

University of Redlands

InSPIRe @ Redlands

---

Our House Articles, Posters, and Presentations

Our House

---

2011

## Duality and Non-duality in Christian Practice: Reflections on the Benefits of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue for Constructive Theology

Wendy Farley PhD  
*Emory University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://inspire.redlands.edu/oh\\_articles](https://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_articles)

 Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Farley, Wendy PhD, "Duality and Non-duality in Christian Practice: Reflections on the Benefits of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue for Constructive Theology" (2011). *Our House Articles, Posters, and Presentations*. 337.

[https://inspire.redlands.edu/oh\\_articles/337](https://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_articles/337)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](#).

This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Our House at InSPIRe @ Redlands. It has been accepted for inclusion in Our House Articles, Posters, and Presentations by an authorized administrator of InSPIRe @ Redlands. For more information, please contact [inspire@redlands.edu](mailto:inspire@redlands.edu).



PROJECT MUSE®

---

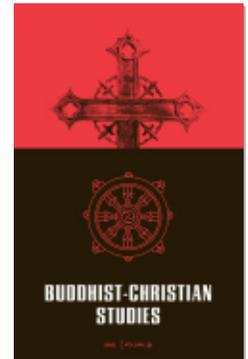
Duality and Non-Duality in Christian Practice: *Reflections on the Benefits of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue for Constructive Theology*

Wendy Farley

Buddhist-Christian Studies, Volume 31, 2011, pp. 135-146 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2011.0002>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/454798>

# Duality and Non-Duality in Christian Practice

## *Reflections on the Benefits of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue for Constructive Theology*

Wendy Farley  
*Emory University*

The question before us is the desirability of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in the work of (what Christians call) constructive theology. As a feminist theologian whose work is ever more deeply shaped by such a dialogue, my immediate answer is an unequivocal yes.<sup>1</sup> This dialogue fits a general pattern over two thousand years in which theologians have drawn from the wisdom of other traditions or cultures to better understand the mysteries of human experience. Without neo-Platonism and Aristotle there could hardly have been anything we recognize as Christian theology. Without pre-Christian Irish religion, there would be no Saint Brigit or Celtic Christianity. Without phenomenology, process, and Marxist philosophy the greatest works of twentieth-century Christian thought would not exist. Christianity, like all religions, is a moving river changed by time and culture and nearly as interiorly diverse as its members. The dialogue with Buddhism might be seen as a contemporary example of Christianity's openness to exchange with other ways of thinking that broadens and deepens its best insights. It is perhaps analogous to Origen's reliance on neo-Platonism or Thomas Aquinas's inspiration by the rediscovery of Aristotle.<sup>2</sup>

The porous boundaries between Christianity and its culture open it to wisdom beyond itself but they also open it to cruelty and ignorance. Nothing protects religions from participating in the human condition and thus the prejudices and power structures that mutilate human society. Consumer culture and oppressions by class, ethnicity, and gender are seamlessly incorporated into Christian identity. The tacit synthesis of a culture's values with those of a religion neutralizes possible critique and can elevate a society's oppressions to a sacred duty. For this reason, too, dialogue with Buddhism is important to call Christianity back to its ethical moorings in the ideal of universal love and compassion.

Religions are porous to the world around them, but they tend to conceal this from themselves and often imagine themselves to be not only untainted but also uniquely

qualified to mediate salvation. Religions provide human beings with language and practice through which dimensions of reality that cannot simply be read off of nature or experience are (in some sense) encountered. This is their great gift. The difficulty of religions is that tradition can become an end in itself. Because a tradition really does offer meaning and tools for transformation it is easy to slip into the existential posture of so idealizing a tradition that it seems in some direct and exclusive way to correlate to ultimate truth. The curvature of the ego onto itself, so attached to its own pain and pleasure that everything else seems a mere shadow, moves from the microcosm of the self to the macrocosm of religious tradition. The particular religion—or that element within it with which I identify—becomes identical with sacred reality. In the hostility to other religions characteristic of many Christians we see the illusion of egocentrism in its religious form. Paul Tillich described this tendency to absolutize itself as the demonic distortion of religion.<sup>3</sup> Religious dialogue is a potent medicine against this overattachment to one's own tradition.

