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Christian-Buddhist Dialogue on Loving the Enemy

Wioleta Polinska
North Central College

We are taught to think that we need a foreign enemy. Governments work hard to get us to be afraid and to hate so we will rally behind them. If we do not have an enemy, they will invent one in order to mobilize us. Yet they are also victims.[1]
  —Thich Nhat Hanh

We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.[2]
  —Martin Luther King Jr.

Literally speaking, Ahimsa means "non-killing." . . . To one who follows this doctrine there is no room for an enemy.[3]
  —M. K. Gandhi

In his autobiography, Martin Luther King Jr. comments that he initially considered Jesus's commands such as "turn the other cheek" or "love your enemies" as limited to individual relationships. Only after reading Gandhi in the late 1940s did he conclude that the love ethic had a much broader scope. Love became to him an effective principle applied to racial groups and nations in conflict and was "a potent instrument for social and collective transformation."[4] Some years later, King was influenced by another Asian religious thinker, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Under Nhat Hanh's influence, King repudiated the war in Vietnam by addressing the similarity between the Vietnamese Buddhist peace movement and the American civil rights movement.[5]

Nhat Hanh and King were both inspired by Gandhi's peaceful approach to social conflicts. All three are exemplary models of love and nonviolence in their respective Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu traditions. Whether *ahimsa* (or harmlessness) in Hinduism, compassion for all beings in Buddhism, or "love of en-

emy'' in Christianity, unconditional love signifies the principal concern of these spiritual thinkers. All three men display an uncompromising commitment to the cause of the oppressed and downtrodden, but, at the same time, they refuse to vilify the opponents. In fact, all three speak of the "love of enemy" as the only sure way to ensure peaceful solution to any social crisis. Recent military conflicts prompted by the tragedy of September 11 offer a challenge for rethinking the most effective ways of dealing with international terrorism and other forms of social struggles. In what follows, I will suggest that, like Martin Luther King Jr., Christians can benefit from engaging in a dialogue with Eastern thought. Specifically, by focusing on the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, I will engage Christian liberation theologies to offer a possible corrective to a theological reflection on social conflict. In conversation with sociological reflection on war, political theorists, and artists, this article will present a fresh reexamination of a nondualistic, nonviolent approach to military and social conflicts.

Social exploitation, injustice, and oppression are focal points of many contemporary Christian theologies that are indebted to Latin American liberation theology. Recognizing the suffering of the poor and the failure of the historical Christian church to address the systemic injustice against them, liberation theologians affirm solidarity with the poor. Because of oppression and poverty, the poor have privileged access to the meaning of the Gospel (hermeneutic privilege) and the church needs to commit to a "preferential option for the poor." That is, those "who are privileged must identify with the poor and the oppressed not only because they need us but also because, from their experience of poverty and oppression, they are in a better position to understand the Gospel."[6] Learning from the poor implies interpreting Christian faith out of the suffering of the poor; it implies seeing God as the God of the poor and the oppressed. The poor are seen as "the favorites of God"[7] because they receive continuous divine attention to their struggle. The liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, Jesus's solidarity with the poor by becoming one of them, as well as his preaching the good news to them, are all examples of God's love for the poor. God's solidarity with the victims of social oppression reaches its zenith in the resurrection of Jesus when God is "doing Justice to a victim."[8] As Jon Sobrino explains, "What is specific about Jesus' resurrection is, therefore, not what God does with the dead body but what God does with a victim. The raising of Jesus is direct proof of the triumph of God's justice. . . ."

Liberation theologians not only take a stand on the side of the poor, but their stand is clearly against the oppressors. These sentiments are expressed in unambiguous language: "To be with the oppressed is to be against the oppressor,"[10] "The wicked are both rejectors of God and enemies of the poor,"[11] "God's reaction on behalf of victims—and against their executioners. . . ."[12] As Julio de Santa Ana puts it, the church is either for or against the oppressor: "It has the option to side with the poor or with the forces of society that create oppression, dehumanization and poverty."[13] In other words, there is no possibility for neu-

trality because, historically, neutrality entailed "playing it safe" and allying with the oppressive elements of society.[14]

