relative context, ... then our symbols and myths can again speak to us... in a way that is impossible so long as we try to take them as unconditioned givens.<sup>69</sup>

From the opposite perspective, Gross suggests that theological methods can contribute to the cross-cultural or historic study of religions by confronting a prevalent and problematic “indifference” in such approaches. Gross discerns a pervasive “combative tone and a gamelike quality” within this kind of research, which is often only concerned with “winning.”<sup>70</sup> Theological input into such methods has the potential to expose the fallacy of “the quest for neutrality and objectivity.” Like Gadamer, Gross suggests that open acknowledgement of a scholar’s “value stance” is the only way to determine objectivity, and also where the study of religions should begin:

One does not maintain neutrality and objectivity by non-allegiance to religious, symbolic, or value systems, because such a value-free stance is quite impossible. Rather, they are protected by probing exploration, self-consciousness about, and open declaration of one’s particular evaluative stance as a scholar of religions... Every methodological stance includes values. I have long urged the practice of

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<sup>68</sup> Rita Gross, “Appendix B – Religious Experience and the study of Religion: The History of Religions” in *Ibid.* 305

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 310

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

declaring such inclinations and interests openly as the only reliable form of objectivity and neutrality.<sup>71</sup>

Once our positions are openly declared, Gross suggests that scholars may move on to more important tasks concerning the “ethical responsibilities” of engaged scholars. Such responsibility she locates in the critical imperative to use knowledge “to promote community rather than disunity in the global village...and to increase empathy and respect, both in one’s self and others, in a pluralistic world.” The only way to fulfil such responsibilities, Gross argues, is through the unification of descriptive and normative methodologies. According to Gross, creating an “artificial division between critical reflective work and cross-cultural scholarship” not only promotes “intellectual and spiritual schizophrenia,” but also constitutes “a serious abdication of responsibility.”<sup>72</sup>

Gross specifies four main elements and values that constitute her ‘methodology of inseparability’. The first is *objectivity*, which “cannot mean that the scholar has no interest or involvement in her subject matter, but that she declares her methodologies and interests clearly.” Furthermore, such a scholar evidences a “lack of apologetic fervour.” The second element is *empathy*, which constitutes “the ability to speak in many voices, or from the point of view of many different outlooks and symbols.” Such a scholar “should also be able to speak convincingly from any of these positions and should be able to switch from one to another readily. She should also be able to translate between the voices or positions. And in all these vocalisations, her own voice should be quite hidden.”<sup>73</sup> As Gross explains, these two elements – objectivity and empathy – should be utilised as the foundation, not the totality, of a sound methodology.

Upon this descriptive and extrinsic foundation, Gross establishes the more subjective and normative elements of her method. Of prime significance (and also relevance to this thesis), Gross affirms an imperative to foster *pluralism*. She states:

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 311

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 312

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 313

That we live in a world of competing, conflicting, multiple religious symbol-systems is news to no historian of religions. That the historian of religions has some responsibility to think constructively and ethically about that situation would be debated by many. But what else justifies the expenditure of time, resources, and energy on cross-cultural studies? Who else is in a better situation to say something intelligent and helpful about the problems of living with diversity and pluralism?<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, Gross affirms her central pursuit “to define a ‘genuine pluralism,’ to describe carefully the concomitant de-absolutising of every specific symbol-system, and to delineate the resulting appreciation of one’s own specificity.” Within this pursuit, she also perceives the necessity to take up a “critical stance” against any “dysfunctional traditional values.” Such values demand *criticism* if they “undermine the dignity of some members” of a religion, or “contradict the vision of genuine pluralism in a global village by promoting militancy or hostility toward ‘the others’.”<sup>75</sup> The combination of these four elements – objectivity and empathy, with the promotion of pluralism and the assumption of a critical stance – constitutes Gross’s ‘method of inseparability’. As she proclaims:

The engaged study of religions, with its combination of dispassionate de-absolutised understandings and passionate existential commitment to just and humane values, is the single most powerful lens through which one can view religion.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the fact that it was only recently that Luis Gómez discontentedly claimed, “Buddhist Studies continues to be a Western enterprise about a non-Western cultural product,”<sup>77</sup> the development of more holistic and integrated approaches, such as suggested by Cabezón and Gross, indicates that the discipline is becoming increasingly more methodologically self-reflective and aware. This is particularly evident in the discourse of Buddhist theology, which, in its attempt to shake off the shackles of the Enlightenment and its insistence upon neutrality and objective social-scientific methodologies, is boldly nailing its colours to the mast. Indeed, it is becoming widely acknowledged that modernity’s quest for neutrality and objectivity is illusive. Such acknowledgement, however, does not mean that we have no choice but to ally ourselves to the suspicious and deracinated arguments of the post-modernists. On the contrary, such acknowledgement may allow us, as

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 314

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 315

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 317

<sup>77</sup> Luis O. Gómez, “Unspoken Paradigms: Meanderings through the Metaphors of a Field,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18, no. 2 (1995). 190

scholars of religion, to embrace a normative approach and use it, I would suggest, to confront critical issues concerning interreligious relations in the late modern world. As Harry Oldmeadow has aptly observed,

As currently practised by many of its exponents comparative religion is quite clearly normative anyway. As soon as we are prepared, for instance, to talk of 'sympathy', of 'mutual understanding', of 'world community', and so on, we have entered a normative realm. It is time scholars ceased to be embarrassed by this fact and stopped sheltering behind the tattered banner of a pseudo-scientific methodology which forbids any engagement with the most interesting, the most profound and the most urgent questions which naturally stem from any serious study of religion.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, it should now be clear that in my exploration of Thich Nhat Hanh and the possibilities of a Buddhist position of pluralism, I will be employing a plural methodology. Rather than opting for one kind of approach, my methodology will encompass the textual, the contextual, and the theological. It should also be clear by now that I am approaching the study of Buddhism as an avowed pluralist, who, while maintaining personal commitments, wishes to affirm all integral religions as vehicles of the most profound and precious truths.

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<sup>78</sup> Kenneth ("Harry") Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo: The Sri Lankan Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000). 205

**Part II**

**The Teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh:  
Towards a Position of Buddhist Pluralism**

## 4

**On Tradition:  
Continuity, Adaptation, and Actualisation**

*When I was in Vietnam, so many of our villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both – to go out and help the people and to do so in mindfulness. We call it engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting... We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

To commence our investigation of Thich Nhat Hanh and his approach to religious diversity, this chapter will examine his specific approach towards the Buddhist tradition. A critical exploration of Nhat Hanh's attitude towards his own tradition is relevant and necessary for two principal reasons. Firstly, by examining Nhat Hanh in relation to his tradition we will be able to contextualise him – that is, we will be able to locate him within the cultural-historic context of twentieth-century Vietnam, and in relation to the religious context of Vietnamese Buddhism. Secondly, Nhat Hanh's particular approach to his own tradition is reflective of his approach to religious traditions in general, and their diversity within the modern world. Thus, a sound comprehension of the former will help facilitate a sound understanding of the latter. This chapter is intended to be foundational and preliminary in its introduction of the man, monk, scholar and activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the context of the Vietnam War. Upon this contextual foundation, the ethical theory and forms of Engaged Buddhism will be analysed as representative of Nhat Hanh's approach to tradition. Finally, we will elucidate the principal dynamics of continuity, adaptation and actualisation that characterise Nhat Hanh's approach to tradition, and affirm the authenticity of his articulation of Engaged Buddhism. To begin, however, a few words should be said on the meaning of tradition itself.

### Tradition

The etymology of 'tradition' is 'that which is transmitted', as descendent from the Latin *trāditio*, meaning 'delivery, surrender, a handing down'. This etymological definition refers to the most common interpretation of tradition as something – be it a cultural custom, belief, myth, a way of thinking or acting, a method or practice – which is handed down, inherited, from generation to generation through historical process, to become established, long-standing, and continuous. This prevalent comprehension of tradition usually stands in opposition to modernity, or that which is modern, where the latter is characterised by the contemporary, the innovative, the progressive, the 'post' and the 'neo'.<sup>1</sup> On a secular level, tradition

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<sup>1</sup> The concepts of modernism and modernity will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapter. For now, all that needs to be conveyed is that we are examining modernism in a broad

may refer to a cultural tradition, such as the *European Tradition*, or to a literary lineage, such as the *Shakespearean Tradition*, or the term may find usage within the lexicon of the law – the *Legal Traditions*. However, a somewhat different significance is freighted to the word within the realm of religion. When used to signify one of the great world religions, the word tradition may refer to an entire corpus of doctrines, practices, myths, rituals, symbols and iconographies, or any one of these, that give formal expression to, that uphold the spiritual legacy of, and that integrate, sustain, and manifest a religious system as it is transmitted through time. Understood in this sense, a tradition is the formal embodiment of an accepted truth; it also constitutes the vehicle for the transmission and verification of this truth, which will encompass the dynamics of spiritual methodologies, salvific actualities, and the nature of transcendent or ultimate reality.

One of the most important questions surrounding the notion of tradition and its transmission is the question of continuity versus adaptation. On the one hand, continuity is a defining aspect of tradition. As a principle of homogeneity, lineage, heritage, and sometimes orthodoxy, it ascertains preservation and integrity. A religious tradition can be understood as a complete and self-sufficient entity which contains all of the necessary means for the realisation of its truth – be it a Christian salvation, or a Buddhist enlightenment. On the other hand, a religious tradition ought not to be understood as a hypostatized artefact, frozen in time and preserved in classical purity. Indeed, the integrity of a tradition is dependent not on blind repetition and docile obedience, nor on the stagnant transmission of an obsolete deposit. Rather, for a religious tradition to maintain integrity, for it to be efficacious, to have vitality, continual impact and sustained meaning for its adherents, it must be dynamic, accessible, and contextually adaptable.

Evidently, the adaptation of a tradition ought not to imply additions or alterations as such, but rather an unfolding or revealing of religious principles that may have previously been implicit, or a renewal of spiritual perspectives or practices that may have lost their vitality. However, a tradition must adapt without losing its

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sense as representative of a contemporary world-view, grounded in recent European and Western history, rather than simply a number of twentieth-century arts movements.

authenticity, severing its traditional roots, or denouncing its foundational authority. As we have seen, Buddhism is a tradition that has been successful in this profound challenge. The dynamics of continuity and adaptation have propelled the tradition through time up to its present encounter with modernity. The contemporary interpretation of Buddhism presented by Thich Nhat Hanh follows this established pattern of cultural transmission. Indeed, as we shall now see, Nhat Hanh's representation of Buddhism resolves the dynamics of continuity and adaptation into a cohesive manifestation of the Dharma.

### Thich Nhat Hanh

On October 11, 1926, Nguyen Xuan Bao was born in a small village in central Vietnam. The son of a petty government official and a loving, nurturing mother, Nguyen enjoyed a happy childhood.<sup>2</sup> At the early age of nine, Nguyen came upon a picture of the Buddha in a magazine and was deeply impressed by a sense of peace and serenity in the image. Two years later, when his brother expressed an interest in becoming a monk, Nguyen also felt the stirrings of a vocation. Sometime later, Nguyen's school class went on an excursion to nearby Na Son Mountain, where a hermit was reputed to live. Nguyen had a longing to meet the hermit – he had heard that a hermit was “someone dedicated to becoming peaceful and happy like the Buddha.”<sup>3</sup> When the hermit did not materialise, Nguyen struck out on his own in search of the holy man. Instead, what Nguyen found was a deep well in the forest. Looking into the pool, the young boy had a moment of clarity. Thich Nhat Hanh has remembered this inaugural transformative spiritual experience as akin to ‘falling in love’:

Suddenly, I heard the sound of water dripping, and I followed that sound until I found a beautiful well nestled among the stones. When I looked down into it, I could see every pebble and every leaf at the bottom. I knelt down and drank the sparkling, clear water and felt completely fulfilled. It was as if I was meeting the hermit face to face!<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Catherine Ingram, “Thich Nhat Hanh,” in *In the Footsteps of Gandhi: Conversations with Spiritual Social Activists*, ed. Catherine Ingram (Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1990), 76.

<sup>3</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love: The Practice of Looking Deeply in the Mahayana Buddhist Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1996), 8. Nhat Hanh has also published this story as a children's book: see Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Hermit and the Well* (Berkeley, CA: Plum Blossom Books, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love: The Practice of Looking Deeply in the Mahayana Buddhist Tradition*, 8-9.

Evidently, the boy Nguyen discovered something of the hermit – we may call it Buddha-nature – within himself.

Four years later, in 1942, at the age of sixteen, Nguyen commenced his novitiate at Tu Hieu Pagoda near the imperial city of Huê in central Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> By virtue of its geographical positioning, both Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions have been acculturated in Vietnam; the former filtered down from the North in China, and the latter was imported by seafarers from India and Sri Lanka into the South. The development of these two traditions in Vietnam has been complex and eclectic and influences from Taoism, Confucianism and indigenous elements have created a unique representation of the Dharma. The presence of Pure Land Buddhism and the *dhyāna* (S. ‘meditation’; P. *jhāna*) school (*Thien* in Vietnamese, *Ch’an* in Chinese, and *Zen* in Japanese) further enriches Vietnamese Buddhism. Today, while the laity adhere to an amalgamation of Pure Land Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, many ordained Buddhists belong to one of the schools of *Thien*. The *dhyāna* school was first introduced into Vietnam in the third-century by a central Asian monk called Tang Hoi, who taught meditation and translated many sūtras before he travelled onto China in 255 CE. Later, in the sixth-century, six important schools of *Thien* were established in Vietnam. The thirteenth-century saw the emergence of *Thien* Master Que Trung (1229-1291), who inspired King Tran Nhan Tong to abdicate the throne and become a monk. The King became Master Truc Lam, Que Trung’s Dharma heir and first ancestor of *lam-Te* – the Bamboo Forest School of Vietnamese Buddhism, which is rooted in the Zen tradition of *lin-chi* (Chinese) or *rinzai* (Japanese) Buddhism.

At his root temple in Huê, the young novice Nguyen (later to become Thich Nhat Hanh) was instructed by the *Thien* Master Thich Chan That.<sup>6</sup> Throughout his one-

<sup>5</sup> The full name of the pagoda is Tu Hieu Temple Named by Imperial Order. Tu means ‘loving kindness’ and Hieu means ‘filial piety’. Tu Hieu Pagoda is located on Duong Xuan hill in the Huong Thuy district of Thua Thien province. It was established by Zen Master Hai Thieu Cuong Ky, a disciple of the first patriarch of the Lieu Quang school, Zen Master Nhat Dinh.

<sup>6</sup> *Thich* is the shortened form of *Thich-Ca*, the Vietnamese for *Shakya*, which is the abbreviation of *Sākyamuni*, the formal name of the Buddha. Every monastic member in the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition has a name that begins with *Thich*. To clarify this point, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk or nun will have a lineage name, a Dharma name, and sometimes a Dharma title. Nhat Hanh’s teacher had the lineage name Thanh Qui, the Dharma name Cuu Canh, and the Dharma title Thich Chan That. Chan That belonged to the fortieth generation of the Lam-te lineage of Thien, which is today

year novitiate, Nguyen was schooled in the philosophies and doctrines of both Mahāyāna and Theravāda, but the emphasis was on the traditional meditative methods of *Thien* practice, in particular the use of *gāthās* (S. ‘religious verse’) and *kung-ans* (Japanese, *kōans*). Nhat Hanh has offered some definition:

The practice of Thien is by no means easy. It requires a profound and powerful inner life, long and persistent training, and a strong, firm will.

The attitude of Thien toward the search for truth and its view of the problem of living in the world are extremely liberal. Thien does not recognise any dogma or belief that would hold back man’s progress in acquiring knowledge or in his daily life. Thien differs from orthodox religions in that it is not conditioned by any set of beliefs. In other words, Thien is an attitude or a method for arriving at knowledge and action. For Thien the techniques of right eating and drinking, or right breathing and right concentration and meditation, are far more vital than mere beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

Nhat Hanh has recounted some of the elements of his training, in particular the required memorisation of a small book called *The Little Manual of Practice*. Evidently, this was a Chinese *vinaya* text. It was divided into three parts: 1) *Practice in Everyday Life*, 2) *Essential Practices for a Novice*, and 3) *The Teachings of Zen Master Kuai Chan* (Quoy Son, also known as Kuei-San, the Chinese Ch’an Master who founded the Kuei-Yang lineage, one of the Five Houses of Ch’an). At first the young novice considered the monastic method of *gāthā* training “a little old-fashioned” – he “thought *The Little Manual* was written for young people and those just beginning the practice of Thien.” In retrospect, however, Nhat Hanh has concluded that this training was “the very essence of Zen.”<sup>8</sup> While Nhat Hanh’s monastic training was evidently traditional, he was to embark upon a “nontraditional career” that would involve, as Christopher Queen has recognised, “travel, administrative responsibilities, contact with members of

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the largest Buddhist order in Vietnam. He also belonged to the eighth generation of the *Lieu Quang* School, an indigenous branch of Lam-Te founded in the eighteenth-century.

<sup>7</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: The Lotus in the Sea of Fire* (London: SCM Press, 1967). 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice* (New York: Doubleday, 1995). 23-25. See also Thich Nhat Hanh, *My Master's Robe: Memories of a Novice Monk* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2002). The latter is an autobiographical collection of short anecdotes – set within the contemplative life of the monastery and against a background of French invasion and colonisation, they recount the years 1942-1947, the time of Nhat Hanh’s novitiate and the early years of his ordination.

the opposite sex, and financial affairs”<sup>9</sup> – certainly not the domains of a traditional Buddhist monk.

In 1949, at age twenty-three, Nguyen received full ordination whereupon he entered the Bao Quoc Buddhist Institute and took the name *Nhat Hanh*. This name bears tribute to an eleventh-century Buddhist teacher called Van Hanh, who was renown as a politically engaged monastic. While Van Hanh means ‘ten thousand actions’, the name Nhat Hanh means ‘one action’.<sup>10</sup> Such a title proved apt for Nhat Hanh who became decidedly focused on ‘one thing’ – the renewal of the religious heritage of his ancient Buddhist tradition. At Bao Quoc the first sign of this driving compulsion can be witnessed: Nhat Hanh voiced a radical challenge to the long-established Institute, proposing that the curriculum be expanded to include more emphasis on Western philosophy, science, languages and literature.<sup>11</sup> When the elders rejected Nhat Hanh’s suggestion, he and four other monks left the Institute and relocated in Saigon, where they lived in an abandoned temple. Nhat Hanh went to Saigon University, excelling in his studies while editing several publications to support himself and his small community. At a time when monks and nuns were prohibited from reading literature, Nhat Hanh published a number of short stories, novels and poetry collections, in addition to more academically orientated books on Buddhism.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this was a treacherous and violent time occurring, as it did, in the midst of French invasion and colonisation and the ensuing French-Indochina War. It is clear that this context had direct bearing on Nhat Hanh’s motivations. As he has recalled:

We belonged to the first generation of monks and nuns in Vietnam who had received a Western education. More than anything we wanted to help the people of our

<sup>9</sup> Christopher S. Queen, "Introduction: The Shapes and Sources of Engaged Buddhism," in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>10</sup> See Sallie B. King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action," in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher Queen and Sallie B. King (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 322.

<sup>11</sup> See Marjorie Hope and James Young, "Chapter 6 - the Third Way: Thich Nhat Hanh and Cao Ngoc Phuong," in *The Struggle for Humanity: Agents of Nonviolent Change in a Violent World*, ed. Marjorie Hope and James Young (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 193. See also Ingram, "Thich Nhat Hanh," 76.

<sup>12</sup> These included his first two books of poetry *The Autumn Flute* (1949) and *Buddhist Teachings in Folk Poetry Form* (1950); *The Family in the Practice* (1952); *How to Practice Buddhism* (1952); and *Buddhist Logic* (1952).

country during the time of war. But the teachings offered by the Buddhist Institutes had not changed for centuries. We were motivated by the desire to bring peace, reconciliation, and brotherhood to our society, and we felt frustrated that our teachers never addressed these needs. Every tradition has to renew itself from time to time in order to address the pressing issues of the day and offer the kinds of practices that are needed for renewal.<sup>13</sup>

Following his graduation, Nhat Hanh was in fact invited to return to Huê where the orthodox elders had agreed to implement a new policy to allow monks and nuns to study subjects beyond the established curriculum of the Institute. Nhat Hanh was convinced that knowledge in the areas of Western philosophy and science could help “infuse life into the practice of Buddhism” in Vietnam. “You have to speak the language of your time,” he insisted, “to express the Buddha’s teachings in ways people can understand.”<sup>14</sup> This progress towards the realisation of Nhat Hanh’s vision was, however, cut short, as his ideas became too radical for those atop the hierarchy in Huê.

Returning to Saigon in 1950, Nhat Hanh and fellow monk Thich Tri Huu established Ung Quang Temple. This Temple would later become An Quang Institute, Southern Vietnam’s most prominent centre of Buddhist Studies and a stronghold of the Buddhist Struggle Movement of the 1960s. From this time onwards, Nhat Hanh became more active in his endeavours to implement a humanistic, unified, and renewed grassroots Buddhism. Nhat Hanh founded the first Buddhist high school in Vietnam, which offered an alternative to the colonial education imposed by the French administration. He was also appointed Editor-in-Chief of the monthly journal *Vietnamese Buddhism* (Vietnamese, *Phat Giao Viet Nam*), which was the official voice of the Buddhist General Association of Vietnam. Nhat Hanh’s written output of journal, newspaper and magazine articles, as well as published books, was constant. The time following the Geneva Peace Accords (1954) was particularly prolific. While this was a time of confusion for Vietnam and uncertainty for the Buddhist establishment, it was a time of great opportunity for Nhat Hanh. A daily newspaper commissioned him to write a series of articles addressing the contemporary role of religion. Presenting headlines such

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<sup>13</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love: The Practice of Looking Deeply in the Mahayana Buddhist Tradition*. 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

as *Buddhism and the Question of God* and *Buddhism and the Problems of Democracy*, the articles were well-received as they “presented Buddhism as something very refreshing and relevant.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Nhat Hanh took the lead in organising a new educational program for An Quang Buddhist Institute. At long last, Nhat Hanh was able to initiate the curriculum he had envisaged in his youth. He established a new periodical called *The First Lotus Flowers of the Season* to give expression to this new vision of an ancient tradition, the name referring to “the young monks and nuns who were the new lotuses for our time.”<sup>16</sup>

Armed with his immense intellectual and creative abilities, Nhat Hanh began to articulate his vision of an ‘engaged’ Buddhism. Nhat Hanh has been credited with coining the term ‘engaged Buddhism,’<sup>17</sup> however the concept, known in Vietnamese as *nhân gian Phat Giao*, was in fact first used by a Buddhist revival movement in the 1930s. From the 1930s onwards, the historical involvement of the Sangha in political activism against colonialism spawned the perception of Buddhism as “the true national religion” of Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> According to Nhat Hanh, the reform movement of the 1930s,

...contributed importantly to the renovation of the native culture, the reformation of Buddhism, the abolition of superstitions, and gradually gave Buddhism intellectual prestige... The Buddha’s teachings were presented in a new light by a young generation of Western-educated intellectuals and this helped enormously the task of bringing Buddhism to the young.”<sup>19</sup>

Within the above description, the typical Engaged Buddhist endeavour to reconstruct Buddhism as a politico-social force in the face of colonialism and modernity is implied. So too is a further distinguishing feature – what Gananath

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>17</sup> According to Kenneth Kraft, Nhat Hanh published a book called *Engaged Buddhism* in 1963. [See Kenneth Kraft, “Prospects of a Socially Engaged Buddhism” in Kenneth Kraft, ed., *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992). 18. Writing in 1996, Christopher Queen noted that he could find no other reference to this work. [See Queen, “Introduction: The Shapes and Sources of Engaged Buddhism.” 34, fn. 6.] Until recently, I was in agreement with Queen. However, Nhat Hanh himself refers to this work as having been published in 1964, and to another later work titled *Actualised Buddhism*, in his recent publication - Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World* (London: Rider Books, 2003). See page 94.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994). 355.

Obeyesekere has called the “rationalisation of the religious life”. In addition to the emergence of a new kind of leader who symbolises a new order, and a shift towards this-worldly asceticism directed at political and social goals, Obeyesekere has noted this feature of rationalisation as defining of a new Buddhism at work in secular realms. According to Obeyesekere, this rationalisation involves “the discrediting of folk religious elements (such as theistic devotionism or ritualism) and an emphasis on mental and moral development through education and virtuous living.”<sup>20</sup> These elements became characteristic features within Nhat Hanh’s representation of Engaged Buddhism.

Despite the established history of reformist movements and the evident infusion of the idea of engagement within the monastic consciousness, Nhat Hanh continued to struggle against disapproval and censure from the Buddhist establishment. In 1956, the publication of the journal *Vietnamese Buddhism*, which Nhat Hanh edited and frequently contributed to, was suspended. Time and again, Nhat Hanh’s efforts to raise awareness, renew Buddhism and create social change in Vietnam were rebuffed by the “pillars of conservatism.”<sup>21</sup> Consumed by a sense of defeat, and suffering from ill health, Nhat Hanh eventually saw a need to retreat. He and his small Sangha chose the remote wilderness of Dai Lao Forest in which to build a hermitage. Deep in the highlands north of Saigon, the group of monks and nuns built *Phuong Boi* – an experimental community geared towards cultivating spiritual transformation. It was a place where they could continue their traditional practice of Buddhism, while cultivating new ways to socially actualise their beliefs.

Nhat Hanh maintained contact with the world beyond *Phuong Boi* through not infrequent trips to various temples and pagodas in and around Saigon, where he

<sup>19</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: The Lotus in the Sea of Fire*. 52.

<sup>20</sup> Gananath Obeyesekere, “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon,” in *The Two Wheels of Dhamma: Essays on the Theravada Tradition in India and Ceylon*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith, *American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion* (Chambersberg, PA: American Academy of Religion, 1972). 63-65.

<sup>21</sup> See Chân Không (Cao Ngoc Phuong), *Learning True Love: How I Learned and Practised Social Change in Vietnam* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993). 48. As Chân Không recognised, “All the young monks were fond of him and wholeheartedly supported his efforts to renew the teachings and practice, but the more conservative elders were not supportive of his innovations...” 29.

offered teaching courses on aspects of Buddhist philosophy and practice. A core group of young university students and social activists gathered around Nhat Hanh, devout followers who were to become the foundational “thirteen cedars” of Nhat Hanh’s engaged movement and monastic order. Among these thirteen was Cao Ngoc Phuong, a young woman who would later become Sister Chan Khong, Nhat Hanh’s lifetime colleague and companion. Nhat Hanh trained these young activists to become “like strong cedars to help support the Buddha’s teachings” to be implemented in the world.<sup>22</sup> Inevitably, however, Nhat Hanh faced continual admonition and criticism for his activities. Moreover, around this time his name was removed—from the membership records—of the *livre de famille* of the An Quang Pagoda, the temple he had helped to establish. This was a move akin to expulsion and is indicative of the growing resistance to his reforms from within the Buddhist ranks, as well as the government. Thus, in 1961, when he was offered a fellowship to study Comparative Religion at Princeton University in the United States (and a subsequent teaching position at Columbia), Nhat Hanh accepted and withdrew into the ivory tower for a period of intensive study, cultural experience, and personal reflection.

### The Buddhist Struggle Movement

Due to the plethora of studies of the Vietnam War, and the extant number of exceptional analyses of the Buddhist Struggle Movement, a detailed examination of these will not be presented here.<sup>23</sup> Suffice to say, the escalation of the Vietnam

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<sup>22</sup> See Ibid. 30, footnote.

<sup>23</sup> The Vietnam War is the subject of countless excellent political, social, military, and historical studies. A few worth mentioning, coming from both American and Vietnamese perspectives are: Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Henry Kamm, *Dragon Ascending: Vietnam and the Vietnamese* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997). John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1998). Tran Van-Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (New York: Presidio Press, 1978). Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976). Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea and the Hazards of World History, Edwin O. Reischauer Lectures*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). To date, Sallie B. King has provided arguably the best succinct yet astute analysis of Thich Nhat Hanh and the Buddhist Struggle Movement of the Vietnam War. See King, “Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action.” In addition to Nhat Hanh’s works, see also: Không (Cao Ngoc Phuong), *Learning True Love: How I Learned and Practised Social Change in Vietnam*. Sallie B King, “They Who Burned Themselves for Peace: Quaker and Buddhist Self-Immolators During the Vietnam War,” *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 20 (2000). Quan Nhu’ Pham Van Minh, *Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism: The Struggle Movement of 1963-1966* (Westminster, California: Van Nghe Publishers, 2002), Robert Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed:*

War brought intense suffering and mass destruction to Nhat Hanh's homeland. A protest collective led by the United Buddhist Congregation of Vietnam (UBCV) attempted to traverse the vast distance between Washington, the bastion of anti-Communism, and the rice fields of rural Vietnam, where ideologies were meaningless in the context of such extreme and horrific destruction. Based upon an ethical foundation of nonviolence and non-partisanship, the Buddhist Struggle Movement sided with neither the Communist North nor the American-allied South; they sought not victory for one side but an end to the warfare and suffering. As such, the Movement forged a 'middle path' and symbolised an alternative 'third way' between the competing ideologies. In a country that was eighty percent Buddhist, the Struggle Movement was a 'rice-roots' movement of the people that managed to bring down the iniquitous Diem government in 1963. By 1966, Buddhism had become a powerful vehicle for nationalist sentiment and the Movement a nationalist struggle for peace that would ultimately confront the monstrous military might of the United States.

Despite the successful employment of pacifist strategies in the *coup d'état*, intensified violence and chaos followed the fall of Diem. At the urgent appeal for help from a faction of the Buddhist leadership, Nhat Hanh left the United States. Back in Vietnam, Nhat Hanh perceived an opportune situation in which to initiate his plans for the renewal and reform of Buddhism. Indeed, the following two years were a time of fierce activism, unwavering dedication, and prolific theorisation as Nhat Hanh began to establish the real meaning and practice of Engaged Buddhism. Whilst still lacking the approval of the Buddhist hierarchy, Nhat Hanh and his collective of young monks and nuns, university students, social workers, and activists began to move Buddhism beyond monastic walls and off the meditation cushion. In February 1964, Nhat Hanh founded Van Hanh University in Saigon, the name of the institution bearing tribute to his religious forebear and namesake. At Van Hanh, Nhat Hanh was able to fulfil his concept of Buddhist higher education, incorporating traditional Buddhist Studies within a broader secular Western curriculum. At this time Nhat Hanh also initiated another

new project centred on the creation of pioneer experimental villages. Using the university as a base, Nhat Hanh began galvanising and training young volunteers to go out into the surrounding countryside and establish schools and medical centres, teach villagers skills such as modern farming methods, and improve their public sanitation. As such the villages served as “models for social change.”<sup>24</sup> In 1965, Nhat Hanh formally established the School of Youth for Social Services (SYSS) and it became the principal apparatus of his Engaged Buddhism. One commentator, Robert King, has acclaimed the SYSS as “undoubtedly, Nhat Hanh’s greatest contribution during this period.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the American Press compared its programs and success to the Peace Corps.<sup>26</sup> Not unexpectedly, being unable to support what was seen as a radical departure from tradition, the Buddhist hierarchy withdrew the schools official status and affiliation with Van Hanh University in 1966. However, by this time the SYSS was sufficiently supported by agencies beyond the hierarchical realm. The SYSS helped to relieve suffering of all kinds, and provided aid to all people, regardless of political affiliation. Nhat Hanh instructed his students to “prepare to die without hatred”:

Our enemy is anger, hatred, greed, fanaticism, and discrimination against people. If you die because of violence, you must meditate on compassion in order to forgive those who kill you. When you die realising this state of compassion, you are truly a child of the Awakened One. Even if you are dying in oppression, shame, and violence, if you can smile with forgiveness, you have great power.<sup>27</sup>

Among the more confrontational faction of the Buddhist Struggle Movement, both clergy and laity were involved in challenging the superpowers and their policies of destruction.<sup>28</sup> Direct protest took many forms. Nhat Hanh has described some of these forms as manifestations of “love in action”:

<sup>24</sup> Không (Cao Ngoc Phuong), *Learning True Love: How I Learned and Practised Social Change in Vietnam*. 60.

<sup>25</sup> Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalisation* (New York: Continuum, 2003). 82.

<sup>26</sup> Leo D. Lefebure, *The Buddha and the Christ: Explorations in Buddhist Christian Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993). 146.

<sup>27</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993). 19.

<sup>28</sup> Sallie King has recognised three factions that made up the Buddhist Struggle Movement: Thich Nhat Hanh and the SYSS formed one faction, in addition to a pro-NLF camp, and the most visible and politically active group led by the An Quang Pagoda monks. The most prominent leaders of the latter group were Thich Tri Quang, Thich Tam Chau, and Thich Thien Minh. See King, “Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action.” 326.

During our struggle, many scenes of love arose spontaneously – a monk sitting calmly before an advancing tank; woman and children raising their bare hands against barbed wire; students confronting military police who looked like monsters wearing huge masks and holding bayonets; young women running through clouds of tear gas with babies in their arms; hunger strikes held silently and patiently; monks and nuns burning themselves to death to try to be heard above the raging noise of the war. And all of these efforts bore some fruit.<sup>29</sup>

Nhat Hanh has also recalled members of the laity shaving their heads in evocation of Buddhist values and presence and family altars being placed in the streets in the paths of approaching tanks. In such instances, in Nhat Hanh's words, the people were "relying on their culture and tradition to oppose the forces of destruction...using their most potent spiritual force to directly confront the violence."<sup>30</sup> Other types of protest included fasting, the mobilisation of boycotts and strikes in non-cooperation with the government, nonviolent civil disobedience, and the formation of an underground network to shelter deserters and aid draft resisters. Some forms of protest were extreme, in particular the several self-immolations. Indeed, the image of an elderly Buddhist monk sitting in meditation engulfed in flames on a Saigon street has become a paradigmatic icon of the Buddhist Struggle Movement.

Nhat Hanh documented the atrocities of war within his poetry and plays, which also served as pedagogical tools.<sup>31</sup> One of his most powerful poems from this period, *Condemnation*, denounces the fratricidal war, and also relays his central axiom of recognising the 'true enemy'. An excerpt reads:

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<sup>29</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993). 40.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 40-41.

<sup>31</sup> The collection of Nhat Hanh's poetry published, and banned, during the war was called *Prayers of the White Dove of Peace to Appear*. Today, his poetry is most readily available in the collection Nhat Hanh, *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*. See also the publication Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Cry of Vietnam: Poetry*, trans. Helen Coutant (Drawings by Vo-Dinh) (Santa Barbara, CA: Unicorn Press, 1968). Nhat Hanh's sole dramatic work - "The Path of Return Continues the Journey" - is published in Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*. 9-36.

“Beware! Turn around to face your real enemies –  
Ambition, violence, hatred, and greed.”

Humans are not our enemies – even those called “Vietcong,”  
If we kill our brothers and sisters, what will we have left?  
With whom then shall we live?<sup>32</sup>

Written in 1964, this antiwar poem was first published in the Buddhist weekly issue *The Sound of the Rising Tide (Hai Triêu Am)*, which at the time had a circulation of fifty thousand. The poem was later turned into a peace song called “Do Not Shoot Your Brother” song by the popular musician Pham Duy:

Our enemy has the name of hatred  
Our enemy has the name of inhumanity  
Our enemy has the name of anger  
Our enemy has the name of ideology

Our enemy wears the mask of freedom  
Our enemy is dressed in lies  
Our enemy bears empty words  
Our enemy is the effort to divide us

Our enemy is not man.  
If we kill man, with whom shall we live?<sup>33</sup>

The popularity of Nhat Hanh’s poetry soon raised suspicions and once again he found himself at the end of many accusatory fingers. Earning the title ‘anti-war poet’, Nhat Hanh was himself condemned by Hanoi and Saigon, both governments of which considered him a threat to their political agendas. While Saigon accused him of being a Communist, Hanoi declared: “His soul and body have obviously been bought by the Pentagon and the White House.”<sup>34</sup> The controversy incited by his artistic works eventually resulted in their denouncement as contraband, and their distribution, which became necessarily subversive, contributed to Nhat Hanh’s ultimate exile from Vietnam.

Nhat Hanh emerged as arguably the chief theorist and leading spokesman within the Movement and was ceaseless in his call for peace and reconciliation. His important 1967 publication *Vietnam: The Lotus in the Sea of Fire* reveals an

<sup>32</sup> “Condemnation” in Nhat Hanh, *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*. 39.

<sup>33</sup> See Ibid. and King, “Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action.” 335.

image of its author as a young activist-monk of incisive vision and resolute purpose, unambiguous motivation and clear conviction. The book presented a unique, penetrating, and assiduous analysis of the real causes of the Vietnam War, based upon a recognition of the fundamental incompatibility of American and popular Vietnamese sentiment. According to Nhat Hanh, an American military victory in Vietnam was never a possibility:

The more American troops are sent to Vietnam the more the anti-American campaign led by the NFL becomes successful. Anger and hatred rise in the hearts of the peasants as they see their villages burned, their compatriots killed, their houses destroyed... The country is full of American soldiers. And these military men do not have any background in the culture, folklore, and the way of living of the Vietnamese people... The majority of the peasants take little or no interest in the problems of Communism or anti-Communism. They are direct victims of the war, and consequently they welcome every effort in the direction of ending the war... The more the war is escalated, the more they are its victims, since both sides threaten their lives and property... The spirit of patriotism among the peasants is very high. They are not informed about the history of the war, or ideological struggles; what they see is a large force of white Westerners doing their best to kill their fellow-countrymen, many of whom previously fought against the French. The peasants do not see the victims of the American military effort as dead Communists, but as dead patriots... I know it is a hard fact for Americans to face, but it is a fact that the more Vietnamese their troops succeed in killing, and the larger the force they introduce into Vietnam, the more surely they build the very thing they are trying to destroy.<sup>35</sup>

Such an analysis did not wash well with the United States military. They saw the Buddhists as nationalist fanatics, driven by political ambitions and capable of alliance with the Communists. As the Catholic peace activist Fr. Daniel Berrigan has observed, the Buddhist Struggle Movement, with its emphasis on nonviolence and Vietnamese self-determination, "became a mortal threat to some of those for whom weapons were the indispensable means of survival or liberation."<sup>36</sup> Countless monks, nuns, and student volunteers were arrested and imprisoned or assassinated. One such attempt was made on the life of Nhat Hanh, who narrowly escaped. Fortuitously, a Christian-based organisation called the Fellowship of Reconciliation arranged for Nhat Hanh to travel to the United States to raise awareness and call an end to the war. Nhat Hanh realised that in order to continue

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<sup>34</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: The Lotus in the Sea of Fire*. 89.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 74-79.

<sup>36</sup> D. Berrigan, "Their Speech is All of Forgiveness," the Foreword to Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*. 5.

his anti-war activism he would indeed have to leave Vietnam. It would take almost forty years for Nhat Hanh's 'path of return' to come full-circle.

Christopher Queen has recognised two common defining features of Engaged Buddhist Movements and organisations: their *collectivism* – “They presume that suffering and its relief have a social dimension that cannot be addressed by private spirituality and morality alone”; and their *globalisation* – “They have established themselves as global agencies, inviting participation, membership, and material support from sympathisers throughout the world, by the high visibility, mobility, and collaboration of their leaders.”<sup>37</sup> Nhat Hanh's international tour firmly established the Buddhist Struggle Movement as a 'global agency'. In the United States, Nhat Hanh spoke to public audiences, local and national media, and U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara and a large gathering of Congressmen. He also met with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Catholic priest/activist Father Daniel Berrigan, and the Trappist monk/activist Father Thomas Merton. The three-week tour was soon extended to three months, with an included trip to Europe and a meeting with the Roman Pontiff Pope Paul VI. Despite Nhat Hanh's practical proposal for peace, his uniquely non-partisan and humane analysis of the war, and his world-wide clarion call for peace, his efforts to instigate reconciliation were ultimately ineffectual. Nevertheless, Nhat Hanh had entered the world stage and his impact was profound and far-reaching. Two encounters stand out in significance: Nhat Hahn's meetings with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Father Thomas Merton. Both deserve mention as they represent the beginnings of Nhat Hanh's career as an interreligious dialogist, an exponent and exemplar of an engaged spirituality, and an apostle of world peace.