These different senses in which a religion integrates into itself the wisdom and illusions of its time and place create enormous diversity within a religious tradition. Root concepts within Christianity concerning soteriology, divinity, and suffering do not have any agreed upon meaning. That is, there is no "Christian" view of salvation. Gregory of Nyssa's ideal of *theosis*, Luther's emphasis on salvation by grace through faith, an evangelical's experience of being born again, a liberal Protestant's commitment to social justice are so diverse that they seem to represent almost different religions.

In light of the malleability and interior diversity of traditions, dialogue may not be between two self-sufficient religions but between participants who inhabit their tradition in a variety of ways.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, I would like to experiment with practice as a basis for some kinds of dialogue. Practice is concretely located in a religious tradition and yet reflects both the interior plurality and fluidity of meaning that seems to characterize religions. Practice may be a way of seeing both ways in which Christianity is other to itself (the contemplative dimension of Christianity, for example, may seem as alien to evangelical Christianity as Buddhism) as well as ways it shares similar sensibilities with some Buddhist practices. Perhaps paradoxically it is sometimes easier to interpret Christian contemplative writings when they are placed in conversation with contemplative literatures of other religious traditions. Certain understandings of Christian theism make it almost impossible to see what is going on in the writings of nondualistic Christians. The irreducible difference between Buddhism and Christian theism is not erased but somewhat modified if we attend to dualistic and nondualistic elements within Christianity. It does not open onto a place where the traditions are "the same" but it does seem to engage the differences a little differently. There are two threads that are intertwining in this proposal. First, the focus on practices oriented toward nonduality focuses the conversation between two traditions in a distinctive way. Second, this conversation enables Christians to understand their own contemplative writings better than if these writings are interpreted exclusively through the lens of a canonical history of Christian thought.

I was prodded to think further in this direction by reading John Makransky, who

notes that “different kinds of spiritual practice lead to different spiritual results and many of these results fall short of complete liberation from suffering.”<sup>5</sup> He goes on to point out the importance of practices that cut through even subtle clinging to concepts, “including all clinging to religious ideas, beliefs, practices, and spiritual experiences as if they were ultimate.”<sup>6</sup> This clinging to a religious tradition as if it were ultimate occurs “if religious training does not provide the means to uproot fully enough the subconscious tendencies of conditioned grasping to human conceptualizations that obscure the unconditioned, non-conceptual reality of *nirvana*.”<sup>7</sup> His own analysis opened up for me a delightful and compelling way to reflect on a theology of religions, but in this paper I would like to take his insight in a slightly different direction. I would like to consider Christian practices in light of this concern that attachment to a religious tradition can itself become a problem. This makes possible an internal critique of certain Christian practices but also directs us to consider practices within Christianity that are oriented toward awareness of nonduality. In particular, I would like to explore the thought of Marguerite Porete as someone who understood that clinging to religious “ideas, beliefs, practices, and spiritual experiences” did indeed serve as an obstacle to the annihilation of the soul.

#### DUALISTIC CHRISTIAN PRACTICES

Dualistic habits of consciousness run very deep. I imagine that they are eradicated or even substantively modified only at the end of a great deal of practice. As long as our experience is shaped by embodied, psychic consciousness, duality between self and other will remain a constitutive quality of awareness. Our bodies and psyches expose us to very vivid experiences of pain and pleasure, of fear, desire, and anxiety. It is natural that the vividness of bodily and psychic difficulty makes it seem as if those bundles of experiences are the center of reality; they are the center of the ego’s experience. The reality of others and of the world itself is more or less shadowy compared to the sharpness of pain, the gnawing of anxiety, the tyranny of longing. The desire to provide for the needs of the body, psyche, and spirit generate an obsessive attachment to those things the ego believes will ease the ache of existence. Frustration, suffering, and oppression generate terror and anger, which make it difficult to see beyond the threatening qualities of someone. Both desire and fear objectify others so they are denuded of their own preciousness and vulnerabilities. They become objects to be possessed, feared, or loathed.

