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The Christian as Interreligious Contemplative:
Comparing St. Francis of Assisi and Jetsün Milarepa

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CERTIFICATION

This certifies that the thesis, “The Christian as Interreligious Contemplative: Comparing St. Francis of Assisi and Jetsün Milarepa,” submitted to Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology, which is a record of research work conducted by Patric Nikolas, SDS, has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in theology.

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In gratitude to Jesus Christ for being my God,
and to the Buddha for being my friend.

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (Jn 10:16).

“If you see an intelligent man who tells you where true treasures are to be found, who shows what is to be avoided, and administers reproofs, follow that wise man; it will be better, not worse, for those who follow him” (*The Dhammapada*, 76).

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PREFACE

I first encountered St. Francis of Assisi in the guest library at New Clairvaux Trappist-Cistercian Abbey in Vina, California, while reading one of his many biographies. The unexpected path his youthful élan drove him to take made sense to me, and I understood his search to reconcile and align his multifaceted yearnings into the singular fulfillment of his vocation. Other than Christ himself, Francis was my original model of uncompromising sainthood – an exemplar worthy of emulation who would not call off the search until the highest fulfillment, God and a God-given vocation, was found and claimed at last.

That such a spark would be ignited at New Clairvaux Abbey is significant for a number of reasons. First, it was the place I regularly visited for spiritual direction when I initially became Catholic and realized that I had a vocation. Second, it was where the roots of my vocation were planted, for prior to discerning a call to apostolic life and entering the Salvatorians, I discovered contemplation and lived at New Clairvaux as a monk for three permanently impactful years. Third, the context of the place set the stage for everything else that would resonate with me, including Buddhism.

Because of this, even though his presence will be very briefly encountered throughout this thesis, I must now say a few words about Thomas Merton, for his background directly influenced mine, even to the extent that I would receive the Sacraments of Initiation, develop an avocational interest in Buddhism, and become the religious priest-to-be who would write a thesis like this in the first place.

New Clairvaux was originally a foundation of Merton's home monastery of Gethsemani Abbey, I knew some of the monks that knew him, and his interests loomed in

the background not only through his own books in the library, but in Asian-themed art, architecture, and sculpture across the monastery grounds. My own embracing of Catholicism was gestated in this context, where Buddhism would remain a mysterious friend on the periphery, inviting me to keep my heart and mind open and engaged with all impermanence and suffering, even beyond the Catholic Church that I love like a wife.

So alongside discovering scripture, patristics, and systematic theology, I also gradually developed an understanding of Buddhism. At first this was through older Theravadan texts such as the *Dhammapada*, an eventual interest in the Mahayana Bodhisattva model, and finally the Vajrayana, or Tibetan Buddhism. Inquiries into Vajrayana Buddhism led me to the happy discoveries of Deer Park Buddhist Center near Madison, the Shambhala Meditation Center in Milwaukee, the writings of Shambhala Founder Chögyam Trungpa, and finally a natural Buddhist counterpart to St. Francis, Jetsün Milarepa. As both saints' biographies are overviewed in this thesis I will not get into describing Milarepa here, other than to state that finding him gave me a sense of completion that is simultaneously open-ended. Like Francis, I consider Milarepa a dear and indispensable friend whose example helps me realize just how much one person can accomplish with a life kept open at the top, be it for union with God or the realization of Buddha-nature.

While I certainly hope that any reader of this thesis will find *The Christian as Interreligious Contemplative* to be a worthwhile and interesting read, it is my highest desire that any spiritual seekers who are discerning an all-encompassing vocation that somehow appears to be more eclectic and ungraspable than traditional structures seem to offer in themselves will learn that it is entirely possible to study Comparative Theology

while maintaining Catholic objectivity, to discover not only a path but an intellectually satisfying context for the path, and to take their rest in God at long last. This can be accomplished, and if one prays and perseveres long enough, maybe even just a little longer than believed to be necessary, God really will show up. He might even bring some new and unexpected friends.

INTRODUCTION

Abstract: A Christian interreligious contemplative is someone who incorporates a simple gaze upon Christ as the interreligious norm or criterion of judgment, thereby engaging interreligious exploration so that God may be known as universally present in other religions. Given that Christ himself can also be understood through the lived examples of saints, in this thesis I utilize Saint Francis of Assisi as the norm through which to gaze upon Vajrayana Buddhism, thereby providing a concrete example of interreligious contemplation in real time. Through engaging Comparative Theology, I will: I) provide a theological background upon which to examine Vajrayana Buddhism and working parallels between Christianity and Buddhism, and II) utilize the famous yogi Jetsün Milarepa as a counterpart to Saint Francis as the norm through which interreligious contemplation is engaged.

This thesis is an exercise in Comparative Theology, which is a discipline where one utilizes insights gained from another religious tradition as a means of learning more about one's own faith. The perspective I engage in undertaking this task is that of a *Christian interreligious contemplative*. A Christian interreligious contemplative is someone who incorporates a simple gaze upon Christ as the interreligious norm or criterion of judgment, thereby engaging interreligious exploration so that God may be known as present in other religions. Given that Christ himself can also be understood through the lived examples of saints, in this paper I utilize Saint Francis of Assisi as the norm through which to gaze upon Vajrayana Buddhism, thereby providing a concrete example of interreligious contemplation in real time.

Because this thesis functions as an exercise in complementary relationships, differing themes of love and ways of loving run throughout the text. These distinctions will become increasingly evident as the chapters progress. Part I provides a theological background upon which to examine Vajrayana Buddhism and working parallels between Christianity and Buddhism. Chapter 1 discusses *Nostra Aetate* and its contextual influence on studies such as this one, Chapter 2 lays out relevant Vajrayana Buddhist

fundamentals, Chapter 3 synthesizes the precursor to Comparative Theology, the Theology of Religions where God is discovered through other religions, Chapter 4 analyzes a famous model for engaging this discovery called the “Anonymous Christian,” and Chapter 5 overviews Comparative Theology. Transitioning toward Part II of the paper, Chapter 5 directly discusses different ways of loving, distinguishing between the *agape* love reserved for God with the church as wife, and *philia*, or friendship reserved for Buddhism as a chosen friend.

Having laid the groundwork for interreligious contemplation, Part II utilizes the famous Buddhist yogi Jetsün Milarepa as a counterpart to Saint Francis as the norm through which interreligious contemplation is engaged. This section begins by introducing a Christological heuristic lens based on quotes from the Gospel of John with accompanying maxims and then continues into Chapters 6 and 7, which respectively provide biographies of St. Francis and Milarepa. Chapter 8 then cues the transition from biographies into parallel Buddhist and Christian theological concepts, and Chapters 9-13 deal with intricate theological distinctions that will be appropriately explained and contextualized in the chapters themselves, followed by the Conclusion.

This is a complex study, though I have endeavored to make it as simple and direct as possible. In reading this paper, I invite the reader to consider the example of a three-dimensional painting, where one learns to relax, un-focus the eyes, and let the image suddenly appear, revealing stark clarity from what had at first appeared obscure and impenetrable. With God who gives the Bride, and an enlightened friend like the Buddha, we will learn to prize the view of Comparative Theology.

PART I – THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Chapter 1: *Nostra Aetate*

Vatican II was an intentionally pastoral Council, focusing not on defining dogma, but rather updating the means by which the Catholic Church interacts with the world. Among the 16 documents produced in this uniquely anathema-free environment, perhaps none was more unprecedented than *Nostra Aetate*. This is the contemporary foundation upon which the Theology of Religions, or the belief that Christ can in varying degrees be known through non-Christian religions, was built. The document spoke positively about world religions, rejecting “nothing of what is true and holy” in them.¹ In doing so, it affirmed that all persons come from and share a common destiny in God, forming “one community” that seeks answers to the “unsolved riddles of human existence” in “different religions.”²

Accordingly, *Nostra Aetate* speaks to the universal awareness of a “hidden power” behind “the course of nature and the events of human life,” which is sought after as God in conceptually varying degrees. Hindus explore and express the “divine mystery” through myth, philosophy, asceticism, and meditation; Muslims worship God by submitting themselves through an Abrahamic faith that venerates Jesus as a prophet and even occasionally invokes Mary; and barring those immediately responsible, Jews are held non-culpable in the death of Christ, persecution against them is utterly rejected, and Christians and Jews are acknowledged as sharing a “common spiritual heritage” that is to be appreciated not only through “biblical and theological enquiry,” but even

¹ NA 1.

² Ibid.

“through friendly discussions.”³ For a church whose history includes persecution of heterodox belief and crusades and inquisitions in the name of doctrinal orthodoxy, *Nostra Aetate* articulated a clear, even revolutionary, break with historically residual triumphalism in its five short chapters.

As to Buddhism in this context, the document simply states:

Buddhism in its various forms testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world. It proposes a way of life by which men can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination either through their own efforts or by the aid of divine help.⁴

Buddhism indeed attests to change-based inadequacy, and the need for practically applied Buddhist teaching, or *Dharma*.⁵ Like the “other religions” referred to above, it likewise has its own program of life to share with the world, that all participants in Buddhist principles may know supreme illumination. As a means of evaluating these ideas and how they tie into the Theology of Religions and ultimately interreligious contemplation for the purposes of this paper, it is now necessary to briefly examine some fundamentals from the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition of Jetsün Milarepa.

Chapter 2: Vajrayana Buddhist Fundamentals in Brief

The Vajrayana path to attaining Buddhahood is clearly laid out in the famous tome *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*. This book was written by Dharma Lord Gampopa (1074-1153 C.E.), whom Milarepa himself taught in the Lam Rim tradition. Lam Rim means that everything must be accomplished on a step-by-step basis in order for the goal of enlightenment, or the ultimate goal of attaining Buddhahood, to be

³ Ibid., 2-4.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ “This term has varied meanings depending on the context. When capitalized in this text, it refers to the holy teachings of Lord Buddha, categorized in two parts: the Dharma which is studied and the Dharma which has been realized. When uncapitalized, it is a collective reference to all phenomena, i.e., things which have identifiable characteristics” Gampopa, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, trs. Khenpo Konchog and Gyaltsen Rinpoche, ed. Ani. K Trinlay Chodron (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1998), 429.

attained. The path begins with understanding that Buddha-nature is not only the goal but also the “primary cause,” for all people have “the potential to progress toward and to fully manifest Buddhahood.”⁶

We possess this potential because our working basis is as human beings, whose lives are known as *precious* if we possess sufficient leisure and endowment to practice the Dharma. Leisure entails sufficient time and means to study and practice the Dharma in the first place, and endowment means being a human being born in a country that has access to holy persons, who has all his or her senses, who does not commit heinous crimes, and who has faith that the Vinaya (code of discipline for Buddhist practitioners) taught by the Buddha comprises “the basis for all Dharma practice.”⁷ While those qualities are personally achieved, there are remaining endowments that are externally circumstantial: that a Buddha has appeared in the world and taught the Dharma, and that the teaching continues and is followed, loved and supported by other people.⁸

Through Dharma practice, one learns how cause and effect are necessarily intertwined. In fact, it is given as an objective reality that the sufferings of *samsara* (the confused cycle of rebirth and suffering to be transcended)⁹ are caused by “nonvirtuous action,” while all happiness is “caused by virtuous action.”¹⁰ When this teaching inspires spiritual seekers to attain the “ultimate benefit and happiness” of Buddhahood, they undergo a ceremony roughly equivalent to baptism in which one *takes refuge* in 1) the *Buddha* as embodying “wisdom and compassion,” 2) the *Dharma* as the means to relinquish personal confusion and develop “the Buddha’s qualities,” and 3) the *Sangha* or

⁶ Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament*, 18-19.