Nhat Hanh and Martin Luther King met for the first time in Chicago in 1966 where they held a joint press conference during which King announced his opposition to the Vietnam War. Evidently, Nhat Hanh's letter to King the previous

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<sup>37</sup> Christopher Queen, "Engaged Buddhism: Agnosticism, Interdependence, Globalization," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002). 326.

year had a decisive influence on King's position regarding the war. Indeed, King saw affinities between the Buddhist Struggle Movement and the American Civil Rights Movement.<sup>38</sup> A strong bond developed between the two spiritual activists; they were united by their shared beliefs in nonviolence, equality, justice, peace and love, beliefs that transcended their cultural and religious differences. At the same time, their relationship helped to transform Nhat Hanh's view of Christianity. This had been tainted by his experiences of a Catholicism corrupted by the missionising dogmatism of colonialism, as in the case of the French occupation in Vietnam, and the power and wealth mongering manoeuvres of dictatorship and American alliance, as in the case of the Catholic leaders of South Vietnam. At the time of their last meeting in Geneva, only three months before King's assassination, Nhat Hanh recalls assuring King: "You know, Martin, in Vietnam they consider you a bodhisattva."<sup>39</sup> Nhat Hanh perceived in King the spirit of truth and compassion, and the profound wisdom that belongs to the truly holy and surpasses religious boundaries. Nhat Hanh had a similar impression upon King, who nominated Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967.<sup>40</sup> In his letter to the Nobel Institute, King stated:

I do not know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle Buddhist monk from Vietnam...conferring the Prize on Nhat Hanh would itself be a most generous act of peace. It would remind all nations that men of good will stand ready to lead warring elements out of an abyss of hatred and destruction. It would reawaken men to the teaching of beauty and love found in peace. It would help to revive hopes for a new order of justice and harmony.

I know Thich Nhat Hanh, and am privileged to call him my friend... He is a holy man, for he is humble and devout. He is a scholar of immense intellectual capacity... he is also a poet of superb clarity and human compassion... His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalisation*. 161.

<sup>39</sup> See Ingram, "Thich Nhat Hanh." 87.

<sup>40</sup> Harry Oldmeadow has astutely observed that "Thich Nhat Hanh...would have been one of the most worthy recipients had those awarding the prize had more prescience. (It might be remarked in passing that the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Dalai Lama restored some of the luster which had been tarnished by some peculiar choices in earlier years – none more so than Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, both embroiled in the ruthless and unprincipled war against Thich Nhat Hanh's country.)" See Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004). 379.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter to the Nobel Institute," (Oslo, Norway: [www.mindfulness.org/letter.htm](http://www.mindfulness.org/letter.htm), 1967).

A similar bond was formed between Nhat Hanh and fellow-monk, war critic and mentor of peace activists, Father Thomas Merton.<sup>42</sup> The two monks met only once, in May 1966 at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, a remote monastic community in Kentucky and home to Merton. As with his meeting with King, a kind of resonance characterised Nhat Hanh's encounter with Merton. Nhat Hanh later recalled the ease with which they conversed and the unexpected depth of Merton's knowledge of Buddhism, and indeed, his spirituality. Nhat Hanh has recalled, "When we talked, I told him a few things, and he understood the things I didn't tell him." Indeed, Nhat Hahn was deeply impressed with Merton's intellectual and spiritual comprehension of nonduality, "one of the most difficult things concerning the understanding between East and West," as well as his tremendous "capacity for dialogue".<sup>43</sup> A representative of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, John Heidbrink, who accompanied Nhat Hanh on his U.S. Tour, has recalled a "charismatic moment" of shared practice in the encounter of the two monks. Because they were interested in each other's religious practice, Merton recited one of the daily offices used by the monks at Gethsemani, and Nhat Hanh responded with a Buddhist chant in Vietnamese. Apparently, Merton was so moved that he began spontaneously to sing along – a moment of authentic 'post-verbal' dialogue.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Nhat Hanh had a powerful effect on Merton, who described him as "first of all, a true monk; very quiet, gentle, modest, humble, and you can see his Zen has worked".<sup>45</sup> Merton later wrote a public appeal on Nhat Hanh's behalf, titled "Thich Nhat Hanh is my Brother". An excerpt reads:

Thich Nhat Hanh is my brother. He is more my brother than many who are nearer to me by race and nationality, because he and I see things exactly the same way. He and I deplore the war that is ravaging his country. We deplore it for exactly the same reasons: human reasons, reasons of sanity, justice and love... Nhat Hanh is a free man who has acted as a free man in favour of his brothers and moved by the spiritual dynamic of a tradition of religious compassion. He has come among us as many others have, from time to time, bearing witness to the spirit of Zen. More than any

<sup>42</sup> For a comprehensive study of the relationship between Nhat Hanh and Thomas Merton in the context of global spirituality and activism, see King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalisation*.

<sup>43</sup> This section of quotes comes from Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984). 151-2.

<sup>44</sup> See King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalisation*. 10.

<sup>45</sup> See Thomas Merton and Christine M. Bochen, *Learning to Love : Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997). 76.

other he has shown us that Zen is not an esoteric and world denying cult of inner illumination, but that it has its rare and unique sense of responsibility in the modern world.<sup>46</sup>

These initial encounters with Christianity, and the seeds of open interreligious dialogue and understanding that they planted, were to bear beautiful fruits later in Nhat Hanh's career. For now, however, we must take note of Merton's reference to Nhat Hanh's motivations and his approach to the Buddhist tradition. According to Merton, Nhat Hanh's compulsion towards social and political engagement was directly informed by an experiential and spiritual comprehension of the inner meaning of compassion within Buddhism, and the imperative for that compassion to have real meaning in a suffering world. In other words, Merton is claiming the traditional authenticity of Nhat Hanh's actions. We will now leave behind the narrative of Nhat Hanh's activism during the Vietnam War and turn to an examination of Engaged Buddhism in general, and Nhat Hanh's renewal of traditional Buddhist philosophy and forms specifically.

### Engaged Buddhism

Buddhism has conventionally been perceived as a world-denying, introspective, socially inept religion of monastic withdrawal. The image of a meditating Buddha is customarily recognised as representative of the renouncing ascetic, bent on personal inner enlightenment, an embodiment of passive peace and transcendent mysticism. This perception has been reflected within the discourses of Buddhist Studies, in which an *idée reçue*<sup>47</sup> depicts Buddhism as an otherworldly religion, indifferent to social ethics and neglectful of programs of socio-political-moral transformation. Max Weber popularised the image of the socially withdrawn and inept Buddhist in his theory of the "ideal types" which manifest in the history of religions. Weber contrasted the "other-worldly asceticism" of Buddhist monks with the "inner-worldly asceticism" of Protestant clergy. He claimed Buddhism to

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Merton, "Thich Nhat Hanh is my Brother", published in King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalisation*. 104.

<sup>47</sup> D. S. Lopez notes a number of *idée reçue*, or 'enduring ideas', which have shaped Buddhist Studies in the West and which are now being questioned: "...that Zen Buddhism is, above all, an experience; that Tibetan Buddhism is polluted, or that it is pristine; that the Buddha image is of Greek or Roman origin; that the Asian is an introvert; that the classical source supersedes the vernacular; that the manuscript supersedes the informant." D. S. Lopez, Jr., "Introduction" in

be “a specifically unpolitical and anti-political status religion”, a “soteriology of intellectuals” that had “established no ‘socio-political goal’”. Of Buddhist practice Weber declared “an insolvable gap yawns between the ethics of action and the technical rules of contemplation and only the latter yields salvation.” Ultimately Weber considered the quest for enlightenment to be an egotistical endeavour, a perception that had far-reaching and lasting influence in the popular and academic understandings of Buddhism.<sup>48</sup>

As we have seen, however, Buddhism today is just as likely to be represented by relatively radical-images of Buddhists engaged in various kinds of nonviolent activism, peaceful protest, or dedicated social service. The Buddhist Struggle Movement of the Vietnam War was just one of the many contemporary manifestations of Engaged Buddhism. Beginning at the turn of the last century, the initial ‘liberation movements’ emerged throughout South, Southeast, and East Asia in response to the encroaching and often disastrous force of modernity. As modern movements of reform, they have been influenced by modernity, yet at the same time have presented challenges to the culturally and politically dominating modernist powers of colonialism, invasion, Westernisation and globalised capitalism.<sup>49</sup> Christopher Queen and Sallie King have defined:

They are concerned to mobilise the Buddhist laity to address their own economic, social and political, and spiritual needs; to contribute to the amelioration of conditions that produce suffering for all living beings; and, finally, to reform, in light of the demands of modernity, Buddhist doctrines and institutions. It is, finally, their focus upon the relief of concrete economic, social, political, and environmental ills

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Donald S. Lopez, ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995). 1.

<sup>48</sup> See Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958). 206-226.

<sup>49</sup> Among the most renowned is the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement; Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s Buddhist mass-conversion movement of ‘Untouchables’; the Venerable Sangharakshita’s TBMSG - *Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana* (“The Association of Friends of the Buddhist Order of the Three Realms”); Thailand’s ‘Development Monks’ and ‘Forest Monks’; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh and the Sakyadhita International Organisation of Buddhist Women, and other such eminent figures as Sulak Sivaraksa, Acham Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Maha Ghosananda, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Dalai Lama. For a comprehensive collection see Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). See also Charles S. Prebish, Christopher S. Queen, and Damien V. Keown, *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, *RoutledgeCurzon Critical Studies in Buddhism*. (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). And Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges and Achievements* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).

that qualifies these movements as “liberation movements,” and it is their commitment to pursue this end on the basis of Buddhist spirituality and heritage that makes them ‘Buddhist liberation movements.’<sup>50</sup>

Engaged Buddhism thereby presents an important challenge to one-dimensional assumptions and mystical imaginings about Buddhism and its soteriology. It also confronts the objectified view of Buddhism as a historically static artefact, and encourages a recognition of the many Buddhisms of the world.

Sallie King has noted the prevalence of “certain key ideas and practices drawn from tradition” that define the core of Engaged Buddhist theory. According to King, these ideas and practices legitimise Engaged Buddhism “by placing it within the continuum of orthodoxy and tradition,” while establishing “the foundational concepts and approaches upon which Engaged Buddhists build.” She continues to note, “The fact that these ideas and practices turn up again and again throughout the distinct Engaged Buddhist movements also has the consequence of establishing a degree of unity in both discourse and practice among Engaged Buddhists.”<sup>51</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh’s engaged ethics, teachings, and practices can be understood as representative of these ‘key ideas and practices’, a number of which have already been mentioned. We will now take a closer look. Firstly, we will look at the central aspects of the Engaged Buddhist re-articulation of traditional Buddhist teachings and philosophies as represented by Nhat Hanh’s discourse. Secondly, we will examine the principal manifestations of Nhat Hanh’s renewal of traditional forms – as represented by the *Order of Interbeing* – and of traditional practice – as represented by the *Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings*.

### Engaged Buddhist Ethical Theory

Among the many contemporary voices contributing to discourses of political theory, global ethics, human rights, nonviolence, and social justice, Engaged Buddhism speaks clearly in articulating its irenic vision of global community. Certain key aspects of Engaged Buddhist ethical theory stand out in significance. We will here examine causality, interdependence and emptiness, the imperative to

<sup>50</sup> Queen and King, eds., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. x-xi.

<sup>51</sup> Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005). 12.

act, the soteriological shift, nonviolence and being peace, and non-partisanism and the true enemy.

### *Causality, Interdependence, Emptiness*

According to tradition, the Buddha's enlightenment constituted a direct experience of the web of causality in which all life subsists. This insight into the true nature of reality revealed the radical temporal and ontological interdependence and impermanence of all phenomena. Penetrating the veils of ignorance, the Buddha perceived the truths of selflessness (P. *anattā*, S. *anātman*) and impermanence (P. *anicca*; S. *anitya*), and the consequent-interconnectedness of reality and interpenetration of all things. This was the experiential foundation for the doctrine of co-dependent origination (P. *paṭiccasamuppādu*; S. *pratītyasamutpāda*) which teaches that all phenomena are conditioned (P. *saṅkhata*, S. *saṃskṛta*), lack intrinsic being, and arise and cease in a determinate series. The early formula is representative: "This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that becomes not; from the ceasing of this, that ceases."<sup>52</sup> As we have already discussed, the sūtras of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, such as the *Heart Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra*<sup>53</sup>, and then the elaborations of the great Mahāyāna theorists, such as Nāgārjuna, developed the later doctrine of emptiness (P. *suññatā*; S. *sūnyatā*), which extends the truths of selflessness and interdependence *ad infinitum*. Today, these quintessential Buddhist teachings form the foundations of the Engaged Buddhist philosophical, ethical, and practical systems.

Many Engaged Buddhist theorists and leaders have applied these teachings to an analysis of contemporary society and its multitude of ills. For example, the founder of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka, A.T. Ariyaratne, has observed:

<sup>52</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* II, 28. This is an elaboration of the simplest expression of this doctrine: *idaṃ suti ayam bhuvati* – "when this exists, that arises". See also *Majjima Nikāya* in Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Individual, Society, and Nature," in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988). 41.

<sup>53</sup> Otherwise known as the 'Sūtra of the Heart of the Perfection of Insight' or the *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛidaya-sūtra*, and the 'Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom of the Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion' or the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*.

One of the unique teachings of the Buddha is the theory of dependent arising. Everything is related to every other thing. If there is no peace in a society, there should be a variety of interdependent and interrelated causes that bring about such a situation. All these causes have to be attacked simultaneously and removed to make a reversal of the processes that have brought about a loss of peace in our society so that we can rebuild a culture of peace.<sup>54</sup>

The Dalai Lama provides another example of social analysis in light of interdependence. In recognition of the interconnected nature of the social and global context of humanity, His Holiness confirms that “our every action, our every deed, word and thought” has direct implications for others. Consequently, our individual happiness and very survival can only be determined communally. The Dalai Lama proposes the critical global construction of sound ethical, political, social, and environmental systems as the only way to ensure the happiness and safety of one and all.<sup>55</sup> The Dalai Lama further articulates his perspective through the notion of ‘universal responsibility’, which becomes ever more propounded with every advance of modernity:

In the past, families and small communities could exist more or less independently of one another... Today’s reality is so complex and, on the material level at least, so clearly interconnected that a different outlook is needed. Modern economics is a case in point. A stock-market crash on one side of the globe can have a direct effect on the economies of countries on the other. Similarly, our technological achievements are now such that our activities have an unambiguous effect on the natural environment. And the very size of our population means that we cannot any longer afford to ignore others’ interests... In view of this, I am convinced that it is essential that we cultivate a sense of what I call universal responsibility.<sup>56</sup>

Nhat Hanh has voiced a similar proclamation:

It has become clear that the fate of the individual is inextricably linked to the fate of the whole human race. People must let others live if they themselves want to live... The only alternative to co-existence is co-non-existence.<sup>57</sup>

Elaborating further upon the interdependence of self and society, Nhat Hanh has applied the Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness to the interdependence of spiritual practice and social change. In doing so, he articulates his very distinctive interpretation of *śūnyatā*:

<sup>54</sup> A. T. Ariyaratne, in King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*. 12-13

<sup>55</sup> HH the Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, as discussed and cited in Ibid. 13

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 14

<sup>57</sup> Nhat Hanh, “The Individual, Society, and Nature.” 42.

When we go to a meditation centre, we may have the impression that we leave everything behind – family, society, and all the complications involved in them – and come as an individual in order to practice and to search for peace. This is already an illusion, because in Buddhism there is no such thing as an individual.

...the individual is made of non-individual elements. How do you expect to leave everything behind when you enter a meditation centre? The kind of suffering that you carry in your heart, that is society itself. You bring that with you, you bring society with you. When you meditate, it is not just for yourself, you do it for the whole society. You seek solutions for your problems not only for yourself, but for all of us.<sup>58</sup>

The cornerstone of the entirety of Nhat Hanh's reinterpretation of Buddhism, that which represents the core vision of his metaphysical and ontological universe and which underlies every element of his teachings, is the Buddhist notion of interdependence, based upon the doctrines of co-dependent origination and emptiness. In his language, employing one of a number of neologisms, this quintessential Buddhist principle is appropriated and re-articulated in the term *interbeing*. Interbeing is the key hermeneutical tool in the study of Nhat Hanh's philosophy. Every aspect of his teachings and practices can be explained in relation to interbeing. In fact, they cannot really be totally understood from an academic perspective, or employed efficaciously from a perspective of praxis or activism, without a comprehension and actualisation of this tenet. The cloud/sunshine/paper analogy is a recurrent pedagogical device in Nhat Hanh's discourse. In his commentary on the *Heart Sūtra*, which out of all the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* is most specifically focused on *śūnyatā*, he explains, "The paper and the sunshine inter-are... To be is to inter-be. You cannot be just by yourself alone. You have to be with everything else."<sup>59</sup> As the Buddhist scholar Peter Oldmeadow has recognised, Nhat Hanh offers a positive reading of the doctrine of *śūnyatā* which, as such, differs from the original negating articulations of emptiness expressed in the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* and offered by Nāgārjuna and other Indian Madhyamika philosophers. Oldmeadow explains:

According to the positive reading, given that things arise or exist in a network of relations, each thing necessarily involves every other thing. The being or coming forth of an entity is the coming forth of the totality. Any change in one entity implies

<sup>58</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987). 46-47.

<sup>59</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamaita Heart Sutra* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988). 3-4.

change to the entire system. The totality is not “assembled” out of particulars; rather particulars have their meaning in relation to, and are an expression of, the totality.<sup>60</sup>

As Oldmeadow notes, Nhat Hanh’s reading of *śūnyatā* finds closer resonance with such positive illustrations as that found in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*’s celebrated metaphor, the ‘Jewelled Net of Indra’. This depiction of *śūnyatā* envisions the universe like a web of jewels, each jewel reflecting the others so that, reflection upon reflection, all jewels appear at once in one, and the one in all. The essential positivity of Nhat Hanh’s reading is most apparent in his explanation of the ‘fullness’ of emptiness:

If I am holding a cup of water and I ask you, “Is this cup empty?” you will say, “No, it is full of water.” But if I pour out the water and ask you again, you may say, “Yes, it is empty.” But, empty of what? Empty means empty of something. The cup cannot be empty of nothing. “Empty” doesn’t mean anything unless you know empty of what. My cup is empty of water, but it is not empty of air. To be empty is to be empty of something...

When Avalokita says that our sheet of paper is empty, he means it is empty of a separate, independent existence. It cannot just be by itself. It has to inter-be with the sunshine, the cloud, the forest, the logger, the mind, and everything else. It is empty of a separate self. But, empty of a separate self means full of everything.<sup>61</sup>

Within the history of Buddhist ideas, the evolution and development of *śūnyatā* is significant in its complexity and diversity. While it is beyond our scope to enter into an extensive investigation of this development, something more should be said about the traditional and philosophical influences on Nhat Hanh’s interpretation. Centuries of debate between different schools of Mahāyāna, debates that continue today, have explored the intricacies, subtleties, and ultimate meaning of the doctrine of *śūnyatā*. In what follows we will briefly explore interpretations of emptiness from the traditions of Madhyamika, Yogācāra, and T’ien-t’ai.

We have already encountered the second-century Indian monk and philosopher Nāgārjuna, and his elaboration of the doctrines of emptiness (S. *śūnyatā*) and two truths (S. *satya-dvaya*). Important to recall here is the Madhyamika emphasis on

<sup>60</sup> Peter Oldmeadow, “Being and Emptiness in Heidegger and Indian Madhyamika Buddhism,” *Literature and Aesthetics: The Journal of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics* December (2006).

<sup>61</sup> Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamaita Heart Sutra*, 8-10.

the 'emptiness of emptiness', and the interdependence of *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*. The Madhyamika does not present emptiness as an ultimate truth in the sense of a separate realm or absolute reality. While emptiness is presented as the ultimate truth about what is ultimately true, it is not depicted as an ultimate truth in the sense of a primary existent – that is, something independent of the causal nexus, resistant to analysis, a permanent substratum underlying all reality. Things simply depend on other things – there is no deeper or transcendent reality that is the ultimate cause or origin. Thus, emptiness cannot be grasped – even as a philosophical construct or teaching it should not be an object of attachment. According to the Madhyamika, emptiness is not an absolute; emptiness at the ultimate level is dependent on the conventional level; thus, emptiness is also empty. Like the proverbial raft that carries the practitioner to the other shore, or the finger pointing to the moon, emptiness is to be understood as a conceptual tool, a pedagogic aid, a way of describing the true nature of reality. Ultimately, as a meditative instrument, emptiness is to lead the practitioner beyond conceptual constructs and discriminative thinking to a direct experience of that reality it attempts to define. Furthermore, the point of the Two Truths is that the realisation of all things as empty, i.e. on the level of ultimate truth, does not imply a shift to a separate world of emptiness, but an insight into the conceptually constructed nature of the conventional realm. The ultimate truth is not to be understood as an ultimate goal or realm beyond the conventional; it is not to be conceived as a move away from one towards the other, but rather what Paul Williams has called a "move of gnosis."<sup>62</sup> Because it exists in relation to *saṃsāra*, and indeed is to be realised within *saṃsāra*, *nirvāṇa* too is empty.

Despite Nāgārjuna's contemporary eminence, it has been recognised that in his own milieu he failed to have much impact on Buddhist thought.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, other schools of Indian Buddhism emerged post-Nāgārjuna with their own understandings of emptiness. Furthermore, following its transmission into China,

<sup>62</sup> See Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). 148.

<sup>63</sup> See Charles B. Jones, "Emptiness, Kenosis, History, and Dialogue: The Christian Response to Masao Abe's Notion of 'Dynamic Sunyata' in the Early Years of the Abe-Cobb Buddhist-Christian

Nāgārjuna's philosophy was critically amended and indeed transformed. Of these developments, the traditions of Yogācāra in India, and T'ien-t'ai in China are significant. Both articulated what can be understood as positive interpretations of emptiness in response to an ostensible negativity and potential nihilism in Madhyamika philosophy. Moreover, because Yogācāra was transmitted into China and became firmly established, it directly influenced Vietnamese Mahāyāna, as is apparent in Nhat Hanh's teachings. The same can be said of T'ien-t'ai Buddhism. Via its proposal of such methods as exercising mindfulness in everyday activities and the practice of perceiving ultimate truth through the contemplation of phenomenal reality, T'ien-t'ai had direct bearing and influence on the development of Ch'an and thereby of Vietnamese *Thien*.

The Yogācāra tradition emerged in India in the fourth-century CE, in response to perceived epistemological and soteriological problematics within late Madhyamika.<sup>64</sup> Through the contributions of its founders, Maitreya-nātha, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, Yogācāra presented a significant corrective to the Madhyamika system, in particular its interpretation of emptiness. It is this more positive representation of emptiness, in addition to related Yogācāra teachings on the Mind and experience, which are reflected and translated within the teachings of Nhat Hanh. In addition to its principal focus on meditative discipline and experience (S. *yoga*), the Yogācāra tradition specifically emphasises the domain and dimensions of Mind. This is indicated by its collection of additional names: *Vijñānavāda* (S. 'the Way of Consciousness'), *Vijñaptimātra* (S. 'Cognitive Representation Only'), and *Cittamātra* (S. 'Mind-Only'). Indeed, the category of Mind is the distinguishing feature of Yogācāra in relation to Madhyamika; Mind indicates the mentalistic or psychological focus of Yogācāra, as well as its recognition of a primary existent of reality.

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Dialogue," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 24 (2004). And Richard Hayes, "Nagarjuna's Appeal," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 22 (1994).

<sup>64</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to enter into these details. For a thorough analysis see Richard King, "Early Yogacara and Its Relationship with the Madhyamaka School," *Philosophy East and West* 44, no. 4 (1994).

The quintessential psychological Yogācāra doctrine of the ‘store-house consciousness’ is representative of the tradition’s emphasis on Mind. The store-house consciousness (S. *ālaya-vijñāna*) is an underlying foundation or substratum of Mind, which is described through the metaphoric image of the ‘seedbed’. According to Yogācāra, this mentalistic seedbed acts as a repository for karmic seeds (S. *bīja*) and habit energies (S. *vāsanās*), which, as they come to fruition depending on causes and conditions, determine the nature of subjective and intersubjective experience. Indeed, Yogācāra philosophy defines subjective reality as a flow or ‘torrent’ of cognitive experiences. In addition to the *ālaya-vijñāna*, the Yogācāra system delineates seven types of consciousness that comprehend this experiential continuum. They are the normal five sensory consciousnesses, the mental consciousness (S. *manovijñāna*), and the ‘tainted mind’ (S. *kliṣṭamanas*).<sup>65</sup> As we shall see in the following chapter, this teaching distinctly resonates throughout Nhat Hanh’s discourse. Nhat Hanh has appropriated and embellished the metaphor of the seedbed of the mind – he consistently refers to the practitioner as a ‘gardener’, with frequent use of the analogy of ‘organic gardening’. He also refers to the Dharma as ‘rain’ and teaches a practice called ‘seed watering’. Moreover, one of Nhat Hanh’s most recent publications is a translation and commentary on Vasubandhu’s *Viṃśatikā* (‘Twenty Verses’) and *Triṃśikā* (‘Thirty Verses’), two principal Yogācāra texts that deal with this psychological element of its teachings.<sup>66</sup>

Turning to the quintessential epistemological Yogācāra doctrine, the theory of the ‘Three Natures’ (S. *tri-svabhāva*), we find the foundations of the Yogācāra corrective to the Madhyamika doctrine of Two Truths and its interpretation of emptiness. The *tri-svabhāva* theory attempts to bridge an ostensible gap between the experience of ultimate truth (S. *paramārtha-satya*) and everyday experience (S. *saṃvṛti-satya*) by positing three aspects of the mind. The first (S. *parikalpita*) is the ‘constructed’ or ‘imagined’ aspect, which, due to the accumulation of *bījas*

<sup>65</sup> The Indian missionary Paramārtha (490-569 CE) proposed a further ninth consciousness – the immaculate consciousness (S. *amalavijñāna*) – which would replace the *ālaya-vijñāna* upon enlightenment. Despite his view, the general Yogācāra belief seems to be that the *ālaya-vijñāna* continues upon enlightenment and exists eternally in a radiant and purified form.

<sup>66</sup> Nhat Hanh studied and memorised Vasubandhu’s texts as a novice monk. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Understanding Our Mind* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2006).

and *vāsanās* in the *ālaya-vijñāna*, generates a false representation of the self and projects illusive objects onto reality. This is the unenlightened realm of duality and linguistic constructs that corresponds to the mundane level of conventional truth. The third aspect (*S. pariniṣpanna*) is the 'perfected' aspect; it corresponds to the level of ultimate truth, as it is the dimension of the mind that directly apprehends the true nature of reality as empty of subject-object duality. The first and the third aspects are linked by a second aspect (*S. paratantra*), the 'dependent' aspect, which signifies the conditioned flow of dependently originated experience that is falsely polarised by the first aspect but correctly perceived by the third. In fact, the third aspect affirms a primary existent of reality; this is none other than the second dependent aspect correctly perceived as the continuum of experiential emptiness itself. It is believed that this unitary state, in which the store-consciousness is cleansed of all imprinted predispositions and illusions, is the natural state of the Mind.

The *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, a scripture from the second-century CE that contains the earliest presentation of the Yogācāra system, proclaims the doctrine of *tri-svabhāva* to be the antidote to Madhyamika nihilism. According to the Yogācāra, the Madhyamika had taken the doctrine of universal emptiness too far, to the point of over-negation, a place of absurd nihilism where everything was destroyed. In opposition, the Yogācāra corrective asserted that in order for the true state of emptiness to be experienced, there had to be a *something* that was initially erroneously divided – an essential mentalistic unity. It is this unity of Mind that is posited as the primary existent and which defines the fundamental positivity of the Yogācāra interpretation of emptiness that has directly influenced Nhat Hanh's articulation of interbeing.

Let us now shift our context to China, two centuries on, for another example of a positive reading of emptiness to which we can relate Nhat Hanh's. Buddhism first came to China around the turn of the first millennium and the initial focus, for several centuries, was mainly textual. Groups of monk-scholars tended to focus on one particular text or school in the endeavour to translate, both philologically and philosophically. One such group, the San-lun school, focused on the *Mūla-*

*madhyamaka-kārikā* but had difficulty comprehending Nāgārjuna.<sup>67</sup> Then, in the early fifth-century, Kumārajīva, the central Asian monk-scholar known as one of the four 'great translators' of Chinese Buddhist texts, arrived in the imperial city of Ch'ang-an and presented an accurate understanding of Nāgārjuna's philosophy. However, Kumārajīva's revelations were not entirely well-received. In particular, a monk-scholar named Chih-i (538-597 CE) composed an extensive reinterpretation of Nāgārjuna's teaching of the Two Truths, thereby presenting a positive articulation of emptiness. According to tradition, Chih-i is the third patriarch of the T'ien-t'ai School of Chinese Buddhism, but historically he is considered to be the school's-founder and principal theoretician. Within Nāgārjuna's theory of the Two Truths, Chih-i discerned a fragmented, negative and irreconcilable vision of reality. According to Chih-i, the ultimate truth of emptiness portrayed not a positive statement about the way things are, but a 'non-affirming negation' that says what they are not.<sup>68</sup> In order to affirm the essential positivity of reality, Chih-i, in a comparable fashion to the Yogacāra elaboration of *tri-svabhāva*, transformed Nāgārjuna's theory of Two Truths into his own theory of Three Truths. In addition to the *ultimate truth* – emptiness, which breaks down the illusions of any permanence or inherent self-essence in things – and the *conventional truth* – provisionality, which confirms the existence of things as impermanent and subject to the laws of cause and effect – Chih-i posited a third truth – the *middle truth*. This third truth transcended, unified and integrated the Madhyamika metaphysical analysis, producing a positive statement about the nature of reality's *suchness*. This Suchness – the impermanence, interdependence and contingency of things – came to define ultimate truth.

In this way, Chih-i reconciled the apparent division between emptiness and relativity as two views of reality. As C.B. Jones has explained it, Chih-i's truth of the middle was:

<sup>67</sup> For an overview of the many interpretations of the doctrine of emptiness in China at this time, see Paul L. Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien T'ai Philosophy: The Flowering of the Two Truths Theory in Chinese Buddhism* (Asian Humanities Press, 1989).

<sup>68</sup> See Jones, "Emptiness, Kenosis, History, and Dialogue: The Christian Response to Masao Abe's Notion of 'Dynamic Sunyata' in the Early Years of the Abe-Cobb Buddhist-Christian Dialogue." 126.

...an affirmation that after realising emptiness, one could return to the very conventional truths within which unenlightened beings operate, and both would be transformed in a vision of what reality is, its Suchness. Rather than enlightenment clearing away all delusions and leaving nothing behind, it would clear away delusions to reveal the luminous truth of the way things really are.<sup>69</sup>

Chih-i also thereby established a metaphysic of immanent transcendence, affirming the existence and movement of the absolute within the contingent. In Chih-i's philosophy, the truth of the middle became a permanent, dynamic and immanent force in the world, akin to Buddha-nature. As Ng Yu-Kwan has recognised, Chih-i's interpretation of emptiness is permanent, because it is the *dharma-kāya*, the body of truth; it is dynamic, because it functions in the world; it is immanent, because it embraces all phenomena. According to Yu-Kwan, the truth of the middle, far from being an abstract statement of a philosophical truth, became a dynamic force working in the world towards the liberation of all beings.<sup>70</sup> This understanding of truth became characteristic of the T'ien-t'ai perspective, and was to have far-reaching and long-lasting influence on East Asian Buddhism. In particular, it greatly informed the development of the aforementioned Hua-Yen School, founded by Fa-tsang (643-712 CE).<sup>71</sup> It is worth noting further that both these schools appropriated the Yogācāra doctrine of Mind as the foundation of reality. Through their East Asian exegeses, this became reinterpreted as One Mind – a dynamic, living and active representation of truth, which has real substance and functions in the world. A further significant contribution from Hua-yen was the doctrine of Perfect Interpenetration. It is this doctrine that is illustrated by the metaphoric image of the Jewelled Net of Indra, to which we have related Nhat Hanh's depiction of interbeing.

It should now be apparent that a solid and ancient foundation of tradition underlies Nhat Hanh's reinterpretation of the doctrines of *prafītya-samutpāda* and *sūnyatā*, as represented by the notion of interbeing. As we shall now see, Nhat Hanh's

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> See Ng Yu-Kwan, *T'ien T'ai Buddhism and Early Madhyamaka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 43-44.

<sup>71</sup> Like Chih-i, Fa-tsang was considered within tradition to be the third patriarch of the school, following Chih-yen (602-668) and Tu-shun (557-640). However, Fa-tsang was responsible for a core translation of the founding text – the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* – and the skilful explanation of its abstruse philosophy in accessible languages and appealing metaphors, which attracted imperial patronage and consolidated the school's position.

principle of interbeing – his reinterpretation of causality, interdependence, emptiness, and the essential nondual nature of reality – is at the heart of all the following principles of Engaged Buddhism. Furthermore, in the following chapters it will become evident that the metaphysic of nonduality inherent in the notion of interbeing lies at the foundation of not only Nhat Hanh's ethics of engagement, but also his approach to community, spirituality, and indeed, religious diversity. With respect to tradition, its allocation of legitimacy, and Nhat Hanh's place within its continuum, we may turn to an observation from Harry Oldmeadow:

A tradition is not static, an unchanging datum that persists in a frozen state through time. Traditions are dynamic: if needs be, they can grow, branch out and blossom. However, the principle of continuity... must always be respected if the tradition is to remain an integral one... One of the implications of the principle of continuity and of the homogeneity of the spiritual economy in question is this: the great doctrinal elaborations which follow a Revelation, usually at some historical distance, do not, essentially, constitute an 'addition' to the tradition but an unfolding of principles and perspectives which until then have remained implicit. One thinks of a Nagarjuna, a Shankara, an Aquinas. Such figures disavow any personal 'originality', claiming only to be elaborating the spiritual teaching to which they are heirs.<sup>72</sup>

It is thus that we should understand the reformations of Thich Nhat Hanh, as he treads gently but surely in the footsteps of his forbears.

### *The Imperative to Act*

Perhaps the most important outcome of the contemporary interpretation and application of emptiness within Engaged Buddhist discourse is the proposal that the experiential realisation of the interdependence of self and other gives rise to a spontaneous and instinctive compassion, benevolence, concern for the welfare of others, and a consequent compulsion towards altruistic action. Referring to the "values orientation inherent to the experience of wisdom," Nelson Foster, an Engaged Buddhist activist and commentator has called this the "politics of *prajñā*."<sup>73</sup> Discussing Zen practice and social action, Foster confirms that the direct experience of nonduality and the acquisition of *prajñā* (S. 'wisdom') entail an inevitable and natural movement towards service on behalf of others. In

<sup>72</sup> Kenneth ("Harry") Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo: The Sri Lankan Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000). 65.

agreement, Kenneth Kraft, another Engaged Buddhist commentator, has perceived “a creative tension between withdrawal and involvement, an underlying synonymity between work on oneself and work on behalf of others.” Kraft claims that, “evidence supporting this viewpoint is found in doctrine, in practice, in legend, and in history. Thus the pre-eminent virtues in Theravāda Buddhism are self-restraint *and* generosity; in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the highest goals are wisdom *and* compassion.<sup>74</sup>

The ethics of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism have both directly influenced the evolution of Engaged Buddhist theory and practice. We will here mention a few key areas of influence from both. Morality (P. *sīla*; S. *śīla*), or the means of behavioural guidance and virtue cultivation, is without doubt a core feature of early Buddhism.<sup>75</sup> From early Buddhism, the practice of cultivating the *brahmavihāras* (P. & S. ‘divine abodes’) is significant. While much early Buddhist morality is focused on self-transcendence, the development of these ‘Four Immeasurable Minds’ – compassion (P. & S. *karuṇā*), joy (P. *muditā*), equanimity (P. *upekkhā*; S. *upekṣā*), and love (P. *mettā*; S. *maitrī*) – shifts ethical observance to a more psychological context, concerning intentions and motivations, and to a more social context, concerning the projection of these divine abodes of the mind towards all beings. Furthermore, such early scriptures as the *Mettā Sutta* are indicative of the early Buddhist affirmation of the inherent worth of all sentient beings.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, there is some debate surrounding the

<sup>73</sup> Nelson Foster, “To Enter the Marketplace,” in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), 48.

<sup>74</sup> K. Kraft, “Introduction”, Kraft, ed., *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> *Sīla* is the first of the three divisions of the Eightfold Path, encompassing steps three to five. *Śīla* is also a central aspect of Mahāyāna Buddhism, constituting the second of the Six Perfections (S. *śad-pāramitā*).

<sup>76</sup> An excerpt from the *Mettā Sutta* reads:

*May all beings be happy and secure in themselves, truly happy. All in whom breath of life exists – moving and unmoving, long, large, middle-sized, subtle and gross in form, visible and invisible, far and near, those who have been and those who will be – may all these be in themselves truly happy. Let none deceive another, nor despise another anywhere. Let none will ill to another because of dispute or enmity. In this way, as a mother protects her own child, her only child, as long as she lives, so should you develop an unlimited mind with respect to all beings. You should develop unlimited thoughts of sympathy for all beings in the world above, below, and across, unmarred by hate or enmity. Then, as you stand, walk, sit, or lie, love is ever present in the mind. This is called the holy state. When you hold onto your*

question of the extent to which early Buddhist ethics were explicitly directed towards the ideals and practice of social service and activism. Indeed, David Chappell has noted that while compassion in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism is understood as an attribute of the Buddha and is prescribed as one of the *brahmavihāras*, it is recommended only to *arhats* and occasional lay people as an antidote to hostile feelings – nothing more.<sup>77</sup> In agreement, Harvey Aronson has recognised that the Theravāda practice of meditation on the *brahmavihāras* does not directly entail social service to others, but rather “personal, psychological, or soteriological benefits.”<sup>78</sup> Even so, it is difficult to refute the possibility that such benefits, through the interaction of ordained and lay, would also benefit society. P. D. Premasiri’s apologetics concern the quest for *nirvāṇa* in the Theravāda tradition:

What is aimed at by such an ideal [the quest for *nirvāṇa*] is not the production of a band of selfish seekers after individual salvation but spiritual leaders capable of setting the right moral pace for the whole of society.<sup>79</sup>

While explicit ethical instruction towards social action and the ‘imperative to act’ may not be a transparent prescription within traditional early Buddhist ethics, more definite precedence can be found in the later Mahāyāna ethics of altruism exemplified by the ‘way of the *bodhisattva*’. There are few ethical prescriptions more profound than the resolutions of the great *Bodhisattva Vow*:

However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them.  
 However inexhaustible the defilements are, I vow to extinguish them.  
 However immeasurable the dharmas are, I vow to master them  
 However incomparable enlightenment is, I vow to attain it.<sup>80</sup>

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*opinions no more, when you are endowed with good conduct and true insight, when you have expelled all craving for pleasures, you will be reborn no more.*

See *Mettā Sutta*, in *Sutta Nipāta*, Pāli Text Society 1:8, 143-52.

<sup>77</sup> See Chappell’s exegesis of the *Upāsaka Precept Sūtra*. David W. Chappell, “Searching for a Mahayana Social Ethic,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no. 2 (1996): 351-375.

<sup>78</sup> Harvey Aronson, “Motivations to Social Action in Theravada Buddhism,” in *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, ed. A. K. Narain (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corp., 1980): 6-7. Aronson claims: “To seek in the discourse on ‘love’ and ‘compassion’ for teachings on the motivation to social action is to seek in vain.” See also Harvey Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980).

<sup>79</sup> P. D. Premasiri, in C. Eller, “The Impact of Christianity on Buddhist Nonviolence in the West”, Kraft, ed., *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*. 93.

<sup>80</sup> *The Bodhisattva’s Vow*, in Edward Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1959). 183-184.