A common human condition is to be bound to the intensities of egological consciousness, and yet this form of consciousness defrauds us of awareness of the flow of reality across boundaries the ego experiences as absolute. The religions provide languages, symbols, and practices that alert us to the relative truth of egological consciousness: the illusory character of separation and the relativity of the pain and pleasure that seem so compelling to the ego. Religions provide symbolic frameworks to express a dimension of reality irreducible to the experiences of the ego and a vocabulary to express the counterintuitive primacy of love, compassion, and peace. And yet Christianity, and I presume other traditions, also inhabits this egological con-

sciousness. Religions do not magically transcend or escape from the human condition and the habits of mind it generates. Religions both reify and point beyond dualistic consciousness. It is the tragedy of religion, perhaps especially of Christianity, to point toward a liberation from dualistic awareness only to further entangle its practitioners in this consciousness.

One practice that many Christians consider essential is to believe certain things. There is a history to this that I will not rehearse here. I will only say that there are good and bad reasons why belief became so essential to Christian practice. It was the genius of Martin Luther to identify a quality of religious life irreducible to those practices that were controlled by an authoritative ecclesial structure. His emphasis on faith alone disentangled the ego from the hopeless striving after a perfection that ever eluded it and opened onto a dimension of gracious and unconditional love. Whatever wisdom and limitation were present in the innovations of the Protestant Reformation, faith quickly degenerated into cognitive assent. This emphasis on cognition reifies habits of dualistic awareness.

Emphasis on belief itself is often tied up with a particular view of reality: Ultimate reality is named God and conceived to be more or less like a (male) human being but in possession of unlimited power. Humanity is characterized primarily as sinful, that is to say, as deserving of punishment. One can be spared an eternity of punishment by believing that Jesus is the son of God who has died to take on the sins of the faithful. The distinction between those who believe and those who don't splits humanity into an eternal duality, the saved and the damned. Access to salvation is dependent upon participation in Christian churches (or at least those churches one identifies as possessing true religion).

This narrative undoubtedly provides life-giving community to many people; it creates opportunities for acts of service and gives meaning in an often meaningless or trivial culture. Yet to the extent that this narrative and the emphasis on believing it form a core religious practice, it is difficult to avoid the concern that it does not always carry its practitioners far toward the healing of the tyranny of attachment to consolations and of hostility to "others." It is easy to find examples of this kind of practice moving in the direction of psychological and even physical violence. It is a narrative deployed to dehumanize gay and lesbian members of a religious community and to justify indifference to those outside of the community. I am concerned that the moral and metaphysical duality of this commonplace version of the Christian narrative undermines capacities for self-respect, humility, and compassion. To the extent that the consequences of practice are significant, this version of Christianity seems to invite a critical glance, even while we acknowledge many life-giving results of these beliefs.

For many Christians, the characteristic quality of divinity is radical love, and this provides the basis for belief and action. Love is a relational and even unitive metaphor for reality that tends to weaken the hard lines between self and other. The ideal of divine love inspires participation in countless social justice movements—abolition, civil rights, prison reform, antiwar and anti-poverty movements, the creation of hospitals and provision for homeless persons, efforts to protect the environment, and so on. Exhausted mothers who gently care for fractious children in airports are among

those for whom love is a non-heroic but entirely ordinary practice. Women and men shaped by practices of love have faced death with equanimity and have helped others do the same.

Whether or in what sense love represents a fundamental duality is difficult to tease out. Schleiermacher points out, for example, that it is only in language not in inner experience that people depend upon anthropomorphic images for ultimate reality.<sup>8</sup> The theistic and personal metaphors characteristic of Christianity suggest a deep duality between God and world and yet the deification of love generates practices that displace egocentrism as the organizing shape of a person's mind. It expresses itself in natural and spontaneous care for others. The ordinariness of practices of love in families, in communities, in the workplace, and in the larger society is a good reminder that heroic disciplines are not the only ways to reform the human person toward equanimity and compassion. Or put another way, the ordinary heroism that practices of Christian love empowers raises the question of how we are to understand the theistic language that sustains it. The language and imagery is of a deity separate from the world, and yet love implies an erosion of the boundary that separates the ego from others as well as God from the world. There may be, as Schleiermacher suggests, an implicit nonduality at work in the imagery of love that governs much Christian practice. That is, phenomenologically if not conceptually, practices of love may point in the direction of nondual, nonconceptual awareness.