⁷ Ibid., 60-61.

⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁹ Ibid., 433. The concept of *samsara* will recur throughout the body of this thesis.

¹⁰ Ibid., 20. Non-virtuous actions are based on ego clinging, and virtuous actions are based on egolessness.

community that “provides examples of successful practitioners” who “protect all sentient beings and lead them toward enlightenment.”¹¹

A standard Buddhist belief is that rebirth into multiple lifetimes of samsara is necessary to enter nirvana. However, Vajrayana Buddhism has a unique approach to this teaching:¹² namely, that rebirth can be bypassed altogether, and nirvana attained in a single lifetime! Jetsün Milarepa accomplished this, though such a feat is very rare. No matter who makes the attempt, success depends on choosing the right *guru*, or human teacher through whom the Buddha manifests.¹³ This is because it is necessary “to rely on a good teacher who has studied for a long time,” who has the right “experience and a good personality” to make proper instruction possible.¹⁴

A key determinant in choosing the right guru is whether he “has received bodhicitta vows.”¹⁵ Translated as “enlightenment mind,” *bodhicitta* is “the desire to achieve perfect, complete enlightenment for others’ benefit.”¹⁶ Once the appropriate teacher has been identified, the student will apply teachings through practical experience. The key to an ultimately successful application is maintaining pure motives to the disregard of personal achievement, that “complete enlightenment” may be attained.¹⁷

Complete enlightenment entails remaining in samsara for the benefit of others until samsara no longer exists and universal enlightenment is actualized. This takes incredible courage and perseverance. Yet it is worth it, for as a result of the practice

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Nirvana is the unconfused state without samsara (ibid., 432). This concept will also recur throughout the thesis.

¹³ The guru concept will be further developed in Chapter 10.

¹⁴ Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament*, 21.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 428. Bodhicitta will also be discussed in Milarepa’s biography (Chapter 7), and further developed in Chapters 11, 12, and 13.

¹⁷ Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament*, 22.

concern with one's own well-being slips away, and unsurpassable joy is found in being a warrior for this infinitely greater goal. "One who has this mind is called a bodhisattva."¹⁸

In addition to what I have provided in this brief introduction, Vajrayana Buddhism features an elaborate cosmology and a vast corpus of doctrine, some practical aspects of which I will apply throughout this thesis. For now, it is fitting to proceed into synthesizing the Theology of Religions, and toward how Buddhism will be interreligiously contemplated in Part II.

Chapter 3: The Theology of Religions Synopsized

In determining what the Theology of Religions is and evaluating what it has to do with Buddhist teaching, we start with the *inclusive* claim that Christ can be known in non-Christian religions. This is because "the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit and along with the Father, permeate all reality and are inherent to the human existence of those who practice the world religions."¹⁹ The connotations that flow from this are staggering, for it follows that all persons who come into the world are already objectively redeemed by Christ's grace, whose self-offering is imprinted on everyone who will ever exist: "From the very beginning, all reality is oriented to Christ. In all created reality is found the presence of God and the self-communication of God in Jesus Christ," for the "entire universe is Christocentric."²⁰

Lest the reader suspect we have gone from *Nostra Aetate* and an overview of Vajrayana Buddhism to a caricature where "anything goes" in just a few pages, variations on this position follow. For starters, there is a rebuke of it in the form of *exclusivism*,

¹⁸ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹ Eugene F. Gorski, *Theology of Religions: A Sourcebook for Interreligious Study* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 248.

²⁰ Gorski, *Theology of Religions*, 248.

which is a view upheld by theologians who believe that explicit faith in Jesus is required for salvation, and who consequently believe that practitioners of other faith traditions cannot be saved. There are also *pluralist* theologians, who believe that Christianity is one path, Buddhism or any other religion another, and that there are many ways to salvation. This position is obviously distinct from exclusivism as well as the inclusivism described in the previous paragraph, for pluralist theology does not believe that all salvation comes from Christ.²¹

Whether inclusivist, exclusivist, or pluralist, it remains necessary to determine what salvation even means in a Theology of Religions context. It should come as no surprise that for Christians, salvation is “the resurrection of the body, the beatific vision, justification before the Lord, the restoration of lost innocence,” and “being an heir to the kingdom of God.”²² Inclusivists and exclusivists can agree on this, albeit from different perspectives regarding who will participate. As to the pluralistic claim that all religions lead to salvation, including versions which evade the Christian imagination regarding what salvation looks like, pluralists have expanded their concepts beyond traditional Christian imagery to “include a fundamental transformation of our human existence,” which occurs as a result of moving away from egocentric living to a life that is “reality centered.”²³

²¹ James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christianity & the Other Religions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 6-7.

²² Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7-8. Cf. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 21-25.

This transformation, which is available through all the great religious traditions, is spoken of variously as eternal life in heaven (Christianity), as the annihilation of the illusion of separateness (Theravada Buddhism), and “as the unity of the soul with Brahman” (Hinduism).²⁴

As we can see, the Theology of Religions opens up many fascinating avenues for interreligious exploration. Though coming from different vantage points of inclusivity and exclusivity that nonetheless arrive at the same conclusions regarding salvation even while disagreeing on who will enjoy the fruits of them, inclusivists and exclusivists stand in opposition to the pluralist position that not all salvation necessarily comes from Christ. Because of these disparities, and toward the interreligiously contemplative goal of this paper, further exploration of the inclusivist position is necessary. Therefore, now that we have overviewed *Nostra Aetate*, some Vajrayana Buddhist fundamentals, and the Theology of Religions itself, our next task is to examine how they come together in what is arguably the most famous (and infamous) model to rise from such speculations: Karl Rahner’s inclusivist model of the Anonymous Christian.

Chapter 4: The Anonymous Christian

Rahner believes that the Catholic faith expressed in the Second Vatican Council leaves “no doubt that someone who has no concrete, historical contact with the explicit preaching of Christianity can nevertheless be a justified person who lives in the grace of Christ.”²⁵ Though only those who explicitly profess and are baptized into the faith are considered Christians in the historically reflexive dimension of how God fully communicates himself, adherents to different traditions may nonetheless freely possess

²⁴ Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 7-8.

²⁵ Karl Rahner, SJ, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, tr. William V. Dych (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1976), 176.

the transcendental self-communication of God in the grace of Jesus, and can be considered *anonymous Christians*.²⁶

Rahner's claim builds on the knowledge that "God can become something," and "he who is not subject to change in himself can *himself* be subject to change *in something else*."²⁷ This is apparent enough, for the very event of the eternal Logos becoming incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth is a process of becoming and changing. It has a "beginning, time, death, fulfillment," and "created reality," all constituting the "history of God himself."²⁸ This event demonstrates that while God himself is always perfect, he possesses the capacity to give himself away so that the human recipient becomes what has come from God.

He, the Logos, constitutes the differentiation from himself by the fact that he retains it as his own, and conversely: because he truly wants to have the other as his own, he constitutes it in its genuine reality. God goes out of himself, he himself, he as the self-giving fullness.²⁹

Because God's self-giving fullness was uniquely present in Jesus not only as God but as a first century Jewish teacher and healer from a particular place and culture, we understand that divinity enters into humanity so that God can reveal himself through human promulgation. This self-giving is how God gives his own history to what is not God. Though the Incarnation is utterly unique, it does not represent the only time God has entered or will enter into human culture, for all cultures are subject to possible embarkment into a history in which God is fully expressed. Given that the God who is not subject to change in himself can change in something else, i.e. become human in

²⁶ Rahner, *Foundations*, 176.

²⁷ Ibid., 220.

²⁸ Ibid., 220-221.

²⁹ Ibid., 222.

human cultures, these cultures all serve as possible grammars for God's self-expression.³⁰

Even God's silence, that is, the non-proclamation of the Gospel in a particular time and place, presupposes "ears to hear the silence of God."³¹

In order to determine what is in fact "heard" in such periods of silence, it is necessary to briefly touch upon two distinctions that will be discussed at some length in Chapter 9 of this thesis, *existential* and *existentiell*. *Existential* "refers to an element in man's ontological constitution precisely as human being. It is an aspect of concrete human nature precisely as human."³² *Existentiell* means "the free, personal and subjective appropriation and actualization of something which can also be spoken of in abstract theory or objective concepts without such a subjective and personal realization."³³ Respectively, this means what something is, and the possibility of actualizing what that means. For Rahner, *existential* means established Catholic Christianity, and *existentiell* means anonymous Christianity.

Rahner uses the term *existentiell* to explain what he means by his belief in "implicit and anonymous Christianity."³⁴

There is and has to be an anonymous and yet real relationship between the individual person and the concrete history of salvation, including Jesus Christ, in someone who has not yet had the whole, concrete, historical, explicit and reflexive experience in word and sacrament of this reality of salvation history. Such a person has this real and *existentiell* relationship merely implicitly in obedience to his orientation in grace towards the God of absolute, historical presence and self-communication. He exercises this obedience by accepting his own existence without reservation and indeed precisely in those areas where freedom risks something which cannot be calculated and controlled.³⁵

³⁰ Ibid., 221-223.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 16.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 306.

³⁵ Ibid. As to established, *existential* Christianity, Rahner continues: "Alongside this there is the fullness of Christianity which has become conscious of itself explicitly in faith and in hearing the word of the gospel,

To many, such inclusivism could come across as incredibly relativized, scarcely (if at all) more orthodox than pluralism. This is not Rahner's intent however, since he builds his position on the foundation that Christianity is in fact the absolute religion God desires for all persons. Because of this, while Christianity remains only theoretically binding until it can be heard, understood, and fully embraced, adherence to the Gospel is obligatory and concretized once it is received as such.³⁶ At the same time, the role of non-Christian religion is not necessarily made irrelevant in light of the church's ascendancy, for God may intend other religions to fulfill a legitimately transcendent and spiritual purpose until such a time as people are ready to receive the Gospel and be brought into the Catholic Church. In other words, "to be a non-Christian today does not mean automatically that someone has actually rejected Christianity."³⁷

This last idea is not so controversial, so perhaps the idea of anonymous Christianity may not be as radical as it appears. Yet is there any justification for its claims beyond interpreting *Nostra Aetate* in such a manner? If we are willing to consider the Acts of the Apostles a credible source, the answer moves toward the affirmative.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."³⁸

For non-Christians who are willing to see this as plausible and make the connection, an incipient Christianity could indeed be observed in development. Yet to further observe

in the church's profession of faith, in sacrament, and in living an explicit Christian life which knows that it is related to Jesus of Nazareth" (ibid.).

³⁶ Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 25.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Acts 17:22-23.

this possibility, it is now appropriate to explore what more can be said about the presence of Jesus in non-Christian religions.

Rahner's general belief that Christ is operative in world religions is here rendered explicit.