Upon the bodhisattva path, the cultivation of wisdom and compassion is inseparable and synchronous. Armed with the sword of wisdom, which cuts through the illusions of the dualistic mind, the enlightened eye of the bodhisattva perceives the world as a moment by moment manifestation of dynamically interrelated fields of energy existing as a luminous and inherently sentient whole. This awareness of the true interdependent nature of reality manifests instinctive boundless compassion – *mahā karuṇa* – for all life. The eighth-century Buddhist poet Śāntideva explains the compassionate consciousness of the bodhisattva:

In the same way as the hands and so forth  
Are regarded as limbs of the body;  
Likewise, why are living things  
Not regarded as limbs of life?

I should dispel the misery of others  
Because it is suffering just like my own,  
And I should benefit others,  
Because they are living things, just like myself.

When I work in this way for others  
I should not let conceit or feelings of amazement arise.  
It is just like feeding myself –  
I ask for nothing in return.<sup>81</sup>

Like the salvific bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the Engaged Buddhist practices “looking with the eyes of compassion and listening deeply to the cries of the world.”<sup>82</sup>

Sallie King has elaborated upon this dimension of Nhat Hanh’s activism, in which:

...we see a compassion which is emotional, but at the same time, as Nhat Hanh understands it, is the fruit of that experiential wisdom that does not create a wall of separation between self and other, but allows itself to feel their interconnection. Just as one would act to remove the source of one’s own pain – pulling a thorn out of one’s skin – so, if one no longer felt separation between oneself and another, would one act to remove the cause of suffering in another: as an instinctual, natural, almost inevitable act.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryavatara*, trans. Stephen Batchelor (Dharmasala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1979). 118.

<sup>82</sup> The *Lotus Sūtra*, quoted in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Teachings on Love* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1997). 6.

<sup>83</sup> King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*. 175.

As King explains, within the discourse of Engaged Buddhism, the ethical standard is transformed from the passive to the active.<sup>84</sup> The traditional practice of Buddhism becomes what Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese Engaged Buddhist leader, has called “active compassion or active *metta*,”<sup>85</sup> akin to what Nhat Hanh calls ‘love in action’.

### *The Soteriological Shift*

Within the discourse of Engaged Buddhism, what can be defined as a *soteriological shift* has relocated the traditional domains of Buddhist practice, belief, and salvation. The belief systems of most religious traditions incorporate both an explanation of the causes of suffering in the world, or what is known as a *theodicy*, and a complex of beliefs and practices with which to transcend the suffering of life – a *soteriology*. The theodicy offered by the Buddha presents a psychological diagnosis that locates the causes of suffering within the mind, in the *akuśala-mūla* (S. the ‘three roots of evil’; P. *akusala-mūla*) – three fundamental negative states of consciousness defined as greed (P. *taṇhā*, S. *trṣṇā*), hatred (P. *dosa*, S. *dveṣa*), and delusion (P. *moha*). However, the Buddha also provided a soteriology, a way to cleanse the mind of these misconceptions and replace problematic delusion with liberating insight. This eight-step path towards liberation prescribes relief from suffering via a program of self-cultivation and the re-training of the mind. Ultimately, Buddhism contends that rather than attempting to change the world to suit us, and our insatiable desires, it makes more sense to change ourselves, to transform our perception, to be in accord with the world. However, within this late modern age, the collective suffering inflicted by the spread of political tyranny, ideological warfare, terrorism, economic injustice, and environmental destruction has convinced many Buddhists that not only the self but also the world needs to be transformed. Evinced this shift in perception and recognition, Nhat Hanh has referred to the present context of globalised karma:

The world of today is no longer the world of yesterday, when each country, each group of people, could live separately. Our karma now has come together, has become collective karma. Now the action of one group effects the other group. We

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 83

<sup>85</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Voice of Hope: Conversations with Alan Clements* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1997). 17.

must choose to suffer together or be happy together, be alive together or be destroyed together.<sup>86</sup>

Perhaps the most profound impact Engaged Buddhism has had on the traditional philosophy and practice of Buddhism concerns its revision of Buddhism's theodicy, which has instigated an alteration in the Buddhist soteriology. The discourse of Engaged Buddhism asserts that the *akuśala-mūla*, the three roots of suffering traditionally located in the mind, have become institutionally and politically manifest within the policies and programs of corporations and governments and other societal structures. According to Engaged Buddhists, the negative individual mental states of greed, hatred and delusion form the cultural roots of violence and fear within society, and the institutionalisation of these forces has created collective suffering on a global scale.

This relocation of the causes of suffering has initiated a concurrent repositioning within the dynamics of salvation. In order to confront violence, oppression, or injustice in the here and now, the traditional metaphysical quest for individual inner liberation has been relocated within the collective outer physical world. This transferral of the religious focus from within to without moves away from the individualistic, transcendent emphasis of monastic liberation, towards collective economic and cultural definitions of liberation within lay communities. The Engaged Buddhist Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka uses the Sanskrit term *laukodaya*, or 'mundane awakening', to define this new locus of liberation. Christopher Queen has succinctly summarised:

[A] profound change in the Buddhist soteriology – from a highly personal and other-worldly notion of liberation to a social, economic, this-worldly liberation – distinguishes [Engaged Buddhist] movements... The traditional conceptions of karma and rebirth, the veneration of the bhikkhu sangha, and the focus on ignorance and psychological attachment to account for suffering in the world (the second Noble Truth) have taken second place to the application of highly rationalised reflections on the institutional and political manifestations of greed, hatred and, delusion, and on new organisational strategies for addressing war and injustice, poverty and intolerance, and the prospects for 'outer' as well as 'inner' peace in the world.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh and Daniel Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001). 119.

<sup>87</sup> Queen, "Introduction: The Shapes and Sources of Engaged Buddhism." 10.

From Nhat Hanh's perspective, the soteriological shift is an inevitable consequence of the escalation of modernity. It is also understood as an inherent outcome of spiritually realising the interdependence of self and society, which, according to Nhat Hanh, defines the authentic practice of Buddhism in the modern world:

When a village is being bombed and children and adults are suffering from wounds and death, can a Buddhist sit still in his unbombed temple? If he has wisdom and compassion, he will find ways to practice Buddhism *while* helping other people. To practice Buddhism, it is said, is to see into one's own nature and become a Buddha. If we cannot see what is going on around us, how can we see into our own nature? There is a relationship between the nature of the self and the nature of suffering, injustice, and war. To see into the true nature of the world's weapons is to see into our own true nature.<sup>88</sup>

The soteriological shift inherent within Engaged Buddhist discourse and practice constitutes an extension of the doctrine of emptiness. The central implication of this extension is the breakdown of any illusive dualism that persists between salvation on an individual transcendent level, and salvation on a collective this-worldly level. While Queen's above comment may imply that individual spiritual practice is somewhat left behind in the wake of the soteriological shift, it is important to realise that Engaged Buddhism asserts that the two dimensions of salvation can and indeed must be realised mutually and simultaneously. Moreover, as Nhat Hanh's above words relate, the soteriological shift implies the dissolution of a further illusive barrier – that which exists between the self and society, the mind and the world, or our own inner nature and the nature of reality. As Nhat Hanh explains:

The peace we seek cannot be our personal possession. We need to find an inner peace which makes it possible for us to become one with those who suffer, and to do something to help our brothers and sisters, which is to say, ourselves... This peace is not a barricade which separates you from the world. On the contrary, this kind of peace brings you into the world and empowers you to undertake whatever you want to do to try to help.<sup>89</sup>

It is to Nhat Hanh's ethical prescriptions regarding peace that we now turn.

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<sup>88</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1998). 31.

### *Nonviolence and Being Peace*

When Nhat Hanh came to the West to call for an end to the Vietnam War, he was profoundly disturbed to witness a pervasive aggression and deep-seated violence evident within the anti-war movement. Accordingly, he began to teach what has been called “probably the single greatest contribution of any Buddhist to global thinking about peacemaking”<sup>90</sup> – the practice of ‘being peace’:

In the peace movement there is a lot of anger, frustration, and misunderstanding. The peace movement can write very good protest letters, but they are not yet able to write a love letter.

...without being peace, we cannot do anything for peace. If we cannot smile, we cannot help other people to smile. If we are not peaceful, then we cannot contribute to the peace movement.

I hope we can bring a new dimension to the peace movement... A fresh way of being peace, of doing peace is needed... It would be wonderful if we could bring to the peace movement our contribution, our way of looking at things, that will diminish aggression and hatred. Peace work means, first of all, being peace.<sup>91</sup>

While the idea of confronting war and violence with a smile may sound simplistic or even naïve, as Sallie King explains, “we should not be misled by Nhat Hanh’s gift for putting sophisticated ideas into simple words.” King continues:

In the simple idea of being peace is contained a world of Engaged Buddhist philosophy, including the idea of approaching conflict free of an assumption of adversarial relations; a commitment to profound, principled nonviolence; an understanding of the web of interdependence as the fabric of our existence; and awareness of the great importance of motivation and attitude in shaping the nature and outcome of an action.<sup>92</sup>

And, like other aspects of Engaged Buddhist ethical theory, the practice of being peace is firmly grounded in a number of central aspects of traditional Buddhist practice and philosophy. The most significant that we will examine here are mindfulness (*P. sati*, *S. smṛti*) and nonviolence (*S. ahimsa*).

The book that was perhaps Nhat Hanh’s first big commercial seller was conceived during the Vietnam War as a letter written to a staff member of the SYSS. It was later expanded and translated and became *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation for the Use of Young Activists*. Nhat Hanh wrote it to remind his

<sup>89</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988). 127-128.

<sup>90</sup> King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*. 175.

<sup>91</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*. 79-80.

<sup>92</sup> King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*. 175.

students of the imperative to maintain disciplined meditative awareness – *mindfulness* – in the midst of contexts of conflict or danger. Mindfulness is an alert state of mind, constantly cultivated through conscious breathing, which forms the foundation for understanding and insight (S. *prajñā*) into the true nondual nature of reality. It is a ‘trans-traditional’ term; it is found in all schools of Buddhism.<sup>93</sup> Zen Buddhism, Nhat Hanh’s tradition, places an emphasis upon mindfulness practice as a constant state of contemplative consciousness that is to be sustained throughout every moment and action of every day. *The Miracle of Mindfulness* demonstrates Nhat Hanh’s application of this traditional Zen understanding of the practice within modern contexts of war and social activism. Mindfulness is presented as the practical and spiritual means for engaged activists to maintain calm, present moment clarity, and an awareness of interdependence – to ‘be peace’ in the midst of war. Mindfulness is described as “the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves.”<sup>94</sup> Mindfulness practice, in addition to nonviolence, forms the spiritual foundation of Nhat Hanh’s activism and is thus the fundamental means of ‘being peace’.

Like mindfulness, nonviolence has deep roots in the Buddhist tradition. The chief traditional source of nonviolence as an aspect of personal morality is found in the first precept prescribing abstention from taking life. Other sources, such as the *Dhammapada*, represents nonviolence as a virtue and a religious ideal:

A man is not on the path of righteousness if he settles matters in a violent haste. A wise man calmly considers what is right and what is wrong, and faces different opinions with truth, non-violence and peace. This man is guarded by truth and is a guardian of truth. He is righteous and he is wise.<sup>95</sup>

Indeed, the ‘Universal Law of the Dharma’ is not bound by violence, nor its root emotion anger, but love: “For hate is not conquered by hate: hate is conquered by

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<sup>93</sup> For example, mindfulness is the seventh of the eight factors of the Eight-Fold Path, the first of the five Factors of Awakening (*bodhyaṅga*), the third of the Five Powers (*bala*), and many suttas and sūtras address its cultivation and application, such as the ancient scripture the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (*The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*).

<sup>94</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation* (London: Rider Books, 1991), 14.

<sup>95</sup> *Dhammapada*, no. 256-7

love. This is a law eternal.”<sup>96</sup> Engaged Buddhists have elaborated upon these traditional themes and applied the teachings to modern contexts and global problems.

A further implication of the realisation of interdependence is revealed in Nhat Hanh’s teaching of ‘being peace’ – the essential inseparability of means and ends. Violence can never be justified. As Nhat Hanh has declared: “I do not accept the concept of a war for peace, a ‘just war,’ just as I also cannot accept the concept of ‘just slavery,’ ‘just hatred,’ or ‘just racism.’”<sup>97</sup> The evident similarities between Nhat Hanh’s approach to nonviolence and Gandhi’s have been widely recognised. Despite coming from different religious perspectives, it is evident that Gandhi’s religious thought and strategies of nonviolent protest and activism for creating peace and actualising liberation have directly influenced Nhat Hanh.<sup>98</sup> Nhat Hanh has commented on the great “spiritual strength” of Gandhi, his simplicity and frugality, and his ability to actualise compassion and sacrifice.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, both activists were working for peace in similar contexts of colonialism and foreign invasion, and both resolutely adhered to an essential policy of nonviolence, compassion and love. Nonviolence is as close to an absolute as the Engaged Buddhist movement comes, but as Nhat Hanh asserts, nonviolence is not a dogma or ideology. He explains:

[P]eople’s general understanding of the principle of nonviolence is very superficial. People tend to think of nonviolence more as a technique of action, rather than a source of strength. There is so much focus on the distinction between nonviolence and violence, between nonviolent people and violent people. But in reality it’s not easy to take sides like that. One can never be sure that one is completely on the side

<sup>96</sup> *Dhammapada*, no. 5. We may also here offer the resonating words of Martin Luther King: “Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets a greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love.” See J. M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King* (San Francisco: Harper, 1986). 17.

<sup>97</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 4.

<sup>98</sup> See King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalisation.*, particularly pages 155-161. Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice*. 157ff. And Catherine Ingram, *In the Footsteps of Gandhi: Conversations with Spiritual Social Activists* (Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1990). For an overview of Gandhi’s activism, its connections to Liberation Theology, Engaged Spirituality, and a re-visioning of his philosophy in the context of globalisation, see Josphe Prabhu, “Introduction: Gandhi Visionary for a Globalized World,” *ReVision* 24, no. 1 (2001). 2-8.

<sup>99</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice*. 157.

of nonviolence or that the other person is completely on the side of violence. Nonviolence is a direction, not a separating line. It has no boundaries.<sup>100</sup>

### *Non-Partisanship and the True Enemy*

The final aspect of Engaged Buddhist ethical theory that we will here examine concerns the fundamental stance of non-partisanship demonstrated by the Buddhist Struggle Movement, and the non-adversarial ethic which provided its theoretical foundation. This is represented by Nhat Hanh's notion of the 'True Enemy'. Once again, these features have traditional roots in the doctrine of interdependence and the experiential awareness of the nonduality of self and other.

As we have already noted, the Buddhist Struggle Movement sided with neither North nor South during the Vietnam War; they maintained a strict position of neutrality in their support of the common people. They were on the side of *life*. From Nhat Hanh's perspective, the Vietnam War was a war of ideologies, tragically waged on a fratricidal battleground, yielding nothing but mass suffering and mindless destruction of the innocent. Nhat Hanh often refers to the bombing of a certain village in which, it was rumoured, a 'Viet cong' was being harboured. The village and hundreds of civilians were obliterated, while an army general justified, "We had to destroy the village in order to save it."<sup>101</sup> Such is the inane 'rationalisation' of ideological warfare. Central to this discourse of rationalisation is the goal of victory, which is enshrined as the ultimate end. In Nhat Hanh's discourse, however, the notion of victory is depicted as a direct product of ignorance. According to Nhat Hanh, victory for one side, and defeat for the other, will never create peace and will always be futile. Victory is the antithesis of the principles the Buddhist Struggle Movement adhered to: understanding, compassion, nonviolence, healing, reconciliation. This tenet is expressed in the *Dhammapada*: "Victory breeds hatred; the vanquished live in sorrow. The peaceful live in harmony, giving up both victory and defeat."<sup>102</sup> One of Nhat

<sup>100</sup> Ingram, "Thich Nhat Hanh," p. 87

<sup>101</sup> Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness*. 22.

<sup>102</sup> *Dhammapada*, no. 201

Hanh's poems reiterates: "Who will be left to celebrate a victory made of blood and fire?"<sup>103</sup>

An Engaged Buddhist analysis of ideological warfare reveals that by definition such conflict is grounded in the dire realm of the fixed view (*P. dṛṣṭi*, *S. dṛṣṭi*). As we discussed in Chapter Two, the rigid attachment to a static viewpoint – whether it is the notion of a separate self, a theistic God, Capitalism or Communism – will inevitably cause suffering. "The conviction that we know the truth, and that those who do not share our beliefs are wrong, has caused a lot of harm" Nhat Hanh explains.<sup>104</sup> Nhat Hanh proposes that rather than objectifying our fear, hatred and prejudice onto the 'other', we must transform the roots of violence within the self through spiritual practice. Our own *inner* enemies of fear, hatred and prejudice can be transformed and the nonduality of self and other can be realised. The Dalai Lama has called this "internal disarmament".<sup>105</sup> Nhat Hanh further proposes that the realisation of the interdependence of self and other can induce a complete empathic nondual identification with both victim and perpetrator, the oppressed and the oppressor. This practice of nondual identification reveals that the perpetrators of suffering are in as much pain as their victims.

Of Nhat Hanh's body of poetic works, his most recognised and acclaimed poem, *Please Call Me By My True Names*, forms a poetic exposition of Nhat Hanh's non-adversarial ethic and the compassion for all that is its foundation and consequence. It reads in part:

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond,  
And I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.  
And I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

<sup>103</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, "Our Green Garden," in Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*. 63

<sup>104</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 11-12.

<sup>105</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV, "New Millennium Message," [www.anglefire.com/on/GEAR2000/hhdl.html](http://www.anglefire.com/on/GEAR2000/hhdl.html) (2000).

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,  
And I am the sea pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

...Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up,  
And so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.<sup>106</sup>

Something final should here be said about the nature of good and evil. The practice of nondual identification may seem to imply an avoidance of, or aversion to, the problem of evil. Indeed, a recurrent and typically Western criticism of Buddhism concerns the question of ethical sufficiency in relation to the doctrine of emptiness (S. *śūnyatā*). Because the latter proposes the ultimate metaphysical groundlessness of all conceptual forms, it has thus appeared to a number of critics to present a seamless ultimate ontological reality devoid of any ethical commitment, call to action, or distinction between good and evil. This perspective can be understood as a reflection of the common popular and academic stereotype of Buddhism as other-worldly and socially removed. Such an assertion of the apparent incongruence between Mahāyāna metaphysics and ethics has been recognised by David Eckel in the work of John Cobb and George Rupp. Commenting on their misrepresentation of Buddhist morality, Eckel states that in their interpretations, “the gradual transformation of what is into what ought to be is dissolved in the contemplation of the eternal truth reflected equally in every moment.” In response, Eckel insists that “the understanding of Emptiness is not an event outside time, but a continuous emptying in which moral action plays a significant, indeed a crucial, part.”<sup>107</sup> Continuing Eckel’s argument, Masao Abe has examined good and evil in relation to the doctrine of the Two Truths. While the dualistic and thus conventional truths of good and evil must inevitably dissolve at the level of ultimate truth, Abe argues that because emptiness ultimately empties itself, ethics are thereby re-established and good and evil are realised in their ‘suchness’ (S. *tathatā*). He suggests,

<sup>106</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “Call Me By My True Names” in Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*.107.

<sup>107</sup> David Eckel in Masao Abe, “God, Emptiness and Ethics” in Masao Abe, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue: Part One of a Two-Volume Sequel to Zen and Western Thought*, ed. Steven Heine, Two vols., vol. I (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995). 195ff

...this unity of the ontological realisation of Emptiness and ethical action must include the dissolution of conventional ethics and the construction of ethics in light of true emptiness.<sup>108</sup>

In this 'light', the distinction between good and evil is realised without any attachment to one or the other. Abe relates this to the Ch'an Master Ch'ing-yüan Wei-hsin's realisation that ultimately, 'Mountains are *really* Mountains, and Waters are *really* Waters'. So too, in their suchness, 'Good' is realised as 'Good', and 'Evil' is realised as 'Evil'.<sup>109</sup>

It is in this 'light' that we should understand Nhat Hanh's poem. What Nhat Hanh's poem relates is that an awakened understanding of good and evil transcends their duality and views them through the eyes of Buddha-nature. Such a perception synthesises the dual construction and constitutes a 'goodness' beyond good and evil that is called *compassion*.<sup>110</sup>

### Engaged Buddhist Forms

In recognition of the decentralisation of Engaged Buddhism, Sallie King has observed:

There are no institutional or ecclesiastical structures formalising Engaged Buddhism as a sect or as a sociopolitical movement, nor are any structures likely to develop. They would serve no purpose. Engaged Buddhism exists as an intention and as a practice within existing forms of Buddhism.<sup>111</sup>

While King's observation holds weight, it is evident that Engaged Buddhism is initiating dynamics of renewal and adaptation within the 'existing forms of Buddhism'. Indeed, in addition to the ethical dimensions of Nhat Hanh's contemporary representation of Buddhism, a renewal of religious forms constitutes a vital aspect of his approach to tradition. Specifically, we will here address Nhat Hanh's renewal of the monastic form and his reconfiguration of the precepts.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 200.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 199.

<sup>110</sup> Winston King, "Motivated Goodness and Unmotivated Perfection in Buddhist Ethics," *Anglican Theological Review* 71, no. 2 (1989): 143-152.

<sup>111</sup> King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*. 5.

### *Tiep Hien – The Order of Interbeing*

In addition to the School of Youth for Social Service, perhaps Nhat Hanh's greatest innovation of the Vietnam War era, which has endured with far-reaching significance, was his establishment of a new religious order – *Tiep Hien*, or the Order of Interbeing. On February 5, 1966, at the height of the War and the Buddhist Struggle Movement's activism, Nhat Hanh ordained six of the thirteen 'cedars', the original members of the SYSS. The Order of Interbeing was deliberately constructed to serve as an expression of and vehicle for Nhat Hanh's vision and practice of Engaged Buddhism. Moreover, it was instituted as a new manifestation of contemporary monasticism. It was conceived to be neither a clerical nor a lay order, but an inclusive, ecumenical community of Buddhist practitioners – men and women, clergy and lay; a community of resistance committed to a common life of spiritual practice and service. The Order of Interbeing exemplifies the dynamics of continuity and adaptation, which define Nhat Hanh's approach to tradition. To substantiate this claim, we will now examine the term *tiep hien*, and *The Charter of the Order of Interbeing*.

*Tiep hien* is a Vietnamese translation of a Chinese phrase found in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*.<sup>112</sup> *Interbeing*, the central neologism of Nhat Hanh's teachings, is the English translation of this term. *Tiep* relates foremost to the sustenance of tradition; it has two meanings – 'being in touch with' and 'continuing'. As we have seen, being in touch with the reality of the world and the reality of the mind, and realising the ultimate unity of world and mind, is a fundamental principle within Engaged Buddhism and traditional Buddhism. By utilising this notion to define the Order, Nhat Hanh was planting roots in the solid ground and fertile soil of Buddhist heritage. In fact, Nhat Hanh has used an example from Christian theology to represent the antithesis of the meaning of *tiep*. Against the modern

<sup>112</sup> The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is a Mahāyāna sūtra which was purportedly orated by the Buddha immediately after his enlightenment. As such, it portrays the world as it would appear to the enlightened mind – as empty of inherent existence, perfectly interpenetrating, and arising and fading away each moment in response to the action of this mind. While only portions of this sūtra exist in Sanskrit, there are two complete Chinese versions and one complete Tibetan version. These are: (1) the translation by Buddhahadra in 60 fascicles, completed in 420 CE (Taishō 278); (2) the translation by Śikṣānanda in 80 fascicles, completed in 699 CE (Taishō 279); and (3) the Tibetan translation in 45 chapters produced by Jinamitra in the eighth-century (Peking edition, vols. 25, 26).

Christian dualistic constructions of vertical and horizontal theology – spiritual life and being in touch with God informing the vertical dimension, and social life and being in touch with humanity informing the horizontal dimension – Nhat Hanh contends that “in Buddhism the vertical and horizontal are one.”<sup>113</sup> Ultimately, to ‘be in touch’ is to realise the quintessential Buddhist teaching of the nonduality of mind and reality, self and world. The concept of “continuing” deepens and strengthens the traditional foundations, referring directly to the continuation of the spiritual heritage of Buddhism. Nhat Hanh explains:

*Tiep* means to tie two strings together to make a longer string. It means extending and perpetuating the career of enlightenment that was started and nourished by the Buddhas and bodhisattvas who preceded us... this is the responsibility of all of us who undertake the practice of Buddhism.<sup>114</sup>

*Hien* refers primarily to the dynamic of adaptation; like *tiep* it also has two meanings – “realising”, and “making it here and now”. As we have seen, the imperative to ‘realise’ or actualise the Dharma, to adapt Buddhism so that it may respond and apply to contemporary contexts, is a central principle within Nhat Hanh’s teachings and mission. In fact, according to Nhat Hanh, for the continuity of tradition to be authentic, it must be realised within a contemporary context, and this implies adaptation. Nhat Hanh’s main intention has always been to ‘realise’ Buddhism – to make it real – so that it may function as a living tradition that has real meaning, purpose, and effect. Thus Nhat Hanh states, “*Hien* means not to dwell or be caught in the world of doctrines and ideas (i.e. static, non-living tradition), but to bring our insights into real life”.<sup>115</sup> Finally, realisation can only occur in the present moment, the “here and now”. This aspect of *hien* relates to Nhat Hanh’s fundamental teaching of ‘being peace’. Ultimately, salvation can only be found in the present moment:

Means and ends cannot be separated... Based on the insight that means are ends, all activities and practices should be entered into mindfully and peacefully... The secret of Buddhism is to be awake here and now. There is no way to peace; peace is the way. There is no way to enlightenment; enlightenment is the way. There is no way to liberation; liberation is the way.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*. 4

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 4-5

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* 5 Parenthesis mine.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* 6

Evidence of the concurrent sustenance and adaptation of tradition can be found throughout *The Charter of the Order of Interbeing*. Herein, the aim of the Order is defined as the endeavour “to actualise Buddhism by studying, experimenting with, and applying Buddhism in modern life.” However, special emphasis is also given to the traditional role of the *bodhisattva* ideal.<sup>117</sup> The *Charter* specifies the *Lin-chi* (*Lam Te*) school of *dhyāna* Buddhism as its heritage and traditional bedrock. Yet its amalgamation of Buddhist teachings is clearly ecumenical or non-sectarian. This ecumenical approach is evidenced in the Order’s inclusive attitude towards religious texts. The Order:

...does not consider any sutra or group of sutras as its basic scripture(s). It draws inspiration from the essence of the Buddhadharmā in all sutras. It does not accept the systematic arrangements of the Buddhist teachings proposed by any school. The *Order of Interbeing* seeks to realise the spirit of the Dharma in early Buddhism, as well as the development of that spirit through the history of the Sangha, and its life and teachings in all Buddhist traditions.<sup>118</sup>

Asserting the authenticity of all sūtras as Buddhist, the Order also professes that it finds “inspiration from the texts of other spiritual traditions.”<sup>119</sup> Finally, the Order’s emphasis upon the critical connection with and perpetuation of the spiritual heritage of the Buddhist tradition, and the imperative to adapt this heritage to determine contemporary vitality and meaning, is indicated in the articulation of the ‘Four Spirits’. These form the foundation of the Order’s philosophy and are said to exist in all Buddhist traditions.<sup>120</sup> These ‘spirits’ amalgamate a number of traditional Buddhist tenets within a wider incentive to maintain vitality and deter stagnation through constant renewal generated by experimentation and applied spiritual practice:

The Order considers the principle of nonattachment from views and the principle of direct experimentation on interdependent origination through meditation to be the two most important guides for attaining true understanding. It considers the principle of appropriateness and the principle of skilful means as guides for actions in society. The spirit of nonattachment from views and the spirit of direct experimentation lead to open-mindedness and compassion, both in the realm of the perception of reality and in the realm of human relationships. The spirit of appropriateness and the spirit

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 105.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

of skilful means lead to a capacity to be creative and to reconcile, both of which are necessary for the service of living beings.<sup>121</sup>

By now, it should be becoming clear that the dynamics of continuity and adaptation, while seeming contradictory, are actually interrelated – authentic continuity of tradition depends upon the renewal and adaptation of that heritage. While the application of Buddhism to modern life, the ecumenical amalgamation of the Dharma, and the inclusive approach to other religions may seem to deconstruct, weaken, or dilute tradition, according to Nhat Hanh these are necessary measures in the articulation and practice of a ‘living Buddhism’.

### *The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings*

Following the inauguration of the Order of Interbeing, the new community established fourteen precepts, or guiding principles. The motivation behind their composition was a development and application of the Eightfold Path and other aspects of the Buddha’s original teachings. They are also based on the ‘Ten Wholesome Things’ – precepts taught by the thirteenth-century Bamboo Forest *Thien* Master Truc Lam.<sup>122</sup> And yet, they are specifically articulated for a contemporary monastic context of peacework and social service, and they therefore constitute a distinctive re-visioning of traditional Buddhist morality. As Fred Eppsteiner has defined, these fourteen precepts represent “a wonderful blend of traditional Buddhist morality and contemporary social concerns” and constitute “a true expression of the bodhisattva practice of socially engaged Buddhism.”<sup>123</sup>

Originally, these ethical, spiritual, and practical guidelines were known as the Fourteen Mindfulness Precepts. However, in 1996, at the first International Council of the Order of Interbeing, the text of the precepts was amended in accord with the Order’s principle of constant renewal. Most significantly, the word ‘precept’ was replaced with ‘training’ to represent the Order’s recognition of the *process* that is awakening. According to the Order, spiritual practice is not simply

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* 106.

<sup>122</sup> See Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine, “All Buddhism Is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing,” in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher Queen (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 51.

<sup>123</sup> Fred Eppsteiner, “Editor’s Introduction,” Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*. ix.

a question of doing 'right' and not 'wrong', as implied by the word 'precept', but a continual unfolding and development of insight and understanding. The imperative form – 'do not' – was also removed, and replaced by statements of awareness and commitment. Finally, to express the critical importance of collective practice, commitment, and the building of community, the Trainings were recomposed in the collective 'we'.<sup>124</sup> To demonstrate the impact of these changes, we may quote the old and new versions of the Fifth Training. The original precept read:

Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.

And the new:

Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, and not in wealth or fame, we are determined not to take as the aim of our life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure, nor to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying. We are committed to living simply and sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those in need. We will practice mindful consuming, not using alcohol, drugs, or any other products that bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness.

Space does not permit us to examine all the Trainings. (Please refer to the Appendix for the full text.) However, we will briefly examine Trainings One, Two, Three Ten, and Thirteen, which are relevant to our discussion here.

The *Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings* concern the three domains of action in the self – the mind, speech, and the body. They are all intended to cultivate mindfulness, however the first seven deal specifically with the mind, the next two with speech, and the last five with the body. Emerging, as they did, out of the 'crucible' of the ideological conflict of the Vietnam War, the first three Trainings are perhaps most relevant to our discussion. They denounce dogmatism, fanaticism, ideological attachment, and exclusivism. As an antidote, they promote and encourage total openness, absolute tolerance, nonattachment to ideologies (even to Buddhism), freedom of thought, nonviolence, and compassionate dialogue, as the means of achieving reconciliation and healing. These Trainings

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<sup>124</sup> An old version of the Fourteen Mindfulness 'Precepts' can be found in Nhat Hanh, *Being*

reflect the first two factors of the Eightfold Path – Right View and Right Thought. The First Training warns against absolutising any given position, even Buddhist positions, as they can lead to narrowness, prejudice, hatred, and even fanatical violence. The Second Training carries on from the first, warning against fixed knowledge. Nhat Hanh's teachings affirm that enlightenment is a process of inquiry, and that fixed knowledge is an obstacle to awakening. Christopher Queen has related Nhat Hanh's warnings about fixed views and his advocacy of mental and spiritual fluidity with the "beginner's mind" and "unknowing" of Zen Buddhism. Accordingly, Queen deems Nhat Hanh's approach as one of "methodological agnosticism".<sup>125</sup> Essentially, fixed views and conceptual knowledge are barriers to living mindfully within a consciousness of interbeing. Leading on from the first two, the Third Training denounces the imposition of views onto others, advocating instead compassionate dialogue and nonviolent action.

The Tenth Mindfulness Training represents non-partisanship, or non-separation from all parties. Throughout the Vietnam War, Nhat Hanh maintained that the Sangha should not take an active part in politics, as "to transform a religious community into a political party is to divert it from its true aim... The voice of caring and understanding must be distinct from the voice of ambition."<sup>126</sup> The Thirteenth Mindfulness Training confronts the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, and implores the practitioner to work for "a more liveable society."<sup>127</sup> This Training expresses an awareness of the unjust causal relationship between affluent countries and impoverished countries, and challenges the inhumanity of making profit through the suffering of humans and other beings. Nhat Hanh promotes active generosity, one of the six *pāramitās* (S. 'perfection') of the bodhisattva. He claims: "We can stay close to oppressed people and help them protect their right to life and defend themselves against

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*Peace*. 89-102

<sup>125</sup> See Queen, "Engaged Buddhism: Agnosticism, Interdependence, Globalization." 330-333.

<sup>126</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*. 43-4.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

oppression and exploitation. The bodhisattva vows are immense, and each of us can vow to sit with the bodhisattvas on their life rafts."<sup>128</sup>

Nhat Hanh has recently suggested that the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings can provide ethical and spiritual guidance within any religious context, and even secular contexts. Indeed, as Fred Eppsteiner has perceived:

The Order of Interbeing [and the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings] makes real what is implicit in Buddhism and all the world's great religious traditions: that compassionate living, engaged in society, is most effective if based on the techniques for centering the self and the appreciation of the sacredness of all things great and small. The teachings and practice of Buddhism engaged in society can help us all.<sup>129</sup>

### The Actualisation of Tradition

As we have seen, Nhat Hanh's approach to tradition affirms the particularity and integrity of Buddhism while it dismantles any ossified traditional structures or lifeless bastions of orthodoxy and allows for a fluidity and flux of forms. This he calls the 'actualisation' of tradition. Nhat Hanh's perspective of actualisation offers a valuable contribution to the debate surrounding the question of the authenticity of Engaged Buddhism as an expression of 'traditional Buddhism'.<sup>130</sup> From the perspective of actualisation, Engaged Buddhism can be seen as neither continuous nor discontinuous with the Buddhist tradition, and this circumscribes its authenticity. In other words, Engaged Buddhism can be understood as discontinuous because it reconfigures traditional forms, but because this reconfiguration is prescribed by such traditional doctrines as skilful means and nonattachment, Engaged Buddhism in fact actualises Buddhism and so can be seen as continuous. According to this perspective, Nhat Hanh's particular interpretation of Buddhism is in fact validated and prescribed by tradition itself. In conclusion to this chapter, let us substantiate this claim with reference to some examples of Nhat Hanh's own articulation of his specific approach to tradition.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>129</sup> Fred Eppsteiner, "Editor's Introduction," Ibid. xi.

<sup>130</sup> For an overview of this debate see Thomas Freeman Yarnall, "Engaged Buddhism: New and Improved! (?) Made in the U.S.A. Of Asian Materials," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Conference*, no. April 7-14 (2000).

Since his early years in Vietnam as a young novice and a social activist, armed with the radical ideas of a non-conformist, an objective towards the revitalisation of the religious heritage of Buddhism has been a driving force within Nhat Hanh's career. One of his earliest books, a short treatise written in Vietnamese and later translated into French as *Aujourd'hui le Bouddhisme*,<sup>131</sup> gave expression to this compelling impetus. Thomas Merton has described this work as a "militant criticism of traditional and conservative Buddhism."<sup>132</sup> Indeed, within this work Nhat Hanh denounces the ossification of traditional Buddhism, bound within the rigid structures and dogmatic blindness of inert authoritarian orthodoxy. According to Nhat Hanh this kind of Buddhism has no-relevance in the modern world. Rather, as the foundational premise of this work contends, the survival of Buddhism as a living religion, one that has real contemporary meaning, significance, vitality, and purpose, is dependent upon its capacity for renewal, adaptation and actualisation. Nhat Hanh argues that without actualisation, Buddhism can have no real meaning or purpose within the modern world. This actualisation of tradition cannot occur, Nhat Hanh argues, solely through classical monastic textual study, but must involve an existential engagement with that which is at the heart of Buddhism – *suffering*. In a traditional context, entering into the experience of suffering, looking deeply into the causes of suffering, and cultivating the means to alleviate that suffering, would occur within the interior realms of the mind and within the confines of a monastery. However, within the modern Vietnamese context within which Nhat Hanh was writing, the imposition and infliction of Western civilisation via its agents of persistent colonialism and interminable warfare was creating very real suffering beyond monastic walls. Thus, Nhat Hanh called for Buddhism to respond to this suffering – to aid in the transformation of the lives of Vietnamese people in modern situations and thereby be actualised as a *living religion* in the *present time*. Nhat Hanh explains the dimensions of transformation and revitalisation involved in the 'enterprise of actualisation':

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<sup>131</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Aujourd'hui Le Bouddhisme*, trans. Le Van Hao (from Vietnamese) (Cholon, South Vietnam: La Boi Press, 1965). The English translation of the title from the French is *Buddhism Today*, although this work has not yet been translated into English. The original Vietnamese title is *Dao Phat Ngay Nay*.

Le problème qui se pose au Bouddhisme consiste moins à se moderniser qu'à s'actualiser. L'entreprise d'actualisation implique une refonte radicale des structures, une destruction des chaînes formalistes qui libèrera le contenu bouddhique. L'heure vient où le croyant se doit de s'engager dans la société et d'y promouvoir une prise de conscience lucide qui est le point de départ d'une idéologie claire, opportune et urgente, capable de répondre aux besoins de l'homme d'aujourd'hui, de détruire ses doutes, angoisses et souffrances, de vaincre les fausses doctrines qui menacent d'écraser sa liberté, son bonheur et sa paix. Il faut inventer pour le Bouddhisme des formes de vie nouvelles et rationnelles qui puissent perpétuer les belles traditions créatrices d'une religion millénaire.<sup>133</sup>

In another of Nhat Hanh's early works that we have already had occasion to discuss – *Vietnam: The Lotus in the Sea of Fire* – this movement towards the revitalisation and actualisation of Buddhism is further elaborated and clarified. Here, Nhat Hanh proposes that a fluidity of forms is necessary for the continuity of the essence of the tradition. Furthermore, he explains that such an approach is sanctioned and authorised by the doctrines of impermanence and non-absolutism proclaimed by the Buddhadharma itself. He relates:

The Vietnamese Buddhists... conceive that this actualisation is necessary. Each country, each time, each place, has its own form of living conditions, and living religion must change and adapt to these so that it may be a part of the social milieu of its time. *The forms of Buddhism must change so that the essence of Buddhism remains unchanged.* This essence consists of the living principles that cannot bear any specific formulation. Being imprisoned in such forms would mean that the essence of Buddhism would be diluted and weakened, so that the discovery of new forms for Buddhism is in fact the way in which Buddhism itself may be perpetuated.<sup>134</sup>

Indeed, as we have seen, Buddhism's capacity for adaptation and reformation within new contexts has been a determining factor in its survival and perpetuation throughout centuries of cultural transmission. The essence of Buddhist teachings affirms that reality is transient, changeable and conditional, and warnings resound

<sup>132</sup> Thomas Merton, "Buddhism and the Modern World" in Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967). 286.

<sup>133</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Aujourd'hui Le Bouddhisme*. 132-133. My translation:

"The problem which has arisen for Buddhism consists less of the need for modernisation than of the need for actualisation. The enterprise of actualisation implies a radical recasting of the structures [of Buddhism], a destruction of the formal chains, which will release the contents of Buddhism. The hour has come when [Buddhism] must engage in society and promote a lucid awakening, which may form the foundation of a clear ideology, opportune and urgent, able to meet the needs of man of today, to destroy his doubts, anguishes and sufferings, to overcome those distorted doctrines which threaten to crush his freedom, his happiness and his peace. It is necessary to invent new and rational vital forms for Buddhism, which are able to perpetuate the beautiful creative traditions of this ancient religion."

about the dangers of conceiving otherwise. These warnings apply not only to the error of reifying the self as a permanent and independent entity, but also to the reification of Buddhism itself as something unconditioned by historical and cultural contexts or resistant to change. The Dharma is not a fixed ideology but a path, or a *way* (P. *maggā*; S. *mārga*) which, before arriving in the midst of social activism and political protest, traversed many different terrains.