#### ANNIHILATION AND NONDUALITY: THE WITNESS OF MARGUERITE PORETE

There are however, literatures within Christianity that are more explicit about the importance of nondual awareness as a central practice for liberating ego consciousness and setting it on a "throne of peace" where love rules. John Makransky provides one way of describing the importance of nonduality from a Buddhist perspective: Buddhism conveys through its teachings and practices "an innate, pure, non-dual awareness" that unites "wisdom beyond grasping to dualism" with "compassion for all caught in such grasping." The fruit of this path is "the actualization of all qualities of Buddha-Nature: non-dual, non-conceptual awareness, emptiness, tranquility, impartial all-inclusive compassion, and endless liberating activity and manifestation on behalf of suffering beings. The path can also be described as an increasingly stable recognition of the *nirvāṇic* nature of all things in their emptiness." He sees in the wisdom of nonconceptual, nondual awareness manifest in great compassion a path that is capable of severing even the subtlest attachments. By looking at practices, we might begin to investigate whether there is an analogue to nondual awareness and its fruits within Christianity. One possible parallel is the *via negativa*, represented for example by the anonymous monk Pseudo Dionysius.

*The via negativa* is a Christian practice intended to dissolve the mind's attachment to concepts and integrate nonduality into awareness. Pseudo Dionysius deploys names and concepts to gradually extinguish both: the divine nature "is not soul nor mind nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding . . . it is not wisdom, neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness, nor is it spirit. There is

neither speaking of it nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond every assertion and every denial.”<sup>9</sup>

Pseudo Dionysius exerted significant influence on Christian thought. Through the apophatic tradition, the relativity of concepts becomes a constant warning against reification of ideas and experiences. But its cognitive emphasis may be insufficient to precisely target the subtle existential attachments that survive the way of unknowing. That is, the negative way opens a path to nonduality, but there are limits to how deeply cognitive practices can go to disengage more subtle existential clinging. Of course, practitioners of the negative way were usually monks and so various physical and psychic forms of asceticism would have been integrated into their daily lives, even if these are not referred to directly in their theological writings. It is impossible to know the efficacy of this combination of practices in individual lives and communities. It can be said that Christian history and theology have focused on more conceptually oriented texts and that there are few examples of these practices challenging attachment to Christianity as the decisive route to salvation. But these are difficult matters and it does not seem possible to discern the extent to which a naïve acceptance of Christianity as the ideal path to salvation was combined with an existential dissolution of attachment.<sup>10</sup>

There is, however, one writer whose combination of sapiential and apophatic practices illuminated for her the limits of religious institutions and practices. The writings of Marguerite Porete will serve as an example of more radical nondualistic possibilities within Christianity as well as the price paid for pursuing the ideal of nonduality to its fulfillment. My own interpretation of Porete has been informed by encounter with Buddhism and in particular the practice of *mahāmudrā* meditation. There is, of course, no question of influence. But this meditation extends the religious imagination beyond the nondual forms of theism represented by thinkers like Pseudo Dionysius or Anselm. The seemingly original insights of Porete seem to invite conversation beyond the bounds of theism in order to glimpse something of her contribution to religious thought and practice.

Marguerite Porete was a near contemporary of Thomas Aquinas who met the opposite fate from that of the angelic doctor when she was burned at the stake in a Paris square in June of 1310. But she left behind one of the boldest texts describing Christian contemplative practice I have encountered. Her focus is not only on the dissolution of concepts but on the annihilation of the will. The text, when separated from Porete herself, circulated anonymously until the mid twentieth century, when it was reconnected with its author. During its anonymous afterlife, it was an important manual of advanced spiritual practice and was considered difficult but not heterodox.<sup>11</sup>

The *Mirror of Simple Souls* is a dialogue among Divine Love, the Soul, and Reason. The reader is another character in the sense that she is invited to participate in the process of annihilation it describes. Lady Love, the personification of reality, is the last trace before language, thought, and will dissolve into nonduality. She names not an essence or person but the path of transformation. She teaches nondual awareness, which enables the soul to sit on a throne of peace, unmoved by either fear or desire. Love is both the last word before language dissolves and the last work perfected in

order to achieve the annihilation of the will: "nobody can have grace in a lesser way."<sup>12</sup> Through this path of love, unknowing, and annihilation all forms of attachment and fear are relinquished, including attachment to religious practice and tradition.