This proposition is to be taken for granted in dogmatic theology. If there can be a faith which is creative of salvation among non-Christians, and if it may be hoped that in fact it is found on a large scale, then it is to be taken for granted that this faith is made possible and is based upon the supernatural grace of the Spirit. And this is the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, so that as the Spirit of the eternal Logos he can and must be called at least in this sense the Spirit of Christ, the divine Word who has become man.³⁹

This is because, irrespective of the non-Christian religion, "Jesus Christ is always and everywhere present in justifying faith, because this is always and everywhere the seeking *memoria* of the absolute bringer of salvation, who is by definition the God-man," arriving at "his consummation through death and resurrection."⁴⁰ We can unsurprisingly see that the universal significance of Christ's death and resurrection is upheld, but now some words must be spoken regarding Rahner's usage of the term *memoria*.

What he does not mean here is that *memoria* is a mere receptive and retentive capacity. Rather, it is a human anticipatory faculty that is reserved for "the absolute bringer of salvation. It seeks him and is on the watch for him in history," striving in hope of ultimately finding "fulfillment in the direct self-communication of God."⁴¹ Because world religions manifest through historical experiences that mediate humanity's transcendental nature elevated by grace, we can respectfully view various salvific figures

³⁹ Rahner, *Foundations*, 316.

⁴⁰ Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Vol. XVII*, 46-47.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

as precursory to the eschatologically unsupersedable savior that is Jesus Christ, even though not all aspects of Christian faith will be evident in world religions.⁴²

Although such differences are apparent enough among disparate traditions, by examining three basic attitudes that manifest through anonymous Christianity, we can observe *memoria* moving people toward the Trinitarian God. These are: 1) an ongoing interior prompting to show love for one's neighbor, 2) an intrepid hopefulness for the future even in spite of fearful or despairing circumstances, and 3) the acceptance of death as an openness to new life.⁴³

These three basic experiences refer to central areas of human existence; if a person is actually practicing them, it is only because that person is acting from and responding to the grace of God that was fully manifest in the life of Jesus. Each of the three areas involves an attitude of self-transcendence, a self-transcendence possible only through the grace of God. These attitudes, therefore, witness to the hidden or anonymous, but operative grace of God which Christians name as the grace of Christ, since it is mediated through and perfectly exemplified in him.⁴⁴

So if one freely receives the Gospel, respects the premise that God is at work in other religions, and believes that non-Christians encounter the grace of God, Christians who participate in the Catholic Church as the absolute religion will need to intentionally embrace a healthy dose of humility, for "the salvation of the world is the work of Christ, not the achievement of the church."⁴⁵ While we may comprise the vanguard of "the kingdom of God," Rahner believed that "taking an inclusivist approach to the problem of religious diversity allows God to be greater than the church."⁴⁶ This is because "a person

⁴² Ibid., 50.

⁴³ Peter J. Schineller, *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, ed. by Leo J. Donovan (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), 103.

⁴⁴ Schineller, *A World of Grace*, 103.

⁴⁵ Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 27.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

is always a Christian in order to become one, and this is also true of what we are calling a personal relationship to Jesus Christ in faith, hope and love.”⁴⁷

In completing this chapter, it must be admitted that the Anonymous Christian does initially appear to be a very satisfying theological model, and its establishment of Christian immemorial supremacy, presenting Christ as the ur-savior, or “unknown god” from Acts, in itself rings true. Though this truth was unknown in its gradual pre-Christian development throughout earlier wisdom traditions, there is no doubt that it became increasingly clear, especially through exegesis of the Greco-Roman philosophical canon that, combined with creatively reimagining the Hebrew Scriptures, resulted in the theological tradition that tells us dogmatic truths about God. There is no doubt that the known proceeds from the unknown, and has been doing so for millennia until the proper time for the fullness of revelation. Moreover, if we are truly made in the image and likeness of God, that means that we have always been able to, however imperfectly, acknowledge our Creator through *memoria* and even its accompanying attitudes as forementioned.

Yet alas, problems remain within this grand anonymous scheme. There is no escaping the demands it places on even inclusivist-minded Christians to stretch their claims about Christ’s uniqueness and necessity for salvation to a perceptible breaking point, though Rahner himself never did this. Granted his is a theological position for Catholics to help them better contextualize their spiritual role in the universe, yet it is unlikely to do much in forwarding ecumenical, much less interfaith, dialogue. Exclusivists could not help but receive the anonymous Christian as hopelessly relativistic,

⁴⁷ Rahner, *Foundations*, 306.

pluralists could not help but see it as bigoted or at least missing the mark, and no serious Buddhist would consider him or herself as incipiently Christian.

This great attempt to navigate through and descry unity amidst paradox has led to apparently unresolvable contradictions, and there is no doubt that the anonymous Christian, indeed Theology of Religions as a whole, is at an impasse.

The great religions of the world, including Christianity of course, cannot be reduced to variant expressions of the Golden Rule or differing interpretations of the same ultimate reality. They differ from one another in ways of great religious importance and theological interest. Claiming otherwise does violence to the specific character of the different religious traditions. The differences that distinguish religions need to be recognized and respected.⁴⁸

Though the theory discussed in this chapter has run its course, that does not mean that interreligious theological activity must cease. On the contrary, the discipline of Comparative Theology opens up an entirely new realm of spiritual transformation and virtuous practice, where differences are not only acknowledged and respected, but necessary.

Chapter 5: Comparative Theology

Where the inclusivist version of the Theology of Religions targeted unifying similarities, Comparative Theology acknowledges the paradoxically unifying power of *differences*. In this discipline we acknowledge our respective traditions in their own right and begin seeking to understand the other on their terms and not ours, with the goal of more thoroughly comprehending our own faith. In other words:

Comparative theology is the attempt to understand the meaning of Christian faith by exploring it in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions. The purpose of comparative theology is to assist Christians in coming to a deeper understanding of their own religious tradition. Doing Christian theology comparatively means that Christians

⁴⁸ Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 163.

look upon the truths of non-Christian traditions as resources for understanding their own faith.⁴⁹

As an example of how to do this, I turn to the following table, which presents us with fundamental tenets from Buddhism and Christianity.⁵⁰ The Buddhist Four Reminders expose our lives as transitory and prepare us for death, and Christianity's Four Last Things are an eschatological summary of Christian principles used in meditation.

The Four Reminders <i>(Buddhism)</i>	The Four Last Things <i>(Christianity)</i>	Shared Insight
1. Precious Human Birth/Life	1. Death	Life provides opportunity as the ground of the spiritual path
2. Death	2. Judgment	Death is an inescapable fact
3. Karma (virtue & non-virtue)	3. Heaven	Conduct and choices matter
4. The Faults of Samsara	4. Hell	Destiny is at hand

Here life and death are placed as opposite bases, and yet the context for both demonstrates that a common insight applies – being finite, life is the ground of the spiritual path for both Buddhists and Christians. As a non-theistic tradition that ascribes to rebirth, Buddhism does not concern itself with receiving divine judgment, for we are reborn based on the merits of our *karma*.⁵¹ It is up to us to recognize and navigate

⁴⁹ Ibid., 139-140. At this point one might ask if there is anything interior to Christianity itself that indicates we can understand our own religion better by examining other religions. This paper will make no attempt to address this question however, for such speculations would take us very far afield.

⁵⁰ Cf. Steven Shippee, "Four Last Things and Four Reminders: Interreligious Contemplative Dialogue Serving the Recovery of a Christian Spiritual Practice," *Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique* vol. III, no. 2 (July – December 2013), 11-12, Accessed November 1, 2018, http://www.dimmid.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={F631F8BE-F3A7-4037-8E00-0E827914EA04}&DE=.

⁵¹ Interdependent causes and effects stemming from good or bad actions. This literally means *action*: "physical, verbal, or mental acts that imprint habitual tendencies in the mind. Upon meeting with suitable conditions, these habits ripen and become manifest in future events" (Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament*, 430).

through the faults of samsara,⁵² and though desiring a higher birth certainly informs a Buddhist's conscience, the finality of death is different than for Christians. For we who in faith rely on the grace of Christ's merits to navigate us safely away from hell and into heaven, we nonetheless agree with Buddhists that death cannot be escaped, our choices matter, and our destinies are at hand. While these considerations of finitude are a good enough place to start making our comparisons, for further perspective in demonstrating the unifying power of opposites, we will first briefly consider the example of a knot.

Though knots appear as formations of "samenesses," of the "here and now," as two separate strands are bound together, they are actually constitutive of "purely negative relations,"⁵³ for they are two individual constructs bound together as a single entity. Any "non-entitative appointment of sameness is paradigmatic for the 'arising' of all 'phenomena,'" for "pure difference founds sameness."⁵⁴ In other words, because sameness is founded on pure difference, highlighting similarity does not imply the elimination of difference. In order for things to be the same, there have to be at least two of them, and unlike the anonymous Christian model which perceives a single strand of incipient Christianity running through all religions, Comparative Theology acknowledges that there are profound disparities among them. These strands all claim to be uniquely significant, and binding them together in a quest to actualize the *sameness* of knowing

⁵² In Chapter 2 we gave a general definition of samsara as the confused cycle of rebirth and suffering to be transcended (ibid., 433). However, these faults refer specifically to eight worldly concerns of gain/loss, praise/blame, pleasure/pain, and fame/disgrace, which must be renounced if serious Dharma practice is to be undertaken. Shippee, "Four Last Things and Four Reminders," 4.

⁵³ Robert Magliola, *Facing Up to Real Doctrinal Difference: How Some Thought-Motifs from Derrida Can Nourish the Catholic-Buddhist Encounter* (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2014), 30.

⁵⁴ Magliola, *Facing Up to Real Doctrinal Difference*, 30. This point of pure difference founding sameness will be drawn upon in Chapter 10. While in the previous table we observed unifying points among opposite perspectives, there is no doubt about the vast differences. Needing God or not needing God, acquiring positive karma or relying on divine grace, and belief in one life or many are discrepancies that cannot be dismissed.

more about one's own religion as a result of doing so is to admit this fact, for they are *purely different*.

As to how examining pure theological difference in the above table founds formative sameness in one's own religion, we begin by affirming that Buddhists believe being born a human person is rare, and precious in that it provides the opportunity to practice the Dharma and attain enlightenment.⁵⁵ A tardigrade, orca, or owl may represent various stages of progressive or regressive rebirths, but only humans can engage in Dharma practice with the intent of attaining Buddha-nature.⁵⁶ What is true for animals also applies to gods or demigods, with the latter being resentful of the former and therefore still bound by attachment, and the former coasting on their acquired merits until they run out and make the entire cycle of rebirth necessary to undertake once again.⁵⁷ Being a human person is therefore uniquely auspicious and precious, for it provides the direct means of actualizing Buddha-nature. To truly believe this and not prioritize Dharma practice with one's entire being is cosmically wasteful and slovenly.

While not looking ahead at multiple lifetimes, Christianity does believe in eternal life, either in heaven or hell. For Catholics, purgatory affirms a belief in liminality and therefore a prolonging of life *en route* to one's heavenly destination, but this is not the same thing as rebirth, and to attempt making it so would provide a disservice to both teachings. A motivation we can learn from Buddhists here is that, if there is such incredible significance placed on the auspiciousness of human life as a means toward

⁵⁵ Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament*, 60-61.

⁵⁶ "Animals have no opportunity to practise the Dharma because they undergo slavery and suffer from the attacks of other animals." Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher, Revised Edition*, tr. the Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), 20.