As we shall discuss in the following chapter, the expanse of Western religious landscape is the most recent terrain across which Buddhism has found its way. In a more recent publication, *Being Peace*, Nhat Hanh refers to the integral necessity for adaptation, acculturation and actualisation if Buddhism is to continue as a living tradition in the West. Exemplifying skilful means, Nhat Hanh reiterates his assertion that the *forms* of Buddhism must evolve so that they may be contextually and culturally applicable and may convey the real *meaning* of the tradition. This, Nhat Hanh maintains once again, is sanctioned by the content of the tradition and is what will define Western Buddhism as authentically Buddhist:

Buddhism is not one. The teaching of Buddhism is many. When Buddhism enters one country, that country always acquires a new form of Buddhism... Buddhism, in order to be Buddhism, must be suitable, appropriate to the psychology and the culture of the society that it serves.<sup>135</sup>

Nhat Hanh's approach, in this sense, exemplifies the traditional doctrine and pedagogic tool of *upāya* (S. 'skilful means') or what Nhat Hanh refers to as 'Dharma doors':

A teaching, in order to bring about understanding and compassion, must reflect the needs of people and the realities of society. To do this, it must meet two criteria: it must conform with the basic tenets of Buddhism, and it must be truly helpful and relevant. It is said that there are 84,000 Dharma doors through which one can enter Buddhism. For Buddhism to continue as a living source of wisdom and peace, even more doors should be opened.<sup>136</sup>

Dharma doors include "images and methods created by intelligent teachers to show the Buddha's Way and guide people in their efforts to practice the Way in

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<sup>134</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: The Lotus in the Sea of Fire*. 106

<sup>135</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*. 84.

<sup>136</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*. 8.

their own particular circumstances.”<sup>137</sup> In presenting this notion, Nhat Hanh is adhering to the traditional methodological principle of the verbal utility rather than the absolute truth of doctrines. As he explains it, “We cannot make any statement about the true nature of reality. Words and ideas can never convey reality.... We must go beyond all concepts if we want to be in touch with the true nature of things.”<sup>138</sup> We have already had occasion to discuss this doctrinal perspective, which has been represented in the proposals and practices of such Buddhist pluralists as Sallie King, Rita Gross, and the Dalai Lama. In articulating his own interpretation of this traditional principle, Nhat Hanh refers to some familiar analogies and parables.

In his commentary on an early scripture called the *Sūtra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake*,<sup>139</sup> Nhat Hanh refers to the simile of the Snake and the analogy of the Raft. As he explains, the simile of catching the snake represents the danger of absolutism:

There are probably not many teachers who would compare their own teachings to a poisonous snake. There must not be many who would say that their teachings can be dangerous if not understood and practiced correctly. The Buddha never said that his teachings were the absolute truth. He called them skilful means to guide us in the practice. The way to make use of these teachings is with our own intelligence and skill.

The Buddha described himself at other times as a doctor whose teachings are a kind of medicine. If the medicine is used correctly, it can help cure sickness. But if it is misused, it can threaten a patient’s life.<sup>140</sup>

The warning against an uncritical absolutism is reiterated through the simile of the Raft, which emphasises the issue of nonattachment to the teachings. Nhat Hanh explains the potential danger: “The Buddha teaches impermanence, no-self, emptiness, and nirvana not as theories, but as skilful means to help us in our practice. If we take these teachings and use them as theories we will be

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Diamond That Cuts through Illusion: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Diamond Sutra* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1992). 109.

<sup>139</sup> This sūtra is recorded in Pāli in the *Alagaddupama Sutta*, which means “Snake Simile”. It is in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, sutta no. 22. It is also recorded in Chinese as the *Arittha Sūtra*. This Chinese version is in the *Madhyama Āgama*, sūtra no. 220. In the Taisho Revised Tripitaka, the *Madhyama Āgama* is no. 26. This sūtra was translated from Sanskrit to Chinese by Gautama Sanghadeva in 397-398 CE.

<sup>140</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Thundering Silence: Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993). 29.

trapped.”<sup>141</sup> Nhat Hanh explains that to be caught in the form of the teachings, or the words, means that one has not been in touch with the substance, or the experiential meaning and purpose of the teaching:

Even if we undertake the crossing, if we are attached to what we learn, we have not understood it properly, and we have been bitten by the snake. In this case, a true raft is not available to us, and therefore we cannot cross the river... All teachings are offered as skilful means to help us along the path. They are not absolute truth. If we do not know how to use these teachings skilfully, we will be enslaved by them.<sup>142</sup>

Nhat Hanh further relates the simile of the Raft to that of the finger pointing to the moon,<sup>143</sup> explaining: “These pointing fingers are not the moon itself, just as the raft is not the other shore. The teachings of the Buddha are not in themselves the experience of enlightenment, just as a map of Paris is not the city of Paris itself.”<sup>144</sup>

According to Nhat Hanh, the quintessence of the Snake Sūtra is contained within the Buddha’s statement: “It is necessary to let go of all the true teachings, not to mention teachings that are not true.” Fixed knowledge is only ever an obstacle to true insight and awakening, Nhat Hanh explains; attachment to views perpetuates the illusion of separation, blinds one to the true nature of interdependence, and further, has the dangerous tendency to become ideologised. To illustrate his point, Nhat Hanh cites the *Samyutta Nikāya* narrative of the ascetic Vacchagotta’s visit to the Buddha – upon asking the Buddha whether there is a self, Vacchagotta receives nothing but silence in response. Nhat Hanh calls this a “thundering silence” and compares it to the roar of a lion. As the Buddha later explains to a disciple:

The teaching of no-self that I give the bhikshus is a means to guide you to look deeply in your meditation. It is not an ideology. If you make it into an ideology, you will be caught in it. I believe the ascetic Vacchagotta was looking for an ideology and not for a teaching to help him in the practice. So I remained silent.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 32-33.

<sup>143</sup> This simile is found in the *Sūraṅgama Sūtra*, which proclaims: “If someone uses a finger to point out the moon to another person, if that person takes the finger to be the moon, he will not only fail to see the moon, but he will also fail to see the finger.” (*Taisho* 945). It also features in the *Luṅkāvatāra Sūtra*: “All the teachings in the sūtras are fingers pointing to the moon.” (*Taisho* 640)

<sup>144</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Thundering Silence: Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake*. 33.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. 37.

In addition to the ancient scriptures, Nhat Hanh's anti-ideological non-absolutist approach to tradition can be attributed to the context of ideological warfare in which his teachings evolved. As we have already seen, this approach is reflected in the first three of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. It is also represented in the Order of Interbeing's *Charter*, which explains the danger of ideological attachment not only for the individual but also for the collective:

A person caught in a doctrine or system of thought can sacrifice millions of lives in order to put into practice his theory, which he considers the absolute truth, the unique path that can lead humankind to happiness. With a gun in hand, a person can kill one, five, or even ten people. But holding onto a doctrine or a system of thought, one can kill tens of thousands of people.<sup>146</sup>

So resolute is Nhat Hanh in this perspective that he once, and now famously, proclaimed: "If you have to choose between Buddhism and peace, then you must choose peace. Because if you choose Buddhism you sacrifice peace, and Buddhism does not accept that."<sup>147</sup> In this proclamation, we arrive at the heart of Nhat Hanh's approach to tradition. To reify Buddhism as an ideological absolute, whilst sacrificing peace, would be the antithesis of all the Buddha taught. As such texts as the *Heart Sūtra* express, the realisation of interdependence and emptiness must encompass Buddhism itself. Indeed, just as the *Heart Sūtra* 'empties' the doctrines of dependent origination and of the Four Noble Truths, so too does Nhat Hanh empty Buddhism itself. He states: "Buddhadharma is made of non-Buddhadharma elements."<sup>148</sup>

From Nhat Hanh's perspective, engagement is an inevitable outcome of any authentic understanding or actualisation of Buddhism. He has stated: "Buddhism is already engaged Buddhism. If it is not, it is not Buddhism."<sup>149</sup> Indeed, within the context of the Vietnam War, as a monk of deep conviction, astute intelligence, and profound insight, but without adequate leadership from his religious institution, Nhat Hanh sought guidance instead his own inner actualisation of the

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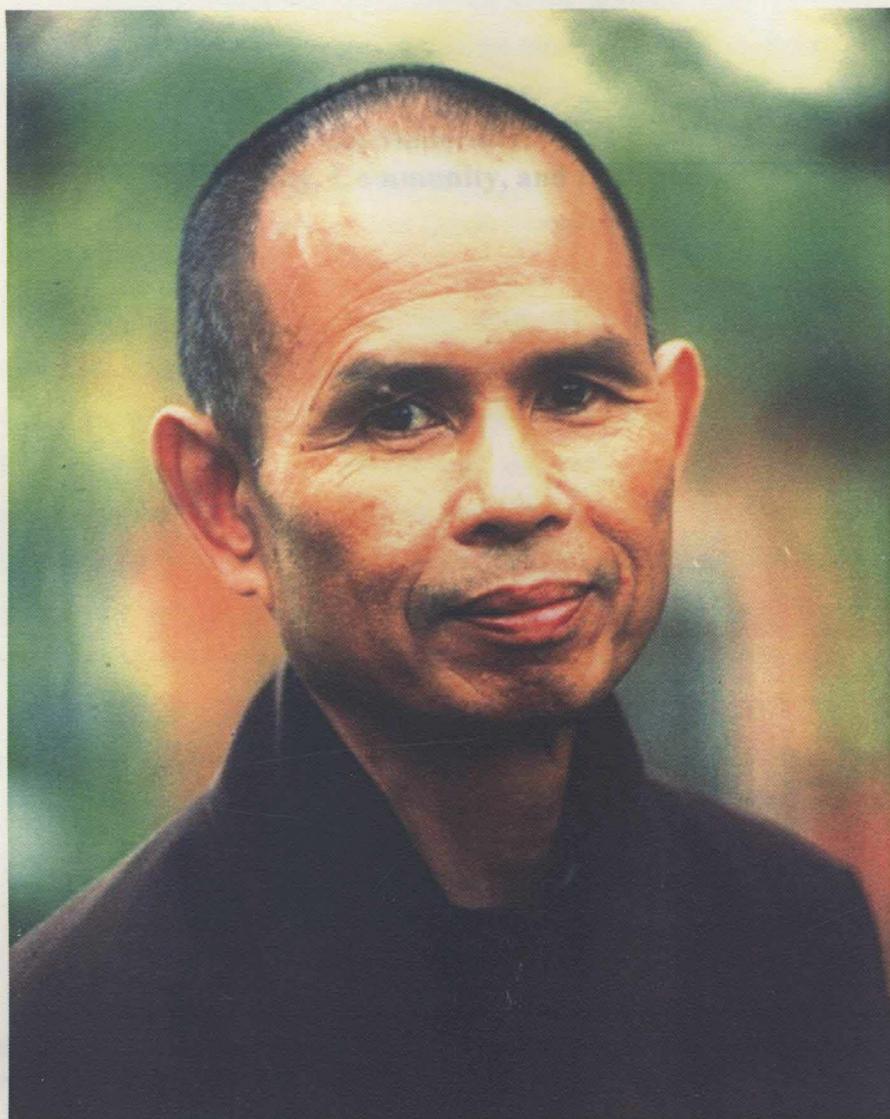
<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>147</sup> Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness*. 23.

<sup>148</sup> Nhat Hanh, *The Diamond That Cuts through Illusion: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Diamond Sutra*. 87.

<sup>149</sup> Hunt-Perry and Fine, "All Buddhism Is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing." 36.

Buddha's teachings. Certainly, Nhat Hanh received some Western education, was definitely influenced by Christianity, and he was undoubtedly compelled by a perceived need to respond to modernity. However, I would suggest that the evolution of Engaged Buddhism has not involved Western imperialism or European hegemony, but rather, the traditional dynamics of continuity and adaptation, in conjunction with a very specific situation of suffering, and a degree of cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. The Engaged Buddhism of the Vietnam War was not simply a case of Buddhism being Westernised, modernised, or colonised, but rather a profound manifestation of authentic, actualised tradition. This vitality of tradition is what is ultimately valued in Nhat Hanh's discourse as indicative of real spirituality and authentic belief – the capacity for religion to have effective meaning and to generate tangible compassion that is actualised in the world.



*...and the power of compassion. Awakening is important. The nature of the bombs, the  
nature of the weapons, the nature of the weapons, and the nature of our own beings  
and the world. This is the real meaning of engaged Buddhism.*

**I**  
**Thich Nhat Hanh**

Thich Nhat Hanh

5

**On Modernity:  
Spirituality, Community, and Dialogue**

*Humankind has become a very dangerous species.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

*Meditation is to see deeply into things, to see how we can change, how we can transform our situation. To transform our situation is also to transform our minds. To transform our minds is also to transform our situation, because the situation is mind and mind is situation. Awakening is important. The nature of the bombs, the nature of injustice, the nature of the weapons, and the nature of our own beings are the same. This is the real meaning of engaged Buddhism.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

At the beginning of the third millennium, Thich Nhat Hanh issued a clarion call for the imperative reinstatement of the domain of the spiritual as the only means of addressing global conflict and stemming the torrents of suffering. Addressing an international, interreligious audience, Nhat Hanh declared:

It has been said that the twenty-first century will be a century of spirituality, and I think it must be a century of spirituality if we are to survive. There has been so much violence, so much suffering, so much despair, confusion, and fear. So it must be a century of spirituality, or no century at all.<sup>1</sup>

While displaying a deceptive simplicity, which we may now recognise as a characteristic feature of Nhat Hanh's discourse, the words of the contemporary Buddhist teacher resound with a sense of urgency and conviction. Following his exile from Vietnam and his entrance onto the world stage, Nhat Hanh has continued to reinterpret and actualise the Buddhist tradition in an attempt to adapt and apply it to the specific cultural context of Western modernity. Within this context, Nhat Hanh has encountered much human suffering. This he attributes to the secular, individualistic, nationalistic, and anthropocentric ideologies that have (mis)informed the endeavours of modernity. Nhat Hanh's approach towards modernity bears specific import within the wider framework of this investigation as the principal elements of his diagnosis of the malaise of modernity, and the cure he prescribes, directly inform his approach to religious diversity, and will be utilised in the following chapter towards our affirmation of a position of Buddhist pluralism.

Before we can begin to examine Nhat Hanh's particular diagnosis and cure, we must first locate his critique in relation to modernity itself. Accordingly, this chapter will commence with a delineation of the dimensions of modernity and the modern Western worldview, and a more specific discussion of the place and meaning of religion and spirituality within these perimeters. Once we have located Nhat Hanh theoretically, we will then locate him geographically by picking up the narrative of his life-story following his exile from Vietnam and his relocation in

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<sup>1</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, "Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century," in *Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities*, ed. Thich Nhat Hanh and Jack Lawlor (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2002), 9. See also Chapter 5: "A Century of Spirituality" in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2005), 87-98.

the West. We will then proceed onto a specific exploration of Nhat Hanh's critique of modernity. While aspects of this critique are related to Nhat Hanh's earlier teachings of Engaged Buddhism and his analysis of the Vietnam War, his diagnosis of modernity's ills is wider in scope and is thus drawn from a greater number of sources. These will be essentially primary sources, however, as this area of Nhat Hanh's teachings is, to date, largely untreated in the extant scholarly literature. Specifically, our investigation of Nhat Hanh's critique of modernity will assess three interrelated domains of his discourse, constituting analysis and diagnosis at the level of the psychological, the social, and the global.

Following our exploration of Nhat Hanh's diagnosis, we will turn to an examination of his cure. In fact, the entirety of Nhat Hanh's later interpretation of Buddhism can be understood as an offering of a solution to a 'world gone wrong'. This solution will be examined in reference to three central principles within Nhat Hanh's discourse – spirituality, community, and dialogue. These three principles correspond with the three arenas of Nhat Hanh's diagnosis: spirituality offers a cure to the psychological suffering of modernity; community represents a solution to societal ills in modernity; and dialogue proposes a means towards the reconciliation of global interreligious discord, and indeed conflict of all kinds. In addition to textual analysis, we will also examine these principles within the context of Plum Village, Nhat Hanh's meditation and retreat centre and home to his core monastic community in south-west France.

### Modernity, Crisis, and Religious Resurgence

For the purposes of this discussion, two related but distinct ways of understanding modernity need to be defined. The first understands modernity in a 'non-reified' sense, which can best be explicated in reference to the etymological foundations of the term. These lie in the Latin *modernus*. *Modernus* itself is derived from the adverb *modo*, which since the late fifth-century was used in equivalence with *nunc*, or 'now'.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the term *modernus* was used during the Middle Ages as a whole to distinguish one's status from the *antiqui* and to define the Christian present from the Pagan past. Gustavo Benavides has recognised the 'trans-

epochal' usage of the term, noting a number of disparate eras, including the Renaissance, the twelfth-century, and the late seventeenth-century, which all identified themselves in relation to an antiquity that was sometimes deemed naïve and sometimes venerated.<sup>3</sup> As the critical theorist Jürgen Habermas confirms:

[T]he term 'modern' again and again expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, this non-reified understanding of modernity can refer to any cultural-historic context that identifies itself in relation to the past – *any* past – thus it could just as easily be applied to the age of the Roman Empire as to Meiji Japan.<sup>5</sup>

The application of this understanding of modernity to the recent intellectual and social movements of Western culture has generated a 'reified' conception of modernity. Modernity, in this respect, defines a specific socio-cultural, geopolitical, and historic entity. Moreover, as the foundation of the *Weltanschauung* of the modern West, this understanding of modernity can be defined by certain ideologies, such as reason and progress, science and technology, individualism and humanism, democracy and capitalism. There is a general consensus that this particular culture of Western modernity has its origins in the European Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. It encompasses the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolutions; it witnesses the rise of capitalism, socialism, nationalism, and colonialism, culminating in the two World Wars, and,

<sup>2</sup> See Gustavo Benavides, "Modernity and Buddhism," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism: M-Z*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003). 544.

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Benavides, "Modernity," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity - an Incomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983). 3.

<sup>5</sup> See John Wilson, "Modernity," in *Encyclopedia of Religion: Mary - Ndembu Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005). 6109. Wilson distinguishes between reified and pre or nonreified interpretations of modernity, but in a somewhat different fashion as to how I have utilised the terms. Wilson suggests that a nonreified conception of modernity can be used as a "means of recognising that cultural change and awareness of that change are pervasive in contemporary societies." He argues that it is more helpful to think of modernity in this way, as opposed to a reified conception that depicts modernity as a "spiritual medium in contemporary life that necessarily rivals religious traditions." While I agree with Wilson's analysis, I have used the concepts of nonreified and reified to represent modernity as a trans-historic and trans-cultural signifier, and a culturally and historically specific signifier.

finally, decolonisation, globalisation, and the Western 'triumph' of democracy. A definition of modernism offered by Harry Oldmeadow will here serve us well:

Modernism...we may loosely define as the prevalent assumptions, values, and attitudes of a world-view fashioned by the most pervasive intellectual and moral influences of recent European history, an outlook in conformity with the *Zeitgeist* of the times.<sup>6</sup>

Adding specifics to Oldmeadow's definition, Elisabeth Ellis perceives modernity as a 'condition', aspects of which are associated with "historical trends arising out of Cartesian philosophy, industrial capitalism, revolutionary politics, and the cultural changes of the turn of the century."<sup>7</sup> Modernity has also been defined as an 'axial period' or an 'axial age'. In 1953, Karl Jaspers asserted, "Man seems to have started from scratch four times," demarcating the Neolithic age, the earliest civilisations, the emergence of the great empires, and modernity.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Arpád Szakolczai and László Füstös have observed:

An axial moment occurs whenever there is a global collapse of the established order of things, including the political system, the social order of everyday life, and the system of beliefs... Such a period happened in the first centuries (collapse of the Roman republic and rise of Christianity), in the fifth-seventh centuries (collapse of the Roman Empire and rise of Islam), in the fifteenth – sixteenth centuries (the waning of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Protestantism), and finally the two major stages of the dissolution of absolutist politics and the traditional European social order, Enlightenment and socialism.<sup>9</sup>

It needs to be qualified that this understanding of modernity as a specific temporal and cultural era, conceived during the Renaissance and delivered by the Enlightenment, ought not to deny the reality of alternative and concurrent modernities taking place beyond the Western realm. Without refuting the advance of 'Europeanisation' or 'Westernisation', this understanding of modernity should not assume the privilege or superiority of the West as modern.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth ("Harry") Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo: The Sri Lankan Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000). 117.

<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Ellis, "Modernity: Overview," in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas - Machiavellism to Phrenology*, ed. Maryanne Horowitz (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005). 1473.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, in Yves Lambert, "Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999). 304

<sup>9</sup> Arpád Szakolczai & László Füstös, 'Value Systems in Axial Moments: A Comparative Analysis of 24 European Countries,' in *Ibid.* 305-6

The values that characterise and govern the culture of the modern West are hostile to the authority sources, leaders, and worldviews of religions.<sup>10</sup> The ideologies of modernity have the tendency to denounce the sacred, to disenfranchise tradition, and to disseminate spiritual impoverishment, a tendency that is today widely acknowledged. In a recent publication titled *Religion in Late Modernity*, Robert Neville has observed a number of characteristics of the modern West, which have effectively undermined the traditional or religious worldview. These include: the notion of the autonomous individual, who is the ground of authority, and whose identity is separable from the history and identity of the group; the conception of the person as a duality of mind and body, or like a machine or object that can be controlled and manipulated; the belief that nature and social systems can be manipulated and controlled; and the notion that only that which is observable and measurable belongs to the real world.<sup>11</sup> Such views find their origins in the Reformation, which, according to Steve Bruce, hastened the rise of individualism and rationalism, two currents that fundamentally changed the meaning of religion in modernity:

[I]ndividualism threatened the communal basis of religious belief and behaviour, while rationality removed many of the purposes of religion and rendered many of its beliefs implausible.<sup>12</sup>

These currents were later reified by the Enlightenment's challenge to the moral, social, and philosophical authority of the Church. Such philosophers as John Locke and Immanuel Kant argued for the segregation of religious discourse and authority from the public domains of politics, economics, science, and philosophy, so that such secular realms might be unimpeded by religious arguments and conflicts. The consequent process of religious removal was further reinforced by such ideologies as Francis Bacon's "knowledge is power," August Comte's affirmation of the historical inevitability of human progress, Karl Marx's "humanisation of nature," and the theory of social Darwinian competitiveness.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, this process evolved into the ideology of secularism, which instigated

<sup>10</sup> See Robert C. Neville, *Religion in Late Modernity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 149

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 145-6

<sup>12</sup> Steve Bruce, *From Cathedrals to Cults: Religion in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 230

<sup>13</sup> Tu Wei-Ming, "The Mirror of Modernity and Spiritual Resources for the Global Community," *Sophia* 34, no. 1 (1995), 80

the privatisation or individualisation of religion and was predicted as the logical, inexorable conclusion of the force of reason. As Gary Bouma has explained, "From the Enlightenment through Darwin, Freud and the founders of sociology the assumption has been that with the expansion of science, the sphere and power of religion would decline."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as modernity advanced, the secular ideology of the progress of history, and the assertion of the finality of science as the agent of knowledge, usurped the authority of religion and became what the postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard has called 'grand narratives', imparting great promises of freedom and self-fulfilment.<sup>15</sup>

Fuelled by the forces of reason and secularism, science and technology, the great ideological juggernaut of modernity advanced through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and into the twentieth-century. Here, however, it faltered in the face of the so-called 'crisis of modernity'. J. L. Mehta has explained the ultimate failure of the modernist project:

Events and trends in European and world history have... shaken that simple faith [in progress] and its optimistic outlook on the future. The actual consequences of the French and later revolutions, the two world wars, the rise of new despotisms and the purges and concentration camps that accompany them, the atom bomb, all of these have more than justified the gloomy forebodings of Flaubert and Baudelaire, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Crisis, catastrophe and extinction have overtaken civilisations and cultures in the past.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, modernity's predictions of material fulfilment, rational and moral perfection, the 'triumph' of empiricism and science over superstition and religion, and the ascendancy of the eschatological faith in progress, were essentially undermined and proven illusive by the eventual bankruptcy of reason. Philosophers such as Nietzsche affirmed an underlying nihilism within Western history, and a cold spiritual void at the heart of the modernist quest was revealed. Commenting on the philosopher Martin Heidegger's insights into modern Western history, Mehta, again, observes:

<sup>14</sup> Gary D. Bouma, "From Hegemony to Pluralism: Managing Religious Diversity in Modernity and Post-Modernity," *Australian Religious Studies Review* (1999). 17

<sup>15</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport Sur Le Savoir (the Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge)* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> J. L. Mehta, *India and the West: The Problem of Understanding, Studies in World Religions* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985). 74

Accompanying “progress” as its chill and deadening shadow is the spiritual night falling on mankind, “the darkening of the world, the flight of the Gods, the degradation of the earth,” as Heidegger describes it. Man has become the subject of history, in this age of technology, objectifying the real and having it in his grip, calculating, planning and ordering, seeking to enlarge his domain over the realm of events by conceptualising and representing them.... The dimension of the Holy... has vanished; Nature has turned into a mere play of forces predictable and controllable by man; things have become mere objects, and history the narration and grasping of the factual and objectifiable, instead of that invisible happening that has brought world-history to pass.<sup>17</sup>

A number of theories, discourses, and proposals have manifested in response to the crisis of modernity, the bankruptcy of reason, and the Weberian ‘disenchantment of the world’. Most obvious has been the critical discourse of postmodernity, which has attempted to deconstruct the false edifices of the modern era. The social critique of postmodernism has pierced the illusions of modernist ‘meta-narratives’ (Lyotard), the linguistically constructed nature of the subject (Derrida), and the fabrication of reality through ‘disciplines of power’ (Foucault). While these postmodern and poststructuralist critiques have been a necessary antidote to modernist myopia, their perspectives, as we have already discussed, are generally deracinated and function according to a hermeneutics of suspicion. In particular, as David Loy has observed, postmodern critiques encompass a “secular suspicion of spiritual perspectives.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it is arguable whether any real alternatives to modernity are offered by the postmodernists, or whether, in contrast, Nietzschean nihilism is simply perpetuated. As Richard Falk has observed, the knowledge gained from critical postmodern discourse “tends to leave us stranded on [an] island of critical insight, producing over time a disabling sense of despair and futility.”<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to postmodern critiques, and in conflict with the predictions of modernist secularism, a different kind of response to the crisis of modernity has emerged in the form of social commentary and criticism, coupled with constructive suggestions and proposals, issuing from a ground of religious tradition. Such proposals are reflective of the contemporary global resurgence or reinstatement of religion.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 81-2

<sup>18</sup> David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* (Boston: Wisdom, 2003). 9

Within the context of the late modern West, religious resurgence exemplifies a “widespread disillusionment with a ‘modernity’ which reduces the world to what can be perceived and controlled through reason, science, technology, and bureaucratic rationality, and leaves out considerations of the religious, the spiritual, and the sacred.”<sup>20</sup> The modern Western religious landscape is therefore witnessing the consolidation of specific traditional structures, the reaffirmation of diverse religious identities, and the emergence and growth of numerous spiritual movements. Beyond Western contexts, this resurgence can be understood as a response to the politically and culturally colonising Western endeavour to establish a global hegemony. In many post-colonial contexts beyond the First World the return to religion encompasses an affirmation of native culture, as opposed to an emulation of the West. Lacking the democracy and development once assured by the promise of the modern secular state, many countries are turning to religion in revolt against the West, and in search of national identity and cultural authenticity.<sup>21</sup>

Either way, the resurgence can have positive and negative consequences. We do not need to look far, either East or West, to find eruptions of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism. Indeed, every religion has the capacity to attract those claimants of absolute truth, in whose hands any religious message can be distorted and unleashed as dogmatism, oppression, violence, terror, and suffering. As Richard Falk has observed:

To the extent that the new wave of religion is animated mainly by a negative spiritual energy, that is, by unconditional and extreme moves to negate the modern, it tends to be destructive of human potentiality, to deny freedom, to claim an exclusive access to truth, to be regressively other-worldly in its promises of salvation, and to fail to provide humanity with a positive way forward.<sup>22</sup>

However, at the other end of the spectrum of late modern religious manifestations we find a reaffirmation of the role of religion in providing ethical guidance and spiritual resources that could help reinstate, as Nhat Hanh has proposed, the

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Falk, “Politically Engaged Spirituality in an Emerging Global Civil Society,” *ReVision* 25, no. 4 (2003): 3.

<sup>20</sup> Scott M. Thomas, “Taking Religious and Cultural Pluralism Seriously: The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Society,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000): 816.

<sup>21</sup> See Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992).

domain of the spiritual within a global culture. Falk has also described this opposite perspective:

[T]here are other more positive and emancipatory energies also contained in this renewal of religion that are associated with a reaffirmation of the spiritual sense of the person, a feeling for the sacred and the mystery that lies at the heart of human existence, an embrace of human solidarity, and a recognition that spiritual longing and religious tradition can take many authentic forms that offer us many evocative metaphors for truth and ultimate concern that no human agency can grasp with infallibility.<sup>23</sup>

The resurgence of religion, from this perspective, embodies a conviction that the religions of the world contain valuable resources that could be utilised in tackling contemporary global crises. The scope of such crises, it is further recognised, goes beyond the boundaries of nation-states, and their resolution therefore depends upon a shared responsibility, an ecological awareness, a common morality, and often a 'global spirituality'.

Before providing some examples of this new configuration of religion, a few words should be lent to the notion of spirituality. In contrast to the many negative associations of globalisation, a number of contemporary interfaith movements, such as the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, appear to be representative of a positive manifestation of global culture, which actualises global interconnectedness in the service of irenic and communitarian goals.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, such terms as 'global spirituality' and 'interspiritual unity' tend to cause alarm, and rightly so, for they may be suggestive of universalist, essentialist, or syncretic strategies that can lead to the debasement of the uniqueness, heritage, and integrity of religious traditions. Furthermore, the word 'spirituality' is itself a modern term, and a vague and woolly one at that, which ought not to be bandied about in an uncritical or unqualified fashion.

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<sup>22</sup> R. Falk, *Religion and Humane Global Governance* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 1-2

<sup>24</sup> In addition to the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, we may also mention the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the International Association for Religious Freedom, the Temple of Understanding, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and the World Congress of Faiths. For an overview see Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). For an interesting television broadcast, see Compass, "The Quiet Revolution: New Prophets (Episode 1), Pioneering City (Episode 2), Global Networks (Episode 3)," in *The Quiet Revolution* (Australia: ABC TV, 2007).

Understood on a popular level in the context of the modern West, spirituality is generally associated with the eclectic, esoteric mixing pot of the New Age movement. It may also refer to a fascination with 'exotic' Eastern spiritualities, such as *feng shui*, yoga, and Zen rock gardens; an interest in the occult and mysticism; or an undefined faith in gurus, aromatherapy, healing crystals, and the like. Without denying the integrity of these spiritual elements, it is apparent that contemporary popular spirituality has the tendency to extract traditional elements and 'interiorise' or 'psychologise' them, thereby creating an individualistic, self-centred, and commodified 'capitalist spirituality'. While the notion of spirituality can be traced to Romantic reactions to the rationality of modernity, from the perspective of 'New Age Capitalism' spirituality would seem to be merely a continuation of the modernist project and its violation of religious tradition. As Jeremy Carrette and Richard King have argued, "The proliferation of 'spirituality' and 'personal development' literature... reflects the capitalist takeover and privatisation of human meaning – all the more sinister for the way in which it is celebrated as 'holistic' and 'ethically' virtuous. The economic ideology of neo-liberalism... has entered the public space of religion in its disguised form as 'spirituality'."<sup>25</sup>

From a less suspicious perspective, spirituality can also be understood as a way of living, or life-orientation, that is prescribed by a religious tradition and is manifested as the practice and actualisation of that tradition's truths. From this perspective, a number of scholars and theologians have articulated definitions of spirituality that are perhaps more functional and acceptable than their popular equivalents. For example, the Christian theologian and dialogist Alan Race has suggested:

Spirituality signifies a sense of personal connectedness with reality and with the intimations of transcendence to be discovered in and through human engagement with reality. In so far as it is the function of religious tradition to nurture a sense of connectedness and transcendence, religions are not only bearers of 'spirituality' they are 'spirituality' – or better, 'ways of spirituality'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Jeremy R. Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005). 46

<sup>26</sup> Alan Race, *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue* (London: SCM Press, 2001). 144

Race is particularly concerned with the dialogical, ethical, and pluralistic capacities of spirituality. In this sense, he suggests that spirituality can contribute towards “interreligious collaboration for the sake of alleviating poverty, coupled with the acceptance of the authentic value of the many religions.”<sup>27</sup> Race therefore determines that spirituality can be authentic and constructive if it is informed by tradition and manifested in a dialogical, experiential, and engaged way. On these grounds, he proposes the construction of a cross-cultural, multifaith ‘interspirituality’, which does not attempt syncretism or assert naïve or idealistic common ground, but sees the possibility of religious complementarity and convergence at the “levels of the moral and spiritual fruits of religious experience.”<sup>28</sup> In contrast to token garden statues of the Buddha, incense sticks, and ‘dream catchers,’ this kind of understanding of spirituality in the late modern world would seem more integrated and genuine.

A *sannyasin* in the tradition of Bede Griffiths, a Benedictine monk, religious scholar, and a pioneer in the contemporary interfaith movement, Wayne Teasdale is known for introducing the term ‘interspirituality’. According to Teasdale, late modernity is witnessing the dawning of an ‘Interspiritual Age’ that is defined by a ‘global spirituality’. While the notion of global spirituality may appear idealistic or utopian, Teasdale suggests that it constitutes “the foundation that can prepare the way for a planet-wide enlightened culture, and a continuing community among the religions that is substantial, vital, and creative.”<sup>29</sup> Teasdale’s definition of this kind of spirituality can provide us with some further identifying criteria for distinguishing genuine from popularised and individualistic instances of spirituality.

Teasdale is particularly concerned to directly confront the problems in the world – problems that represent the failure of modernity – from the perspective of the religions:

The religions contain certain inner resources of a psychological, moral, and contemplative nature that can bring about an inward transformation of human

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 152

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 156

<sup>29</sup> Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions* (California: New World Library, 1999). 26

motives that would then be consistent with a needed sensitivity toward the Earth, other species, and how we live and use technology. It would be totally shortsighted to assume that changes in motivation could be achieved without these resources of the religions, for surely the political, economic, social, educational, and scientific realms have failed to move the masses in this regard.<sup>30</sup>

To this end, Teasdale proposes seven common elements definitive of a global spirituality: a capacity to live morally, deep nonviolence, solidarity with all life and the Earth itself, a spiritual practice and a mature self-knowledge, simplicity of life, selfless service, and prophetic action.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, he delineates seven capacities of such a spirituality: openness, presence, the ability to listen, to be, to see, the capacity for spontaneity, and joy.<sup>32</sup>

Richard Falk, a scholar from the field of international law and politics, a social commentator and anti-war critic, is exemplary in his proposal of a “socially engaged spirituality”. According to Falk, the core assumptions of modernity have engendered a world order characterised by “inhumane governance.” Such assumptions include convictions

...that science and reason will ensure the progress of human society; that religion and spirituality are essentially superfluous in the public order; and that such secular ideas as political boundaries, sovereignty, territorial supremacy, and the rule of the law provide solid grounds for optimism about human destiny.<sup>33</sup>

In reality, however, such assumptions have been invalidated. As Falk discerns, the impact of modernist order has ultimately transpired to “fracture the peoples of the world, to neglect the plight of those who are most deprived and vulnerable, to place nonsustainable burdens on the environment that seem likely to diminish the life quality of future generations, to deepen over time the disparities between rich and poor, and to engender an ethos of consumerism that forecloses the most fulfilling forms of individual and social self-realisation.”<sup>34</sup>

In opposition, Falk proposes a “reconstructive” postmodern discourse as the medium in which to articulate a “politically engaged spirituality” within an

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<sup>30</sup> Wayne Teasdale, “The Interspiritual Age: Practical Mysticism for the Third Millennium,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34, no. 1 (1997). 76

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 80ff

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 85ff

<sup>33</sup> Falk, “Politically Engaged Spirituality in an Emerging Global Civil Society.” 4

<sup>34</sup> Falk, *Religion and Humane Global Governance*. 17

emergent “global civil society.” From this perspective, Falk endeavours to “reverse the political optic by claiming that transformative patterns of behaviour will result from ‘spiritual’ interventions in societal processes, rather than from ‘mechanical’ or ‘material’ causes.” Furthermore, his primary concern is with

...transformation, a radical turning of consciousness, which depends on spreading or deepening the realisation that human behaviour in all its aspects needs to become far more reverential toward the sacredness of life.<sup>35</sup>

According to the Beat poet, deep ecologist, and Zen Buddhist Gary Snyder, Buddhism has much to offer in the way of an alternative social reality. For example,

The joyous and voluntary poverty of Buddhism becomes a positive force. The traditional harmlessness and avoidance of taking life in any form has nation-shaking implications. The practice of meditation, for which one needs only “the ground beneath one’s feet,” wipes out mountains of junk being pumped into the mind by the mass media and supermarket universities.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, Snyder proposes the construction of a “true community (sangha) of all beings” and the evolution of a “planetary culture”, representative of a social configuration defined by the natural, the imperfect, the familial, cautionary, and traditional, as opposed to the legalised greed and monopolised violence inherent within the nation state. “If we are lucky,” Snyder suggests, “we may eventually arrive at a world of relatively mutually tolerant small societies attuned to their local natural region and united overall by a profound respect and love for the mind and nature of the universe.”<sup>37</sup>

A similar vein of Buddhist social commentary can be found in the work of David Loy, which is particularly concerned with the interface between Buddhism and modernity. Loy has observed areas of congruence between the postmodern recognition of the constructed nature of the world, our sacred canopies and our selves, and Buddhist deconstructive insights regarding the impermanence and interpenetration of all things, especially the Buddha’s essential teaching of “the deconstruction and reconstruction of the fictive self.” However, while the Western

<sup>35</sup> Falk, “Politically Engaged Spirituality in an Emerging Global Civil Society.” 2

<sup>36</sup> Gary Snyder, “Buddhism and the Possibilities of a Planetary Culture,” in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1985). 83

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 84-85

postmodern perspective “grows out of, and depends upon, a secular modernity that privileges empirical rationalism over religious superstition,” the “more religious perspective [of Buddhism] implies different possibilities,” as well as potential “remedies for our postmodern nihilism.”<sup>38</sup>

It is in relation to these representations of religion in late modernity – articulations of spirituality, suggestions of engagement, and penetrating social commentary – that we should understand Thich Nhat Hanh’s critique of modernity and his continued reinterpretation of the Buddhist tradition. As we shall see, Nhat Hanh’s approach to modernity encompasses all of these elements, while it skilfully balances the particular and the universal, the traditional and the modern, his own commitment as a Buddhist monk and his openness to an unconfined spirituality. Before we examine Nhat Hanh’s critique of the modern West, let us return to the narrative of his life-story and his relocation within the modern West.

#### **When Thich Nhat Hanh Came to the West...**

At the conclusion of Nhat Hanh’s international speaking tour in the mid-1960s, he was strongly advised not to return to Vietnam by those who feared for his safety and his freedom. Consequently, Nhat Hanh remained abroad and continued his anti-war efforts as an emissary for the Buddhist peace movement. When the Paris Peace Talks began in 1968, the Overseas Vietnamese Buddhist Association, which was based in Paris, formed a Buddhist Peace Delegation with Nhat Hanh as its chair. While the delegation was not officially recognised among the superpowers, the French government allowed the Buddhists to host a conference in order to represent the voice of the Vietnamese people. The delegation also organised press conferences, strategic meditation gatherings, and published newsletters, and in this way they were instrumental in the peace process.