Marguerite Porete walks the way of negation, noting that because God is so utterly ineffable "everything one can say or write about God, or think about him, God who is greater than what is ever said, everything is thus more like lying than speaking the truth."<sup>13</sup> Our speech is at best loving lies. Ultimate truth "is not placed in writing by human hand but by the Holy Spirit, who writes this lesson in a marvelous way, and the Soul is the precious parchment. The divine school is held with the mouth closed, which the human mind cannot express in words."<sup>14</sup> Truth is written on the soul, inexpressible in language. Like all writers of the negative way, Porete's negations remain constrained by the object of negation. God, in some sense an entity, in some sense over against the ego, haunts her rhetoric. But the ontologized quality of language is unsatisfactory. She deploys language to dissolve mental structures and attachments. But even this is inadequate to her task. Her primary emphasis is not on the cognitive dimension of apophasis but on the annihilation or nothingness of the will. Within the constraints of the duality of language, she evokes a space in which the seat of action and thought becomes undilutedly divine. But this unitive language already presupposes duality. Porete eschews the bridal mysticism of her fellow beguines and seeks more radical metaphors. Progressively deconstructing the will, what we might call the ego or consciousness of a separate self, she emphasizes the noncognitive sense in which duality is effaced by practice. Through annihilation, the Soul returns to her pre-created state, "naked as I was when I was who was not."<sup>15</sup> Or, as she later puts it, "she is what God is through the transformation of love, in that point in which she was, before she flowed from the Goodness of God."<sup>16</sup>

Porete pairs reason's dispossession of concepts with the will's dispossession of works. She writes for advanced practitioners, in particular fellow beguines who practice both asceticism and unitive meditation. She is at pains to show that even these spiritual practices can become obstacles. The church tolerated women's religious practices that were shaped by penitential theology and bridal mysticism, but from Porete's perspective even these reflect subtle forms of attachment. She was suspicious of the vacillation between bliss and longing and critical of severe ascetic practices. Bridal mysticism permitted women a voice, but only if they accepted the violence of self-abnegation and penitential practices. Porete did not accept this bargain. She had a more radical sense of what the human spirit was capable of and, I suspect, compassion for her sisters whose wings were cut. As Amy Hollywood puts it: "in their rejection of bodily asceticism, paramystical phenomena, and, most importantly, special visionary and unitive experiences, Porete and Eckhart are attempting to allay women's pain."<sup>17</sup> Asceticism could become a bondage to suffering and an ultimately futile assertion of the will. Porete acknowledges that her fellow beguines were "marvelously filled with love by great faith through the concord of union," but insists that they were deceived in thinking that there was no state beyond unitive mysticism.<sup>18</sup>

Even willing in perfect accord with the divine will is still willing. It presupposes the survival of an independent ego that wishes to please, that exerts itself in action,

and that oscillates between pain and pleasure, if religiously modified in form by the bliss of union and a desert of mortification. Even someone who spent one thousand years perfectly fulfilling the commandment to love would have remained encumbered by their own will: they would have continued willing love.<sup>19</sup> “One who remains in will is often in such a war, whatever good works his will might do.”<sup>20</sup> Through the disciplines of medieval asceticism, the will is remorselessly trained to renounce its attachment. But as Porete points out, the will survives these techniques fairly well. It might desire more sublime pleasures and accept the physical discomfort of cold, hunger, fatigue, pain, as well as a tortured abdication of self-worth. But the dualistic and egocentric structures of mind remain intact. Just as the truth about divinity is not apprehended by a more accurate concept, the release of will into divinity is not accomplished by more fitting joys and sorrows. These may be, as the Panchen Lama puts it, wondrous skillful means for beginners.<sup>21</sup> But they remain in thrall to the psychology of pain and pleasure, and to the theology that stands behind it—pleasing or offending a deity fundamentally separate from them.