At the same time, a number of liberation theologians are aware of the possible dangers of seemingly exclusive language of their claims. Santa Ana, thus, recognizes that the oppressors too are God's people, but thinks that their liberation will be found only through the liberation of the poor.[15] Still, Santa Ana and Monika Hellwig warn against the idealization of the poor. They mention that the poor sometimes compromise their hopes in exchange for survival,[16] and that the poor, just like the rich, have vices.[17] At the same time, the preference for the poor is based on their vulnerability and their needs, not on their virtue.[18] While both rich and poor have their respective needs, "the poor are more likely to own their need because they cannot so easily escape it or hide it from themselves and others."[19] God's preferential love for the poor is not based on their higher morality or religiosity, but on their existential needs coming from the inhuman conditions of their lives. Ultimately, the poor themselves are not the source of this privileged position; rather, this option for the poor is an expression of the divine gratuitous love.[20]

But the boundary between the oppressed and the oppressors is ambiguous. Thus, Hellwig recognizes that when a poor person turns against a fellow poor person, he or she in turn becomes an oppressor as well.[21] In addition, because liberation theologies extend the category of the oppressed beyond the poor to racial and ethnic minorities and women,[22] there are even more permutations on who counts as an oppressor. Feminist liberation theologian Sharon Welch speaks of herself as both oppressed (because of her sex) and an oppressor (possibly because of her white race and her social status).[23] Likewise, Santa Ana identifies most Christians as wealthy or at least in a position to satisfy their needs, whereas most of the poor in the world as non-Christians. In his own words, "Christians not only control the wealth of the nations, they also control dominant political, economic and educational systems. And because they have the control mechanism to manipulate the system to their advantage, they swing the pendulum in their own direction, leaving the rest of humankind in destitution and starvation."[24]

Fast and easy distinction between the victims and the victimized, the oppressed and the oppressors, seems to collapse. If the majority of Christians both historically and today contribute to the economic inequalities because of their complacency, should we think about them as oppressors? What about those cases when a person is both the oppressed and the oppressor? To which group should we assign them? If many find themselves in multiple roles, how helpful is the distinction between the oppressed and the oppressors? Finally, if there are so many oppressors, why is there little attention given to helping them see their shortcomings? If, as Santa Ana affirms, the privileged must identify with the poor and oppressed, and there is not much focus on the needs of the oppressors, how do the oppressors arrive at this change of heart?

Concern for a more holistic reinterpretation of liberation theology was ex-
pressed as early as in 1974 by Frederick Herzog and furthered more recently by
Joerg Rieger, Delores Williams, and Sallie McFague. These theologians speak of
common interest theology that seeks liberation of both the oppressors and the
oppressed, the poor and the rich.[25] That is, common interest theology is con-
cerned about the well-being of the whole community by developing a theology
that addresses the "common good from new angles, which now include the un-
derside of history."[26] The underside of history stands for the oppressed, so this
new angle reflects the common predicament of oppression that involves every
member of the community. The privileged need to recognize their own role in
the systemic oppression, but this cannot happen until they see the harm done to
the most vulnerable. However, as Delores Williams points out, the oppressed
must also recognize their complicity in their own oppression. Speaking from a
womanist perspective, Williams argues that black women participate in their
oppression by either acquiescing to societal systems that devalue black women-
hood or by not challenging "the patriarchal and demonarchal systems in soci-
ety."[27] Sally McFague addresses the interlinking of oppressors and the oppressed
when considering contemporary disregard for nature and the global poor. She
directs her attention to the oppressors, middle-class North Americans, in order
to make them aware that they live their consumerist lifestyle at the expense of
the suffering of other human beings and myriads of nonhuman creatures. Thus,
McFague appeals to North American Christians to redefine their concept of liv-
ing abundantly along the lines of "philosophy of enoughness, limitations on en-
ergy use, and sacrifice for the sake of others."[28] At the same time McFague's pri-
mary concern is with liberating the oppressed because "*we* are the oppressors and
must, *if we are Christians,* liberate others from our domination."[29] Nonetheless,
the North American oppressors are also entrapped by their insatiable pursuit of
opulence, which leaves them unhappy and lacking freedom. By pursuing the
"philosophy of enoughness" for the sake of the other, North American Christians
might also liberate themselves.[30] Whether engaging the issues of economic in-
justice, gender inequality, or ecological concerns, all of the above theologians
advance a common interest theology that embraces both the oppressors and the
oppressed in order to achieve justice for all.