When the Paris Peace Accords were finally signed in 1973, Nhat Hanh was in Bangkok making plans with the Unified Buddhist Church for the post-war reconstruction and social development of Vietnam. By this time, the SYSS had become a well-established organisation and Nhat Hanh foresaw its principal role

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<sup>38</sup> Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*. 5-6

in the rebuilding of Vietnam. However, following the violation of the peace treaty by North Vietnam, its occupation of South Vietnam, and the ascension of Communist rule, the Buddhist movement was barred from social involvement and Nhat Hanh was officially refused permission to enter Vietnam. Forced into exile, Nhat Hanh sought refuge in France.

Just as he had done during the war when he retreated to *Phuong Boi*, Nhat Hanh once again turned to his community for support. This small Vietnamese Sangha managed to purchase a dilapidated farmhouse on a small plot of land in quiet countryside not far from Paris. Here, Nhat Hanh returned to the simplicity of monastic life and found a place of healing within his spiritual practice. A few years earlier during a conversation with Father Daniel Berrigan, Nhat Hanh made the observation that “communities of resistance” need not only refer to resistance to war, but also to the onslaught of secular modern society. He suggested:

...living in modern society, one feels that he cannot easily retain integrity, wholeness. One is robbed permanently of humanness, the capacity of being oneself... So perhaps, first of all, resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted, and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly...

I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness.<sup>39</sup>

This was precisely Nhat Hanh’s intention when he retreated to the rural property that became known as *Les Patates Douces*, or ‘Sweet Potatoes’, in reference to the main food source of the Vietnamese poor. Here Nhat Hanh stayed put; he ceased travelling, attending conferences, meeting with the press or world leaders, and instead focused on his practice – meditating, writing, gardening, drawing. However, as a community of resistance that represented healing and wholeness in the midst of suffering and alienation, Sweet Potatoes gradually began to attract large numbers of people, including Vietnamese refugee families, but also those seeking refuge from modern society. Therefore, in the 1980s Nhat Hanh began leading meditation retreats and resumed his public role.

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<sup>39</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh and Daniel Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001). 129

As Nhat Hanh's popularity grew, it became apparent that the Sweet Potatoes property was not large enough to accommodate the growing numbers of practitioners. In 1982, Nhat Hanh and his Sangha found a property for sale in south-west France, eighty-five kilometres east of Bordeaux. The initial purchase was of two tracts of land, which were named the Upper and Lower Hamlets. Together, they formed *Plum Village* (Vietnamese, *Lang Mai*; French, *Villages des Pruniers*), the name referring to the community's plan to grow and sell plums to raise money for Vietnamese aid.

Today, Plum Village functions as a centre of monastic training in Nhat Hanh's particular fusion of mindfulness practice and socially engaged spiritual activism. Plum Village also offers a place of retreat for outside practitioners of any faith, or none. Since its inception, both the physical size of Plum Village and the number of its monastics has grown. Plum Village now encompasses seven hamlets within a thirty-kilometre radius and is home to Nhat Hanh's permanent monastic community of about one hundred and fifty monks and nuns.<sup>40</sup> Apart from the original Upper and Lower Hamlets, there is the Middle Hamlet, West Hamlet and New Hamlet, Gatehouse New Hamlet and Hillside New Hamlet. Five main temples are spread among the hamlets: the *Dharma Cloud Temple* and the *Foot of the Mountain Temple* are both at the Upper Hamlet, the *Loving Kindness Temple* is at the New Hamlet, and the *Dharma Nectar Temple* and the *Assembly of Stars Temple* are at the Lower Hamlet. In 2006, the international Order of Interbeing consisted of approximately one thousand lay practitioners and two hundred and fifty monastic practitioners, outside of Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> Those monastics not based in Plum Village live in Germany, at the *Intersein Monastery* in Bavaria, or at one of the monasteries in the United States: *Deer Park Monastery* in California, *Magnolia Village* in Mississippi, or *Blue Cliff Monastery* in New York State.<sup>42</sup> Since Nhat Hanh's return trips to Vietnam in 2005 and 2007, the Order of Interbeing has grown by the hundreds and two monasteries have been re-established that practise under Nhat Hanh's supervision – the *Tu Hieu Temple* near Huê, and the *Prajna Temple* in the central highlands. Finally, throughout the

<sup>40</sup> See Plum Village website: <http://www.plumvillage.org/HTML/aboutUs.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> See Order of Interbeing website: <http://www.orderofinterbeing.org/aboutoi.html>.

United States and Canada, many Mindfulness Practice Centres (MPCs) have been established. While avowedly “in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh”, these MPCs are run by lay practitioners who present the teachings in a non-sectarian environment that is spiritual rather than explicitly Buddhist.<sup>43</sup>

Evidently, Nhat Hanh’s ministry is today global in scope. Indeed, it is often asserted that next to the Dalai Lama, Nhat Hanh is the most acknowledged and esteemed Buddhist leader in the world. Since coming to the West, Nhat Hanh has led retreats and workshops not only in France, but also in Australia, Canada, the United States, throughout South America and Europe, and in the Middle East and Asia. Nhat Hanh and his Sangha continue to work tirelessly on humanitarian and social development projects in Vietnam. At the same time, Nhat Hanh has reinterpreted his teachings of Engaged Buddhism to apply to Western contexts and deliver a more universal message. He explains:

Engaged Buddhism does not only mean to use Buddhism to solve social and political problems, protesting against bombs, and protesting against social injustice. First of all we have to bring Buddhism into our daily lives.<sup>44</sup>

Nhat Hanh’s retreats generally focus on this kind of universalised, experiential and pragmatic Buddhism, or what Nhat Hanh calls ‘mindfulness practice’. Indeed, mindfulness practice constitutes the core of Nhat Hanh’s pedagogy. According to Nhat Hanh, it is the key to creating peace in the self and peace in the world; it is the means and the end, the way to deal with all conflicts, both internal and interpersonal, and indeed international and interreligious; it is the foundation of insight into interbeing, present moment awareness, and ‘being peace’. In addition to the general mindfulness retreats, Nhat Hanh has also held more specific retreats for families, teenagers, war veterans, members of Parliament/Congress, law enforcement officers and other public servants, people in jails and other kinds of correctional facilities, people of colour, counsellors and therapists. Furthermore,

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<sup>42</sup> Note that the original *Maple Forest Monastery* and the *Green Mountain Dharma Centre Nunnery* both closed in 2007 and relocated to the *Blue Cliff Monastery* in Pine Bush, New York.

<sup>43</sup> See Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine, “All Buddhism Is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing,” in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher Queen (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 62. And for examples of MPCs, see the *Mindfulness Practice Centre of Fairfax*: [www.mpcf.org](http://www.mpcf.org), the *Still Water Mindfulness Practice Centre*: [www.stillwatermpc.org](http://www.stillwatermpc.org), and the *Mindfulness Practice Centre of Vancouver*: [www.mindfulnessvancouver.org](http://www.mindfulnessvancouver.org).

<sup>44</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987), 53

retreats for academics and professionals have focused on such specialised fields as psychology, psychotherapy, the science of the mind, and quantum physics. It is worth noting that Nhat Hanh is particularly concerned to nurture the spiritual aspects and practices of all religious traditions, which he does through the proposal of mindfulness practice. From a non-dogmatic and de-absolutised perspective, Nhat Hanh encourages the revitalisation and actualisation of all religions by offering his teaching of mindfulness for inclusion within other religions' often spiritually impoverished praxial systems.

The universalism of Nhat Hanh's contemporary teachings is further indicated by his global approach to nonviolence and peace. In 2000, Nhat Hanh was involved in the drafting of the *Manifesto 2000*, a declaration consisting of six pledges to promote a culture of peace and nonviolence in the world, which was signed by many Nobel Peace Prize Laureates. The following year, Nhat Hanh publicly bore witness to those who suffered during the 9/11 attacks, but he also urged the American government against violent retaliation. Nhat Hanh has spoken consistently against war in the Middle East, and has led numerous demonstrations and 'Peace Walks' that have been attended by thousands. He has also addressed the issue of global warming. In 2005, Nhat Hanh spoke before UNESCO, presenting a characteristically pragmatic proposal for ending violence, war, and global warming. He offered the concept of a weekly 'No Car Day' as a potential measure that could be promoted globally. Most recently, Nhat Hanh has spoken in support of the nonviolent protests of the Buddhist monks in Burma.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to the evident global reach of his later discourse and ministry, recent years have also seen Nhat Hanh placing more emphasis on the traditional form of monasticism, or what Thomas Merton called "monastic formation."<sup>46</sup> Nhat Hanh is clearly concerned to anchor his contemporary teachings in the solid rock of

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<sup>45</sup> Nhat Hanh and American Buddhist teacher and author Jack Kornfield released a joint statement of support on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007. See Plum Village website: [http://www.plumvillage.org/HTML/pressrelease/buddhachannel\\_tnhjackkorn.html](http://www.plumvillage.org/HTML/pressrelease/buddhachannel_tnhjackkorn.html). See also interview with Nhat Hanh in Time Magazine, David Van Biema, "Burma's Monks: 'Already a Success'," *Time Magazine* <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1670911,00.html> (2007).

<sup>46</sup> See Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalisation* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 99

tradition, as represented by this most ancient and inviolable traditional form.<sup>47</sup> In response to the growth of his monastic community, Nhat Hanh seems focused as never before on providing the members of his Order with sufficient training and the relevant resources, so that they may continue his tradition and actively implement his teachings in the world, where, he contends, they may be of some help.

### **Diagnosis: Hungry Ghosts, Toxic Culture, Global Terror**

Thich Nhat Hanh's diagnosis of the malaise of the modern age begins with the same observation made by the Buddha himself over 2500 years ago. As represented in the Four Noble Truths, this observation concerns the fundamental problem of human suffering, and the nature of its essential cause, which is, according to the Buddhist tradition, the wrong perception of a separate and permanent self. While this diagnosis can apply equally to the inhabitants of ancient India as to the current subjects of the modern West, Nhat Hanh's interpretation of the Noble Truths constitutes a contemporary analysis based upon modern contexts of individual and collective suffering. Within these contexts, Nhat Hanh discerns a fundamental ignorance or denial of interbeing, which, he considers, is the underlying cause of an array of symptoms that are afflicting not only the individual, but also the collectives of societies, and indeed the entire planet.

#### ***A Psychological Analysis***

To begin with, Nhat Hanh's psychological diagnosis of modern subjectivity reveals a fundamental ignorance, a lack of awareness, a pervasive forgetfulness, displacement, and mental dispersion, elements which have generated a culture of 'false selves'. Individualism, greed, and consumerism characterise these false selves, which, ignorant of their true natures, are often afflicted by alienation, 'rootlessness', and a sense of meaninglessness or anomie. Within the Buddhist

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<sup>47</sup> Nhat Hanh has written a number of books on contemporary monasticism. For example, see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Freedom Wherever We Go: A Buddhist Monastic Code for the 21st Century* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2004), Thich Nhat Hanh, *Joyfully Together: The Art of Building a Harmonious Community* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2003), Thich Nhat Hanh, *My Master's Robe: Memories of a Novice Monk* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2002), Thich Nhat Hanh,

tradition, the Sanskrit term that defines these beings is *preta* (P. *peta*) – ‘hungry ghosts’. As Nhat Hanh elucidates:

Every time I see someone without roots, I see him as a hungry ghost. In Buddhist mythology, the term ‘hungry ghost’ is used to describe a wandering soul who is extremely hungry and thirsty but whose throat is too narrow for food or drink to pass through...

Hungry ghosts long to be loved, but no matter how much we love and care for them, they may not have the capacity to receive it... Something seems to be standing in their way preventing them from touching the refreshing and healing elements of life. They want only to forget life... Our society produces millions of hungry ghosts, people of all ages – I have seen some not yet ten years old – who have no roots at all. They have never experienced happiness at home, and they have nothing to believe in or belong to. This is the main sickness of our times.<sup>48</sup>

In recognition of the prevalence of “anxiety, fear, and the dispersion of mind” among the hungry ghosts of modernity, as well as tendencies towards “forgetfulness, acquiescence to the status quo... and egotism of all kinds,” Nhat Hanh is concerned for the mental health of modernity. According to Nhat Hanh, the mental illness of modern society is the consequence of a fragmentation of humanity’s essential collectivism. As he perceives, “many people are victims of our modern life which separates human beings from the rest of the human family.”<sup>49</sup> The afflictions that characterise modern mental illness – forgetfulness, aggression, dispersion, and separation – are manifestations of a more fundamental lack of awareness of interbeing, which is instilled and reinforced by modern society itself and its many distractions.

Nhat Hanh acknowledges a pervasive tendency amongst modern people to take refuge in what he calls “toxic cultural products,” including violent or graphic films, magazines, books, and television shows. These products “water the seeds of suffering, hatred, and fear” in individual and collective consciousness, and thus perpetuate our delusion and unhappiness.<sup>50</sup> Nhat Hanh also recognises the tendency for people in the modern West to take refuge in alcohol and drugs as a

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*Stepping into Freedom: An Introduction to Buddhist Monastic Training* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1997), Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1992). 99-100

<sup>49</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Individual, Society, and Nature,” in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988). 44-5

<sup>50</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Roots of War” in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993). 83

means of escapism or the evasion of reality. Nhat Hanh is highly critical of this false solution of “self-anaesthesia.”<sup>51</sup> As Nhat Hanh observes, the problem in the modern world is that “consumerism itself can become a kind of addiction, because we feel so lonely.”<sup>52</sup> In addition to the distractions of toxic cultural products and the lure of drugs and alcohol, Nhat Hanh observes that “many of us also take refuge in consumption. When we do not feel good about ourselves, when we feel empty or depressed, we turn to the refrigerator or go to the shopping mall in order to fill the void and forget our suffering. We take refuge in the act of eating, drinking, or shopping. We are trying to fill the emptiness inside because we do not know what to take refuge in. We seek distraction by feeding our senses.”<sup>53</sup>

According to Nhat Hanh, the illusion of separation at the heart of individualism has generated a pervasive alienation within modern subjectivity, or what he calls “rootlessness”. As Nhat Hanh explains, many people in the modern world have been wounded or disillusioned by negative or destructive relationships with their families, their communities, their religion, or their country, and consequently they may no longer have any connection to their tradition or their past. Consequently, as Nhat Hanh observes, “some of us may not like to talk or think about our roots because we have suffered so much from the violence of our family or our culture. We want to leave these things behind and search for something new.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, people become uprooted, and, more often than not, cannot find anything of substance to replace their roots. They become “like trees without roots, they cannot absorb nourishment.”<sup>55</sup> Rootlessness reinforces isolation, anomie, and loneliness. It constitutes an ignorance of our interbeing not only with our immediate families, but also with our extended families, our family history, as well as the heritage of our religious traditions, our communities and society. According to Nhat Hanh, to be rootless is to suffer.

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<sup>51</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World* (London: Rider Books, 2003). 63

<sup>52</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*. 92

<sup>53</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 63-4

<sup>54</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*. 103

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 106

Nhat Hanh's diagnosis of the ailments of the individual in modernity translates into the context of the family and the lives of children. Nhat Hanh recognises a great deal of interfamilial conflict in the modern world, which he attributes to the dilation of individual psychological suffering and rootlessness. Emphasising the importance of the role of the parent, Nhat Hanh explains that the internal suffering of, or difficulties between, parents have a profound impact on children.<sup>56</sup>

Nhat Hanh's psychological analysis of Western modernity diagnoses a population of individualistic, unaware, materialistic, escapist consumers – hungry ghosts whose appetites are never satisfied, false selves who have severed their roots and pass on little nourishment, hope, or happiness to their children. As we shall now see, within collective contexts of society, the diagnosis is not much brighter.

### *A Social Analysis*

When the internal suffering of hungry ghosts is manifested collectively, the society that emerges is plagued by the same ailments and delusions that plague the individual, as it is constructed upon the same fundamental ignorance of interbeing. Nhat Hanh's social analysis of modernity reveals and critiques the underlying ideologies that reinforce this collective ignorance, and their dire and insidious consequences. These include the ideologies of individualism and reason, and the outcomes of rampant consumerism, a runaway economic system, and an ensuing widespread social and economic injustice.

According to Nhat Hanh, the second half of the twentieth-century and beyond have been dominated by “the cult of individualism”. Individualism he defines as “the desire to do things only for the sake of our separate self.”<sup>57</sup> As he has perceived, “Our civilisation, our culture has been characterised by individualism. The individual wants to be free from the society, from the family. The individual does not think he or she needs to take refuge in the family or in the society and thinks that he or she can be happy without a Sangha.” However, Nhat Hanh insists

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<sup>56</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 16-17. See also Nhat Hanh, *Joyfully Together: The Art of Building a Harmonious Community*. 94

<sup>57</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 171-2

that this individualistic thinking and behaviour is the reason “why we do not have solidity, why we do not have harmony, why we do not have the communication that we so need.”<sup>58</sup> While the ideology of individualism has appeared to offer freedom from the past, from family, from tradition, and society, in fact Nhat Hanh argues that it has imprisoned us in delusion – “the prison of the self.”<sup>59</sup> He suggests, “As individuals, we have suffered tremendously. Individualism is predominating, families are breaking down, and society has become deeply divided... Despair is a great temptation in our century. Alone, we are vulnerable.”<sup>60</sup> In addition to this social disintegration and despair, Nhat Hanh argues that within the context of society individualism translates into a destructive greed that steals humanity from its spiritual roots:

Our society has been dominated by the desire for fame and wealth, material things, and hedonism. As a result, many people have fallen away from their spiritual traditions and their families. We cannot have healthy families and communicate if we believe joy can be found only in the pursuit of power, sex, and wealth. Happiness does not come from consumption of things... We let individualism prevail in the twentieth century, and frankly, we have made a mess of it.<sup>61</sup>

The disastrous impact of individualism on humanity and its spiritual foundations has been reinforced by another modern ideology – reason. Incorporating traditional terminology, Nhat Hanh has presented a Yogācāra analysis of the prioritisation of reason. From the perspective of Yogācāra, reason, or the intellect (*S. manovijñāna*) is only one of the seven sense-consciousnesses that are grounded in the fundamental store-consciousness or ‘seed bed’ (*S. ālaya-vijñāna*). As we discovered in the previous chapter, this ‘seed bed’ is the foundation of consciousness and is where transformation takes place, insight is attained, and the true self is realised. As Nhat Hanh discerns, only imbalance and disharmony can result from the prioritisation of just one element of consciousness:

Life today is organised according to “reason.” We participate in life with only part of our being – our intellect, our *manovijñāna*. The other half, deeper and more important, is the store consciousness, the foundation of the roots of our being. This part cannot be analysed by reason or even by the *manovijñāna* itself. Man today

<sup>58</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “Go as a Sangha,” in *Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities*, ed. Thich Nhat Hanh and Jack Lawlor (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2002). 19-20

<sup>59</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 171

<sup>60</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism*. 90

<sup>61</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 171-2

loves reason. He trusts his rationality so much that he is uprooted from his true being. From this comes the feeling of alienation from which he suffers and through this, little by little, his humanity becomes more and more mechanical.<sup>62</sup>

The combined force of individualism, consumerism, and reason has further subsumed the truth of interbeing and reinforced an economic system that has trapped humanity in a steely grip. Lost in the oblivion of self-absorption, consumed by modernity's destructive distractions and empty refuges, stuck in an economic rat race, bent on a trajectory to nowhere, and severed from the nourishing roots of tradition and family, the modern person becomes a victim of society.

The ignorance and illness of society, manifested as exploitation, social and economic injustice, and ecological destruction, can ultimately, according to Nhat Hanh, only be understood as a form of insanity:

Causing harm to other human beings brings harm to ourselves. Accumulating wealth and owning excessive portions of the world's natural resources deprives fellow humans of the chance to live. Participating in oppressive and unjust social systems creates and deepens the gap between rich and poor, and aggravates the situation of social injustice. Yet while tolerating excess, injustice, and war, we usually are completely unaware that the human race suffers as a family. While the rest of the human family suffers and starves, enjoying false security and wealth can only be seen as a sign of insanity.

It has become clear that the fate of the individual is inextricably linked to the fate of the whole human race... The only alternative to co-existence is co-non-existence.<sup>63</sup>

This incisive and penetrating analysis of the social context of modernity clearly represents the interconnection between individual behaviour and the state of the world. "If your daily life has not much to do with your government," Nhat Hanh asks, "then what does have to do with the government? That is a hard question. Has your daily life anything to do with the people who are dying in the third World? This is the same question."<sup>64</sup> Nhat Hanh is adamant that the collective suffering in society is directly related to individual suffering – this is the reality of interbeing. He states: "Our daily lives, the way we drink, what we eat, has to do with the world's political situation... The nature of the bombs, the nature of

<sup>62</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice*. 152

<sup>63</sup> Nhat Hanh, "The Individual, Society, and Nature." 41-2

<sup>64</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, "Please Call Me by My True Names," in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988). 37

injustice, the nature of the weapons, and the nature of our own beings are the same.”<sup>65</sup>

### *A Global Analysis*

Individual and societal ignorance of interbeing is further evidenced on a global scale by widespread ecological destruction and the environmental crisis, as well as the spread of global warfare and terrorism. Let us examine Nhat Hanh’s critiques of these issues.

Firstly, Nhat Hanh is concerned with the ever-expanding “separation between the rich and the underdeveloped countries.” He perceives, “The debts that poor countries have to pay to the rich are greater each year than the sums they receive in aid to help them develop economically.”<sup>66</sup> The proliferation of the arms trade and the concurrent escalation of famine and starvation intensify the iniquity of this economic injustice. Nhat Hanh is particularly critical of the fact that “Millions of people make a living off the arms industry, manufacturing ‘conventional’ and nuclear weapons.”<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, Nhat Hanh consistently affirms that the problem in the First World is that “the affluent societies of the West consume the vast majority of the Earth’s resources and pollute the Earth and its atmosphere by this consumption.”<sup>68</sup> He asserts, “Our Earth, our green beautiful Earth is in danger, and all of us know it. Yet we act as if our daily lives have nothing to do with the situation of the world. If the Earth were your body, you would be able to feel many areas where she is suffering.” Using poetic analogy, Nhat Hanh continues to configure the sun as “our second heart, our heart outside of our body” and he suggests that “forests are our lungs outside of our bodies. Yet,” he continues, “we have been acting in a way that has allowed millions of square miles of land to be deforested, and we have also destroyed the air, the rivers, and parts of the ozone layer. We are imprisoned in our small selves, thinking only of some comfortable conditions for this small

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<sup>65</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*. 74

<sup>66</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice*. 154

<sup>67</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1998). 46

<sup>68</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice*. 154

self, while we destroy our large self." Ultimately, Nhat Hanh calls for not only a "deep ecology" but a "universal ecology", one that would recognise the interconnection between the pollution of nature and the "pollution in our consciousness."<sup>69</sup>

A final aspect of Nhat Hanh's diagnosis of the malaise of modernity concerns the spread of global warfare and the immediate threat of terrorism. In relation to contemporary conflicts in the Middle East and the 9/11 attacks, Nhat Hanh reiterates his Engaged Buddhist axiom concerning the 'true enemy': the other is not the enemy, it is the discrimination of self and other as separate entities that is the ultimate enemy and the essential cause of war. The principal corollary of this teaching is that a war can never be won, because all parties involved are victims – victims of the wrong perception of separation and its related negative emotions of fear, anger, and hatred. Violent defeat of the 'other side' does not resolve this wrong perception, it simply perpetuates and intensifies it. This perspective also therefore determines the futility of retaliation, punishment, or revenge, as ultimately everyone suffers the consequences of violence. In a similar fashion to David Loy's analysis, Nhat Hanh has applied the Buddhist perspective of nonduality to the 'Holy War' between the United States and Islam, commenting on the first Gulf War and the current 'War on Terror', as well as the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine.

Nhat Hanh's analysis of war reveals the deluded dualistic 'logic' that fuels its many strategies of destruction. He is concerned to expose the cyclic nature of war and thereby reveal the failure of strategies of punishment, retaliation, and revenge. "The war machine is horrible," he states. "If you get into it, you will be crushed, and you will have to crush the lives of others."<sup>70</sup> Nhat Hanh emphasises the failure of war to achieve any kind of resolution and thereby affirms the essential irony of this cyclic dynamic. From this perspective, Nhat Hanh suggests "I don't believe that the CIA, the Pentagon, or the Army can stop terrorism. It will take all of us, looking deeply into our human condition, to understand and help stop terrorism. A

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<sup>69</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Sun My Heart" in Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*. 129-32

terrorist is a human being who needs help.”<sup>71</sup> Like a doctor who heals the sick, Nhat Hanh makes his diagnosis: “A terrorist, like you, is a human being who has been heavily infected by the viruses of wrong perception and wrong belief. Terrorists suffer just as we do.”<sup>72</sup> Nhat Hanh’s principal insight here is that the roots of war lie in the self. In one way or another, we are all terrorists, and in order to uproot terrorism we must begin by disarming ourselves, by resolving the wars within and transforming our own internal battles of fear, discrimination, and hatred into peace.

We say we want to strike against terror, we want to destroy terrorism, but do we even know where to find it? Can we locate it with a radar? Can the army find terrorism using its night goggles and heat sensors? Misunderstanding, fear, anger and hatred are the roots of terrorism. They cannot be located by the military. Bombs and missiles cannot reach them, let alone destroy them, for terrorism lies in the hearts of human beings. To uproot terror, we need to begin by looking in our hearts... With compassion and communication, terrorism can be uprooted and transformed into love.<sup>73</sup>

Essentially, all of the elements of Nhat Hanh’s critique of modernity are interrelated. Within Nhat Hanh’s analysis, war in the Middle East can be directly related to the single actions of a single American citizen – whether they argue with their partner, whether their child overhears, and then how much violence that child may consume by watching the television, and how much petrol it takes for the parent to drive the child to school. When asked during an interview, “What was the reason for the attacks on the United States?” Nhat Hanh answered by referring to all these different but interrelated contexts:

The deep reason for our current situation is our patterns of consumption. U.S. citizens consume sixty percent of the world’s energy resources yet they account for only six percent of the world’s total population. Children in America witness 100,000 acts of violence on television by the time they finish elementary school. Another reason for our current situation is our foreign policy and the lack of deep listening within our relationships. We do not use deep listening to understand the suffering and the real needs of people in other nations.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Begins Here: Palestinians and Israelis Listening to Each Other* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2004). 113

<sup>71</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism*. 24

<sup>72</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 200-1

<sup>73</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism*. 10

<sup>74</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “What I Would Say to Osama Bin Laden” in *Ibid.* 112. This interview is also available: [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/88/story\\_8872\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/88/story_8872_1.html)

The principal implication of this view is that we are all essentially responsible for the state of the world. The violence in the Middle East is directly related to the violence in our individual minds, our interpersonal relationships, our societies and their cultures, just as much as it is related to our politics and our governments. Therefore, as we shall now see, Nhat Hanh's cure for the malaise of modernity begins with the self and proposes that the individual transformation of consciousness can generate real peace in our communities, societies, and ultimately, the whole world.

### **Cure: Spirituality, Community, Dialogue**

Thich Nhat Hanh's contemporary representation of the Dharma offers an antidote to the malaise of modernity. For the psychological ailments that plague modern individuals, Nhat Hanh presents the cure of spirituality, or what he calls 'the art of mindful living'. Mindfulness practice provides a means of healing the self by transforming destructive emotions into peace and happiness, and wrong perceptions into understanding and compassion. For the fragmentation of modern society and its deluded ideologies of individualism and greed, Nhat Hanh presents the cure of community – the Sangha. The interdependent dynamic of the Sangha provides support and strength in the practice through the collective energy of mindfulness. To take refuge in the Sangha provides real protection. It also actualises the reality of interbeing, both between people and with the natural world. Finally, for the international and interreligious conflicts of the world, Nhat Hanh offers the cure of dialogue. Through the practice of deep listening and loving speech on a global level, true communication between warring parties can be established, genuine understanding may be attained, and conflict may be resolved.

#### ***Spirituality***

One of the principal features of Plum Village is its large number of bells – some that stand outdoors in elaborate shrines and others shaped like large bowls that sit more humbly on the floors of meditation halls. They are known as 'mindfulness bells' and when they are sounded at random times throughout the day, it is a Plum Village practice to stop whatever you are doing, be silent, focus on your breath

and the present moment, and return to your ‘true home’, your ‘true self’. This is mindfulness practice. The sound of the bell, however, is only meant to be a reminder, a means of refreshing awareness. Nhat Hanh teaches that mindfulness, rather than being an abstract notion or something that only occurs during sitting meditation, should be practised and actualised in every moment of everyday life. Indeed, this applies to all of Nhat Hanh’s teachings. From a non-intellectual, experiential perspective, Nhat Hanh offers such teachings as interbeing, love, and the true self not as ideologies or doctrines but as living truths that can be realised. This, he insists, constitutes authentic spiritual practice. Let us here examine what Nhat Hanh means by mindfulness practice and how it actually works.

Within Nhat Hanh’s discourse, the notion of the ‘true home’ represents the immediate availability of awareness and peace within the refuge of the present moment, the here and now. Throughout Plum Village, hanging on walls, carved into stones, or written on signposts along the garden paths, are many *gāthās* – phrases or sayings that are intended as meditation aids for the practitioner. A recurrent *gāthā* reads “I have arrived... I am home”. Addressing his Western, and mainly Christian audience, Nhat Hanh explains the meaning of this *gāthā*:

Our true home is in the present moment. To live in the present moment is a miracle. The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the present moment, to appreciate the peace and beauty that are available now. Peace is all around us – in the world and in nature – and within us – in our bodies and our spirits. Once we learn to touch this peace, we will be healed and transformed. It is not a matter of faith; it is a matter of practice.<sup>75</sup>

The miracle of the present moment and the refuge of the true home are always available, as long as we are available to them. If you are rootless, alienated, distracted, consumed, or unaware, like so many “wanderers” in modern society, you may not have been able to reach your true home – you may be lost. However, as Nhat Hanh explains, through the practice you can find your way:

When you are carried away with your worries, fears, cravings, anger, and desire, you run away from yourself and you lose yourself. The practice is always to go back to oneself. You have a wonderful vehicle. And you don’t have to buy gasoline.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*. 1-2

<sup>76</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (London: Rider Books, 1999). 50

Nhat Hanh is adamant that “To suffer is not enough” – we also need to be aware of the wonders of life. “Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, the eyes of a baby.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, he suggests that through the practice of looking deeply, which perceives the interbeing of all things, we can realise that “our home is everywhere... the trees are our home and the blue sky is our home.”<sup>78</sup>

As a traditional Buddhist practice, mindfulness (P. *sati*; S. *smṛti*) constitutes the meditative cultivation of an aware and present state of mind that forms the foundation of insight and understanding. *Smṛti* is the first of the three emblematic, guiding principles of Plum Village, the second being *samādhi*, or concentration, and the third *prajñā*, meaning wisdom or understanding. (See Figure II) As Nhat Hanh explains, these three principles are interrelated:

Mindfulness is the practice of stopping and becoming aware of what we are thinking and doing. The more we are mindful of our thoughts, speech, and actions, the more concentration we develop. With concentration, insight into the nature of our own suffering and the suffering of others arises. We then know what to do and what not to do in order to live joyfully and in peace with our surroundings.<sup>79</sup>

By way of expressing this process of healing, transformation, and growth, Nhat Hanh uses a number of recurrent metaphors. Most frequently, he suggests that practitioners are like ‘organic gardeners’ who turn the fertile soil of the mind, using the compost of suffering to grow beautiful flowers of peace and happiness. This metaphor is based upon the Yogacāra teaching of the ‘seedbed’ of consciousness, the ‘storehouse’ of the mind which is like a plot of land that contains numerous ‘seeds’ – seeds of suffering, happiness, joy, sorrow, fear, anger, and hope. The quality of our mental health and our lives in general is dependent on the quality of the seeds in our consciousness – which seeds sprout often, which are growing the strongest. As Nhat Hanh explains, “To practice mindfulness means to recognise each seed as it comes up from the storehouse and to practice watering the most wholesome seeds whenever possible, to help them

<sup>77</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*. 3

<sup>78</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 41

<sup>79</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 18

grow stronger.”<sup>80</sup> Over time, this process of ‘selective watering’ strengthens the mind and helps to develop equanimity, so that when difficult emotions or distorted perceptions arise, we have the ability to deal with them in ways that do not cause any harm.

Nhat Hanh has recognised that of the many ways Buddhism could be presented to a modern Western audience, the ‘Dharma door’ of psychology is the most appropriate. In a recent interview, Nhat Hanh commented on the importance of the role of psychology in Western Buddhism:

I think Buddhism should open the door of psychology and healing to penetrate more easily into the Western world. As far as religion is concerned, the West already has plenty of belief in a supernatural being. It’s not by the law of faith that you should enter the spiritual territory of the West, because the West has plenty of this.

So the door of psychology is good. The abhidharma literature of Buddhism represents a very rich understanding of the mind, which has been developed by many generations of Buddhists. If you approach the Western mind through the door of psychology, you may have better success helping people to understand their mind, helping people to practice in such a way that they can heal the mind.<sup>81</sup>

### *Community*

One of Nhat Hanh’s more recent works, *Finding Our True Home*, constitutes a contemporary commentary on the *Smaller Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra*, one of the three central texts of the Pure Land School of Buddhism.<sup>82</sup> As a devotional cult of the Buddha Amitābha, the Pure Land School is characterised by a doctrine of future salvation in Amitābha’s Pure Land *Sukhāvātī*, the ‘Western Land of Great Happiness’. At a popular level, the founding myths of this school contend that all beings may gain rebirth in Sukhāvātī, regardless of how enlightened they may be upon death. In the *Smaller Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra*, the Buddha’s discourse praises

<sup>80</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*. 25

<sup>81</sup> Melvin McLeod, “This Is the Buddha’s Love: An Interview with Thich Nhat Hanh,” *Shambala Sun* 2006. 54-5

<sup>82</sup> The other two texts are the *Longer Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra* and the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra*. The two *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtras* were composed in India during the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, yet they have been most influential in China, Japan, and other parts of east Asia where Pure Land schools have flourished. Both have extant versions in Sanskrit and Chinese, and a Tibetan version of the Smaller Sūtra still exists. In Chinese there are five different translations of the Longer Sūtra (Taishō 362, 361, 360, 310, and 363) and two of the Smaller Sūtra (Taishō 366 and 367). While the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra* has a Sanskrit title, no Sanskrit text is known to exist. The work only exists in Chinese and central/east Asian languages that are obvious translations from the Chinese. Consequently, there is general scholarly consensus that this text was not

the merits, beauties, and wonders of Sukhāvātī, and he encourages his disciples to seek rebirth in this ‘Land of Bliss’. Nhat Hanh’s commentary offers a revitalising interpretation of the text. He re-articulates and demythologises the Pure Land teachings, skilfully combining them with his own teachings of mindfulness practice. Nhat Hanh deconstructs the dualistic notion of future happiness and salvation and insists “the promised land is available to us as soon as we are available to it.”<sup>83</sup> Once again he addresses the issue of the interdependence of happiness and suffering. Happiness, Nhat Hanh impresses, cannot exist without suffering; happiness depends upon our ability to transform our suffering, and this ability is determined by the quality of our practice. Nhat Hanh thereby relocates the Pure Land so that it is no longer a mythical Western Paradise to be finally reached after death, but a present place of refuge, peace, and freedom from suffering, which can be actualised in the here and now through mindfulness practice. He states:

If we use the eyes of a meditator, the Pure Land practice is no longer an eternal longing or a superstition but a very realistic doctrine. The Pure Land is something we live in our daily life. Every step, every breath, every word, every look, can produce the Pure Land. The practice of building a Sangha can be identified with the practice of building a Pure Land.<sup>84</sup>

Essentially, Nhat Hanh’s commentary proposes that the Pure Land can be internally manifested in one’s mind, where it becomes the true self or the ‘true home’, as the title of the book suggests. Furthermore, he also suggests that the Pure Land can be externally manifested in the collective embodiment of a Sangha, a community of spiritual practitioners.

Perhaps the most pronounced of Nhat Hanh’s later teachings are his prescriptions concerning the Sangha and Sangha building. Against all the sufferings of modern society – its rootlessness, fragmentation, secular ideologies of individualism, and illusions of greed and separation – Nhat Hanh’s discourse on the value and strength of a spiritual community is poignant. In all of his recent publications, Nhat Hanh reiterates his conviction that the very survival of humanity and the

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composed in India but in China between 424 and 442 CE, and that its title is a hypothetical reconstruction from the Chinese *Kuan-wu-liang-shou fo ching*.

<sup>83</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Finding Our True Home: Living in the Pure Land Here and Now* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2003), 42.

Earth depends upon a realisation of Sangha, or community. Understood as a community of spiritual practitioners, the Sangha provides a true refuge from the dangers and toxins of modern society. Furthermore, as a manifestation of interbeing, it functions according to a symbiotic dynamic that provides support in the practice. When members of a Sangha take their practice into the wider context of society, their mindful actions and conscious consumption have direct impact and contribute towards the manifestation of a societal Sangha. Finally, Nhat Hanh emphasises the notion of a planetary Sangha based upon humanity's realisation of our essential interbeing with the natural world. According to Nhat Hanh, such a realisation provides a means of reversing the destructive trajectory of the environmental crisis. Once again, these teachings are founded upon tradition: the Sangha is one of the 'Three Jewels' – Buddhism's three confessional refuges, in addition to the Buddha and the Dharma. However, it is evident that within the context of the modern West, Nhat Hanh has expanded the traditional boundaries of the definition of Sangha to include society, and indeed, the whole planet.

According to Nhat Hanh's definition, a Sangha is "a community of people – monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen – who are walking together on a spiritual path."<sup>85</sup> More specifically, it is "a community of friends practicing the Dharma together to bring about and maintain awareness," and it provides:

...the kind of environment that can help us become rooted. A Sangha is not a community of practice in which each person is an island, unable to communicate with each other – this is not a true Sangha. No healing or transformation will result from such a Sangha. A true Sangha should be like a family in which there is a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood.<sup>86</sup>

The critical necessity of Sangha building is a recurrent axiom in Nhat Hanh's later teachings. Sangha building is "the most important practice – the most important action – of our century. How can the twenty-first century be a century of spirituality," he asks, "if we do not take up the work of Sangha building?"<sup>87</sup> Nhat Hanh contends that the practices of Sangha building are today "even more important than studying the sutras, practicing sitting meditation, listening to

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 49

<sup>85</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Joyfully Together: The Art of Building a Harmonious Community*. 7

<sup>86</sup> Nhat Hanh, "Go as a Sangha." 18 & 20

<sup>87</sup> Nhat Hanh, "Spirituality in the Twenty-First Century." 10

Dharma talks, or attending Dharma discussions.”<sup>88</sup> The responsibilities of Sangha building include consistent and dedicated mindfulness practice; accepting all members, even the difficult ones, with a spirit of equanimity, inclusivism, and love; utilising communication skills such as compassionate speech and deep listening rather than reprimanding, correcting, or placing blame; relinquishing a desire for self-gratification or possessions; and embracing a simple lifestyle. In either a monastery or a practice centre, if each member fulfils these responsibilities, the Sangha will be successful in facilitating healing, transformation, and collective awakening.