The annihilation of the will recalibrates the soul’s orientation to nature, suffering, and spiritual practice. Nature no longer offers impediment or temptation. Suffering no longer terrorizes and religious practice is no longer interplay between discipline and ecstasy. The annihilated soul does no work; it returns to pre-created emptiness. “It knows not what it is, whether God or human, for it is not . . . Such a lady seeks God no more. She has no why, she has nothing to do with herself. Nothing is lacking to her, therefore why would she seek Him? Whoever seeks, he is ‘with’ himself.”<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the annihilated soul is “without a mediary.”<sup>23</sup> Virtue and mystical union, which had been important at earlier stages, are now insignificant. The unencumbered Soul is in Paradise, for “paradise is nothing other than to see God only.”<sup>24</sup> In this state the soul sees neither herself nor God but God sees Godself in her, who sees that “there is nothing except God.”<sup>25</sup> But, if we think of God as in any sense an entity, a something, we might imagine that one has become one with this entity. I think Porete’s sense of nothingness resists such an interpretation. Concepts are dissolved but so is desire, even the most refined forms of religious eroticism. Non-concupiscent desire for God is annihilated: “I say I love Him but I lie, for I am not.”<sup>26</sup> In this state of annihilation, neither God nor the “I” exist.

Porete understands that it is possible to dismantle conceptual knowing and remain bound by ideas about ultimate reality. It is possible to discipline the will and direct it toward ever-more universal love and yet remain ensnared by fear and desire. Annihilation of the will dissolves even the desire to engage in religious practice. Relinquishing views and practices is the practice through which we enter into the great emptiness, where “there is nothing except God.” She is among those who are able to witness to the dissolution of existential as well as cognitive duality. The simple soul becomes a mirror that reflects nothing because there is no longer same or other, neither subject nor object. There is nothing to reflect, nothing to be reflected.

Though she emphasizes that the annihilated soul neither acts nor understands, it does not appear to be inactive. Living out the paradoxes of the bodhisattva path, the unencumbered soul is encumbered by the task of writing words for the sake of fellow

contemplatives. But through this work of love “the Soul remains in pure nothingness without thought.”<sup>27</sup> Reason expires partway through the dialogue, unable to bear the paradoxes of love, but returns soon afterward in order to carry on the conversation. Without this interlocutor Love would not be able to convey her message. The will also dies but Porete continued to act with a degree of courage that remains astonishing. She was aware that teaching women threatened ecclesial authority: “I must hide from them and not speak my language to those who prefer death to the being of life where I am in peace without moving myself.”<sup>28</sup> But she remained encumbered by love for fellow practitioners who found themselves oppressed by the limitations of ecclesially sanctioned practices.

The existence of Porete’s book is itself the most dramatic witness to the persistence of thought and action in the state of annihilation. The point of her work is didactic: she encourages other beguines to move beyond the constraints of bridal mysticism and penitential theology into a radical peace that the church could neither deliver nor destroy. Her text provides a theology and a practice to enter into this state of peace. But the witness of her life suggests that practice is lived as well as described in writing. One can imagine that eighteen months in the Inquisitor’s prison would evict some people from their throne of peace. We do not know her inward state during this period but we do know that she steadfastly refused to speak to the Inquisitor. She is described as meeting her fate with nobility that brought tears to the eyes of the crowd. There seems to be some consistency between her description of the annihilated state and the courage of her witness in the face of ecclesial savagery that testifies to the existential as well as cognitive efficacy of nondual awareness.

#### COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

The Christian theological tradition consistently acknowledges that God transcends human thought. But dualistic constructs are a constant feature of Christian faith and institutional practice. Part of the difficulty is that negation is still structured by the object of negation. God is beyond our words and concepts, but this God beyond concept remains God: almighty, invisible God only wise. God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. Theologically and existentially, these affirmations of divine transcendence remain somewhat inconsistent. They do not go deep enough to fundamentally challenge our attachments. Christians are often unwilling to detach from institutionally mediated symbols, doctrines, and authorities so that they can fall more deeply into the erotic abyss we characterize as divine. The conflicts through history between sapiential practice and institutional authority have been won by those who know how to play the game of power well. Because of this subjection of sapiential practices to the methods and logic of institutional violence, Christianity has relegated its witness to its own wisdom tradition to the margins.