⁵⁷ This is true of the gods, who "have no opportunity to practise the Dharma because they spend their time in a state of mental blankness" and therefore remain subject to karma and rebirth. As to the demigods, they are distinguished by "jealousy as their predominant emotion," and from previous lives "have a strong propensity for envy, quarrelling and fighting" Rinpoche, *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, 20, 92, 410.

eventual enlightenment, even if only taking place after millions of lifespans of Dharma practice, *how as Christians could we not utterly prioritize knowing and loving God in this single life?* We only have one chance at getting it right, and though we can and ought to trust in divine mercy, at the same time, we simply must take our faith seriously and stay awake, for we do not know how long we have.⁵⁸

Because of the inevitability of death and rebirth, or death and judgment resulting in a beatific or malefic fate, the way we comport ourselves and the choices we make bear greater significance than we often realize. Whether faced with multiple lifetimes' worth of the faults of samsara or even a permanent place in hell, we all have a date with destiny. This life is therefore to be seen as precious, for it provides the opportunity to practice virtue and grow in union with God toward a heavenly afterlife. Unless thoroughly unimaginative or rigidly fundamentalist, Christians cannot help but be motivated by this theological comparison, and concur that the *purely different* Buddhist view of rebirth founds a greater appreciation for the *sameness* of orthodox Catholic belief in Christians.

At this point a component of orthodox Catholic belief, namely that all the baptized are caught up in the marriage of Christ to the church, deserves some exploration pertaining to Comparative Theology. That is, having a wife does not and should not preclude the possibility of having friends. Some of our friends may be markedly different than we are, yet in such a way that our differences complement and create new ways of relating with one another. As seen in the Introduction to this thesis, marriages and friendships respectively involve *agape* and *philia*. *Agape* represents the “steadfast, unwavering, and constant” perfection of love, a radical and “unconditional command that

⁵⁸ Cf. Matt 24:42: “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

applies whether we find the character in question appealing or not.”⁵⁹ While pertaining to all we meet, this love simultaneously applies to our most intimate familial relationships such as the father to the Prodigal Son, and especially toward marriage, for husbands are instructed to love their wives “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”⁶⁰

In a Christian context, the second type of love, *philia*, applies to Buddhism, for it is a chosen friend that helps us to understand our own faith tradition better, thereby strengthening the marriage. We all need friends in our lives, people we can associate with and be ourselves in front of because it is mutually supportive and beneficial. In this sense:

Philia helps Christians to do theology comparatively. *Agape* requires Christians to love the non-Christian regardless of their actual beliefs and religious practices. *Philia*, which is preferential love, calls Christians to enter into friendships with non-Christians based on the innate attractiveness of their actual beliefs and religious practices. In other words, Christians should hold non-Christians in friendships based on a preferential love, a love that treasures the non-Christian not because of Jesus’ command to love, but because of the innate goodness and virtue of the friend.⁶¹

There is a precedent for such friendships dating back to at least 1968, when “Benedictine abbots sponsored the first Asian East-West Intermonastic Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, dedicated to the encounter of Western monastic spirituality with Eastern spiritual traditions.”⁶² It was at this conference where the Trappist monk Thomas Merton instantly became “spiritual brothers” with the Dalai Lama, thereby forging a

⁵⁹ Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 173-174.

⁶⁰ Eph 5:25.

⁶¹ Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 174-175.

⁶² Donald W. Mitchell and James Wiseman, OSB, eds. *Transforming Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), VIII.

connection between Vajrayana Buddhism and Catholic monasticism.⁶³ Though Merton tragically died at the conference, his death produced a lasting seed that brought about an ongoing encounter between East and West.⁶⁴ This seed bore additional fruit in July 1996 at Gethsemani Abbey, when at the behest of the Dalai Lama, who “wished to place a Tibetan prayer shawl over the simple cross that marks the grave of Thomas Merton, his friend,” a group of Catholic and Buddhist monks and nuns held a conference on the spiritual life.⁶⁵ Such interreligious dialogues have become a normalized manifestation of Comparative Theology, and there is even a Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies sponsored by the University of Hawaii, featuring a photo of the two friends, Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama, on the home page.⁶⁶

As engaging and helpful as such friendships can be, one of the more attractive features of Comparative Theology is simply that, in emphasizing studying another tradition as a means of gaining new insights into one’s own practice, respective objectivity is maintained. We seek the good for our friends and pray for their highest spiritual destiny, but do not attempt to coerce either them or ourselves into being someone else – Catholics remain Catholic and Buddhists remain Buddhist.

⁶³ Mitchell and Wiseman, *Transforming Suffering*, VIII.

⁶⁴ For example, the Benedictine Confederation founded two organizations at the Vatican’s request: the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) in North America, and the Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique (DIM) in Europe, both in 1977. “The aim of these two organizations is to foster interreligious dialogue, exchanges, and collaboration, especially between Buddhist and Christian monastics” (ibid.).

⁶⁵ Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 177. Subsequently taking place from April 13-18, “the Second Gethsemani Encounter was held to dialogue about ways of transforming suffering. This time the Buddhist and Christian participants who were invited were primarily persons who had years of training and experience in spiritual direction and guidance in the West” Mitchell and Wiseman, *Transforming Suffering*, XIII. Also held at Gethsemani Abbey was Gethsemani III, taking place from May 27-31, 2008, which covered the theme of monasticism and the environment. Donald W. Mitchell and William Skudlarek, OSB, eds. *Green Monasticism: A Buddhist-Catholic Response to an Environmental Calamity* (Brooklyn: Lantern Books, 2010), 2.

⁶⁶ <https://www.society-buddhist-christian-studies.org> (accessed November 6, 2018).

As an intentional means of maintaining such objectivity in moving toward Part II of this thesis, which involves adopting the exegetical perspective of an *interreligious contemplative*, I propose a theologically assumed context that is intended to safeguard Catholic orthodoxy, lest we collapse distinctions between wife and friend. Giving a pride of place to Christianity over Buddhism at this stage is inescapable, though I encourage the reader to see it as a sign of respect. There is no doubt that authentic Buddhism would arrive at a similar conclusion about Christianity (i.e. while actualizing Buddha-nature is superior to union with God in heaven, that moving through theistic teachings is a good step toward Dharma practice in an eventual lifetime, etc.). So when facing forthcoming terms such as vertical and horizontal, supernatural and natural, higher and lower, rather than seeing a pejorative value judgment, instead consider it a matter of distinguishing between *agape* and *philia*, or again, between wife and friend. Though these are different types of love, a well-integrated comparatively theological life values, even needs, both of them.

Therefore, we now turn to the Thomist teaching of *obediential potency* as adapted by Bernard Lonergan, which involves possessing a natural human desire for a supernatural end. As such, we are fated for horizontal and vertical finalities: horizontally, we are directed toward naturally proportionate ends that apprehend God through an understanding of being; and vertically we are directed toward a higher supernatural end, through which we transcend ourselves and apprehend God as the Trinity through the

beatific vision.⁶⁷ Thereby actuated by God, obediential potency allows a temporal being to be empowered by God's divine, essential self-communication.⁶⁸

Lonergan's analysis of world order also brought him to a renewed understanding of the term *supernatural*, which involves the belief that there are higher intelligibilities which do not merely exist alongside lower intelligibilities, but actually incorporate and direct them to higher purposes.⁶⁹ Moreover, the higher types of being are composed of the lower, which possess the inherent possibility of being drawn up into the higher.⁷⁰ Accordingly, Lonergan distinguishes between a relative supernatural, which relates to higher and lower created realities (i.e. consciousness itself as transcendent over a single thought), and an absolute supernatural reserved for God, meaning complete transcendence beyond any created reality.⁷¹

For our purposes, Buddhism represents the natural end, and Christianity the supernatural end. This is because to whatever extent we encounter Buddhism as a means of learning more about Christianity, our natural desire for a supernatural end will help us to encounter God through whatever understanding of being we can acquire through friendship with Buddhism. Because of God's involvement in what we are learning about Christianity in the process, our friendship will be naturally elevated into the *agape* love of the Trinity as God endows his divine and essential self-communication. This supernaturality is composed of, incorporates, and directs what we can learn about orthodox Catholic teaching by studying the Dharma and any relevant aspects of

⁶⁷ Jeremy Blackwood, "Lonergan and Rahner on the Natural Desire to See God," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* n.s. 1, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 90.

⁶⁸ Blackwood, "Lonergan and Rahner," 90.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

Buddhism. By leading us into Christianity, such aspects will merge us into the highest transcendence and union with God, as we are elevated beyond the natural (Buddhism) and into the supernatural (God as Trinity). Such is the power of friendship, for when we can truly love our neighbors as ourselves,⁷² with God's help we can love and attain complete union with him both in the Catholic Church and in heaven.

Part II: BIOGRAPHIES AND WORKING PARALLEL CONCEPTS

Introduction to Part II: *An Exegetical Perspective and a Heuristic Lens*

Now as we move from the theological background and toward examining working Christian and Buddhist parallel concepts, the perspective from which I approach this task is, as forementioned, as a *Christian interreligious contemplative*. As stated in the Introduction, by this I mean someone who incorporates a simple gaze upon Christ as the interreligious norm or criterion of judgment, thereby engaging interreligious exploration so that God may be discerned as present in other religions. Continuing the process initiated in the previous chapter with the table on The Four Reminders and The Four Last Things, I will engage this manner of discerning the Christian God reflected in Vajrayana, or Tibetan, Buddhism through examining correspondences in the lives of a saint from each tradition, St. Francis of Assisi and Jetsün Milarepa.

The remainder of this paper initially recalls significant biographical details for each saint, with subsequent chapters drawing inspiration from the biographies to offer working parallels from Catholicism and Buddhism that engage interreligious contemplation. In order to do this we need a Christological heuristic lens to gaze through, so I have taken three simple quotes from the Gospel of John and based maxims

⁷² Cf. Mk 12:28-31.

on each that will be used as the contextual bases for comparison after the biographical chapters, beginning with Chapter 9: *Sainthood, Existential/Existentiell, Mahamudra*.

<u>Quote</u>	<u>Maxim</u>
“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12).	Be Radically Other-Centered
“If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15).	Completely Prioritize Divine Teaching
“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13).	Showing Forth Love is the Most Important Thing

In drawing such comparisons, we will also see further examples of how as a contemplative endeavor interreligious contemplation shows a broader means of loving God. As an exercise that explores Buddhism as in the previous chapter, it also provides a unique opportunity to know more about our own faith: “before Christians can fully understand (ourselves) and the role of (our) religion,” we will have to learn more about “non-Christians.”⁷³ As we have seen, if we can learn about them we can learn from them, and “once Christians begin to take the truths of non-Christian religions seriously,”⁷⁴ our own faith will be affected. The point of this undertaking is that through interreligious contemplation the effect will be *positive*, resulting in new insights that inform our minds and hearts, provide a transformative “blessing in the deepest sense of the word,”⁷⁵ and astonish us with new and unforeseen possibilities for virtuous practice.

⁷³ Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 9.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Chapter 6: Biography of St. Francis of Assisi

Francis (1181-1226) was born into privilege in a merchant family in Assisi, and though as a youth he was “given up unto pleasures,” he nonetheless had a “divinely implanted” and “generous compassion toward the poor.”⁷⁶ Feeling great restlessness with the worldly path he was expected to follow, and not yet understanding how to contemplate the divine, resulted in a protracted illness that paved the way for a transformative spiritual awakening.