The palpable peace and harmonious dynamic that are instilled at Plum Village bear witness to Nhat Hanh’s teachings on the Sangha. As an exemplar, Plum Village manifests the peace of a Pure Land and the symbiotic support structure of a true Sangha. Nhat Hanh and his associates have developed a number of new forms and methods that enable the Sangha to run smoothly. These new structures have been based upon real instances of conflict and resolution that have occurred at Plum Village, as well as traditional monastic resources. The Plum Village Sangha structure combines the traditional authorial model of seniority with contemporary democratic principles. Furthermore, every hamlet has a Caretaking Council and a Dharmacharya (Teaching) Council, as well as an Abbot or Abbess. Amongst the monks and nuns there is a Mentor System and a Second Body System. While a monk or nun’s mentor will be an elder in the community, their ‘second body’ will be a fellow brother monk or sister nun whom they specifically care for, and who cares for them. The Plum Village Sangha has also developed certain practices that are used to resolve conflicts in the community, such as Triangle Practice, Beginning Anew, and the Seven Methods of Resolving Conflicts. Another set of practices, including Shining Light, Flower Watering, and Bringing Our Teacher Inside are communal practices, but they are intended to aid individual spiritual progress.<sup>89</sup>

According to Nhat Hanh, when you practise as part of a Sangha you develop powerful inner resources that enable you to confront the various perils of modern

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<sup>88</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Joyfully Together: The Art of Building a Harmonious Community*. 11

society with strength, equanimity, and resilience. The prophetic vision of the Buddhist tradition proposes that the forthcoming Buddha will be Maitreya, the Buddha of 'loving kindness'. Nhat Hanh has suggested that this future 'Buddha of Love' will not manifest in the form of a person, but as a vast Sangha:

A Sangha that practices loving kindness and compassion is the Buddha that we need for the twenty-first century. Each of us is a cell in the body of the Buddha of Love. Each cell has its own role to play, and we cannot afford to miss one of our cells. We have to stay together. We have the power to bring Sanghakaya, the Sangha body, and Maitreya Buddha into existence just by sitting together and practicing deeply.

So the next Buddha may not take the form of an individual. In the twenty-first century the Sangha may be the body of the Buddha... All of us have the duty to bring that Buddha into being, not only for our sake, but for the sake of our children and the planet Earth. This is not wishful thinking, this is a real determination.<sup>90</sup>

### *Dialogue*

Nhat Hanh's vision of a planetary Sangha encompasses the individual, families, society, nature, and also, finally, the geo-political domain of international and interreligious relations. In response to the conflicts that plague this domain, in the form of warfare, ideological conflict, and terrorism, Nhat Hanh again offers a cure. This cure is based upon his approach to individual and societal suffering, however it adds a further element. In addition to mindfulness, Sangha practice, and ethical action in society, Nhat Hanh's cure for international and interreligious conflict incorporates the principle of dialogue. It needs to be recognised that this kind of dialogue is not the kind of conceptual exchange implied by 'discursive dialogue' but is based upon spiritual practice and insight into interbeing. Nhat Hanh proposes specific nonviolent, spiritually grounded communication practices that can bring about insight and understanding, resolution and peace. Thus, Nhat Hanh's cure can best be understood as a form of 'interior dialogue' conjoined with a form of 'engaged dialogue'. We will here examine the different aspects of Nhat Hanh's approach to dialogue, his suggestions of how they could be utilised within global political contexts, and how they have advanced the peace process in the Middle East by uniting Palestinians and Israelis in collective practice at Plum Village.

<sup>89</sup> See Chapter 5 "Caring for each Other" in *Ibid.* 70-91

<sup>90</sup> Nhat Hanh, "Go as a Sangha." 17

As with all of Nhat Hanh's teachings, the peace process must begin with the self and individual spiritual practice. As we have already discerned, Nhat Hanh's analysis of the nature of conflict locates its fundamental cause in wrong perceptions and prejudices that become manifest as fear, discrimination, anger, hatred, and violence. For the peace process to be successful, it must begin with the healing and transformation of these wrong perceptions and strong emotions. According to Nhat Hanh, the failure of conventional peace negotiations in the past has been due to the lack of this essential spiritual dimension:

Too often in the past, peace conferences have been environments where people came and fought each other, not with weapons but with fear. When we are carried away by our fear and prejudices, we cannot listen to others. We cannot just bring two sides together around a table to discuss peace when they are still filled with anger, hatred, and hurt. If you cannot recognise your fear and anger, if you do not know how to calm yourself, how can you sit at a peace table with your enemy? Facing your enemy across a table, you will only continue to fight.<sup>91</sup>

Without a spiritual dimension to the peace process, peace talks are just talking, and as Nhat Hanh has recognised, "A lot of talking has been done for many years, and it has not worked."<sup>92</sup> In contrast, Nhat Hanh proposes that true peace negotiations need to *practise* peace, not just *talk* about it. He suggests, "Our capacity to make peace with another person and with the world depends very much on our capacity to make peace with ourselves... When we have peace within, real dialogue with others is possible."<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, Nhat Hanh proposes that peace dialogues should be organised like meditation retreats, so that they create the right environment of calm, trust, and non-judgement, that is essential for individual practice and fruitful communication. In this sense, the strength provided by the collective practice of the Sangha can be beneficial:

When warring parties come to a peace conference, each side is full of suspicion, anger, and distrust. With those emotions in their hearts, not much can be achieved, because there is no peace inside as a basis for making peace with the other... A real peace conference should be organised like a retreat, and both groups should be given time to calm themselves and take care of their emotions, their fear and suspicion... Some of us know how to help... and we can help prepare the ground for mutual understanding.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 189

<sup>92</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Peace Begins Here: Palestinians and Israelis Listening to Each Other*. 16

<sup>93</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (London: Rider Books, 1995). 10

<sup>94</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Peace Begins Here: Palestinians and Israelis Listening to Each Other*. 47-8

Finally, fruitful dialogue is dependent upon the right motivations. When approaching the dialogical or negotiating table, the prime motives should be understanding, reconciliation, resolution, and peace. Nhat Hanh has observed, “If we talk to each other, if we organise a dialogue, it is because we believe there is a possibility that we can understand the other person better.”<sup>95</sup> Moreover, “In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change... If we think we monopolise the truth and we still organise a dialogue, it is not authentic.” Thus, in contrast to attitudes of imperialism or dogmatism, Nhat Hanh affirms that “Dialogue must be practiced on the basis of ‘non-self’.”<sup>96</sup> It is only on the basis of non-self, or an awareness of interbeing, that the suffering of the other can be truly understood.

We can delineate four steps in Nhat Hanh’s teachings on dialogue in the peace process: deep listening, loving speech, mutual understanding, and finally compassion. Together, according to Nhat Hanh, these practices constitute a cure to global conflict. Let us examine each of these steps.

In September 2001, following the 9/11 attacks in the United States, Nhat Hanh gave an interview that was later titled “What I Would Say to Osama bin Laden”. Offering a Buddhist response to the terrorist attacks, the perspective voiced by Nhat Hanh differed sharply from the mainstream reaction of the American people and government. He stated: “If I were given the opportunity to be face to face with Osama bin Laden, the first thing I would do is listen.”<sup>97</sup> Evidently, ‘listening’ to bin Laden has not been a top priority in the policies of America’s ‘War on Terror’. Indeed, many would consider simply ‘listening’ to be naïve and futile in the face of such an extreme act of violence. From Nhat Hanh’s perspective, however, initial listening is the only way to respond that will ensure an eventual resolution. He continues to define his motivations for listening:

I would try to understand why he had acted in that cruel way. I would try to understand all of the suffering that had led him to violence. It might not be easy to listen in that way, so I would have to remain calm and lucid. I would need several friends with me, who are strong in the practice of deep listening, listening without reacting, without judging and blaming. In this way, an atmosphere of support would

<sup>95</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 85

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 9

<sup>97</sup> Nhat Hanh, “What I Would Say to Osama bin Laden” in Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism*. 103

be created for this person and those connected so that they could share completely, trust that they are really being heard.<sup>98</sup>

Nhat Hanh describes the practice of listening as a kind of 'art'. The 'art of deep listening' must be practised in conjunction with mindfulness, insight, and compassion. Nhat Hanh explains:

Compassionate and deep listening means that the other person, or the other nation, has a chance to say what they have never had the opportunity or courage to say, because no one ever listened deeply to them before.

At first, their speech may be full of condemnation, bitterness, and blame. If you can, continue to sit there calmly and listen... If you interrupt, deny, or correct what they say, you will be unable to go in the direction of reconciliation. Deep listening allows the other person to speak even if what he says contains misperceptions and injustice...

Listening to someone with compassion can turn him into a friend... You become a bodhisattva, a being who ends suffering. You lose an enemy and win a friend.<sup>99</sup>

The next step that follows listening is compassionate or loving speech. After listening to bin Laden, Nhat Hanh suggested that "we might need to take a break to allow what has been said to enter into our consciousness. Only when we felt calm and lucid would we respond. We would respond point by point to what had been said. We would respond gently but firmly in such a way to help them to discover their own misunderstandings so that they will stop violent acts from their own will."<sup>100</sup> Loving speech incorporates skill, nonviolence, and 'fierce compassion' in a pursuit to reveal wrong perceptions in both self and other. The principal aim of deep listening and loving speech is to acknowledge the suffering of the other and restore communication. Nhat Hanh explains this process in terms of the doctor/cure analogy:

The virus you see is made of fear, hatred, and violence. You can be a doctor for a person with this illness. Your medicine is the practice of restoring communication... If the patient refuses the doctor's help, doesn't trust her, and fears the doctor may be trying to kill him, he will never cooperate. Even if the doctor is motivated by a great desire to help, she cannot do anything if the patient will not collaborate. So the first thing the doctor has to do is find ways to open communication. If you can talk to the patient, there is hope. If the doctor can begin by acknowledging the patient's suffering then mutual understanding can develop and collaboration can begin.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 17-18

<sup>100</sup> Nhat Hanh, "What I Would Say to Osama bin Laden" in Ibid. 103

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 24

Mutual understanding is the third step in the dialogical peace process. At the time of 9/11, Nhat Hanh recognised that the attacks were a desperate call for understanding, attention, and help.<sup>102</sup> According to Nhat Hanh, understanding the 9/11 attacks would involve cultivating insight into the root causes of the conflict, and the wrong perceptions of both the self and the other/nation. Understanding also encompasses a comprehension of ‘Right Action’ – the correct response to a conflict. We have already discussed Nhat Hanh’s perspective on revenge and punishment and his assertion of the traditional Buddhist principle that you cannot fight violence with violence. Alternatively, Nhat Hanh affirms that with true understanding, compassion is born. “If we use compassion to embrace those who have harmed us,” Nhat Hanh suggests, “it will greatly diffuse the bomb in our hearts and in theirs.” Finally, compassion is “the antidote to violence and hatred... There is no other medicine.”<sup>103</sup> Unfortunately, as Nhat Hanh perceives, “they do not sell compassion in the supermarket. If they sold compassion, we would only need to bring it home and we could solve the problem of hatred and violence in the world very easily.”<sup>104</sup> Instead, compassion depends upon spiritual practice, dialogue, and understanding. Through these practices, peace is possible.

It is apparent that Nhat Hanh’s teachings concerning the role of dialogue in the peace process are mainly directed at the United States. Following 9/11, Nhat Hanh made many public statements in the U.S. urging the American government not to retaliate with violence on the Arabic nations. Two days after the attacks, in a public talk in Berkeley, California, Nhat Hanh proclaimed:

In this very moment we invoke all of our spiritual teachers, Buddhas and bodhisattvas to be with us, helping us to embrace the suffering of America as a nation, as a country, to embrace humanity as a family, so that we can become lucid and calm, so that we will know exactly what we should do, and what we should not do to avoid making the situation worse... America can be a great nation if she knows how to act with compassion instead of punishment.<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, a number of Nhat Hanh’s later works have contributed towards the opening of an interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Islam. A week

<sup>102</sup> See “What I Would Say to Osama bin Laden” in *Ibid.* 106

<sup>103</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World.* 196

<sup>104</sup> Nhat Hanh, “What I Would Say to Osama bin Laden” in Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism.* 107

after the attacks, the *New York Times* published a statement, in which Nhat Hanh specifically calls upon the teachings of Christianity:

Many people in America consider Jesus Christ as their Lord, their spiritual ancestor, and their teacher. We should heed his teachings especially during critical times like this. Jesus never encourages us to respond to acts of violence with violence. His teaching is, instead, to use compassion to deal with violence... I have the conviction that America possesses enough wisdom and courage to perform an act of forgiveness and compassion, and I know that such an act can bring great relief to America and to the world right away.<sup>106</sup>

Nhat Hanh's focus on the U.S. can be understood as a continuation of his activism and engagement from the days of the Vietnam War. Indeed, Nhat Hanh has recognised similarities between the wars in Vietnam and Iraq.<sup>107</sup> The principal suggestion Nhat Hanh offers to the U.S. government is to cease its military actions in foreign countries and return to the suffering within its own borders, the roots of war, which need urgent attention. He implores:

We do not need to go overseas to a war zone to see violence. The Los Angeles policemen beating Rodney King, that was also Vietnam. War manifests itself in so many ways here and now. It is a reflection of our collective consciousness, which is filled with suffering. With this heritage, the violence will repeat itself over and over. There will be other Vietnams, other Gulf wars. It is our task to look deeply into the violence, hatred, and fear to see their roots.<sup>108</sup>

In acknowledgement of all the marginalised, impoverished, misguided, and excluded people in American society, Nhat Hanh affirms the need to enact the First Noble Truth – the recognition of suffering. “The first step towards peace is to listen to and understand yourself and your fellow citizens,” he suggests. “Otherwise, how can you listen to and understand the suffering of other people. How can you understand the suffering of Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, or Iraq?”<sup>109</sup> To recognise the internal suffering of America, Nhat Hanh proposes the creation of a ‘Council of Sages’ – a group of non-political people who have experience of suffering and are trained in the practice of dialogue and peacemaking. The Council would create a forum for deep listening and

<sup>105</sup> Nhat Hanh, “A Prayer: The Best Flowers of Our Practice” in *Ibid.* 99-100

<sup>106</sup> Nhat Hanh, “Cultivating Compassion to Respond to Violence,” *New York Times*, September 18, 2001, published in *Ibid.* 101-2

<sup>107</sup> See Bob Abernethy, “An Interview with Thich Nhat Hanh,” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* [www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week703/interview.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week703/interview.html) (2003).

<sup>108</sup> Nhat Hanh, “To Veterans” in Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*. 90-1

compassionate communication, in which people who had suffered exploitation, discrimination, or social injustice, could express themselves. Once suffering and its causes are acknowledged (the First and Second Noble Truths), America can move towards resolving such suffering (the Third and Fourth Noble Truths). As Nhat Hanh perceives, “America can be a role model for the world, but only if America can practice listening to herself. This would be her most beautiful export. God will indeed bless an America capable of doing this.”<sup>110</sup>

Having begun to deal with its own internal suffering, Nhat Hanh suggests America could then enter into dialogue with other nations. Based upon the model of the Council of Sages, Nhat Hanh proposes the creation of an International Council as a forum in which to confront global suffering. He defines:

The setting must be one of safety and love. Countries from around the world can come together not as enemies that bomb and destroy each other but as wise people sponsoring sessions of deep listening. All nations could come and help with the practice; people from different cultures and civilisations would have the opportunity to speak to one another as fellow human beings who inhabit the same planet.<sup>111</sup>

In addition to such a Council, Nhat Hanh also proposes the renewal of the structure and function of the United Nations. Nhat Hanh is critical of how the monopolising strategies of the U.S. government use the United Nations as an “instrument to serve their own national interests.” In opposition, Nhat Hanh suggests that the UN should be transformed into a “community of nations”, a truly “global Sangha”. As a Sangha of nations, the UN could draw upon the collective insights and strengths of all countries and become a real peace organisation with acknowledged authority:

If the UN could become a true community, the tensions between various countries could be taken care of by the Sangha of the United Nations. The United Nations’ General Assembly could also be a place where people learn to listen to each other as brothers and sisters... If the United Nations can become a real Sangha body and if the Security Council can become a true instrument of peace, we could act quickly and solve many of the problems of violence around the world... the UN is our hope.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 194

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 196

<sup>112</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism*. 96

Nhat Hanh's discourse on global dialogue includes a number of examples of successful peace negotiations. South Africa's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, which was established by Bishop Desmond Tutu to deal with apartheid, provides an ideal exemplar. Nhat Hanh recalls, "Televised sessions were organised where members of the different racial groups were able to listen to and be heard by each other, with the tangible result that blacks and whites could begin to find a way to coexist peacefully and respectfully in South Africa. This is a concrete example of the powerful effect that direct compassionate communication can have on a national and international level."<sup>113</sup>

In 1997, Nhat Hanh himself was instrumental in introducing nonviolent practice into the Parliament of India. While on a visit, he suggested to Mr. K. R. Narayanan, the vice president of India, that Parliament sessions could be improved by practising mindfulness, deep listening, and loving speech during congress. Consequently, a committee for the Ethics of the Parliament was inaugurated and given the specific task of improving the quality of communication. Nhat Hanh has commented, "This kind of practice of nonviolence is possible everywhere, in every country. We urgently need to reduce the animosity and tension in government. If there is an atmosphere of harmony, calm, and sharing in government, there will be a future for our country and for every country."<sup>114</sup>

A final example comes from Plum Village itself. Since 2001, the Plum Village Sangha has been sponsoring groups of Palestinians and Israelis to come to Plum Village and participate in retreats. The Palestinians and Israelis are taught how to practise mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful eating, and deep relaxation, so they may be able to address their own individual suffering. The intention of the practice is to develop insight into their essential interbeing. Nhat Hanh explains, "When they first come, they are often suspicious of each other. They can't look at each other with sympathetic eyes. But with the practice and the support of the

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<sup>113</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 19

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 191

community, they are able to calm their suffering, their anger, their suspicion, and their hate. After several days, they are able to see that the other group also suffers. It takes time.”<sup>115</sup> Once insight has begun to emerge, the Plum Village Sangha organises special sessions for the Palestinians and Israelis to engage in dialogue based upon the practice of mindfulness, deep listening, and loving speech. The aim, once again, is to open communication and to introduce the spiritual dimension so that peace is not just being talked about, it is being generated in the minds, actions, and words of the participants. So far, the dialogues and retreats have been successful. Through insight into interbeing and peaceful communication, the veils of separation are lifted and understanding is born. As Nhat Hanh explains:

Injustice is suffered on both sides. The Palestinians have suffered so much. And when the Israelis come and describe to us their suffering, we are able to see that they too have suffered. That kind of understanding is crucial... Then we will discover each other as human beings and we will not be deceived by outer layers like “Buddhism,” “Islam,” “Judaism,” “pro-American,” “pro-Arab,” and so on. This is a process of liberation from our ignorance, ideas, notions, and our tendency to discriminate. When I see you as a human being who suffers so much, I will not have the courage to shoot you.<sup>116</sup>

Where it has been possible, Sanghas of both nationalities have been established in the Middle East, where the process of healing and transformation continues and peace is practised, even in the midst of war. Commenting on such a Sangha, a Palestinian woman has revealed:

I feel that something is beginning to settle and grow stronger. There is a real process happening and there seems to be equal participation from both sides, pushing the boat in the right direction. The members of the Sangha belong to two fighting nations. The fight is deeply rooted and is very painful. It has a background of many decades of hatred. Our group is different from others in one major way: it deals with conflict resolution through practicing inner peace, deep listening, and talking with affection and love... We have to practice in a very grounded way because we live in a cruel reality. There are many obstacles that can disturb our attention and focus and can water the seeds of hatred and rage in us. Our experience [in the Sangha] settles our faith and strengthens it inside each of us.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Peace Begins Here: Palestinians and Israelis Listening to Each Other*. 15

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* 101

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* 69-70

The existence of such Sanghas is an exceptional achievement in the peace process, and while it may be only a small scale achievement, as Nhat Hanh affirms, "If we can do it on a larger scale, there will be peace in the Middle East."<sup>118</sup>

In conclusion, it should be recognised that despite being forcibly removed from the context of war in Vietnam, Nhat Hanh, in his later teachings, is still principally concerned with the notion of engagement. However, having undergone transmission into the context of the modern West, Nhat Hanh's teachings of engagement have evolved and refocused their application on the 'roots' of war. Nhat Hanh's later teachings are therefore not so much concerned with actively confronting the military forces of the great superpowers, as with engagement with the internal wars that are waged between 'true enemies' within the individual psyche and contemporary collective consciousness. According to Nhat Hanh, these wars have been fuelled and intensified by an array of deluded ideologies that support the edifice of modernity. Indeed, Nhat Hanh is highly critical of the illusions of modernity, its secular ideologies of greed and destruction, individualism and consumerism, and the mass manifestation of fear and hatred that are the substance of contemporary global warfare and terror. However, through skilful means and modernising strategies, Nhat Hanh has continued to reinterpret Buddhism within this specific cultural-historic context, in order to alleviate the suffering of as many people as possible. Assuming the traditional role of the 'holy physician', Nhat Hanh's later teachings offer the balm of mindfulness practice, the healing refuge of the Sangha, and the pragmatic prescription of dialogue in the peace process, as salvific cures to modernity's ailments. It is important to note that these cures are not just simple solutions. As Nhat Hanh is fond of saying, they do not sell compassion or mindfulness at the supermarket. Nor is it simply a matter of believing in these cures. Rather, the curative agency of mindfulness, community, and dialogue is dependent upon spiritual practice, Sangha building, and the actualisation of peace in deep listening and loving speech. Nhat Hanh's cures are not ideologies or dogmas that are upheld as ultimate solutions or exclusive means, but are presented as living practices that must be experienced or enacted for their potency to have effect. As we shall now

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 18

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see, it is on the basis of this non-ideological, non-dogmatic, and experiential approach to spirituality that Nhat Hanh offers his teachings for inclusion in the religious systems of other, non-Buddhist traditions. Furthermore, it is in relation to Nhat Hanh's universalising yet de-absolutising approach to Buddhism that we will now construct the notion of Religious Interbeing as a means of affirming pluralism among the world's religions.



Although God is in everything, we can't compare God with creatures that live on Earth, just as we cannot compare water with a wave, because one is the ultimate nature and one is the phenomenon. We can compare one wave with another, but we cannot compare waves with water, and no words can be used to give it a name or describe it. We could call it God, we could call it Allah, we could call it the creator, but these are just ways of naming it. All these expressions and ideas are our unsuccessful attempt to define God. Therefore, whether we say God, or 'Dieu' (French), or 'Thuong De' (Vietnamese) or Allah, these are just names, and are not strong enough to contain the wonderful reality that is the ultimate dimension.

God does not need to be famous in human society, like a movie star or a president. God is not a little bag of peanuts for us to fight over. And God does not want to compete with us to be more famous than we. To be in touch with the wonderful reality of the ultimate dimension, we have to go beyond the name, and only then can we feel the true hollowed nature.

Thich Nhat Hanh

## 6

**On Religious Diversity:  
Interbeing, Mindfulness, and Peace**

*Although God is in everything, we can't compare God with creatures that live on Earth, just as we cannot compare water with a wave, because one is the ultimate nature and one is the phenomenon. We can compare one wave with another, but we cannot compare the water with the wave. It is the ultimate nature, and no words can be used to give it a name or describe it. We could call it God, we could call it Allah, we could call it the creator, but these are just ways of naming it. All these expressions and ideas are our unsuccessful attempt to define God. Therefore, whether we say God, or 'Dieu' (French), or 'Thuong De' (Vietnamese) or Allah, these are just names, and are not strong enough to contain the wonderful reality that is the ultimate dimension.*

*God does not need to be famous in human society, like a movie star or a president. God is not a little bag of peanuts for us to fight over. And God does not want to compete with us to be more famous than we. To be in touch with the wonderful reality of the ultimate dimension, we have to go beyond the name, and only then can we find the true hallowed nature.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

The central proposal of this thesis suggests that the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh contain valuable resources that could contribute towards the discourse of Buddhist pluralism. To demonstrate and verify this proposal, our methodological intention has been to analyse and understand Nhat Hanh's approach to other religions in relation to the Buddhist tradition, Nhat Hanh's cultural-historic context, and the corpus of his teachings. In accord with this strategy, the previous two chapters have established a textual and contextual foundation of understanding by analysing Nhat Hanh's approach to tradition and to modernity. As such, we are now equipped to undertake an analysis of Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity.

This final chapter will attempt to weave together the various discourses and issues we have examined thus far. It will draw upon our initial examination of Christian and Buddhist responses to religious diversity, focusing principally on the discourse of pluralism. The central categories and principles of Nhat Hanh's teachings, which have been textually illustrated and contextually located, will also inform our analysis. Specifically, this chapter will present three readings of Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity, based upon three central categories within his teachings: the perspective of interbeing, the practice of mindfulness, and the principle of peace. Each reading will demonstrate how each category corresponds with established positions within the discourse of Buddhist pluralism, such as we examined in Chapter Two. The readings will also analyse how each category has been constructively applied within Nhat Hanh's dialogue with Christianity. To conclude, we will address and respond to potential criticisms that could be levelled against Nhat Hanh's approach.

Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity proposes the interdependence of religions. Presenting an alternative to Western Christian positions of identist and differential pluralism, Nhat Hanh's approach constructs an experiential, dialogical, and ethical form of pluralism, which affirms both the unity and diversity of religions, whilst asserting the need for interreligious engagement with the suffering of the world. This approach will herein be conceptualised as a

position of *Religious Interbeing*. Ultimately, this thesis contends that the position of Religious Interbeing is of significant value, not only to Buddhist understandings of pluralism, but also to the Christian theological debate concerning pluralism, and the practical domain of interreligious encounter and exchange within the late modern world.

### Thich Nhat Hanh and Religious Diversity

In his hermitage at Plum Village, Nhat Hanh has effigies of both the Buddha and Jesus on his personal altar. In fact, Nhat Hanh counts Jesus Christ as one of his “spiritual-ancestors.”<sup>1</sup> However, this dual religious belonging has not always been part of Nhat Hanh’s religious identity. Nhat Hanh’s youth in Vietnam was spent under the oppressive conditions of colonialism. The early coercive efforts of French missionaries to convert the Vietnamese population and the later evangelising enforcements of the Diem government combined to create a negative perception of Christianity among the majority of twentieth-century Vietnamese Buddhists. Reflecting on his initial encounter with Christianity, Nhat Hanh has recalled that “in such an atmosphere of discrimination and injustice against non-Christians, it was difficult for me to discover the beauty of Jesus’ teachings.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, during these early days as a young activist monk, Nhat Hanh’s involvement in the peace movement led him into dialogue with more liberal-minded Christians also involved in resistance. Within Vietnam, a strong Catholic presence of opposition to the war emerged and eventually formed an alliance with the Buddhist Struggle Movement. The irony of this alliance, as Robert King has observed, was that “the conflict that had so deeply divided the Vietnamese people had brought Buddhists and Catholics closer together.”<sup>3</sup> As a leader of the Buddhist movement, Nhat Hanh was vocal about the Buddhist position, declaring their willingness to “co-operate with other religious groups – Cao Daiist, Hao Haoist, and especially Catholics – in order to realise peace and reconstruction in Vietnam.” Nhat Hanh suggested that the “determination to work for peace and a

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<sup>1</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (London: Rider Books, 1995). 6

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 5

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalisation* (New York: Continuum, 2003). 123

democratic society can serve to unite the various elements that have sometimes been divided, and lead them to an acceptance of each other based on this common interest.” Such an approach, Nhat Hanh proposed, would enable Buddhists and Catholics to “overcome the obstacles and lay aside the ghosts that had haunted them for so many centuries.”<sup>4</sup> Nhat Hanh’s further encounters with Christian members of the international peace movement, such as Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, and Daniel Berrigan, helped to deepen his understanding and appreciation of the Christian tradition. Evidently, the roots of Nhat Hanh’s emphasis on interreligious complementarity and collective engagement, which define his contemporary approach to religious diversity, can be traced back to this time.

In his later years of exile, Nhat Hanh’s endeavours to transmit Buddhism in the West led him into even greater contact with a diversity of religions. In response, Nhat Hanh has built upon his earlier encounters to establish a significant dialogue with Christianity. More recently, he has expanded the scope of his dialogue to include the traditions of Judaism and Islam. However, while Nhat Hanh has affirmed the differences between religions, he has not focused on them. Rather, he is interested in dialogical areas of complementarity, especially at the levels of practice, experience, and engagement with the world. To utilise one of his metaphors, Nhat Hanh does not ‘water the seeds’ of difference in religions. Instead, he waters the seeds of interreligious understanding and communion, intending to cultivate and nurture an organic garden of faiths subsisting in symbiotic harmony and reciprocal support. Nhat Hanh’s approach envisages Religious Interbeing: he presents a pluralist vision of the interdependence of religions, engaging with each other on contemplative and dialogical levels, while working together for the benefit of humanity and the planet.

### **Reading One: Interbeing**

Within Nhat Hanh’s discourse, each concept he defines, each doctrine he explains, and each practice he prescribes refers back to the fundamental teaching of interbeing. Interbeing is the cornerstone of Nhat Hanh’s pedagogic system and his

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<sup>4</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: The Lotus in the Sea of Fire* (London: SCM Press, 1967). 93-4

pluralist vision of religions. As we saw in Chapter Four, the teaching of interbeing imparts the inseparability of spiritual practice and social engagement, and thereby supports every aspect of Engaged Buddhist ethics and practice. Moreover, as we saw in Chapter Five, the realisation of interbeing within the self, the context of society, and between nations, provides a potential cure for a fragmented, deluded, and suffering world. In this chapter, we will discover how the perspective of interbeing can also support a theological position of pluralism. We will commence this reading by briefly recapitulating the meaning of emptiness within the discourse of Buddhist pluralism. We will then examine how Nhat Hanh has utilised emptiness within his discourse on religious diversity, and will thereby delineate the concept of Religious Interbeing. Finally, we will investigate how Nhat Hanh has applied the perspective of interbeing in his dialogue with Christianity.

### ***Emptiness and Buddhist Pluralism***

As we discussed in Chapter Two, a number of Buddhist scholars have recognised the important implications of the doctrine of emptiness (*S. śūnyatā*) for the theory and practice of pluralism. From Judith Simmer-Brown to Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, Marco Pallis to Masao Abe, Frederick Streng to Rita Gross, this wide range of scholars and teachers have utilised the perspective of *śūnyatā* as a resource for concurrently affirming the unity and diversity of religions. To briefly reiterate, the realisation of emptiness involves the deconstruction of erroneous mental processes of discrimination that segregate reality into a world of separate entities. This deconstruction transforms consciousness and generates a nondual perspective, which perceives reality as it truly is. The perspective of emptiness still discerns the diversity of forms in the world, and thus acknowledges difference. But it also sees the true conditioned nature of forms, and thus realises their emptiness and interdependence.

When the realised perspective of emptiness is applied to a discernment of religious diversity, similarly, a difference of religious forms is acknowledged, but so is their conditioned nature. As such, religions are not perceived as reified statements of truth, or absolute representations of reality. Rather, they are located

in the conventional realm of relativity and are therefore understood to be provisional linguistic constructs or 'skilful means'. Religions are to be utilised as methods that can facilitate a direct encounter with truth. However, they must ultimately be relinquished or transcended in order for such encounter to occur.

As many commentators have recognised, the important corollary of this application of emptiness to religious diversity is that the 'emptying' of religious forms asserts their equality. From the perspective of emptiness, the variety of religions is affirmed. But as they are all located in the realm of the conditioned, as methods rather than statements of truth, no one religious form can be considered as superior, including Buddhism. In other words, emptiness undermines absolutism. As such, the 'emptying' of religions asserts their diversity, as well as their equality, and therefore their unity. Moreover, in breaking down false barriers of separation, the 'emptying' of religions opens avenues for dialogue and establishes the potential for reciprocal exchange and support

### *Interbeing and Religious Diversity*

By way of clarification, let us turn to Nhat Hanh's comments on the interdependent nature of reality. Composing a "meditation on interbeing endlessly interwoven", Nhat Hanh explains:

All phenomena are interdependent. When we think of a speck of dust, a flower, or a human being, our thinking cannot break loose from the idea of unity, of one, of calculation. We see a line drawn between one and many, one and not one. But if we truly realise the interdependent nature of the dust, the flower, and the human being, we see that unity cannot exist without diversity. Unity and diversity interpenetrate each other freely. Unity is diversity, and diversity is unity. This is the principle of interbeing.<sup>5</sup>

As we have discussed, Nhat Hanh's teaching of interbeing constitutes a contemporary interpretation of the doctrines of co-dependent origination, non-self, and emptiness. Nhat Hanh uses a variety of metaphors to illustrate the nature of interbeing, including loaves of bread, pieces of paper, and flowers:

When we look into the heart of a flower, we see clouds, sunshine, minerals, time, the earth, and everything else in the cosmos in it. Without clouds, there could be no rain,

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<sup>5</sup> Nhat Hanh, "The Sun My Heart" in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993). 129

and there would be no flower. Without time, the flower could not bloom. In fact, the flower is made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent, individual existence. It 'inter-is' with everything else in the universe.<sup>6</sup>

Within his discourse on religious diversity, Nhat Hanh applies the insight of interbeing to the different religious forms to produce a pluralist vision that affirms their integrity as different and distinct forms, but also their complementarity, interdependence, and unity as spiritual, experiential, and ethical systems:

Just as a flower is made only of non-flower elements, Buddhism is made only of non-Buddhist elements, including Christian ones, and Christianity is made of non-Christian elements, including Buddhist ones. We have different roots, traditions, and ways of seeing, but we share the common qualities of love, understanding, and acceptance... When we see the nature of interbeing, barriers between ourselves and others are dissolved, and peace, love, and understanding are possible.<sup>7</sup>

Nhat Hanh's articulation of the interdependence of religious forms represents a pluralist perspective of what we will herein call Religious Interbeing. In accord with the realisation that 'form is emptiness', Nhat Hanh's perspective of Religious Interbeing affirms an interreligious unity that experientially transcends the boundaries of religious forms. However, because 'emptiness is also form', he concurrently affirms the value of religious difference. Concerning the differences between the philosophical systems of Buddhism and Christianity, Nhat Hanh has acknowledged discrepancies between the Buddhist teachings of rebirth, non-self, and emptiness, and the Christian teachings of one life, real self, and enduring existence.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Nhat Hanh is careful to affirm the significance of such diversity, claiming: "We have to preserve the differences. It is nice to have differences. *Vive la différence*."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, he also claims that irreconcilable philosophical differences do not preclude the possibility of interreligious concord in relation to the experiential and moral dynamics of religious meaning. He states: "If the philosophical ground is so different, the practice of compassion and loving-kindness in Buddhism and of charity and love in Christianity is different. All that seems to be a very superficial way of seeing."<sup>10</sup> The perspective of interbeing looks beyond the surface of philosophical and formal difference towards what

<sup>6</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 11

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (London: Rider Books, 1999). 15

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 16-17

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 15

Nhat Hanh considers to be the 'essence' of religious traditions, a substance of experiential truth that is unlimited by form. In this sense, he contends:

I do not think there is that much difference between Christians and Buddhists. Most of the boundaries we have created between our two traditions are artificial. Truth has no boundaries. Our differences may be mostly differences in emphasis.<sup>11</sup>

Nhat Hanh uses a recurrent analogy of fruit to represent the importance of difference and the foundation of sameness. He states: "We don't want to say that Buddhism is a kind of Christianity and Christianity is a kind of Buddhism. A mango cannot be an orange... they are two different things." However, beyond the surface, Nhat Hanh discerns that the essential substance of the mango and the orange is the same. He explains:

It is good that an orange is an orange and a mango is a mango. The colours, the smells, and the tastes are different, but looking deeply, we see that they are both authentic fruits. Looking more deeply, we can see the sunshine, the rain, the minerals, and the earth in both of them. Only their manifestations are different. Authentic experience makes a religion a true tradition. Religious experience is, above all, human experience. If religions are authentic, they contain the same elements of stability, joy, peace, understanding, and love. The similarities as well as the differences are there. They differ only in terms of emphasis. Glucose and acid are in all fruits, but their degrees differ. We cannot say that one is a real fruit and the other is not.<sup>12</sup>

Nhat Hanh utilises certain resources from the Buddhist tradition to reinforce his pluralist position. Most significantly, he prescribes nonattachment to religious doctrines and an unfixed faith as necessary means for realising Religious Interbeing. As we have discussed, on the path of Buddhist practice doctrines are valued more for their 'verbal utility' than for their 'verbal truth'. Rather than being understood as conclusive statements of religious truth, doctrines are utilised as praxial tools that aid the practitioner towards an experience of truth. The Buddhist tradition therefore sees religions like 'rafts', or 'fingers pointing to the moon', and instructs that attachment to these 'vehicles' or 'signposts' will impede the process of practice and obstruct access to transformative experience. Therefore, Buddhism asserts the imperative to relinquish attachments to doctrines. As Nhat Hanh explains, "The Buddha did not present an absolute doctrine... For a Buddhist to be attached to any doctrine, even a Buddhist one, is to betray the

<sup>11</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 154

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 194-5

Buddha. It is not words or concepts that are important. What is important is our insight into the nature of reality and our way of responding to reality.”<sup>13</sup>

In response to his experiences of ideological conflict during the Vietnam War, Nhat Hanh has consistently proclaimed the dangers of attachment to views. The first of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings guards against idolatry and attachment to doctrines, theories, and ideologies.<sup>14</sup> Nhat Hanh’s later teachings confirm the importance of nonattachment for healthy interreligious interaction: “Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others’ viewpoints.”<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, attachment to religious views reinforces the false and potentially dangerous perception of separation between religions. Nhat Hanh has observed, “People may think of Buddhism as something that can exist by itself, independent of Christianity, Judaism, or anything else.” In response, he refers to a Buddhist teacher who rinsed out his mouth every time he pronounced the word ‘Buddhism’: “Rinsing his mouth was a kind of preventative medicine to remind himself (and his students) not to cling to the concept ‘Buddhism’ as something that can exist all by itself.”<sup>16</sup>

Attachment to religious doctrines is the antithesis of actualisation. Attachment reifies and ossifies the structures of religions and thereby separates them; the real and effective meaning of doctrines stagnates, their vitality is stifled, and belief can become dangerously blind. Indeed, Nhat Hanh has been particularly critical of recent expressions of Christian exclusivism as represented in the work of Pope John Paul II. Commenting on a book titled *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Nhat Hanh repudiates its implication that “Christianity provides the only way of salvation and all other religions are of no use.” He very simply states: “This attitude excludes dialogue and fosters religious intolerance and discrimination. It does not help.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, Nhat Hanh prescribes the continual renewal of faith

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 54-5

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>15</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991). 127

<sup>16</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 148

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 192-3

and an openness of religious knowledge. Commenting on the nature of faith, Nhat Hanh explains:

[I]f you are committed only to a set of ideas and dogmas that may be *called* faith, that is not *true* faith... but it gives you energy. That energy can still blind and can lead to suffering... Having the kind of energy that can keep you lucid, loving, and tolerant is very different from having energy that is blind... We have to distinguish between true faith and blind faith. That is a problem in every tradition... The object of faith should not be a mere notion, a mere concept or an idea. It should be true insight into reality, true direct experience.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, Nhat Hanh suggests that faith must constantly reform, renew, and actualise itself in relation to the *practice* of religious teachings and the cultivation of insight. "A true teaching is not static," Nhat Hanh explains. "It is not mere words but the reality of life."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Nhat Hanh affirms that the authentic practice of any religion will reveal that "no single tradition monopolises the truth."<sup>20</sup>

According to Nhat Hanh, the non-dogmatic perspective of interbeing establishes a favourable environment for authentic and effective dialogue. This applies to exchanges between nations, which we have discussed, as well as dialogue between religions. Within his discourse on interreligious dialogue, Nhat Hanh once again affirms the importance of religious differences and insists upon the necessity of approaching dialogue from a position of commitment. He suggests, "For dialogue to be fruitful, we need to live deeply our own tradition and, at the same time, listen deeply to others."<sup>21</sup> Despite this emphasis on the particular, Nhat Hanh also suggests that the experiential realisation of interbeing entails a shift of perspective in which "the distinction between observer and observed disappears."<sup>22</sup> Nhat Hanh suggests that dialogue based upon the awareness of the interbeing of self and other disables any proselytising pursuits and undermines any imperialistic assumptions, while it facilitates deep existential engagement and transformation. He explains:

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<sup>18</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 72 & 117. Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 56

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 114

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 7

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 11

Dialogue is not a means for assimilation in the sense that one side expands and incorporates the other into its 'self'. Dialogue must be practiced on the basis of 'non-self'. We have to allow what is good, beautiful, and meaningful in the other's tradition to transform us.<sup>23</sup>