Marguerite Porete was not the only Christian nondualist. But her fate indicates why this path is at best an underground railroad, a path grown over, concealed, choked by weeds, and as often as not rejected as heterodox. The Inquisition burned her book and burned her as well. After that a pall settled over contemplatives. The

few women who wrote concealed themselves within conventions of feminine piety. Few men risked to write as boldly as Meister Eckhart after he, too, came into conflict with the Inquisition. Christians only rarely ventured to speak the truths of sapiential monotheism: institutions cannot deliver transformation, ultimate reality is not confined to the expression of any historical tradition, the duality of divinity and humanity is an illusion, truth does not sign its name with violence.

In the contemporary situation, theology is one place carved out where there is more freedom to explore the back-eddies of tradition and the implications of marginal writings and practices. I understand constructive theology to be a spiritual practice as well as an academic discipline. As an academic practice, it interprets the multiple textual traditions that form the Christian canon. As a constructive practice it also presses toward more adequate interpretations by surfacing the distortions of patriarchy, racism, or ethnocentrism that become sedimented into the institutional life of the church. It reimagines the root symbols and concepts that structure Christian thought and practice in ways that make sense in contemporary society. It is, on the one hand, an aspect of interpretation of doctrinal traditions and is in that sense intimately related to the church. On the other hand, it has a kind of independence from the church's authority structures. It represents that part of Christian practice that engages in critique and that creatively carries Christian thought forward through time. All religions have some mechanisms for mediating authorities that enjoy sacred worth with the flux of human history and the plurality of spiritual needs. In Christianity, theology is one such mechanism. This is perhaps why theologians are sometimes beatified and sometimes burned.

As a spiritual practice, constructive theology orients itself not only to a particular textual tradition (Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin) but to its primary subject matter: the meaning of suffering, the luminosity of the human spirit, and the ultimate dimension of meaning that Christians express as divinity or divine being. All of the religions I know have an apophatic element. The Tao that can be named is not the living Tao. The flame that appears to Moses liberates but has no name. Emptiness is nonconceptual; no philosophy directly captures it. And yet Christianity is loath to accept this qualification. The God beyond every name and every negation, about whom we speak nothing better than loving lies, is still the God my own tradition is uniquely qualified to describe.

For me the greatest value of dialogue for theology is that it expands the practice of the *via negativa*. It thinks into traditions whose concepts, practices, and symbols may in some way resonate with things familiar in one's own religious language and yet remain stubbornly, delightfully irreducible. Thinking "God," for example, within a single tradition allows a richly profound set of ideas about God to emerge. Swimming among neo-Platonism and Aristotle, Whitehead and Rosemary Radford Ruether prevents one from grasping too firmly any single conceptual framework for ultimate reality. And yet, we remain in the same neighborhood. Reading Nāgārjuna and Śāntidēva breaks open the mind further than the practice of negative theology within a single tradition does. We are linguistic, symbol- and meaning-making creatures. We are shaped by culture and tradition. But finding ways to recognize the *relative* merit of

even the most life-giving aspects of one's own religious tradition is a way to move from a tradition's account of reality toward reality itself. Religious dialogue is one such practice.

The wisdom of nonduality and the aspiration to great compassion are pearls of great price, central to every great religious tradition. The preservation of sapiential practices within Christianity has been thwarted by subjection to institutional authorities that perceive in them (correctly) a threat to their totalizing powers. Dialogue with Buddhists provides an opportunity for Christians to dig more deeply into our own wisdom traditions to discover resources that can contribute to the annihilating force of nondual love. Meditation on emptiness may help us encounter the boldness of writers like Porete more directly. I can't say what benefit there might be for Buddhists in this. Here in *samsāra*, most religious traditions dilute their wisdom in agonistic internal debates and forget ways in which ideals are limited by patriarchy or other cultural blind spots. Across the religious traditions we remain bound together by a desire for wisdom that is difficult to achieve. I am hopeful that conversation with one another will help us to purify the deepest truths of our overlapping paths.

Or as Nāgārjuna says:

I prostrate to Gautama  
Who through compassion  
Taught the true doctrine,  
Which leads to the relinquishing of all views.<sup>29</sup>

#### NOTES

1. I am struck by the clarity and detail with which Grace Burford describes the disadvantaged position of Buddhism in this country. Certainly it is a minority tradition in the United States and a relatively young discipline in the Western academy. It is easy for me to imagine that the shaping of Buddhist practice, thought, and scholarship by traditions dominated by Christianity would be frustrating and limiting. I can only hope that dialogue would open more space for Buddhism rather than less. I also feel that Christianity is in such desperate need of the conversation with Buddhism that perhaps it can be considered if not a gift of the body, at least *śevā* to combine the need for strictly Buddhist scholarship and organizations with opportunities for dialogue.