A triggering event in his conversion was meeting a destitute knight to whom he gave the garments he was wearing, followed by a dream where he saw a great palace adorned with military accoutrements marked with the sign of the Cross, which he intuitively recognized as a reward for the kindness he had shown the soldier. Sensing the accoutrements as his and his followers’, yet not understanding their spiritual significance and mistaking them as omens of literal warfare, Francis sought the patronage of the Count of Apulia, whom he would represent in combat.

It was not to be, for on his way Francis sensed God communicating with him, prompting him into divine and not earthly service. If he was to have combat it would be bloodless, and so returning to Assisi, he withdrew from public life and began praying constantly for his purpose, confident “that the warfare of Christ is to be begun by victory over self.”⁷⁷

A significant sign of self-victory involved meeting a leper on the road, giving him money, overcoming repulsion, and embracing him. God acknowledged this turning point,

⁷⁶ Saint Bonaventure. *The Life of St. Francis*, tr. the Rev. Fathers of the College of Saint Bonaventura (Quaracchi: Waxkeep Publishing, 1898), 16, Apple Book. Though Bonaventure’s book is hagiographical, the applicable theology it tells us about Francis makes it more relevant to this paper than a standard biography.

⁷⁷ Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis*, 20-24, Apple Book.

speaking to Francis out of the Crucifix while he prayed in the Church at San Damiano:

“Francis, go and repair My House, which, as thou seest, is falling utterly into ruin.”⁷⁸

In time understanding that this instruction meant developing a whole new paradigm of religious life, Francis underwent a complete conversion. He participated in this process by becoming devoted to the Crucified Christ and poverty, overcoming extreme resistance from his indignant father by publicly renouncing his inheritance, stripping off his clothing, and flinging himself into the arms of his bishop, who gave him a simple tunic, which Francis donned and marked with the sign of the Cross.⁷⁹

Never looking back, Francis then founded his order and was given permission to preach by Pope Innocent III, and in spite of initial misgivings Francis’ Rule was approved.⁸⁰ It was shockingly austere, mandating begging for alms, fasting not only during Lent but also from All Saints’ until Christmas, forbidding the friars from receiving any money or appropriating anything for themselves, and not permitting them to enter monasteries of women, lest temptation arise.⁸¹ When Francis was tempted, he threw himself naked into snow or briar patches, and unwilling to admit pride a foothold into his status as founder, declined becoming a priest.⁸²

Toward the end of a festival commemorating the Assumption in 1224 Francis retreated to a hermitage on Mt. Alvernia, and peripheral to the Feast of the Holy Cross he received the stigmata. This is fitting, for it was in contemplation of Christ crucified, and again crucified through the suffering poor, that Francis came to love poverty as his Lady

⁷⁸ Ibid., 25-33.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 34-41.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 68-73.

⁸¹ Saint Francis. *Rule of St. Francis of Assisi (1223)* (Capuchin Franciscans. Accessed May 23, 2016. <http://capuchins.org/documents/RuleofStFrancis.pdf>), 2-5.

⁸² Herbert J. Thurston and Donald Attwater, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints, Vol. IV*. (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1990), 25.

Poverty to whom he was betrothed. For him poverty was not only material but also spiritual and interior, which explains his reluctance to encourage intellectual pursuits among the friars.

After the Feast of St. Michael Francis came down from the mountain, healed those who were brought to him, and after his health plummeted and his eyesight failed, he composed the *Canticle of Brother Sun*, recommended continued observance of his Rule, and welcoming his “Sister Death,” died in a borrowed habit while the passion narrative in the Gospel of John was read to him while he blessed his disciples.

Procedures leading to his canonization took place immediately, his order remains the most numerous in the Church to this day,⁸³ and his appeal is so timeless that our current Pope took him as namesake.

Chapter 7: Biography of Jetsün Milarepa

Milarepa (1040-1123) means “Good News,” and he was raised with love, “hearing only gentle voices.”⁸⁴ His family was powerful and respected, and Milarepa was still a young boy when his father died, leaving him, his mother, and sister behind with a will that entrusted its distribution to Milarepa’s aunt and uncle. Succumbing to greed they seized all of the assets, leaving Milarepa, his mother, and sister in grinding poverty and humiliating servitude. They were betrayed, hungry, and miserable, and were living in “the highest degree” of “the reality of sorrow.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Thurston and Atwater, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, 30-31.

⁸⁴ Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, *The Life of Milarepa*, tr. Lobsang P. Lhalungpa and Far West Translations (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), 15.

⁸⁵ Lhalungpa, *Milarepa*, 21. This citation refers to *dukkha*, or *suffering*, which is a fundamental principle of Buddhism: life is, or is at least inseparable from, suffering. Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1991), 288, Apple Book.

Their despair fomented into hatred, and Milarepa's mother told him to go learn destructive magic, so he could destroy their enemies.⁸⁶ Milarepa then sought out a lama named "Terrifying Conqueror," offered his "body, speech, and mind" to learn destructive magic to wield against his enemies, and filled the front of his garment with "horse and donkey manure, cow dung, and dog droppings for the lama's field" as tribute.⁸⁷ Impressed, the lama taught Milarepa what he knew, further arranging for him to learn the power to cast hailstorms from a colleague ironically named "Ocean of Virtues."⁸⁸ Together they built a house within which to perform magic, cast a destructive spell for two weeks, willing that only Milarepa's aunt and uncle should survive, aware and in terror of the nephew they had wronged.⁸⁹

Finding vengeance to be hollow and miserable, Milarepa's joy at conquering his enemies was short-lived. Desiring true Dharma practice that would help all beings attain enlightenment, he sought out the famous lama Marpa the Translator. Marpa was anticipating him, for his own master Naropa had approached him in a dream, likening Milarepa to a vajra (scepter) that would light up the whole universe.⁹⁰

Marpa watched for Milarepa's arrival by going out to plow his field near the road. He brought two jars of beer,⁹¹ one for him and one for his guest, burying the second jar in the earth and covering it with his hat. Milarepa approached, and Marpa gave him the beer and told him to plough the earth. Later after being summoned to the house, Milarepa told him who he was and what he had done, then offered his body, speech, and

⁸⁶ Lhalungpa, *Milarepa*, 23.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 43-44.

⁹¹ As will be seen, the beer represents the dharma.

mind. Marpa agreed to teach him, but Milarepa would have to feed and clothe himself.⁹² From his dream, Marpa understood that Milarepa was very important. He also understood that it would take a very strict formation to burn off his negative karma, which explains the cruelty of his tutelage. Shockingly, the first instruction was to send hailstorms against Marpa's enemies, apparently to make Milarepa face the negative consequences of his actions while desiring to do good instead. Then he was promised instruction if he built a series of towers, all of which he was ordered to destroy. His body began wearing down, and constant criticism and periodic beatings from Marpa caused him to despair and seriously consider suicide.⁹³

Perseverance paid off however, and Marpa agreed to teach, feed, and clothe him, instructing him to meditate and be happy. He then placed Milarepa in a monastic robe, revealed that Naropa had portended his coming, and ordained him in a layman's vow of common liberation. Marpa further revealed that on the day they met when he labored in the field, the fact that Milarepa finished the beer and the work he was given to do signified that he would grasp the entire Buddhist teaching.⁹⁴ After a time, Milarepa knew he would have to go his own way and become a hermit, and told Marpa he was going to leave. Marpa wept, for he knew they would not see each other again.⁹⁵

Never looking back, he lived off a nearby stream of water and ate only nettles from a bush until his skin turned green. Though he did nothing but meditate day and night, gradually people in his life heard of him and sought him out. Thus he reunited with his sister, a woman to whom he had been betrothed as a youth, and even his horrible

⁹² Lhalungpa, *Milarepa*, 41-47.

⁹³ Ibid., 48-71.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 72-74.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 89-94.

aunt, all of whom he taught the Dharma. As a result of his constant bodhicitta practice he began to have “the sensation of being able to change (his) body at will and of levitating through space and of performing miracles,” and he guided many disciples to bodhicitta and enlightenment.⁹⁶

At the end of his life Milarepa was invited to preside at a wedding feast, where a lama who was jealous of his prestige bribed his concubine to kill Milarepa with a glass of poisoned milk. Knowing his immediate disciples were enlightened and believing that his time had come anyway Milarepa chose to drink it, for he believed a greater good would come from it that benefited others. He was even careful to time drinking the poison so that the concubine would receive her payment.⁹⁷

The poison was slow to act, and as he taught for several days, the skies were reportedly filled with gods listening. The assembly was filled with joy, numerous miracles accompanied his final days, and “at the age of eighty-four, at sunrise on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month in the year of the Wood Hare, under the ninth lunar constellations, the Master passed into nirvana.”⁹⁸ It is said of Milarepa that he is “the greatest of saints,” his life story provides “a clear example of supreme liberation, and the result of his infinite compassion and universal concern was seen in the emergence of his spiritual descendants” who “were as numerous as the stars in the night.”⁹⁹ A Buddha in his own right, Milarepa is among the most beloved practitioners in Vajrayana history.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 128, 152.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 155-156.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 157-172.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 195.

Chapter 8: Transitioning from Biographies into Theology

There is no doubt that for Francis, religious practice had substantially different meaning than for Milarepa, for as discussed in Chapter 5, Catholics do not believe in multiple lifetimes. Every soul is unique, and while Baptism denotes spiritual rebirth, the consciousness does not live on to be reborn in a different physical body after death. As in our first biography, while Francis did not have *lives* to waste, he definitely concluded that he would not waste any more of the lifetime he had, and once he began prioritizing the benefit of others ahead of himself, he never looked back. Milarepa was at least equally urgent, seeking to both transcend his negative karma and attain enlightenment in a single lifetime for the benefit of all beings.

Why did they do this? Francis and Milarepa alike are known for their exaggerated asceticism and single-mindedness, and though they had personal circumstances that triggered in each a lifelong devotion to finding markedly different answers to living life than what would normally be considered, it was their instinct for flipping circumstances on their heads and forging spiritually transcendent meaning that characterized them as the saints they became. Setting out on their quests involved a radical rearrangement of priorities, where they concluded that the benefit of others was more important than what they wanted for themselves.

Chapter 9: Sainthood, Existential/Existentiell, Mahamudra

Be Radically Other-Centered

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12).¹⁰⁰

Francis and Milarepa are saints, and saints are people who prioritize the needs of

¹⁰⁰ In serving as the “channel of communication between the human and divine worlds” par excellence, Christ withholds nothing for himself. Mark Allen Powell, ed., *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 833.

others in the name of a divine mandate or impulse that they have completely interiorized.¹⁰¹ Through virtuous practice, they thereby attain the highest ideal of their faith tradition. For a Christian, this means actualizing *divinization* or union with God, and for a Buddhist, transcending suffering, thereby entering nirvana and becoming a Buddha. Anything else they may contemplate, discern, think, feel, do, or say proceeds from this state. Whether it be God or Buddha-nature they are wholly oriented toward an *other*, and this basis from which they advance in virtuous practice is what characterizes them as saints.¹⁰² As saints they would be unlikely to identify themselves as such, though they would probably concede that they were doing something markedly different from other walks of life. While all beings are called to holiness,¹⁰³ actualizing sainthood is rare. Theologically however, the qualities of sainthood can be characterized by *existential* and *existentiell* attributes.