While dialogue based upon the perspective of Religious Interbeing would acknowledge formal philosophical and conceptual differences between religions, it would be more concerned with sharing the complementary 'fruits' of practice within a contemplative, interior, and experiential form of exchange. Within the dynamics of such exchange, syncretism is no longer a danger to be avoided. Nhat Hanh's recollection of a conference in Sri Lanka of theologians and scholars of religion is illustrative. He recalls the Indian Christian theologian Stanley Samartha addressing the assembly and proclaiming: "We are going to hear about the beauties of several traditions, but that does not mean we are going to make a fruit salad." When it was Nhat Hanh's turn to talk, he declared: "Fruit salad can be delicious!" In other words, Nhat Hanh discerns concord amongst different religion's experiential expressions and therefore sees no conflict in a spiritual sharing or praxial synthesis of religions. He states: "To me, religious life is life. I do not see any reason to spend one's whole life tasting just one kind of fruit. We human beings can be nourished by the best values of many traditions."<sup>24</sup>

### *Interbeing and Nhat Hanh's Dialogue with Christianity*

Nhat Hanh's dialogue with Christianity encompasses an interpretation of the Christian tradition from the perspective of interbeing. In particular, Nhat Hanh presents a nondualistic interpretation of the traditional Christian understanding of the nature of reality, and he thereby offers an alternative view to mainstream Christian theological attempts to define God. Appealing to those traditions of Christianity that affirm both the immanence and the transcendence of God, Nhat Hanh proposes that the authentic practice of Christian teachings can manifest the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

A defining feature of Nhat Hanh's dialogue with Christianity is his negative attitude towards the tradition of Christian theology. Nhat Hanh contends that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 9

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 1-2

words, concepts, or religious doctrines cannot adequately describe ultimate reality, because the dualistic construction of language cannot encompass the nondual and ineffable absolute. Nhat Hanh contends that this is the reason why the Buddha never speculated about the nature of ultimate reality. He explains:

Nirvana is the kind of reality that cannot be described by notions or words. Nirvana means literally extinction, and here extinction means the extinction of notions and concepts and ideas and words – even the word nirvana... With any word you use to point at the noumenal dimension you have to be careful. You should not get caught in that word.<sup>25</sup>

This traditional recognition of the limits of language informs Nhat Hanh's anti-theological attitude. "Discussing God is not the best use of our energy," he suggests. Rather, we should "touch God not as a concept but as a living reality."<sup>26</sup> In particular, Nhat Hanh criticises the Christian tradition of onto-theology as one in which "theologians have spent thousands of years talking about God as one representative." According to Nhat Hanh, this constitutes "talking about what we should not talk about."<sup>27</sup> In contrast, he contends that ultimate reality can only be understood through the transcendence of concepts and direct experience. He explains, "Once the ultimate is touched, all notions are transcended... God and nirvana as concepts have been transcended."<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Nhat Hanh contends that "a good theologian is one who says almost nothing about God."<sup>29</sup>

Nhat Hanh does refer to a number of Christian theologians and philosophers who have been "more careful in making statements about God," such as Paul Tillich, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Martin Heidegger.<sup>30</sup> He also discerns complementarity between Christian mystics and Zen masters:

I have noticed that Christians and Buddhists who have lived deeply their contemplative lives always come to express themselves in more non-dualistic, non-dogmatic ways. Christian mystics and Zen masters never sound speculative or intellectual. A dialogue between a Christian mystic and a Zen master would not be difficult to understand. Their speculative minds have given way to a nondiscursive spirit. Because they have learned not to get caught in notions or representations, they

<sup>25</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 148-9

<sup>26</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 21

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 139-140

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 189

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 150

<sup>30</sup> See *Ibid.* 139, 143, & 140, respectively.

do not speak as though they alone hold the truth, and they do not think that those in other traditions are going the wrong way.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, he appeals to the Christian mystical tradition of apophatic or negative theology, the “theology of the Death of God”, which proposes “the death of every concept we may have of God in order to experience God as a living reality directly.”<sup>32</sup>

The principal implication of Nhat Hanh’s emphasis on the experience of God is that God is available to be experienced. Indeed, Nhat Hanh cites the French writer André Gide as having claimed: “God is available to us twenty-four hours a day.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Nhat Hanh refers to Orthodox Christian doctrine, which “states very clearly that every human being has the divine nature of God and shares in the Divine goodness of God.”<sup>34</sup> From the perspective of interbeing, which discerns the interrelatedness of all things, there is a direct connection between the self and ultimate reality, whatever it may be called. According to Nhat Hanh, Buddhism represents this interconnection in a clear and uncomplicated way, but he also suggests that all religious traditions contain such an insight.<sup>35</sup> In a discussion of idolatry and prayer, Nhat Hanh questions: “Who is the person to whom we pray? Who is Allah? Who is God? Who is Buddha? Who is the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara? Who is Our Lady?”<sup>36</sup> In response, he proposes the immanence of the divine: “God and we are of the same substance. Between God and us there is no discrimination, no separation... It is a mistake to think that God is only outside.”<sup>37</sup>

In accord with this assertion of the immanence of God, Nhat Hanh offers Christianity a nondual interpretation of the nature of reality. He suggests that through authentic spiritual practice and genuine religious experience, God, or the ‘ultimate dimension’, can be encountered within the ‘historical dimension’ of

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 180

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 150

<sup>33</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 2

<sup>34</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2006). 73

<sup>35</sup> See Ibid. 31 & 42

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 29

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 31 & 57

mundane, phenomenal reality. In so doing, he suggests that the Kingdom of God can be manifested in the here and now. In a discussion of *The Lord's Prayer*, Nhat Hanh observes:

Christians pray, sing psalms and hymns, receive the sacraments – all these are prayers directed to the aspiration *your kingdom come*, the aspiration that the Kingdom of God be present in this very moment. If we're able to bring the ultimate dimension into the historical dimension, then we can live both dimensions at the same time. There is no reason why we can't touch the ultimate dimension while we are living in the historical dimension.<sup>38</sup>

From the perspective of interbeing, the interconnection of the historical and ultimate dimensions means that “You do not have to die in order to enter the Kingdom of God; in fact you are already in it now and here.”<sup>39</sup> Just as St. Francis experienced God in the almond tree, so too, Nhat Hanh suggests, can all Christians experience God in the world.<sup>40</sup> To illustrate the interbeing of the phenomenal world and the world of God, Nhat Hanh draws upon the Christian discourse of horizontal and vertical theology. While horizontal theology deals with the phenomenal dimension of separate forms, vertical theology deals with the ultimate dimension of God. Nhat Hanh suggests, “If you do not succeed in getting in touch with the horizontal dimension, you will not be able to get in touch with the vertical dimension... There is interbeing between the two. If you cannot love man, animals, and plants, I doubt that you can love God.”<sup>41</sup>

Nhat Hanh also offers an analogy of water and waves to represent the interconnection between the phenomenal and the ultimate. The horizontal or phenomenal world of forms is depicted as an ocean of waves. Just as each wave in the ocean is dependent on and conditioned by other waves, so too is every phenomenon in the world of forms dependent on and conditioned by every other phenomenon. But there is another dimension, which is represented by the water. This is the vertical dimension of ultimate reality – of emptiness, the extinction of all forms and concepts, and of God. Just as interbeing defines the relationship

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 78. See also Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 182 and Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 98-102

<sup>39</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 155

<sup>40</sup> See Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*. 70 and Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 43 & 152-3

<sup>41</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 3

between phenomena in the historical dimension, it also defines the relationship between the historical and ultimate dimensions. Nhat Hanh explains:

It seems as though the wave and the water are two different things, but in fact they are one. Without water, there would be no wave, and if we remove the wave, there is no water.<sup>42</sup>

In reference to the theological question of defining God as a person, Nhat Hanh contends that the ultimate cannot be characterised in terms of the phenomenal. Nevertheless, he proposes that the ultimate can be experienced *through* phenomena:

God is not a being in the phenomenal world. He or She is the ground of all being. It would not be difficult for Christians and Buddhists to agree on this.

We can talk about the phenomenal world, but it is very difficult to talk about the noumenal world... We can say that this wave is high or low, big or small, beautiful or ugly, has a beginning and an end. But all these notions cannot be applied to water. God is neither small nor big. God has no beginning or end. God is not more or less beautiful. All the ideas we use to describe the phenomenal world cannot be applied to God. So it's very wise not to say anything about God.

[Nevertheless], the practice of touching things deeply on the horizontal level gives us the capacity to touch God – to touch the noumenal level or the vertical dimension... We can touch the noumenal world by touching the phenomenal world deeply.<sup>43</sup>

In our endeavour to delineate the dimensions of a Buddhist position of pluralism, Nhat Hanh's analogy of wave and water can be constructively applied to the diversity of religions. Each distinct religious form can be represented by the metaphor of the wave. Insight into the true nature of the wave, however, reveals that its form is not permanent, independent, nor absolute. Rather, it is dependent upon all the other waves for its existence, structure, and continuity. Insight into the true nature of religions reveals that they too are not permanent, independent, nor absolute, but are dependent upon all other religions for their existence, structure, and continuity. Further insight into the nature of the wave reveals that its form is merely an external appearance or construct that functions like a kind of vehicle, and that its true substance is the water. In this sense, each religion can be understood also as a vehicle that leads its adherents towards a direct encounter with its true substance or ultimate referent – the great ocean of the absolute. Like the Buddha, Nhat Hanh does not speculate on the nature of this absolute, nor on

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 6

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 7-9

the nature of the experience of the absolute. However, it seems evident that he considers the ultimate dimension to be unitive and each religion to be a different representation of this one reality:

In Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, we can call this omnipresent presence “God”. God and Buddha are not two different things. We should not allow words and expressions to deceive us. The important thing is that we are able to be in touch with reality. The yellow fruit that you peel is called “chui” in Vietnamese and “banana” in English, but it’s the same fruit. Both words point to the same reality.<sup>44</sup>

To conclude this reading of interbeing, it can be maintained that Nhat Hanh’s approach to religious diversity affirms both the unity and diversity of religions upon the foundation of an experiential pluralism. In relation to the phenomenal dimension of form and language, Nhat Hanh asserts the value of each religion as distinct and unique. However, each of these forms is essentially understood to be no more than a linguistic representation of a unitive non-linguistic ultimate reality that has to be experienced to be known. In relation to the experiential dimension of the ultimate, the religious forms are realised as ‘empty’ and thereby transcended. As Nhat Hanh proclaims, all religious expressions are “unsuccessful attempts to define God... just names, [which] are not strong enough to contain the wonderful reality that is the ultimate dimension.”<sup>45</sup>

### Reading Two: Mindfulness

In order to develop our understanding of Nhat Hanh’s experiential pluralism, this second reading of his approach to religious diversity will explore his interreligious application of the practice of mindfulness. Nhat Hanh proposes that the authentic practice of any religious system can lead to a direct encounter with its religious truth in the here and now. As we have seen, he does not speculate on the nature of this absolute. Nor does he assume that followers of different religions will experience it in the same way. What he does claim is that it can be experienced in the present moment of the phenomenal world. Or rather, he affirms that a spiritual practitioner can participate in ultimate reality within daily life. While Nhat Hanh contends that all religions contain the necessary resources to facilitate such experience or participation, he also considers that Buddhism has much to offer in

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<sup>44</sup> Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*. 58

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 76

the form of “concrete methods of practice.”<sup>46</sup> In accord with the dynamic of reciprocity established by the perspective of Religious Interbeing, Nhat Hanh offers the practice of mindfulness as a trans-religious praxial tool. He proposes that mindfulness can help to revitalise other religions’ rituals and practices and thereby help to actualise a direct experience of God, Allah, Yahweh, etc., in the here and now. Essentially, Nhat Hanh considers that living in the presence of God, or participating in the ultimate dimension, constitutes the manifestation of spirituality in daily life. As we have seen, Nhat Hanh considers spirituality to be an imperative means of establishing individual healing, social transformation, international concord, and global community in the twenty-first-century.

This reading of mindfulness as a resource for pluralism will commence by briefly reiterating arguments for the experiential nature of religious truth from the discourse of Buddhist pluralism. We will then examine Nhat Hanh’s offering of mindfulness as a universal practice and means of generating religious experience. Finally, we will investigate how Nhat Hanh has applied mindfulness to aspects of Christian belief and practice, including the notion of the Holy Spirit, the Christian practice of prayer, and the ritual of the Eucharist.

### *Buddhist Pluralism and the Experiential Nature of Religious Truth*

As we have seen, the Buddhist tradition emphasises the affective dimension of religious doctrines. Doctrines are valued for their efficacy as tools upon the path of practice, and it is believed that attachment to a doctrine must be relinquished for liberation to occur. As the discourse of Buddhist pluralism has recognised, this understanding of the provisional nature of doctrines situates them all within the realm of relativity, which guards against any hazardous claims to absolute truth. Underlying this approach to doctrines is one of the most significant elements of Buddhist pluralism – the assertion that religious truth is experiential. Essentially, the experience of religious truth is understood to be nondual, non-conceptual, and non-linguistic. As such, it cannot be completely captured by any one religious

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<sup>46</sup> See Bob Abernethy, “An Interview with Thich Nhat Hanh,” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* [www.pbs.org/wnct/religionandethics/week703/interview.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnct/religionandethics/week703/interview.html) (2003).

doctrine or philosophy but must be experienced, and such experience is dependent upon the efficacy of religious practice.

As we discussed in Chapter One, an ongoing debate within Christian theological discourse argues the opposing philosophical merits of identist pluralism and differential pluralism. In a recent addition to the debate, an alternative voice has suggested that pluralism should be understood experientially rather than philosophically. In particular, Judson Trapnell and Rose Drew have explored the dynamics of such an experiential pluralism in relation to traditions from the East. Arguing against the finality of the theories of Perspectivism and Constructivism, they demonstrate that traditions such as Buddhism present the possibility of having experiences that transcend the conceptual categories of specific religious traditions. Such transcendent experience is capable of producing new modes of consciousness that can discern the integrity of the part and the unity of the whole, or the value of separate and different religions as well as their congruence and complementarity as a collective interdependent unity. On the basis of such possible experience, Trapnell and Drew propose that contradictions between truth claims that appear at cognitive, rational, and analytic levels can be reconciled through spiritual training and the transcendence of the epistemological boundaries of religious frameworks. While such an argument implies that religious experience is illogical and irrational, it is asserted that this does not undermine the validity of such experiences as informing modes of consciousness. Trapnell and Drew, and other scholars such as Diana Eck, and exemplars such as Thomas Merton, have affirmed that while tradition-specific language may be necessary to express ineffable experience, this does not mean that such experience is necessarily bound by that language or traditional context.<sup>47</sup>

In a similar fashion, a number of Buddhist pluralists that we examined in Chapter Two have affirmed the limits of language in relation to the experiential nature of religious truth. Among them, the Thai monk and venerated teacher Buddhādāsa

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<sup>47</sup> See Rose Drew, "Reconsidering the Possibility of Pluralism," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 40, no. 3 (2003), Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), Judson B. Trapnell, "Indian Sources on the Possibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35, no. 2 (1998).

Bhikkhu has proposed different levels of language and experience in his analysis of religious diversity. Buddhādāsa delineates three levels of religious perception and meaning. On an outer level, where religions appear as separate and dissimilar, a form of “conventional language” applies. On an intermediary level, where religions are united by a shared altruistic goal, Buddhādāsa proposes the “language of the Dhamma”, which de-absolutises and equalises the religions. Finally, however, at an inmost level, experiential insight dissolves all religious forms and the reality to which they all refer is directly apprehended. At this level, language is not possible or necessary.<sup>48</sup>

A number of contemporary scholars have confirmed Buddhādāsa’s insights. Among those we have examined is Sallie King, who has related her dual religious identity as a Buddhist and a Quaker to both religions’ recognition of the limits of language and the experiential nature of religious truth. King explains that religious truth is “epistemologically transcendent,” meaning that it is beyond conceptual knowledge, language, and culture, and cannot be mediated through beliefs, tradition, or religious authority alone. Rather, as she affirms, it is experiential, and moreover, it is universally available.<sup>49</sup>

As we saw in the previous reading of interbeing, Thich Nhat Hanh acknowledges the limits of language and affirms the experiential nature of ultimate reality. As we shall now see, he also argues for the universal availability of such experience and encourages its actualisation by proposing the universal applicability of the practice of mindfulness.

### ***Mindfulness Practice and Religious Diversity***

Where interbeing is the cornerstone and ultimate referent of all Nhat Hanh’s teachings, mindfulness encompasses the living and breathing practice of the teachings. Mindfulness practice constitutes the constant meditative cultivation of

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<sup>48</sup> See Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Christianity and Buddhism: Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture* (Bangkok: Karn Pim Pranakorn Partnership, 1967), Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, “No Religion,” in *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, ed. Donald Swearer (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

present moment awareness. This cultivation involves conscious breathing, concentration in every movement and every thought, and the development of insight or wisdom through deep looking into the interdependent nature of reality. The practice of mindfulness constitutes what Nhat Hanh calls the ‘path of return’: mindfulness brings the practitioner back to their true home in the present moment and in the refuge of the true self. It creates peace and equanimity, it facilitates understanding and generates compassion, and it aids the transformation of suffering into happiness. Finally, the practice of mindfulness reveals the true reality of interbeing. It thus opens a doorway onto the ultimate dimension and allows the practitioner to fully participate in the ultimate within the phenomenal world.

According to Nhat Hanh, mindfulness is a universal practice – it functions as a kind of essential awareness of life that can be practised by everyone. Mindfulness is “to become completely alive and live deeply each moment of your daily life.”<sup>50</sup> By practicing mindfulness, “every moment can be a holy, sacred minute.”<sup>51</sup> As such, Nhat Hanh asserts the trans-religious relevance of mindfulness practice and equates it with the Christian and Jewish practice of living in the presence of God:

The word mindfulness is not used in Christian and Jewish circles because mindfulness is a Buddhist word. But what is mindfulness? Mindfulness is to be aware of everything you do every day. Mindfulness is a kind of light that shines upon all your thoughts, all your feelings, all your actions, and all your words. Mindfulness is the Buddha. Mindfulness is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit, the energy of God.<sup>52</sup>

Nhat Hanh consistently states that you do not have to be a Buddhist to practise mindfulness. He insists: “Each one of us knows that we have mindfulness in us... You know that mindfulness is not a foreign thing to you.”<sup>53</sup> Mindfulness is the energy of awareness that allows you to enjoy more fully whatever you might be doing, whether it is drinking a glass of water, holding your child’s hand, or doing

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<sup>49</sup> See Sallie B. King, “A Pluralistic View of Religious Pluralism,” in *The Myth of Christian Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

<sup>50</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 84

<sup>51</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Begins Here: Palestinians and Israelis Listening to Each Other* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 18

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 88

the dishes. “That kind of mindfulness,” he explains, “improves your happiness, your peace. That is universal.”<sup>54</sup> As such, Nhat Hanh offers mindfulness for inclusion within other religious systems, suggesting that it may enhance their potential for actualisation. He observes,

Why do we not enjoy God? Because we are not free. Our mind is not there. We have no capacity of touching God, or of enjoying Him or Her. The practice of mindfulness helps us to free ourselves to enjoy what is there.<sup>55</sup>

Nhat Hanh even suggests that mindfulness can be practised in secular or simply spiritual contexts without any reference to Buddhism or religions in general. Commenting on a recent retreat he held for police officers and criminal justice workers in the United States, Nhat Hanh suggests, “it is important to organise mindfulness retreats in a non-sectarian way. You don’t have to be Buddhist, have a Buddha statue, burn incense, or bow, to practice mindfulness.” At this particular retreat, he recalls, “we only practiced to walk, sit, eat, listen, and speak in mindfulness. We didn’t worship; we didn’t do anything religious. Yet the atmosphere was very spiritual.”<sup>56</sup>

The principal intention behind Nhat Hanh’s trans-religious offering of mindfulness practice is to help religious others to experience their religious truth in the here and now. Nhat Hanh affirms the diversity of practices, beliefs, and rituals that may be used by other religions to access their religious truth. Indeed, he does not intend to undermine these differences. He offers mindfulness practice as a means of boosting the efficacy of these means and forms and enriching the praxial life of other religions. Ultimately, his intention is to encourage religious experience. Nhat Hanh does not explore the nature of religious experience because, as Buddhādāsa, Trapnell, Drew, and Sallie King all assert, such experience transcends the linguistic. As such, Nhat Hanh leaves open the possibility that different religious contexts may manifest different religious experiences, an argument posed by such theorists as John Cobb and R.C. Zaehner. While religious experiences may differ, what is important to Nhat Hanh is that

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 87

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 2

<sup>56</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2005). 76-7

they actually occur, that religious truth is actualised in the lives of adherents, and that ultimate truth is participated in, in the here and now.

### *Mindfulness and Nhat Hanh's Dialogue with Christianity*

To demonstrate exactly how the practice of mindfulness can enhance non-Buddhist religious practice, we will conclude this reading by presenting a few examples from Nhat Hanh's own interior dialogue with Christianity. In particular, we will examine his application of mindfulness to the notion of the Holy Spirit, the Christian practice of prayer, and the sacrament of the Eucharist. While Nhat Hanh remains a devout Buddhist monk, it is apparent that his spiritual 'roots' are diverse. He has openly embraced the Christian tradition through what Raimundo Panikkar calls an intrareligious dialogue. He has explored Christianity from within and has interior knowledge of its difference and otherness. As Richard King has observed, "Nhat Hanh shows himself to be unusually conversant with both traditions; he is in that sense 'bilingual'.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Nhat Hanh's knowledge of the Christian tradition is comprehensive. Moreover, it is evident that he has experientially realised the teachings of Christianity within his own spiritual practice. Based upon the perceived interbeing of Buddhism and Christianity, Nhat Hanh sees no problem in following the teachings of both traditions. On a level of form and doctrine, the philosophical, soteriological, and teleological structures of the two religions would seem to be at odds. However, as we have said, Nhat Hanh is not interested in 'religious ends' but 'religious nows', and in the focused moment of the present, the universal experience of the now, it is apparent that he considers the religions' experiential dynamics and praxial fruits to be the same.

Nhat Hanh is particularly critical of the sporadic devotion, blind belief, and rigid faith of many so-called followers of religions, including Buddhism. Concerning Christianity, he queries, "Is it sufficient to go to church every Sunday?" Answering in the negative, he observes, "People seem to be very kind while in church, but as soon as they get out, it seems that all their kindness has gone."<sup>58</sup> To

<sup>57</sup> King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalisation*. 131. Emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 96

follow Christianity in such a way is “to practice only the form, not the essence.”<sup>59</sup> Many Christian commentators have also acknowledged this lack within their tradition. The Dominican monk Brian Pierce, OP, has observed an ensuing “crisis of practice” within Christianity. He elaborates:

We are often baptised Christians by name, though many of us have not awakened to the riches that such a grace entails. We are swimming in the ocean of God’s presence and yet still spend much of our lives frantically searching for water. I would characterise the situation as a crisis of mindfulness. To a great extent, we have lost the capacity to practice the unfolding of the grace of baptism. We have the ancient rituals in place and our theological libraries are filled with writings on the sacraments, but we have forgotten how to make it all real. How to live out our full baptismal enlightenment. It is here, it seems to me, where Thich Nhat Hanh’s practice of mindfulness sheds such needed light onto the path for so many Christians today.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, within Nhat Hanh’s dialogue with Christianity, he asserts the need to practise the essence, not just the form, to realise the grace of God’s presence in the here and now. This involves the integration of the meaning of beliefs and rituals into daily life so that they become aspects of effective daily practice.

According to Nhat Hanh, “Jesus was very clear about the need to practice the teaching.”<sup>61</sup> Emphasising the fact that Jesus was not only the Son of God but also the Son of Man, Nhat Hanh proposes, “It is important to look deeply into every act and every teaching of Jesus during His lifetime, and to use this as a model for our own practice. Jesus lived exactly as He taught, so studying the life of Jesus is crucial to understanding His teaching. For me, the life of Jesus is His most basic teaching, more important than even faith in the resurrection or faith in eternity.”<sup>62</sup> To follow Jesus as an exemplar and actualise his teachings is to manifest Jesus as a ‘living reality’ – as the ‘Living Christ’. Nhat Hanh explains:

The Living Christ is the Christ of Love who is always generating love, moment after moment. Christians have to help Jesus Christ be manifested by their way of life, showing those around them that love, understanding, and tolerance are possible. This will not be accomplished just by books and sermons. It has to be realised by the way we live.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 126

<sup>60</sup> Pierce (OP), Brian J., *We Walk the Path Together: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh and Meister Eckhart* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005). 70

<sup>61</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 70

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 36

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 57

Nhat Hanh's suggestions are intended to provide guidance on the Christian path, a means of rediscovering extant values and spiritual meanings that may have been submerged beneath centuries of theology and an uncritical acceptance of dogma. Pierce confirms:

The Buddhist teaching on dwelling fully and mindfully in the present moment is helping Christians to rediscover this dimension in our own tradition... Certainly there are different philosophical frameworks underlying our two traditions, but the Buddhist emphasis on having access to the ultimate dimension, the presence of God, in each moment of our lives is vitally important for Christians, and to affirm this truth is to recover ancient insights from our own mystical tradition.<sup>64</sup>

On the basis of its potential efficacy as a doctrine, Nhat Hanh has discerned a correspondence between the practice of mindfulness and the notion of the Holy Spirit. He suggests, "the Holy Spirit is the kind of energy that is capable of being there, of understanding, of accepting, of loving, and of healing... It is the same thing as the energy of mindfulness."<sup>65</sup> Nhat Hanh understands the Holy Spirit to be "the energy of God" and proposes that "if we touch the Holy Spirit, we touch God not as a concept but as a living reality."<sup>66</sup> As such, Nhat Hanh suggests that the Holy Spirit offers Christians "a door to the Trinity."<sup>67</sup> Indeed, of the three elements, Nhat Hanh considers the Holy Spirit to be the "safest" or least problematic way of accessing the Trinity as it constitutes a tangible energy that can be manifested within the self. Like the universal seed of mindfulness, Nhat Hanh suggests that "all of us also have the seed of the Holy Spirit in us, the capacity of healing, transforming, and loving. When we touch that seed, we are able to touch God the Father and God the Son."<sup>68</sup>

This interpretation of the Holy Spirit offers a nondual perspective of the traditional Christian division between the sacred and the profane, or the divinity of Jesus and God in comparison to the Original Sin of humans. Indeed, Nhat Hanh has argued against the belief that Jesus is the *only* Son of God, implying that we are all offspring of the divine. In his analysis of *The Apostles' Creed*, Nhat Hanh

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<sup>64</sup> Pierce, *We Walk the Path Together: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh and Meister Eckhart*. 19 & 21

<sup>65</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 194

<sup>66</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 21

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 20

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 15

states: "You are also a daughter or a son of God. You are Jesus. All of us are Jesus."<sup>69</sup> While such an interpretation would seem typically Buddhist, and definitely contentious, it is certainly not unheard of in the Christian contemplative and mystical traditions. Resonance may be found in the words of Thomas Merton:

Contemplation...knows God by seeming to touch God. Or rather it knows God as if it had been invisibly touched by God...touched by God who has no hands, but who is pure reality and the source of all that is real! Hence contemplation is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being...received as a present from God, as a free gift of love. This is the existential contact of which we speak when we use the metaphor of being 'touched by God'.<sup>70</sup>

We can also refer to the thirteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhart, whose words curiously echo Nhat Hanh's:

God's seed is in us. If it were tended by a good, wise and industrious gardener, it would then flourish all the better, and would grow up to God, whose seed it is, and its fruits would be like God's own nature. The seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree, the seed of a nut tree grows to be a nut tree, the seed of God grows to be God.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, Nhat Hanh himself refers to the Greek Orthodox teaching of deification to support his interpretation of the Holy Spirit as provisional of direct access to God within the self:

[T]he idea of deification, that a person is a microcosm of God, is very inspiring. It is close to the Asian tradition that states that the body of a human being is a minicosmos... A human being is a mini-God, a *micro-theos* who has been created to participate in the divinity of God.<sup>72</sup>

The idea of the immanence of God plays a central role in one of Nhat Hanh's recent publications called *The Energy of Prayer*. Within this book, prayer, like the Holy Spirit and like mindfulness, is represented as an effective spiritual practice and an agent of transformation and healing that draws upon the immanent energy of God. In contrast to the understanding of prayer as a function of pure faith or

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<sup>69</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 138

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972). 2-3

<sup>71</sup> Meister Eckhart, "Of the Nobleman," in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, ed. Edmund Colledge OSA and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981). 241

<sup>72</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 123

divine will, Nhat Hanh suggests that prayer can function effectively, like mindfulness, as a tangible transmission of energy within our consciousness.<sup>73</sup>

Nhat Hanh proposes two principal ingredients that constitute effective prayer: relationship and energy.<sup>74</sup> The first concerns establishing an understanding of the relationship between the self, as the subject of prayer, and God, as the object of prayer. Affirming the immanence of God, Nhat Hanh explains: “We hear repeatedly that God is within us. To me this means that God is within our consciousness.”<sup>75</sup> God, as the object of prayer, is therefore equated with the seed of awakening in the soil of our consciousness; if this seed is watered with the energy of mindfulness, or prayer, it will bloom as an agent of understanding and transformation.

The second ingredient of effective prayer concerns the necessary energy. Nhat Hanh uses an analogy of a telephone connected to its wire to symbolise the initial relationship of prayer. He then suggests that the energies of mindfulness, concentration, insight, and loving kindness are like the electrical current that transmits the message of the prayer. These energies function in the consciousness to generate understanding and thereby effect change. Nhat Hanh suggests that without these effective energies, “our prayer is just superstition.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, Nhat Hanh represents prayer as an internal process of contemplation and insight that creates transformation within the mind and thereby in the world. Essentially, Nhat Hanh’s ‘de-mythologising’ analysis of the dynamics of prayer discerns its pragmatic and efficacious potency as a religious practice that is not geared on placing demands or achieving desired results but developing spiritual insight.

Akin to his interpretations of the Holy Spirit and of prayer, Nhat Hanh presents the sacrament of the Eucharist as an effective spiritual practice. He suggests that the ritual of the Eucharist can effect understanding and transformation in the self and facilitate encounter with the ultimate dimension of reality. Nhat Hanh first

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<sup>73</sup> Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*. 31-2

<sup>74</sup> See *Ibid.* 41-5

<sup>75</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 155

<sup>76</sup> Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*. 44

took the Eucharist with the Catholic priest and anti-war activist Father Daniel Berrigan. In a dialogue with Berrigan, Nhat Hanh reflects on the meaning of the ritual. He proposes that Jesus' offering of the bread as His body and the wine as His blood was a drastic way of awakening His disciples from "forgetfulness" and "ignorance" so that they might encounter true reality. He therefore suggests to Berrigan, "When you perform the rite of the Eucharist, you have a role that is very similar to the act of Jesus. Your role is to bring back life and reality to a community that is participating in the worship."<sup>77</sup> In other words, Nhat Hanh sees the ritual of the Eucharist as an act of direct participation in God, or life:

When we look around, we see many people in whom the Holy Spirit does not appear to dwell... The practice of the Eucharist is to help resurrect these people so they can touch the Kingdom of Life... Holy Communion is a strong bell of mindfulness.<sup>78</sup>

One of the prevalent *gāthas* used at Plum Village is "Eat your Bread, Eat the Cosmos". To eat a piece of bread in mindfulness is to be in direct contact with, and be participating in, the true reality of interbeing. Applying this teaching to the Eucharist, Nhat Hanh suggests that to practise the sacrament with mindfulness, or the energy of the Holy Spirit, is to be in direct contact with, and be participating in, the presence of God:

If Christ is the body of God, which he is, then the bread he offers is also the body of the cosmos. Look deeply and you notice the sunshine in the bread, the blue sky in the bread, the cloud and the great earth in the bread...the whole cosmos has come together in order to bring you this piece of bread...Eat it mindfully. Eat it in the presence of God. Eat it in such a way that the Holy Spirit becomes an energy within you.<sup>79</sup>

Obviously, many Christians would voice objections to Nhat Hanh's interpretations.<sup>80</sup> However, others may find resonance and guidance within his teachings. Representing the latter, Brian Pierce, OP, has recognised:

Much of Christianity has a rich and liturgical and sacramental life, but unfortunately it has been largely limited to something that is done on Sunday mornings within the

<sup>77</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh and Daniel Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001). 3

<sup>78</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 30-1

<sup>79</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 107

<sup>80</sup> See Kristin Kiblinger's comments on Nhat Hanh's interpretation of the Eucharist in Kristin Beise Kiblinger, "Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions: An Overview" (paper presented at the Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions - Seventh Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies, University of Salzburg, Austria, 2007). Unpublished. Podcast available at <http://www.buddhist-christian-studies.org>

walls of a church building. The bridge linking liturgy and life has broken down. This is indeed one of the great tragedies of modernity... we must liberate sacramentality from the limits of the sanctuary and bring it back into the realm of daily life. This is the great insight of Thich Nhat Hanh's practice of mindfulness.<sup>81</sup>

Pierce suggests the notion of "sacramental mindfulness" as a means of translating Nhat Hanh's teachings into Christian practice. Pierce does not see this proposal as a dubious synthesis of Christianity and Buddhism but as a means of utilising the message of Christ in constructive ways so that it may respond to the suffering world:

What happens in the Last Supper is a re-membering, that is, a "bringing of all the scattered members back together" into communion. The fragmented body of Christ present in our world – with its separated families, its divided nations, its decimated rain forests, and its broken human hearts – is reunited... The eucharistic re-membering, when celebrated with a true spirit of mindfulness, connects us with the world around us... Through this sacramental action, we participate in the mission of Christ to reconcile and unite all things on earth and in heaven, helping to give expression to a world where there are no more divisions.<sup>82</sup>

Pierce's suggestions are representative of the kinds of contemplative dialogue, experiential exchange, and spiritual synthesis that are implied by Nhat Hanh's affirmation of Religious Interbeing. Moreover, his location of the meaning of the Eucharist within a global perspective that addresses suffering in the world leads us towards our final reading of Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity, which concerns the imperative for global community and peace.

### Reading Three: Peace

Thich Nhat Hanh proclaims the ontological interdependence of religions and the experiential interdependence of reality as the foundation of his approach to religious diversity. While this is evidently a Buddhist view of religions and reality, it contains a number of resources and internal dynamics that affirm it as a position of pluralism, rather than religious inclusivism or imperialism. Firstly, the position of Religious Interbeing declares the non-absolute status of all religions, including Buddhism. Secondly, the position is supported in reference to religious experience, which enables the affirmation of religious diversity on a level of language and form, and religious unity on a level of practice and experience.

<sup>81</sup> Pierce, *We Walk the Path Together: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh and Meister Eckhart*. 75

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 110-1

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Nhat Hanh's approach ultimately refers to the ethical principle of peace.

Nhat Hanh's teachings of religious actualisation and non-absolutism, and his universal application of mindfulness, are essentially proposed as ways to manifest peace within the self, between religions, and thereby in the world. Indeed, the principle of peace constitutes the fundamental motivation behind Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity. Where ossified religious structures, dogmatic belief, and blind faith generate fierce and exclusive claims to religious superiority, Nhat Hanh proposes that actualised religious expressions can help to break down barriers between religions. He asserts that religions that are renewed through practice will not cause conflict or generate suffering. While Nhat Hanh could be accused of imposing a nondual structure of reality onto religious others, his intentions, rather than encompassing the assertion of Buddhist superiority, are irenic. Essentially, the need for peace can be understood as a global ethic. In this sense, Nhat Hanh's interreligious discourse on peace presents a contribution towards the understanding of religious diversity that is both possible as a pluralist affirmation, and imperative as a means of interreligious reconciliation.

In this final reading of peace as a resource for affirming pluralism, Nhat Hanh's position of Religious Interbeing will be further substantiated by what we will herein call an *engaged* pluralism. The perspective of an engaged pluralism unites the world religions on the basis of a common moral or altruistic ground and a shared ethical goal of relieving suffering in the world.<sup>83</sup> It affirms the presence of universal qualities of compassion and nonviolence within the ethical systems of all religions and thereby asserts the capacity and imperative for all religions to engage in the world to alleviate suffering, reconcile conflict, and create peace. This reading will commence with a recapitulation of the significance of ethics in the discourse of Buddhist pluralism, and a delineation of the proposition of

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<sup>83</sup> The theologian Paul Knitter is a leading proponent of such an understanding of pluralism. See Paul F. Knitter, "Towards a Liberation Theology of Religions," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), Paul F. Knitter, ed., *Pluralism and Oppression: Theology in World Perspective*, vol. 34, *The Annual Publication of the College Theological Society* (Lanham and New York: University Press of America, 1988).

engaged pluralism. We will then examine how Nhat Hanh utilises the ethical principle of peace and evidences the notion of engagement within his approach to religious diversity. Finally, we will demonstrate how he has applied the principles of peace and engagement in his dialogue with Christianity, particularly to the ethical teachings of Jesus and the question of the role of the Church in society.

### ***Buddhist Pluralism, Ethical Criteria of Evaluation, and Engagement***

A central dilemma within the position of pluralism concerns the question of its limits. As a pluralist, should one affirm the value of those who hold a hostile position of exclusivism? As we saw in Chapter Two, the discourse of Buddhist pluralism provides a definite solution to this dilemma of relativism. This solution affirms that pluralists cannot avoid the need to evaluate religious beliefs and practices. However, it is suggested that such evaluations be made according to ethical rather than doctrinal absolutes. In other words, the value of the religious other is determined not by the feasibility of their understanding of salvation, or the accuracy of their representation of the absolute, but in relation to the degree of kindness, love, compassion, and nonviolence that their practice manifests. Rita Gross has clearly articulated this approach of ethical criteria, arguing that an emphasis on the morality of religions, rather than the question of their metaphysics, is critical for positive and peaceful interreligious interaction today. She states:

It is more important that we learn how to live together than that we all think alike religiously. And since we are never all going to think alike religiously, we must not pin peace and security on theological agreement. Theological agreement is irrelevant to building a better, more peaceful world.<sup>84</sup>

Sallie King has also affirmed the need to evaluate religions according to their morality, claiming, "We know the presence of the Spirit by its fruits." King offers a collection of such fruits as universal ethical imperatives, including: unconditional love, compassion, concern for others, and kindness to all; selflessness, or altruistic generosity and courage; nonviolence and gentleness as a

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<sup>84</sup> Rita M. Gross, "Excuse Me, but What's the Question?: Isn't Religious Diversity Normal?," in *The Myth of Christian Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005). 82

general rule; and finally, an avoidance of rigid dogmatism.<sup>85</sup> A further example can be found in the Dalai Lama's approach to other religions, which prioritises morality and practice over philosophy and metaphysics. His Holiness emphasises the shared qualities of love, compassion, sincerity, and honesty between religions and proposes a common altruistic goal to benefit humankind.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the Dalai Lama's approach can be understood as representative of a prevalent concern within contemporary Buddhism for social engagement and the need to establish global community. This concern provides the impetus for much Buddhist interreligious dialogue. As David Chappell has observed, such dialogue is "based not on intellectual curiosity but on moral values in an effort to deepen the spiritual life of society, to remove discrimination and exploitation, and to nurture a sense of global community in a divided world."<sup>87</sup>

As we have seen, ethical endeavours of engagement have propelled the career of Thich Nhat Hanh, as both a monk and an activist. As we shall now see, Nhat Hanh's teachings of engagement also underlie his approach to religious diversity. Indeed, the notion of Engaged Buddhism can inform our construction of engaged pluralism. A position of engaged pluralism would affirm the equality of religions in reference to the ethical efficacy of their doctrines and practices. Furthermore, it would assert a collection of necessary universal ethics, including compassion, altruism, nonviolence, an acknowledgement of religious differences and commitments, but an equal avoidance of religious imperialism. Essentially, an engaged pluralism would affirm each religion's capacity to integrate their spiritual practice with a form of compassionate action in the world, and this capacity would be prioritised over the affirmation of religious differences. In a world plagued by war and conflict, social and economic injustice, and environmental destruction, engaged pluralism would affirm the critical imperative for the religions to unite, to

<sup>85</sup> King, "A Pluralistic View of Religious Pluralism." 100

<sup>86</sup> See Dalai Lama XIV (HH Tenzin Gyatso), *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (London: Rider, 1996), Dalai Lama XIV (HH Tenzin Gyatso), *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*, trans. Jeffrey Hopkins (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1984), Dalai Lama XIV (HH Tenzin Gyatso), "'Religious Harmony' and Extracts from the *Bodhgaya Interviews*," in *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

<sup>87</sup> David W. Chappell, "Buddhist Interreligious Dialogue: To Build a Global Community," in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986). 4

realise their collective humanism, and cultivate communal spiritual values so that everyone and everything may be liberated from suffering. The religious complementarity and collaboration implied by such a pluralist approach would constitute an authentic manifestation of Religious Interbeing.