2. Of course Origen's writings were later declared to be "heretical" and Thomas's work with Aristotle was illegal when he did it.

3. This theme is omnipresent in Tillich's work, especially in volumes 1 and 3 of the *Systematic Theology*. For example: "the claim of something finite to infinity or to divine greatness is the characteristic of the demonic. Demonization of the holy occurs in all religions day by day." *Systematic Theology* 3: 102. A refugee from National Socialism who watched his fellow Christians abdicating to antisemitism and totalitarianism, it is perhaps not surprising he was so attuned to the demonic vulnerabilities of religion.

4. Amos Young has done an admirable job of specifying some of the different ways in which Christians enter into dialogue. It would be interesting to consider whether the variety of ways Christians think of religious dialogue are related to different ways Christianity is practiced.

5. John Makransky, "Buddhist Inclusivism: Reflections toward a Contemporary Buddhist Theology of Religions," in *Buddhist Attitudes toward Other Religions*, ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2008), 47.

6. *Ibid.*, 49.

7. *Ibid.*, 51.

8. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, section 5, postscript. This theme is omnipresent in Schleiermacher's work: "the transference of the idea of God to any perceptible object, unless one is all the time conscious that it is a piece of purely arbitrary symbolism, is always a corruption." *Christian Faith*, 4.4. "The usual conception of God as one single being outside of the world and behind the world is . . . only one manner of expressing God, seldom entirely pure and always inadequate." *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 101. Both of these texts describe consciousness as an interpenetration of dualistic and nondualistic dimensions. Religious speech is related to dualistic, sensible self-consciousness, but the distinctive quality of religious awareness occurs in nondualistic immediate self-consciousness.

9. "Mystical Theology," Chapter 5 in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

10. The examples of Nicolas of Cusa and Anselm are perhaps instructive. Nicolas remained a devoted emissary of the pope during the period just prior to the Reformation when the power of the Vatican was reaching a zenith of corruption, and yet he is among the very few who toy with the idea that God is present in every religion. In "The Vision of God," in Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1997, he describes a practice which illustrates the way in which divine love is present everywhere, even when it seems the objects of love are moving in opposite directions. Anselm also was embroiled (not always willingly) in church politics and the messy intermingling of ecclesial and secular power and yet the *Proslogium* is a particularly beautiful expression of the nonconceptual reality of divinity and the way we are tethered to this Good by desire rather than thought.

11. The fate of Porete's text and its influence is described in various places, including Zum Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*, and in the introduction to the Edmund Colledge, J. C. Marler, and Judith Grants translation of Marguerite Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls* (a text oddly hostile to Porete and her writing).

12. Marguerite Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, chap. 3.

13. *Ibid.*, chap. 119.

14. *Ibid.*, chap. 66.

15. *Ibid.*, chap. 111.

16. *Ibid.*, chap. 135.

17. Amy Hollywood, *Meister Eckhart and Beguine Mystics*, 110.

18. Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, chap. 118.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, chap. 111.

21. This distinction between ecstatic experience and the stability of nonduality resonates with a similar position taken by the First Panchen Lama. He notes that the "mind absorbed in non-obstructive lucidity and clarity is often understood by meditators of the snow mountains as forging a state of Buddhahood." But he believes this is merely as "a wondrous skillful means for beginners' to settle their minds and focus on merely the conventional mind." "A Root Text for the Precious Gelug/Kagyü Tradition of Mahamudra: the Main Road of the Triumphant Ones," *Gelug / Kagyu Tradition of Mahamudra*, H. H. The Dalai Lama and Alexander Berzin, 99.22. Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, chap. 100.

23. *Ibid.*, chap. 101.

24. *Ibid.*, chap. 97.

25. *Ibid.*, chap. 118.

26. *Ibid.*, chap. 122.

27. *Ibid.*, chap. 97.

28. *Ibid.*, chap. 68.

29. Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, trans. Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), chap. 27.