As in Chapter 4 on the Anonymous Christian, *existential* “refers to an element in man’s ontological constitution precisely as human being. It is an aspect of concrete human nature precisely as human.”¹⁰⁴ *Existentiell* means “the free, personal and subjective appropriation and actualization of something which can also be spoken of in abstract theory or objective concepts without such a subjective and personal realization.”¹⁰⁵ As in their earlier mention, this means what something is, and the possibility of actualizing what that means.

¹⁰¹ As covered in Chapters 2 and 11-12, a Buddhist parallel term for sainthood is *bodhisattva*.

¹⁰² It should be noted that while God is absolutely other and Christian sainthood means personal union with God, actualizing Buddha-nature involves overcoming the appearance of separateness, for Buddha-nature permeates all reality.

¹⁰³ Consider *Lumen Gentium* and the universal call to holiness: “Fortified by so many and such powerful means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect” (LG 11).

¹⁰⁴ Rahner, *Foundations*, 16.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

How do aspiring saints know they are striving toward sainthood? First they will come to recognize it *existentielly*, and second *existentially*. This means identifying a sense of restlessness, a persistent belief that one does not fit in and is mysteriously called to live differently than most people. For Francis, this was his discontent with a privileged life that many would envy. Seeing knightly élan as irrelevant, it was by giving to a destitute knight and then overcoming his revulsion and embracing a leper while giving him alms, that *existentielly* moved him toward actualizing his vocation. As a result God spoke to him from the San Damiano Crucifix, and his status as Founder of the Franciscan Order, which prioritizes individual poverty so that benefiting others may be constant, was *existentially* confirmed.

In agreeing to learn magic, Milarepa was *existentielly* on the right track, for he was a young man who just wanted to help his mother. In that sense he was attempting to prioritize the needs of others, but this is impossible for a Buddhist practitioner if vengeance is involved. Though in bringing dung as manure to Terrifying Conqueror's field he was seeking to foster life, it was a life that would only bring death, to which he could merely contribute old detritus. The inner Buddha who knew that the one goal worthy of striving for was enlightenment for all beings would not be silent, though his voice was not yet fully heard and recognized. Yet after remorse drove him to seek out Marpa, who placed beer in the ground for Milarepa to drink before he tilled the field, we see his *existential* vocation coming into view. By Marpa's admission the beer represented the Dharma, which as the path to enlightenment, further represented the infinite life Milarepa was destined to sow, reap, and share by becoming a hermit who meditated constantly toward the enlightenment of all beings.

Through the examples of Francis and Milarepa, we see that saints in the making can identify predispositions and *existentially* move toward their purpose, but the intervention of an *other* is *existentially* necessary. We may pull the trigger so to speak, but God, Buddha, or for my purposes the Buddha-nature within which God may be descried, ultimately empties the chamber. For Francis this meant renouncing his patrimony and pioneering religious life outside monasteries in the world, and for Milarepa it was about renouncing the world only to embrace it all the more when people from the world sought him out.

For a working Buddhist parallel with *existential/existentiell*, I turn to Mahamudra, or the Great Seal, which “represents the culmination and fulfilment of all practices,” and which is traditionally “discussed in terms of the threefold logic” of ground, path, and fruition.¹⁰⁶ Ground Mahamudra means Buddha-nature is “the foundation of all our experience,” though we have not recognized it as “the perfect state of awareness that pervades all sentient beings.”¹⁰⁷ No matter how good or bad in effect, at some level everything is perfect, and all phenomena are empty and sealed with enlightenment. Though Christians do not ascribe to the same sense of emptiness in phenomena as Buddhists, a parallel claim could be our inseparability from the all-pervading love that God constantly gives all sentient beings.¹⁰⁸

While Ground Mahamudra is empty of substantial reality, meaning it lacks causes and conditions for our various projections that keep us from recognizing it, it is a

¹⁰⁶ Reginald A. Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet. The World of Tibetan Buddhism Volume Two* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 877-878, 892, Apple Book.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 897-898.

¹⁰⁸ “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39). While reality may not be seen as perfect at the root, the highest perfection nonetheless remains accessible.

flawlessly empty context beyond causes and conditions that inseparably grounds spiritual progress in the unoriginated qualities of Buddhahood. Ground Mahamudra is therefore comprehensible as the *existential* possibility for enlightenment in which Buddhahood or sainthood is universal, for it is the pure possibility of recognizing reality as such.

Now turning to Path Mahamudra we recognize it as *existentiell*, for as “the various practices and methods of meditation given in the Vajrayana tradition for the realization of mahamudra,”¹⁰⁹ it describes what working toward enlightenment actually is in the personal acquisition of sainthood. Key components include the Four Yogas of Mahamudra, which can also be described as Four Levels of Magic. Using the term “magic” as “an expression of total nonaggression and an expression of total energy and power” that one brings to meditation, they are: 1) *one-pointedness*, which is intended to very bluntly cut through obstacles like “a dagger made out of stone;”¹¹⁰ 2) *simplicity* or nonexaggeration, which prioritizes directness and simplicity over being merely good or kind;¹¹¹ 3) *one taste*, meaning we feel our pleasures and pains, no matter how extreme, as they are and without qualification;¹¹² and 4) *nonmeditation*. This means not meditating on images or ideas, but having a “simple, direct, personal experience” of nothingness. “That is the greatest magic of all.”¹¹³ To a Christian this last step might sound underwhelming, but to meditate on nothingness is to unite oneself with the unoriginated qualities of Buddhahood, and in that sense is comparable to *contemplation*, where in moving beyond prayer and meditation, one directly encounters God in silence.

¹⁰⁹ Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World*, 915-916, Apple Book.

¹¹⁰ Chögyam Trungpa, *Journey Without Goal: The Tantric Wisdom of the Buddha* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2010), 318-319, Apple Book.

¹¹¹ Trungpa, *Journey Without Goal*, 320-322, Apple Book.

¹¹² Ibid., 322-323.

¹¹³ Ibid., 323-326.

Fruition Mahamudra is “the culmination and fulfillment of the practices,” further known as “the enlightenment of all the buddhas.”¹¹⁴ Parallel to the Eschaton where all things are restored in Christ,¹¹⁵ this leads to a new recognition of identity, where we realize our basic Buddha-nature by identifying with the *four kayas*. Because the kayas directly overlap into the following section, I will examine them there alongside parallel Christian concepts. For now I will summarize what has been said in this section: the benefit of others being more important than personal benefit means that the false or hidden self that must first depart from self as a frame of reference is *existential* due to being grounded in God or Buddha-nature, and the true self that is revealed only with, in, through, and for others, is *existentiell* as the subject’s developing vocation becomes individuated through personal holiness. As saints Francis and Milarepa understood these principles, and their definitive breaks with the world made them utterly available to everyone and everything else as both ground and path, teleologically staking their claims in fruition for themselves and their followers.

Chapter 10: The Kayas, Latria/Hyperdulia/Dulia

Completely Prioritize Divine Teaching

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15).¹¹⁶

The paradigm of a teaching guru is at the heart of reality. This is because the primordially unfabricated nature of reality is fully actualized by the Buddha, who manifests certain forms to benefit all sentient beings from his state of supreme realization, that they might learn how to attain enlightenment. The basis of all these manifestations is

¹¹⁴ Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World*, 959, Apple Book.

¹¹⁵ I am referring to the Eschaton in the most culminative future-based sense. In the meantime, we live toward it by participating in the kingdom of God.

¹¹⁶ “It is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock, high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth” (CCC 1548).

called Dharmakaya, which is related to absolute spaciousness and being-as-suchness, as the formless possibility out of which Sambhogakayas are manifested. These latter are gods, or *yidams*, who are the bases of covenants that are made with one's guru, once the guru has assigned a particular deity to his disciple. The disciple then prays to his *yidam*, even meditating upon him or herself as actually embodying the deity as the disciple's practice becomes more efficacious as a result. Gurus themselves are those in whom the Buddha manifests in a Nirmanakaya form, or emanation body, as particular human teachers. "Through these different manifestation states, he teaches all the teachings which completely describe samsara and enlightenment."¹¹⁷ Finally there is Svabhavikakaya, which is the union of all the kayas. Whenever we realize that the kayas are ultimately linked as a single, cosmic teaching system, "that totality is what is known as Svabhavikakaya."¹¹⁸

Though Buddhism ascribes to belief in rebirth and multiple lifetimes, Vajrayana Buddhism's unique assertion that enlightenment is attainable in one lifetime directly stems from practicing the guru's teachings, who is seen as a fully realized Buddha in Nirmanakaya form. Analytical study has its place and is encouraged, but the ultimate practice – i.e., the one through which one can attain realization in *this* life, is what the guru instructs you to do. It is not an exaggeration to call this guru devotion, for understanding the kayas makes this clear as appropriate. To practice devotion to one's guru is to directly tap into the four kayas, the one ultimate, primordial reality where Buddha-nature itself is realized. In the final analysis, prioritizing the needs of others and

¹¹⁷ Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament*, 28-29.

¹¹⁸ Chögyam Trungpa, *Training the Mind & Cultivating Loving-Kindness*, ed. Judith L. Lief (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2010), 205, Apple Book.

practicing what the guru teaches, even to the extent of visualizing the guru as a fully realized Buddha, are the only way to make progress possible at this level.

Regarding working parallels with the kayas, I turn to the following table:

Dharmakaya	Absolute Mystery/Trinitarian God	Latria
Sambhogakaya	Gods/Yidams	Hyperdulia/Mary
Nirmanakaya	Earthly beings, gurus who show forth Buddha	Dulia/saints who show forth God
Svabhavikakaya	Union of all kayas	Eschaton/restoration of all things in Christ

I compare Dharmakaya to Absolute Mystery, for “What is made intelligible is grounded ultimately in the one thing that is self-evident, in mystery.”¹¹⁹ Dharmakaya is the mysterious nothingness on which nonmeditation is undertaken, which in comparison to divine contemplation finds its counterpart in *latria*, directly worshipping God as Trinity. Christianity does not deal with gods but prayerful intercessors to God, and through *hyperdulia* (Sambhogakaya), God is worshipped through focusing on and invoking Mary as the prime example of sainthood to emulate. Through *dulia* (Nirmanakaya) all other saints, including angels, may be likewise invoked to enhance worship. Parallel to Svabhavikakaya is the Eschaton, where all things are restored in Christ. Though unlike Svabhavikakaya where the kayas are already unified, the Eschaton will be inevitably actualized at the end of time.

While tables like the one above can provide working parallels, hard and fast comparisons will remain ungraspable. This ungraspability now becomes evident in

¹¹⁹ Rahner, *Foundations*, 22.

responding to a simple question – who was Francis’ guru? There is no doubt that Francis saw Jesus Christ as the Divine Teacher and guru-like:

The Lord has called me by the way of simplicity and humbleness, and this is the way He has pointed out to me for myself and for those who will believe and follow me... The Lord told me that He would have me poor and foolish in this world, and that He willed not to lead us by any way other than by that.¹²⁰

The context for this teaching goes all the way back to when Christ gave Francis his mission from the San Damiano Crucifix. Yet beyond carrying out his mission as Founder of the Franciscan Order, Francis showed no interest in learning any gradually revealed lessons a guru would teach. While he came to tolerate ongoing learning among his brethren, for him it was irrelevant: “Nothing gives me so much consolation as to think of the life and passion of our Lord. Were I to live to the end of the world I should stand in need of no other book.”¹²¹

This does not mean that Francis was unwilling to grow in spiritual aptitude. His ministry was certainly informed by scripture, sacraments, and the liturgy, and there is no doubt that he prayed often and decisively acted on the will of God whenever and however he deemed it necessary. Nonetheless, he had no Nirmanakaya equivalent as guru *per se* to instruct him, and given the ontology of God in whom the Persons are never separate, when Jesus spoke to Francis he was addressed by no less than the Holy Trinity, whom we have already identified as a parallel to Dharmakaya. So even if his guru would appear to be Jesus, reconciling the guru as a Nirmanakaya is not possible in this case.