### *Peace and Religious Diversity*

Where interbeing is the cornerstone of Nhat Hanh's teachings, and mindfulness their living and breathing practice, the principle of peace constitutes their primary motivation, means, and goal. Since his initial renewal of Buddhism during the Vietnam War, Nhat Hanh has prioritised peace, even over Buddhism itself. Moreover, the cultivation of peace on individual, social, and global levels constitutes the crux of Nhat Hanh's contemporary representation of Buddhism within the modern West. Finally, because Nhat Hanh considers that every religion has the capacity to manifest peace, it is at the centre of his approach to religious diversity. While Nhat Hanh's pluralist position could appear to imply an uncritical acceptance of any and all religious practices, the application of the principle of peace defines its limits. Indeed, it could be suggested that peace represents a kind of ethical absolute in Nhat Hanh's pedagogic system and pluralist position. At the same time, as we have seen, Nhat Hanh's teachings on peace are presented as pragmatic and accessible practices that can be incorporated into any religious system. In Nhat Hanh's interreligious vision, peace becomes the common ground, and establishing this common ground becomes critical for interreligious harmony and our collective survival.

As has been mentioned, Nhat Hanh is more interested in religious 'nows' than religious 'ends'. He has stated: "All soteriologies belong at first to the historical dimension." However, with the cultivation of insight, "the notions of beginning and ending are transcended."<sup>88</sup> In Nhat Hanh's interreligious vision, the present moment becomes the locus for all religious meaning and experience. As such, he considers the object of all religious meaning to be reality, or life. He claims, "the object of praying and meditating is life – life in the most beautiful, glorious meaning of the word. The existence of Buddhism, of Christianity, and other

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<sup>88</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 190

religious disciplines has to do with life, with reality.”<sup>89</sup> According to Nhat Hanh, when the interdependence of religions is actualised, and the present moment of reality is directly encountered, discrimination becomes superfluous, separation dissolves, and humanity is united. He suggests:

We are separated by names like “Buddhist,” “Christian,” “Jew,” “Muslim.” When we hear one of these words, we see an image and we feel alienated, we don’t feel connected. We have set up many structures in order to be separated from each other and make each other suffer. That is why it is very important to discover the human being in the other person, and to help the other person discover the human being in us. As human beings we are exactly the same.<sup>90</sup>

Within Nhat Hanh’s discourse, the recognition of the unity of humanity is conjoined with a fundamental recognition of the universality of suffering. “What exactly is reality?” Nhat Hanh asks. He responds: “The suffering of everyone is reality. Rich and poor, North and South, black, yellow, red, and white is reality. Our daily consumption of poisons and our weapons industry are reality. Our lack of time and energy for ourselves and others is reality. The destruction of human life, of other species, and of the environment by our unmindful way of living – these are reality.”<sup>91</sup> Nhat Hanh insists that all religions have a responsibility to respond to the suffering of others and of the world by cultivating understanding, practicing nonviolence, and generating peace. He asserts:

Each one of us can draw from the wisdom of his or her own spiritual tradition – whether it is Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, or any other... There is hope for future generations only if we can put into practice our deep aspiration for a culture of peace and nonviolence. If we cannot take practical measures to bring about a global ethic of nonviolence, we will not have enough strength to face and deal with the difficulties we will encounter in this new century. We can do this. True peace is possible.<sup>92</sup>

According to Nhat Hanh, the ethical systems of all religious traditions advocate inclusiveness and non-discrimination, and advance the imperative to help others. He observes, “We know that everyone suffers, even those who have tried to hurt us. As a living continuation of Jesus Christ, of Muhammed, of Moses, of the

<sup>89</sup> Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness*.

<sup>90</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Peace Begins Here: Palestinians and Israelis Listening to Each Other*. 98

<sup>91</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World* (London: Rider Books, 2003). 180

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 10

Buddha, and of all spiritual ancestors, you have to help everyone.”<sup>93</sup> The important interreligious implication here is that non-discrimination, inclusion, nonviolence, and compassionate engagement must also characterise one’s approach to religious others. Nhat Hanh suggests, “An attitude of openness, the willingness to recognise and accept the diversity of human experience and the spiritual values of other traditions and cultures, is essential in the practice of nonviolence. We create true peace when we are inclusive of others.”<sup>94</sup> According to Nhat Hanh, the embrace of the other, and the realisation of the interdependence of self and other, is the foundation of peace. He claims, “God is compassion and inclusiveness. If God loves everyone, how can we exclude anyone? Do not believe that by eliminating the other you can find peace. Helping them is the *only* way.”<sup>95</sup>

To establish peace between religions, the vision of Religious Interbeing must ultimately become a reality. Commenting on the actualisation of religious interdependence, Nhat Hanh explains, “It is not necessary that all share the same religious ideals. What is important is that you find yourself in a situation where nobody discriminates. I think religions ought not separate people. Yet there should be the particularity, the identity, of each group or each person.”<sup>96</sup> The point of realising Religious Interbeing is that separate religious identities do not, indeed cannot, exist in isolation. He explains:

In fact, an identity can be an identity only when there are things that describe it as a nonidentity... So, all things rely on each other in order to be. My identity meets your identity in order to be possible. Why don’t we come together in order to find ways to preserve not only my identity but your identity and that of others too? Resistance against boundaries, against the setting up of false frontiers and limitations, is so important.<sup>97</sup>

According to Nhat Hanh, the realisation of Religious Interbeing can help to manifest peace between religions. Moreover, the consequent dynamics of interreligious reciprocity and collaboration can contribute towards a collective awakening. Nhat Hanh asserts: “We must glean the best values of all traditions

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 180

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 15

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 181

<sup>96</sup> Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness*. 143

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 120

and work together to remove the tensions between traditions in order to give peace a chance."<sup>98</sup> Finally, it is on the foundation of this interreligious unity and peace that Nhat Hanh suggests collective spiritual engagement in society:

We can bring the spiritual dimension into our daily life, as well as our social, political, and economic life. This is our practice. Jesus had this intention. Buddha had this intention. All of our spiritual ancestors, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist had this intention. We can display the light of wisdom and come together in order to create hope and prevent society and the younger generation from sinking in despair.

We can learn to speak out so that the voice of the Buddha, the voice of Jesus, the voice of Mohammed, and all our spiritual ancestors can be heard in this dangerous and pivotal moment in history. We offer this light so that the world will not sink into total darkness.<sup>99</sup>

### *Peace and Nhat Hanh's Dialogue with Christianity*

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, the Vietnam War witnessed the union of Buddhism and Christianity in pursuit of peace. Perhaps the most obvious form of protest during the war, which was practised by both Buddhists and Christians, was the act of self-immolation.<sup>100</sup> During a conversation with Daniel Berrigan, Nhat Hanh recalls an incident of self-immolation from 1967 involving one of the original members of the Order of Interbeing, a nun named Nhat Chi Mai. Before setting fire to herself, Mai placed in front of her "a statue of the Virgin Mary and a statue of a woman Bodhisattva, Quan Am, the Buddhist saint of compassion." She also placed a poem beside her that read: "Joining my hands, I kneel before Mother Mary and Bodhisattva Quan Am. Please help me to realise fully my vow." The image of this young Buddhist nun, engulfed in flames on a Saigon street, kneeling before both Christian and Buddhist effigies of compassion, presents a powerful symbol of the convergence of the two traditions in the cause of peace. Indeed, Nhat Hanh suggests to Berrigan the possibility of consonance between the death of Mai and the death of Jesus, as both sacrificed themselves for others.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 114

<sup>99</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism*. 97-8

<sup>100</sup> For an insightful discussion of Quaker and Buddhist immolations during the Vietnam war, see Sallie B King, "They Who Burned Themselves for Peace: Quaker and Buddhist Self-Immolators During the Vietnam War," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 20 (2000).

<sup>101</sup> Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness*. 67-71

Within Nhat Hanh's dialogue with Christianity, he places great emphasis on Jesus' ethical teachings on anger, revenge, and love, and attempts to demonstrate their pragmatic potential for creating peace. He cites the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." To be a peacemaker, Nhat Hanh asserts that you must have a peaceful heart – that you must have inner peace in order to create peace in the world. In contrast, action based on anger or hatred will only create more anger and hatred, within the self and others. In support of this view, Nhat Hanh refers to Jesus' admonishment against killing and his declaration that "whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgement... Whosoever shall say 'Thou fool,' shall be in danger of hellfire." Nhat Hanh offers a characteristically nondual interpretation of Jesus' depiction of hell, maintaining that you are not punished for you anger by being expelled to hell, but that anger creates a hell in your mind. He makes a similar comment regarding killing in the mind. However, Nhat Hanh further cites Jesus' teachings on the futility of revenge and the need to 'turn the other cheek' as provisional of an alternative to conflict and killing and the means of creating peace. Finally, Nhat Hanh cites Jesus' teaching on 'loving your enemies', and equates it with his own teaching of discerning the 'true enemy'.<sup>102</sup> Ultimately, Nhat Hanh considers that all religions contain teachings on peace, nonviolence, and love: "Hatred cannot overcome hatred. Violence cannot overcome violence. The Bible, the Koran, the Torah, and the Sutras teach us that."<sup>103</sup>

Turning to the Church, Nhat Hanh affirms its potential capacity to function in the world as an agent of engagement, compassion, and peace. He questions, "Are we making Jesus' presence real in our Churches today?" He follows this question with six more that challenge the communal practice of the Christian tradition. In doing so, he articulates a collection of trans-religious engaged ethics. Firstly, he asks whether the Church is engaged in interreligious dialogue. Secondly, he affirms the need for social engagement, questioning "Are we bringing the service

<sup>102</sup> This discussion of Jesus' ethical teachings was first presented in a dharma talk at Plum Village in March 1991. It has been published as 'A Peaceful Heart' in Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*. 73-80, and in Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 74-9

<sup>103</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism*. 29

of the church to those who suffer, to those who are discriminated against?" Third, Nhat Hanh argues for the ordination of female priests. Fourth, he questions the wealth and consumption of the Church, declaring the necessity of simple living. Fifth, Nhat Hanh questions whether the Church is in touch with the suffering of the poor and oppressed or whether it chooses to associate only with the wealthy. And finally, he proclaims Jesus' gospel of nonviolence. He questions, "Are we blessing wars and sending priests along with our armies to support the efforts of war? ...Do the churches practice nonviolence and social justice, or do they align themselves with governments that practice violence and hatred?"<sup>104</sup>

The ethics revealed in Nhat Hanh's questioning of the Christian Church are representative of those criteria that limit his avowal of pluralism. For Nhat Hanh to affirm the validity of a religion, it must encompass all the above tenets of dialogue, engagement, gender equality, mindful consumption and voluntary poverty, non-discrimination, and nonviolence. We can find further evidence of Nhat Hanh's ethical tenets in the Five Mindfulness Trainings, which Nhat Hanh offers as trans-religious ethical guidelines. He explains that they "are worded in such a way that everyone can apply them, regardless of spiritual tradition or cultural background."<sup>105</sup> In fact, Nhat Hanh suggests that the deep meaning of the Trainings can be discerned in all religious traditions, suggesting the Judaic and Christian congruent example of the Ten Commandments.<sup>106</sup> Once more, Nhat Hanh's emphasis is upon the practice of the Christian teachings and their actualisation of the immanence of God as the essential means of deterring absolutism, achieving experience and insight, and manifesting and assuring peace. He concludes:

God may be a notion for some, but God as the energy of mindfulness, concentration, and compassion is not a notion. For me the energies of peace, wisdom, and stability are the energies of God, of the Holy Spirit. When we generate peace, loving-kindness, and understanding in ourselves, we are generating the energy of God within us.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup> See Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 71-3

<sup>105</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 72. See Appendix A for the full text of the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

<sup>106</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 111

### Critique and Response

In order to examine Thich Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity, we have undertaken three readings based upon the categories of interbeing, mindfulness, and peace. In each of these readings it has been suggested that Nhat Hanh's application of the categories towards the diversity of religions has revealed valuable resources that could be utilised within the construction of a Buddhist position of pluralism. In relation to Nhat Hanh's fundamental teaching of interbeing, this position of pluralism has been conceptualised by the notion and vision of Religious Interbeing. An experiential form of pluralism and an engaged form of pluralism substantiate this position of Religious Interbeing. To summarise, the application of interbeing towards religious diversity affirms the unity and diversity of religions – their difference, equality, and interdependence. The application of mindfulness practice towards religious diversity affirms the equal capacity of all religions for praxial and experiential actualisation. Finally, the application of peace towards religious diversity asserts the equal capacity, and indeed equal responsibility, of all religions to engage with one another, in order to unite in compassionate engagement with the suffering of the world.

As we have seen, a discourse of critique and debate surrounds the theological position of pluralism. At the centre of this discourse are issues concerning religious superiority and imperialism, the dangers of distortion and misrepresentation, the quest for unity and common ground, and the assertion of religious difference. These issues have been most fully articulated and debated within the discourse of Christian theology. As we discussed in Chapter One, the position of identist pluralism has been criticised by the position of differential pluralism for its apparent imposition of tradition-specific categories onto the religious other, which results in the misrepresentation or distortion of the other, and a denial of its difference.

As we saw in Chapter Two, these issues have also emerged within the discourse of Buddhist pluralism. In a similar fashion, the use of the doctrine of emptiness

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<sup>107</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community and the World*. 35

within Buddhist pluralism has been criticised for its supposed denial of religious difference via its assumption of a positionless position. Such critiques contend that emptiness undermines the value of religious differences by asserting that the very perception of difference is a product of the deluded, dualistic, and discriminating mind, and is thus the cause of suffering.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, it is argued that the positionless position implied by the emptiness of emptiness is just as much a particularist, tradition-specific position as any other religious point of view. Thus, to assert the equality of all religions on the basis of emptiness still constitutes the imposition of a Buddhist framework and Buddhist criteria of judgement. This apparent imposition is deemed a claim to Buddhist superiority, resulting in the colonisation of the other, or at least the misrepresentation or distortion of the other, and thereby, once again, the denial of its difference.<sup>109</sup>

Further criticism of the implied experientialism of the positionless position issues from the theoretical perspective of Constructivism. It is apparent that the positionless position depends upon the experiential transcendence of the doctrine of emptiness itself. However, the theory of Constructivism argues that all experiences are contextually constructed and that it is therefore impossible to transcend tradition-specific boundaries and frameworks.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, even if such experiences were possible, because they purportedly transcend the linguistic, critics contend that there is no way of proving their transcendence, as the only means of expressing and communicating the experience is limited within the confines of tradition-specific language.<sup>111</sup> Thus, despite its appeal to experientialism, according to this critique the positionless position remains a Buddhist position and cannot therefore affirm pluralism.

<sup>108</sup> See David W. Chappell, "Buddhist Responses to Religious Pluralism: What Are the Ethical Issues?," in *Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society*, ed. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), Jamie Hubbard, "Topophobia," in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism*, ed. Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

<sup>109</sup> See Kristin Beise Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), Kristin Beise Kiblinger, "Using Three-Vehicle Theory to Improve Buddhist Inclusivism," *Buddhist - Christian Studies* 24 (2004).

<sup>110</sup> For example, see Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (London: Sheldon Press, 1978).

<sup>111</sup> For example, see S. Mark Heim, "Salvations: A More Pluralistic Hypothesis," *Modern Theology* 10 (1994).

Evidently, such criticisms could be levelled at Thich Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity. Nhat Hanh's affirmation of the unity and diversity of religions on the basis of the realisation of interbeing could be critiqued as a dubious assumption of a positionless position. Just because Buddhism is 'de-absolutised' along with all other religions, it can be argued that this 'emptying' still constitutes a Buddhist strategy, and therefore does not necessarily assert the equality of religions or the value of religious difference. Moreover, while Nhat Hanh does not fully articulate an assumption of the final soteriological identity of religions, he implies the singularity of the absolute in the universal 'religious now' and insists on the trans-religious realisation of that 'now'. Thus, he could be accused of imposing a nondual structure of religious meaning. Finally, Nhat Hanh's appeal to experientialism is open to clear criticism. The arguments of Constructivism would firmly discredit Nhat Hanh's suggestion of a trans-religious experiential encounter with reality in the here and now as supportive of a position of pluralism.

As we saw in Chapter Three, such a critique has been articulated in the work of Kristin Kiblinger. Kiblinger argues that Nhat Hanh both denies differences and imposes Buddhist categories onto the religious other. She contends that Nhat Hanh's "anonymous Buddhism and his habit of seeing a common core to all world religions – a core that seems to be Buddhist – dissolve the distinctiveness of the other and absorb the other into his own Buddhism."<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, Kiblinger questions Nhat Hanh's application of interbeing and critiques his appeal to experientialism. She argues that his prescription against attachment to views and the need to transcend views do not lead to a positionless position. She states: "The problem... is that this goal of striving for non-attachment from all views is itself a view; it arises from the very Buddhist presuppositions that its supposedly transcends. Every stance and value is exclusive of some other. The aim of such a mystical or intuitive breakthrough, especially for those who have yet to achieve that aim, cannot free Buddhism from the conflicts involved in being one religion alongside others."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Towards Religious Others*. 102

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 100

While such criticisms may appear to hold weight, it has been the principal methodological assertion of this thesis that an analysis of Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity in relation to a comprehensive understanding of his teachings, the contexts out of which they emerged, and the nature of his intentions, may reach a different conclusion. Indeed, in responding to such potential criticism, we need to recall the methodological suggestions of the discourse of Philosophical Hermeneutics, which we examined in Chapter Three. Having completed our investigation of Thich Nhat Hanh within his 'hermeneutical circle', having covered a sizeable portion of his written body of work, and having grasped the nature of his perspectives and prejudices as a Buddhist monk, a peace activist, and a contemporary spiritual teacher, it should now be clear that Nhat Hanh is not interested in asserting the superiority of Buddhism, in denying the difference of the religious other, nor in converting that other. Employing a 'hermeneutics of trust', rather than suspicion, fear, or discrimination, and by way of concluding this chapter, let us delineate the dimensions of Nhat Hanh's volition. In doing so, it can be confirmed that Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity can best be understood in relation to the discourse of pluralism.

Firstly, it needs to be recognised that Nhat Hanh is not making any claims to objectivity – he is approaching the issue of religious diversity as a Buddhist monk and his interpretations of other religions will therefore be Buddhist interpretations, based upon Buddhist categories. As Gadamer's notion of the role of 'prejudices' implies, the fact that Nhat Hanh brings his prejudices, or his perspective, to the 'dialogical table' does not undermine his approach. Rather, it equips him with an array of resources from the Buddhist tradition that can be used constructively to comprehend, and possibly to reconcile, the diversity of religions in the late modern world. Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity will inevitably be based upon Buddhist categories; what is important is how he uses those categories to affirm religious unity and diversity and what his intention may be in applying them.

The significance of the proposal of Religious Interbeing is its capacity to affirm the distinction of religious forms and their interdependent unity at the same time.

Indeed, Nhat Hanh emphasises the value of the differences between religions, while he maintains their essential equality by revealing their interbeing and unity as praxial means. This capacity to affirm diversity and unity is determined by the nondual perspective that is the result of the realisation of emptiness. While this realisation and its resultant perspective is defined by tradition-specific language, the discourse of Buddhist pluralism asserts that its inherent transcendence of religious forms, including Buddhist forms, undermines any claim to absolutism. As such, it is contended that the perspective of emptiness is able to affirm religious difference, equality, and unity, without proclaiming Buddhist superiority.

Representing a position of Religious Interbeing, Nhat Hanh's approach to religious diversity therefore presents an alternative model of pluralism to the models of identist and differential pluralism that have been articulated within Christian theological discourse. Identist pluralism contends the unitive nature of ultimate reality and a singular salvific end. In contrast, differential pluralism argues for a multidimensional ultimate reality and a diversity of salvific ends. Reconciling these two views, the position of Religious Interbeing, as represented by Nhat Hanh, affirms a diversity of salvific means but emphasises the importance of the 'salvific now'. Within the salvific now, the ultimate dimension is encountered in the phenomenal dimension as a direct salvific experience of reality, or life, which is conceived as both multidimensional and unitive at the same time.

While the position of Religious Interbeing is determined by transcendent experience, Nhat Hanh contends that such experience can occur in any religious context through authentic spiritual practice. It is on these grounds that Nhat Hanh offers the practice of mindfulness.

The realisation of the interdependence of religions reveals that no one religion is complete within itself. The principal implication of this realisation is that through the dynamics of dialogue and exchange, elements from one religious tradition can enhance and complement another tradition. This reciprocal dynamic of dialogue and exchange is at the heart of Nhat Hanh's affirmation of the interbeing of

religions. An example of interreligious reciprocity can be discerned in the suggestion that elements from Christian social ethics have influenced the evolution of Engaged Buddhism. In response, it can be understood that elements of Buddhist meditation can enhance Christian spiritual practice. The central dialogical dynamic of exchange and reciprocity informs Nhat Hanh's offering of mindfulness practice as an interreligious praxial tool. It also explains the dynamic of 'reverse inclusivism' through which Nhat Hanh makes his offering. Indeed, it is apparent that Nhat Hanh is less concerned to include other religions beneath the 'universal canopy' of Buddhism than he is with offering his Buddhist teachings up for inclusion and assimilation within the praxial systems of other religions, which in many cases may have become ossified, stagnant, ineffective, and meaningless. Essentially, Nhat Hanh's intention is not to distort, impose, or misrepresent, but to help renew, revitalise, and actualise religious traditions. Essentially, Nhat Hanh wants to help religious others rediscover the affective dimensions of their own traditions. And most importantly, he offers his assistance on the basis of a solid ethical foundation of nonviolence and non-proselytism, and with the ultimate intention of creating peace.

Therefore, it can be discerned that Nhat Hanh uses Buddhist categories as the Buddha intended them to be used – as tools to aid religious practice upon the path to realisation and liberation. Nhat Hanh's teachings of interbeing, mindfulness, and peace are not applied to religious diversity as absolute doctrines that represent absolute truths, but as praxial means that can renew or enhance the meaning of religious life for other religions. Nhat Hanh presents his position from a non-absolute perspective and with the intention of initiating dialogue. He offers his contributions as a monk, a scholar, a theologian of sorts, and a dialogist. But most importantly, he makes these offerings as a teacher. Nhat Hanh is less concerned with scholarly pursuits and theological debate than with the altruistic endeavour to alleviate peoples' suffering.

Evidently, the verification of Nhat Hanh's non-absolutism lies within the experiential realisation of interbeing, which is based upon a fundamental Buddhist teaching. However, according to traditional exegesis on emptiness, the actual

experience of 'emptying', or the experience of 'inter-being', leaves no room or need for an exclusive assertion of the finality of Buddhism, or the subversive dissemination of the superior Dharma. Because this verification in interbeing ultimately appeals to non-linguistic experience, it will inevitably bear the brunt of the philosophical critiques of Perspectivism, Constructivism, and the discourse of difference. Nevertheless, to employ a hermeneutics of trust rather than suspicion, it can be suggested that Nhat Hanh's non-absolutist stance can be verified in reference to his morality, his non-proselytism, and finally, his life and presence as exemplar.

Certainly, Nhat Hanh is not a relativist. Within his approach to religious diversity, he guards against relativism by positing definite ethical limits to his affirmation of pluralism. He evaluates religious principles and practices according to moral criteria and an absolute stance of nonviolence and peace. He also affirms the need for such evaluations to take place within contexts of ethical dialogue, so as to avoid the imposition of tradition-specific values and categories. He states:

Real dialogue makes us more open-minded, tolerant, and understanding. Buddhists and Christians both like to share their wisdom and experience. Sharing in this way is important and should be encouraged. But sharing does not mean wanting others to abandon their own spiritual roots and embrace your faith. That would be cruel.<sup>114</sup>

Nhat Hanh has emphasised the importance of religious roots for authentic interreligious dialogue.<sup>115</sup> In fact, he emphasises the importance of roots for happiness in general. In response to the many 'hungry ghosts' who have turned to his teachings over the years, Nhat Hanh has consistently asserted the importance of returning to one's original roots. He explains, "a person without roots cannot be a happy person. You have to go back to your roots. You have to go back to your family. You have to go back to your culture. You have to go back to your Church."<sup>116</sup> Buddhist practice may help people to return to their roots, but ultimately Nhat Hanh is not interested in, and does not encourage, conversion.

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<sup>114</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. 196

<sup>115</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Going Home*. 180

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* 183

Above all, Nhat Hanh's intention is to alleviate suffering and create peace. Thomas Merton once claimed of Nhat Hanh, "Just the way he opens a door and enters a room demonstrates his understanding. He is a true monk."<sup>117</sup> Indeed, Nhat Hanh exemplifies his own teaching of 'being peace'. As such, he is ultimately motivated to transform interreligious exclusivism, intolerance, and conflict by fostering and cultivating interreligious dialogue, understanding, and harmony. Nhat Hanh has recognised that actualised religions, which are based upon authentic spiritual practice and experience and ethical realisation and action, are less likely to make claims to absolutism and superiority than religions that are based upon superficial practice, blind belief, and rigid faith – religions that are trapped within reified and dangerous claims to absolute truth. Therefore, he 'de-absolutises' all religions, he encourages practice over theology, and affirms religious equality in relation to the capacity to 'be peace'. From Nhat Hanh's perspective, the only possible options for common religious ground in the late modern world are those that can contribute towards establishing global community and interreligious reconciliation. Thus, relativity and interdependence, shared practice and experience, and the universal quest for peace emerge as both viable and imperative meeting points for religions today. Ultimately, however, it is evident that even these means of establishing interreligious unity should not be reified as ideologies. Nor should the position of pluralism itself be upheld as a dogma or an absolute. Rather, as Nhat Hanh affirms, interreligious understanding and unity in the late modern world depends upon the continual renewal of relations through genuine religious practice and consistent interreligious dialogue. The notion of Religious Interbeing should not be a reified construct, set in stone, but something to be realised and actualised. Finally, just as the realisation of emptiness can liberate the mind from suffering, so too could the realisation of Religious Interbeing help to resolve interreligious conflicts, by uniting the religions, without undermining their differences, upon the common ground of reality and peace.

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<sup>117</sup> See Deer Park Monastery website:  
[http://www.deerparkmonastery.org/about\\_us/ourteacher.html](http://www.deerparkmonastery.org/about_us/ourteacher.html)

## Conclusion



here and now. So I am in touch with the present moment in France, in Europe, yet I am also in touch with Vietnam now. Vietnam is not there, it is right here, in me. So that moment when the plane lands is not the real moment when I get in touch with Vietnam. I am in touch with Vietnam now.

## III

**Plum Village Gāthā: *You Have Arrived***

Over the years since he was forced into exile, the idea of the "true home" has become a resounding principle in Nhat Hanh's teachings. Our true home, he affirms, is not to be found in any geographical location, but in the true self, and in the here and now. Nhat Hanh often defines the journey of spiritual practice that leads to the true self in terms of 'the path of return' or 'going home'. It could be suggested that the context of exile has informed Nhat Hanh's teachings and has

<sup>1</sup> Thích Nhat Hanh, *Pragmatic Faith: Letters - Journals 1962-1966*, trans. Mohi Werten (London: Rider Books, 1966), p. 205.

## Conclusion

On a Saigon evening in May 1966, at the height of the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hanh, prepared to embark upon an international tour to call an end to the violence that was afflicting his homeland. As the war raged around him, he contemplated his immanent departure and recorded his thoughts in his diary:

Tonight the sky is strangely bright. Tomorrow I'll leave Vietnam, but already I miss my home. I know that wherever I go, there will be stars, clouds, and a moon, but I am determined to return to my homeland.<sup>1</sup>

It took almost forty years for Nhat Hanh's 'path of return' to come full-circle. In 2005, he was finally granted a return visa to Vietnam. Following lengthy negotiations, Nhat Hanh was given permission to offer public teachings, and, after forty years of prohibition, it was agreed that a selection of his books would be legally published. Nhat Hanh was finally allowed to go home.

While waiting to board his flight to Hanoi in Charles de Gaulle airport, Nhat Hanh spoke of his impending return:

My practice is to live in the present moment. I do not lose the present moment, the here and now. So I am in touch with the present moment in France, in Europe, but I am also in touch with Vietnam now. Vietnam is not there, it is right here, in me. So that moment when the plane lands is not the real moment when I get in touch with Vietnam. I am in touch with Vietnam right now, right here.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years since he was forced into exile, the idea of the 'true home' has become a resounding principle in Nhat Hanh's teachings. Our true home, he affirms, is not to be found in any geographical location, but in the true self, and in the here and now. Nhat Hanh often defines the journey of spiritual practice that leads to the true self in terms of 'the path of return' or 'going home'. It could be suggested that the context of exile has informed Nhat Hanh's teachings and has

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<sup>1</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals 1962-1966*, trans. Mobi Warren (London: Rider Books, 1998), p. 205

contributed to their universalisation. Indeed, as we have seen, Nhat Hanh asserts that all religions provide a spiritual path that can lead the adherent home to their true self, which may be the self of Buddha-nature or the self that lives in the presence of God. We all have the capacity, he insists, to go home to our true selves in the present moment.

Despite Nhat Hanh's emphasis on the universal spiritual path of return, however, it is apparent that his own particular geographical path of return is of significance. Indeed, Vietnam remains the land of Nhat Hanh's birth, the place of his noviciate and ordination, the foundation of his ancestry and heritage, the bedrock of his religious tradition, and his own interpretation of that tradition. Nhat Hanh's return to Vietnam was a historically momentous occasion, which evidenced the growth of religious tolerance in Vietnam. It also verified Nhat Hanh's teachings on the very real possibility of establishing understanding, reconciliation, and peace in the world.

Patently, one of Nhat Hanh's principal intentions in returning to Vietnam was to reconnect with his heritage, and work towards the reinstatement and renewal of Vietnamese Buddhism, which had been undermined by years of war and Communist rule. A further intention was to establish a Buddhist-Communist dialogue. To this end, when Nhat Hanh was eventually permitted to give talks beyond the temples, he invited many intellectuals, government officials, and Party members. During one such talk, an audience member posed the question:

Does Buddhism allow its disciples to love the Country, the People, and the Party?

Nhat Hanh's answer posed another question, which skilfully encapsulated his concern for ideological exclusivism and oppressive dogmatism:

If a Buddhist were not allowed to love the Country and the Party, then why be a Buddhist?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Transcribed from footage in the film *Going Home*. See George Schouten, "Going Home: Zen Teacher Thich Nhat Hanh's Return to Vietnam," (The Netherlands: Buddhist Broadcasting Foundation, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> See *Ibid*.

While there is much apparent incongruence between Buddhism and the Communist system, Nhat Hanh was determined to locate a common spiritual ground. As such, he spoke at length on the spiritual dimensions of Marx's original philosophy, contending that the loss of this aspect within twentieth-century Communism has been the cause of much suffering.<sup>4</sup> He also repeatedly affirmed one of the central principles of his teachings – the imperative to value humanity and peace over and above any ideology or religion.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, Nhat Hanh located the common ground between Buddhism and Communism in the potential capacity within the practice of both philosophies to “cherish the presence of the other human being.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, according to Nhat Hanh, the visit to Vietnam facilitated the removal of many obstacles of fear, suspicion, and misunderstanding, and this was the measure of its success.<sup>7</sup>

Nhat Hanh's proposal of a common ground, upon which all divergent ideologies, religious or otherwise, may unite, encompasses a humanistic spirituality that affirms the ultimate value of the other. Moreover, compassion for the other is prescribed as the essential means of achieving reconciliation and establishing peace. Within Nhat Hanh's pluralist vision, the other is cherished on the basis of the realisation of interbeing. This vision is thus representative of the classic bodhisattva realisation of wisdom and compassion. However, within Nhat Hanh's teachings this exalted vow becomes a universal possibility, and the means of establishing reconciliation and very real peace in the world. While such a view would seem to assert a Buddhist truth above all others, it needs to be recalled that Nhat Hanh affirms peace as a global ethical absolute that is valued above all religions and ideologies, including Buddhism. While this, in turn, may seem to undermine the distinction of the separate religions or ideologies, including

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<sup>4</sup> Nhat Hanh states: “Marx has spoken about the spiritual life. [Communists] distinguish between religion and spirituality. [Marx] is not for religion, but he is for spirituality. And sometime later he said that maybe man has to go through religion to get to spirituality. So his thinking should be better understood – he was afraid that people would misunderstand his thinking and create a Communism without a spiritual dimension, that would create a lot of suffering.” Transcribed from *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Nhat Hanh states: “There is no religion, there is no ideology, that is higher than brotherhood. Brotherhood should be above everything. You cannot sacrifice brotherhood for the sake of religion, for the sake of ideology.” Transcribed from *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Buddhism, as we have seen it is the especial capacity of the perspective of interbeing to affirm the value of separate forms while discerning their relativity and interdependence. Moreover, it is the especial capacity of Buddhism to be able to 'de-absolutise' or 'empty' itself, according to its own doctrinal tenets, so that it may affirm the equality of all religions and ideologies.

This essential capacity to affirm both the particular and the universal, the difference and the identity, the diversity and the unity, is at the heart of the notion of Religious Interbeing. Indeed, it constitutes Nhat Hanh's principal contribution to the discourse of pluralism and the dynamics of interreligious encounter in the late modern global community. Due to their quiet simplicity, Nhat Hanh's teachings are often deemed inconsequential and irresolute by angry activists and hard-line Buddhists alike.<sup>8</sup> In response, it ought to be recalled that Nhat Hanh is a man who lived through the Vietnam War and did not turn away from the horror and suffering but embraced it with a 'fierce compassion'. This engaged and compassionate volition defines his approach to religious diversity. His vision of the interdependence of religions does not rest upon meaningless platitudes of 'interreligious harmony' or vague truisms of 'world peace'. Rather it proposes the deep engagement with religious difference in order to realise a common spiritual ground, upon which the religions may unite in order to deeply engage with the suffering of the world. Finally, it should be clear that Nhat Hanh's affirmation of the interbeing of religions is but one aspect within his all-inclusive spiritual vision, which encompasses the interbeing of the nature of reality itself, and thus affirms an ultimate vision of global interbeing, a vision of the unity of the world abiding in diversity.

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Nhat Hanh, the Plum Village sangha, and an international sangha returned once again to Vietnam in 2007, and that a further trip is planned for May of this year.

<sup>8</sup> While this is a common assumption, it is difficult to find any explicit denunciations of Nhat Hanh's teachings. For a critique of Engaged Buddhist practices, see Ken Knabb, "Lessons for Engaged Buddhists and Evading the Transformation of Reality," *Social Policy* 33, no. 1 (2002): 50-55. Elsewhere, Nhat Hanh's teachings have been deemed "Buddhism Lite". See Perry Garfinkel, "Politics of a Still Mind," *Shambala Sun* 2007: 62-65.

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## Appendix

### *The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of The Order of Interbeing*

#### 1

*Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for.*

#### 2

*Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We shall learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to others' insights and experiences. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives.*

#### 3

*Aware of the suffering brought about when we impose our views on others, we are committed not to force others, even our children, by any means whatsoever – such as authority, threat, money, propaganda, or indoctrination – to adopt our views. We will respect the right of others to be different and to choose what to believe and how to decide. We will, however, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness through compassionate dialogue.*

#### 4

*Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us develop compassion and find ways out of suffering, we are determined not to avoid or close our eyes before suffering. We are committed to finding ways, including personal contact, images, and sounds, to be with those who suffer, so we can understand their situation deeply and help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace, and joy.*

#### 5

*Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, and not in wealth or fame, we are determined not to take as the aim of our life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure, nor to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying. We are committed to living simply and sharing our time,*

energy, and material resources with those in need. We will practice mindful consuming, not using alcohol, drugs, or any other products that bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness.

## 6

*Aware that anger blocks communication and creates suffering*, we are determined to take care of the energy of anger when it arises and to recognise and transform the seeds of anger that lie deep in our consciousness. When anger comes up, we are determined not to do or say anything, but to practice mindful breathing or mindful walking and acknowledge, embrace, and look deeply into our anger. We will learn to look with the eyes of compassion at those we think are the cause of our anger.

## 7

*Aware that life is available only in the present moment and that it is possible to live happily in the here and now*, we are committed to training ourselves to live deeply each moment of daily life. We will try not to lose ourselves in dispersion or be carried away by regrets about the past, worries about the future, or craving, anger, or jealousy in the present. We will practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. We are determined to learn the art of mindful living by touching the wondrous, refreshing, and healing elements that are inside and around us, and by nourishing seeds of joy, peace, love, and understanding in ourselves, thus facilitating the work of transformation and healing in our consciousness.

## 8

*Aware that the lack of communication always brings separation and suffering*, we are committed to training ourselves in the practice of compassionate listening and loving speech. We will learn to listen deeply without judging or reacting and refrain from uttering words that can create discord or cause the community to break. We will make every effort to keep communications open and to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

## 9

*Aware that words can create suffering or happiness*, we are committed to learning to speak truthfully and constructively, using only words that inspire hope and confidence. We are determined not to say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people, nor to utter words that might cause division or hatred. We will not spread news that we do not know to be certain nor criticise or condemn things of which we are not sure. We will do our best to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten our safety.

## 10

*Aware that the essence and aim of a Sangha is the practice of understanding and compassion, we are determined not to use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit or transform our community into a political instrument. A spiritual community should, however, take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.*

## 11

*Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society, we are committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. We will do our best to select a livelihood that helps realise our ideal of understanding and compassion. Aware of global economic, political and social realities, we will behave responsibly as consumers and as citizens, not investing in companies that deprive others of their chance to live.*

## 12

*Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict, we are determined to cultivate non-violence, understanding, and compassion in our daily lives, to promote peace education, mindful meditation, and reconciliation within families, communities, nations, and in the world. We are determined not to kill and not to let others kill. We will diligently practice deep looking with our Sangha to discover better ways to protect life and prevent war.*

## 13

*Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, we are committed to cultivating loving kindness and learning ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. We will practice generosity by sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. We are determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. We will respect the property of others, but will try to prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other beings.*

## 14

*(For lay members): Aware that sexual relations motivated by craving cannot dissipate the feeling of loneliness but will create more suffering, frustration, and isolation, we are determined not to engage in sexual relations without mutual understanding, love, and a long-term commitment. In sexual relations, we must be aware of future suffering that may be caused. We know that to preserve the happiness of ourselves and others, we must respect the rights and commitments of ourselves and others. We will do everything in our power to protect children from sexual abuse and to protect couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct. We will treat our bodies with respect and preserve our vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realisation of our bodhisattva ideal. We will be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world, and will meditate on the world into which we are bringing new beings.*

*(For monastic members): Aware that the aspiration of a monk or a nun can only be realised when he or she wholly leaves behind the bonds of worldly love, we are committed to practicing chastity and to helping others protect themselves. We are aware that loneliness and suffering cannot be alleviated by the coming together of two bodies in a sexual relationship, but by the practice of true understanding and compassion. We know that a sexual relationship will destroy our life as a monk or nun, will prevent us from realising our ideal of serving living beings, and will harm others. We are determined not to suppress or mistreat our body or to look upon our body as only an instrument, but to learn to handle our body with respect. We are determined to preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realisation of our bodhisattva ideal.*

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1998 (Third Edition) 17-22

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