¹²⁰ Thurston and Atwater, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, 27.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

In finding a working parallel for Francis' guru, we therefore recall the earlier statement in Chapter 5 that "pure difference founds sameness."¹²² This is because we simply will not find a person who comparatively functions as Francis' guru. We are at an impasse of difference here. Yet perhaps we can locate Francis' guru if we are willing to contemplate his or her identity in a purely different manner than would normally be considered. I propose that this difference involves seeking not a *person* but a *principle* we encounter in his biography, namely Lady Poverty.

The holy man regarded Poverty as the familiar friend of the Son of God, and as one now rejected by the whole world, and was zealous to espouse her with such a constant affection as that not only did he leave father and mother for her sake, but he did even part with all that might have been his. For none was ever so greedy of gold as he of poverty, nor did any man ever guard treasure more anxiously than he this Gospel pearl.¹²³

Lady Poverty was the principle through which he constantly strove to receive what Christ was teaching. Francis' commitment to his Lady was so all encompassing that he could not even limit his devotion to her as exclusively spousal, for he alternately named her his *lady*, his *mother*, and his *bride*.¹²⁴ Seeking her *dowry* "not in the present but in the future,"¹²⁵ he was "greedy to surpass others, he who thereby had learnt to think himself of less account than all others."¹²⁶

Having made himself as poor as possible and thereby completely open to transformation in God no matter how and through whom the divine will was transmitted, Lady Poverty was the lens through which Francis perceived God, the earpiece through

¹²² Magliola, *Facing Up to Real Doctrinal Difference*, 30.

¹²³ Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis*, 142-143, Apple Book.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹²⁵ Brother Thomas Celano, *The Lives of Saint Francis of Assisi*, tr. A.G. Ferrers (The Franciscan Order, 13th Century), 258, Apple Book. As noted earlier when citing Bonaventure, Celano's book is hagiographical. Nonetheless, the applicable theology it tells us about Francis likewise makes it more relevant to this paper than a standard biography.

¹²⁶ Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis*, 153, Apple Book.

which he received godly instruction, and the model for how he lived at all times. In effect, “she” functioned as his guru. Therefore, as a means of acknowledging what having a guru meant to Francis in principle, we now turn to the table below.

Dharmakaya	Latria/Trinitarian God Lady Poverty as lady
Sambhogakaya	Hyperdulia/Mary Lady Poverty as mother
Nirmanakaya	Dulia/saints who show forth God Lady Poverty as bride
Svabhavikakaya	Eschaton/restoration of all things in Christ Lady Poverty as dowry

Francis’ identifying Lady Poverty as *lady* points to Dharmakaya, for identifying “her” as such is the means by which he encountered the Trinity through *latria* adoration. This is because though he had eschewed knightly élan, a sense of noble and unquestioning obedience to his Lady, and certainly his Lord, constantly informed his outlook. Due to his uncompromising desire to serve, waiting on Lady Poverty as *lady* meant alignment with and entrance into the Dharmakaya, or the Absolute Mystery of the Trinitarian God, for Francis would settle upon nothing less.

As to Lady Poverty as *mother*, this is comparable to *hyperdulia*, for Mary is the Mother of the Church who provides the supreme example of sainthood. As seen in the previous table on page 40, we align *hyperdulia* with Sambhogakaya because in our monotheistic tradition prayerful intercessors to God are the closest analogue we have to gods, and Mary is the supreme intercessor. In referring to the principle of Lady Poverty as *mother*, Francis’ identification of “her” would have surely overlapped into honoring the actual Mother of God through Marian devotion.

Lady Poverty as *bride* is like *dulia*, representing the saints who show forth God as Nirmanakayas. As a means of illustrating how this applies, I draw on an additional

biographical narrative. This takes place after Francis refused a Brother's request to take a purse from the ground that looked full of money to distribute to the poor, but instead turned out to contain a poisonous serpent. Then, on the way to Siena, Francis received an unusual greeting:

Three poor women, alike in all respects as to height, age, and countenance, met him on the wide plain between Campiglio and San Quirico, proffering a new greeting by way of gift: "Welcome," said they, "Lady Poverty!" At these words, that true lover of poverty was filled with joy unspeakable, inasmuch as there was naught in him that he would so lief have saluted by men as that whereof they had made mention. On a sudden the women vanished, whereupon the Brethren that were his companions pondered on their wondrous resemblance each unto the other, and on the newness of their greeting, their appearing, and their vanishing, and deemed, not without reason, that some mystery was thereby signified concerning the holy man. Verily, by those three poor women, — for such they seemed, — with such resemblance in countenance, that met him, that gave him such unwonted greeting, and that so suddenly vanished, it was fittingly shewn that the beauty of Gospel perfection, — touching chastity, to wit, and obedience, and poverty, — shone forth perfectly in kindred form in the man of God.¹²⁷

The hagiographical nature of the narrative does not detract from what we are to know and apply about Francis. That is, as a living saint who shows forth God and embodies the principle of Lady Poverty through the religious espousal of perfected poverty, chastity, and obedience, Francis epitomized his vocation to the point where Lady Poverty was mysteriously present to others by simply encountering him in person. Having rendered her visible as *bride* through religious espousal, the Nirmanakaya principle integrated itself so thoroughly in his own person that to see Francis is to see him and his "guru" simultaneously, for they are inseparable.

Lady Poverty as *dowry* entails not only living toward complete and full union with God in heaven, but also the restoration of all things in Christ in the Eschaton. This

¹²⁷ Ibid., 151-153.

is because Francis is a rare, epoch-making saint along the order of Augustine and Aquinas, whose status renders him metonymical not only with personal salvation as sealed in his own person through the stigmata, but with salvation itself. His future-based *dowry* takes on and embodies his guru Lady Poverty through all the means of grace the church provides, showing forth the possibility of actualizing full, Svabhavikakaya union with God.

Chapter 11: Bodhicitta/Agape

Showing Forth Love is the Most Important Thing

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13).¹²⁸

As initially presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis, bodhicitta is translated as “awakened mind/heart,”¹²⁹ and comprises *absolute* or *action*, and *relative* or *aspiration* categories. Absolute bodhicitta is the “union of emptiness and compassion,” and the “essential nature of awakened mind.”¹³⁰ Relative bodhicitta is the “tenderness arising from a glimpse of ultimate bodhicitta that inspires one to train oneself to work for the benefit of others.”¹³¹ Bodhicitta is incredibly significant, for it is the very “backbone of Buddhism” without which nothing meaningful can be accomplished.¹³² As will be discussed in the following two chapters, it is the “one thing to hold, cherish, and actualize,” and Buddhahood itself “is the perfect mental formation of bodhicitta.”¹³³

Having this courageous mindset allows one to remain in samsara for the benefit of all beings until there is no more samsara and universal enlightenment is actualized. As a result of this practice concern about personal well-being disappears, with the ultimate joy

¹²⁸ “Christ, King and Lord of the universe, made himself the servant of all, for he came ‘not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’” (CCC 783). Cf. Mt 20:28.

¹²⁹ Chögyam Trungpa, *Training the Mind*, 372, Apple Book.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament*, 30.

¹³³ Ibid., 31.

being found in fighting for this infinitely greater goal. “One who has this mind is called a bodhisattva.”¹³⁴ A bodhisattva’s life becomes a means of practice under all circumstances, and they are always reminded of “impermanence, the suffering of samsara, and the progress of bodhicitta.”¹³⁵ This is what it means to live out the bodhisattva vow: “I will not retire or take nirvana until all sentient beings are free of samsara and attain enlightenment.”¹³⁶

Overall, a working parallel with bodhicitta is *agape*, or the love of God.¹³⁷ While bodhicitta is grounded in dharmakaya and *agape* in latria, they are equivalent in terms of significance, for prioritizing divine love is literally the First Commandment. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”¹³⁸ Also consider Christ’s expansion of the text, where he says: “‘You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and the first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 32. This vow denotes another interesting feature of Vajrayana Buddhism; the assertion that even enlightened Buddhas will intervene in the world of samsara, and do not depart into nirvana never to return. Trungpa criticizes God-based religions based on his belief that, “in the theistic approach when we retire from this world, we go to heaven. Once we are in heaven we do not have anything to do with the world. We have no obligations, and we can be happy ever after” Trungpa, *Journey Without Goal*, 156, Apple Book. As any Catholic will attest however, this is erroneous. In the Creed we profess belief in the communion of saints, call on saints as intercessors all the time, even canonizing them based on evidence of their intercession.

¹³⁷ I present *agape* grounded in latria because worship of God can be divinely reciprocated as *agape*, and this context for how *agape* is to be understood is found in Edith Stein’s *The Science of the Cross*: “Love’s highest fulfillment is ‘being-one’ in free mutual surrender: this is the inter-trinitarian divine life. The creature’s aspiring, yearning love (*amor*, *eros*) that strives to ascend, and God’s merciful, condescending love for his creatures (*Caritas*, *agape*) aim for this fulfillment. Where these two meet, the union can progressively happen: at the expense of whatever still stands in its way, and in the measure in which this obstacle is destroyed.” Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross: The Collected Works of Edith Stein, Volume Six*, tr. Josephine Koeppl (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2002), 576-577.

¹³⁸ Ex 20:1-3.

commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”¹³⁹ Though freedom from suffering (nirvana) and union with God (heaven) are not the same, both divine love and bodhicitta naturally reach out to other people for their benefit. This is ontological – bodhicitta or agape that does not naturally overflow from self to others does not and cannot exist.

Chapter 12: Aspiration Bodhicitta/The Science of the Cross

Through aspiration bodhicitta one imagines all beings suffering in samsara, where with “great compassion and wisdom”¹⁴⁰ one meditates on the “four boundless qualities” of love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and impartiality.¹⁴¹ Meditating on these helps us to feel kindness and care for other people, taking pleasure in understanding their problems while maintaining equanimity in meditating on their behalf. This is a practice of awakening the mind/heart, really thinking through the impossibly vast scope of suffering in all manifestations. Given the examples of Buddhas and bodhisattvas who have modelled the four boundless qualities, aspiration bodhicitta finds a parallel in practicing *the science of the cross*, where the examples of Christian saints are likewise emulated, and interiorly imagining samsara, as it were, becomes epitomized. This means embracing a sense of “holy realism” where faith in God becomes the content of how life is actually lived, and the “original inner receptivity of the soul reborn in the Holy Spirit” leads persons to accept the truths of faith.¹⁴² This *science of the saints* becomes *the science of the cross* when “the mystery of the cross” becomes the interior form of a soul.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Mt 22:37-40.

¹⁴⁰ Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament*, 31.

¹⁴¹ Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang, *A Guide to The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trs. Dipamkara and the Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2011), 411, Apple Book.

¹⁴² Stein, *Science of the Cross*, 10-11.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

Chapter 13: Action Bodhicitta/Scopos-Telos/Theological Virtues-Kenosis

Action bodhicitta then builds on aspiration bodhicitta and purifies the mind, so that “precious altruistic thought” can be actualized for the well-being of others through “all study and practice,” even sitting momentarily or chanting mantras.¹⁴⁴ This involves overcoming the poisonous emotions of desire, aversion, and ignorance, with the respective antidotes of Vinaya (the code of discipline for Buddhist practitioners, especially monks and nuns), Sutras (the written discourses of the historical Buddha Gautama, constituting all the teachings), and Abhidharma (also known as higher Dharma or Buddhist psychology).¹⁴⁵ These mental actions are further divided into six *paramitas* or *perfections*. Literally meaning “gone beyond,” this training activates bodhicitta so that practitioners can move beyond samsara and into enlightenment.¹⁴⁶ They are “generosity, moral ethics, patience, perseverance, meditative concentration and discriminating wisdom.”¹⁴⁷

The perfection of *generosity* refers to a special method of cutting “attachment to anything for one’s own benefit” that we may open our hearts and minds to share everything with others, actualize harmony, and “free ourselves from stinginess and clinging.”¹⁴⁸ Training in *moral ethics* consists of physical, verbal, and mental discipline that helps to bypass samsara and focus on enlightenment. This contributes to realizing mahamudra, which represents the “result of the complete perfection of purification,” and avoiding “the cause of samsara, to attain enlightenment by training one’s own mind, and

¹⁴⁴ Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament*, 32.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 434-435, 32-33.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 432.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 179.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 33-34.

to benefit sentient beings.”¹⁴⁹ *Patience* is a “special method to counter and overcome the obstacles to peace and harmony in the relative as well as the absolute state.”¹⁵⁰

Perseverance “is like a special ‘hand’ with which to collect the wealth of virtues, wisdom, and compassion,” and a corrective to the laziness that keeps us from accomplishing Buddhahood.¹⁵¹

Meditative concentration refers to analytical and stabilizing meditation. Analytical meditation involves training the mind through investigating the world and one’s interior experience. Given that all phenomena operate within causes and conditions and are impermanent, we should not cling to objects as if they were real in any meaningfully permanent sense. Meditative stabilization on the ten virtues¹⁵² teaches that samsara is inessential and we can be free from confusion,¹⁵³ and *discriminating awareness* or *wisdom awareness* “is a special quality of the mind which penetrates the unfabricated nature of all phenomena,” without which “one cannot be freed from samsara nor attain Buddhahood.”¹⁵⁴ This sixth paramita of wisdom awareness can be thought of as one’s spiritual eyes, with the other five providing metaphorical support as the body. What the eyes see is the transcendent knowledge beyond ego and samsara, known as

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 34-35.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁵² These are protecting the lives of others, practicing great generosity, maintaining moral ethics, speaking truth, harmonizing those who are unfriendly, speaking peacefully and politely, speaking meaningfully, reducing attachment and maximizing contentment, practicing loving-kindness, and engaging in the perfect meaning. These virtues are counterbalanced by the ten nonvirtues that cause suffering in samsara: taking life, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive speech, harsh words, idle talk, covetousness, harmful thought, and wrong views (ibid., 111-117).

¹⁵³ Ibid., 36-37.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 37.

Prajnaparamita, as articulated in the *Heart Sutra*: “Form is emptiness; emptiness itself is form.”¹⁵⁵

Prajnaparamita basically entails understanding how the universe works! Prajna is the wisdom that sees emptiness itself as absolute and form as relative, with form being none other than emptiness and emptiness itself none other than form.¹⁵⁶ This means that “everything is composed of interdependent causes and effects” or *karma*, with phenomena or *luminosity* ceaselessly manifesting out of the emptiness as a single, inseparable entity.¹⁵⁷ When experienced meditation makes this clear, the mind opens and becomes “free of boundaries so that the excellent qualities of great compassion and wisdom awareness can manifest. Everything becomes obvious and nothing is hidden,” and “there is no need to speculate or investigate.”¹⁵⁸

For a Christian parallel to action bodhicitta itself, I turn to the distinctions *scopos* and *telos*. Simply put, the spiritual life is a Trinitarian model that goes out from God, so that “the goal or scopos” of “purity of heart” (form) may be developed, “without which it is impossible for anyone to reach” the “telos” which “is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven” (emptiness).¹⁵⁹ For Christians, Prajnaparamita is equated with contemplating God, where the relative form of self gradually merges with the Absolute Mystery. This is defined as “perpetual purity of heart,” with “our actions and thoughts” ordered “to attaining it in the most direct way.”¹⁶⁰ For Catholics, contemplation of God within a Trinitarian model of living is also what is meant by *simplicity*.

¹⁵⁵ Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament*, 37.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ John Cassian, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, tr. Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (New Jersey, USA: Paulist Press, 1997), 43-44.

¹⁶⁰ Cassian, *Conferences*, 43-44.

The six paramitas are paralleled by the *theological virtues* of faith, hope, and charity. Generosity and moral ethics find their counterparts in *faith*, for this is “the theological virtue by which we believe in God, and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself.”¹⁶¹ By faith we generously commit our entire selves to God, and Francis’ utter self-abnegation in following God within the teachings espoused by the Church, even to the point of dying in a borrowed habit and sincerely welcoming death as a sister, shows a perfection of generosity and moral ethics. In sacrificing his entire life and undergoing extreme hardship in order to attain Buddhahood in a single lifetime so that the Dharma would be available to his followers throughout subsequent generations, Milarepa’s mastery is no less perfect.

Patience and perseverance are like *hope*, which “is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶² While hope of heaven for himself and everyone who could be saved made perfect sense to Francis, and Trinitarian concepts would not have occurred to Milarepa to even consider, Milarepa nonetheless understood the aspiration to happiness which Marpa granted him by agreeing to teach him the Dharma, and which he later found in his practice. Hope in heaven or enlightenment keeps “man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal

¹⁶¹ CCC 1814.

¹⁶² CCC 1817.

beatitude,” preserves “from selfishness,” and leads “to the happiness that flows from charity.”¹⁶³

Charity, or *love*, “which is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God,”¹⁶⁴ parallels meditative concentration and wisdom awareness. Concentrating solely on the kingdom and enlightenment for all beings were what Francis and Milarepa were all about, and wisdom awareness helped keep them aware of the grace of God and true Dharma practice to safely navigate them through the extreme lengths they traversed.

Other people who followed them were not always aware of wisdom guiding the process. For example, when Francis said: “The Lord has called me by the way of simplicity and humbleness, and this is the way He has pointed out to me for myself and for those who will believe and follow me,” it was in response to members of his own order at their 1219 general chapter who thought Francis “too haphazard,” and needing more “practicalness.”¹⁶⁵ Milarepa’s decision to forgive his aunt and teach her the Dharma was certainly impractical, but wisdom awareness gave him no other serious option. This is due to his conclusion that, “It is the harm caused by enemies and obstacle makers that gives you the opportunity to develop patience. Careful observation will show you that, from the point of view of Dharma, enemies and obstacle makers are kinder to you than your own parents.”¹⁶⁶ This is because “your parents, by teaching you all the trickery and deceit necessary to succeed in this world, can prevent you from getting free

¹⁶³ CCC 1818.

¹⁶⁴ CCC 1822.

¹⁶⁵ Thurston and Atwater, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, 27.

¹⁶⁶ Rinpoche, *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, 180-181.

from the depths of the lower realms in your future lives.”¹⁶⁷ Ironically, adversaries in this sense are better for you, because they “bring you to the Dharma, as happened to Jetsun Mila, whose uncle and aunt robbed him of all his wealth.”¹⁶⁸

The point is, with both saints charity also has an element of *kenosis*, or self-emptying, which is described in the Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians as a mindset: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”¹⁶⁹ Thereby modeling *scopos*/form for the *telos*/emptiness of divinization resulted in God “highly (exalting) him and (giving) him the name that is above every name.”¹⁷⁰ Sharing in *kenosis* is *koinōnia*, or common participation,¹⁷¹ and suffering in this sense both strengthens community bonds and further contextualizes faith, hope, and charity. Darkness and doubt must be passed through for charity to be strong enough to be meditatively concentrated upon, and made aware of as wisdom.

CONCLUSION

Proceeding from the theological background established in Part I and flowing into Part II of this thesis on St. Francis, Milarepa, and interreligious contemplation, I have endeavored to explore new and unforeseen possibilities for virtuous practice, even by drawing attention to how Buddhist rebirth can help Christians engage our single life of praxis with greater intentionality. By examining radical other-centeredness, I showed

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 181.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Phil 2:5-7.

¹⁷⁰ Phil 2:9.

¹⁷¹ Raymond Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 792.

how Christians approach sainthood by divinization, and Buddhists through overcoming suffering. This gave new insight when considering union with God as the result of overcoming suffering! By embracing a radical other-centeredness that prayerfully strives toward divinization through vanquishing suffering, Buddhism can help Christians more effectively acknowledge sanctifying activity taking place, providing a broader context to love one another as Christ commands.

By taking a closer look at the kayas and comparing the Eschaton to Svabhavikakaya, the insight emerged that in doing so, Christians can have a more mature and fulfilling faith life. This is because while the Eschaton will happen at the end of time, Svabhavikakaya refers to an already existent unity. While these concepts represent different realities, we can and ought to live as if the Eschaton were comparably realized among us. Though we already do this to a certain extent by participating in building up the kingdom of God, Christians can tend to overemphasize a future-based otherworldly reality, which contributes to our being less mindful of the present effect we have on the world. In turn, this contributes to exploiting resources and people, further perpetuating sin and suffering. We will only benefit by observing Christ's commandments right here and now.

With faith in God expressed through generosity and moral ethics, hope as patience and perseverance, and love as meditative concentration and wisdom awareness, learning about Vajrayana Buddhism enriches the perspective through which we can discern and act on the will of God. Though Catholic Christianity may be the most complete form of belief that dares to point at the universe and ascribe order to it, that

should only remind us of how imponderable God really is, and how infinitesimal our claims to knowledge really are relative to Absolute Mystery.

Faith is at its best when it awakens the mind/heart, and the bigger and more searching our thoughts and feelings become, God can be known and loved all the more. Through the examples of St. Francis, Jetsün Milarepa, and the innumerable saints of our various faith traditions, we can see a heroic faith in action that inspires greatness. Though their ways will be initially unfamiliar to us, the very least we can learn from them are new perspectives to enliven our own belief, especially so that others will benefit not only spiritually, but even practically when we befriend one another and work together for the common good.

If religion is to be a vital force for good in the world, it is incumbent on religious practitioners to transcend all superstitious anachronisms and destructive behaviors, prioritizing only the goodness and virtue religious traditions can represent when they are at their absolute best. In this sense, searching for interreligious parallels is not merely an intellectual pursuit; it is a contemplatively integral mind/heart process where every new connection we make reveals another possibility to “reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all.”¹⁷² We do this for God and the Dharma, for heaven and enlightenment, and for all beings and situations we encounter. Showing forth love is the most important thing, and we can never know and love God enough.

¹⁷² NA 2.

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