Thich Nhat Hanh agrees with common interest theology that both rich and
poor need to be included in theological reflection because God would not want
us to take sides. The rich might not be suffering materially, but they too suffer
spiritually and emotionally. From his perspective, "God embraces both rich and
poor, and He wants them to understand each other, to share with each other
their suffering and their happiness, and to work together for peace and social jus-
tice. We do not need to take sides."[31] Moving beyond the insights of common
interest theology, Nhat Hanh directs us to observe the danger of the division
into "us" versus "them." Taking sides implies a dualistic response motivated by
anger that ultimately leads us toward polarization. In contrast, an appropriate
response is one that aims at reconciliation and peace rather than at conflict. At

the heart of reconciliation is love that embraces the whole of reality. This involves listening to each side and describing to each the suffering of the other.[32] Thus, in addition to social justice concerns of common interest theology, Nhat Hanh appeals to the importance of reconciliation and peace between all of the involved parties.

But is not this approach threatened with danger? Does he not sacrifice the principle of justice affirmed by liberation theology? Are we not ending up with the dreaded "blaming the victim" position while the oppressors are let go scot free? Nhat Hanh understands that his perspective might be taken as maintaining the status quo and encouraging social injustice, but this interpretation is a misreading of his intention. A clear stand against oppression and injustice and an inquiry into the causes of social injustice are necessary.[33] What he refuses to do is to engage in partisan conflicts, because "If we divide reality into two camps— the violent and the nonviolent—and stand in one camp while attacking the other, the world will never have peace. We will always blame and condemn those we feel are responsible for wars and social injustice, without recognizing the degree of violence in ourselves."[34] What could Nhat Hanh possibly mean that by segregating people into the categories of the violent and the nonviolent we are denying violence in ourselves? And how will this segregation into two camps imperil the cause of peace and justice?

Integral to his argument is a Buddhist teaching of dependent co-arising, which affirms "the interconnected and interdependent nature of all things."[35] Reality is not built of separate entities, but rather each being is inextricably linked to the rest of beings. Every "part" of the universe is affecting every other "part." Within the human realm, the well-being of each individual is interlinked with the well-being of the whole human race. We "inter-are" so deeply that "the only alternative to coexistence is co-nonexistence." Nhat Hanh's insights from the Buddhist perspective closely resemble Sally McFague's Christian reflections on the nature of reality. Informed by postmodern science that affirms the interdependence of all beings in the universe, McFague captures this reality theologically.[37] Guided by the Christian belief in God incarnate, she sees God as embodied in all of reality, and not just in the person of Jesus Christ. Likewise, not just humanity but all of the creation is fashioned to reflect *imago dei.*[38] By stressing the interdependence of all reality indwelled by God, she maintains that human community can prosper only when our planet is sustainable.[39] Furthermore, because God is present in all reality, Christian love needs to extend to all humanity and even to all the nonhuman beings.[40] In light of the above analysis, McFague calls on North American Christians, the oppressors, to abandon their consumerist ways of being for the sake of the planet and the poor around the world. While Nhat Hanh would agree with McFague's concern for the prosperity of all interlinked beings, his Buddhist teachings focus on how our interdependence with others makes partisan conflict unintelligible. Our interbeing with others implies that whether we are so called "oppressors" or "the oppressed," we all contribute to injustice and violence in the world. Nhat Hanh

would concur with McFague that moving toward justice and peace involves jettisoning consumerism and our exploitative attitudes toward the planet. At the same time, he would insist that in order to deal successfully with social, military, and ecological conflicts, we need to first rid ourselves of violence within our own lives.

Nhat Hanh reflects on his own complicity in the violent ways of the world in a poem titled "Please Call Me by My True Names." Two stanzas from the poem read as follows:

> I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
> my legs as thin as bamboo sticks
> and I am the arms merchant,
> selling deadly weapons to Uganda.
>
> I am the 12-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
> who throws herself into the ocean
> after being raped by a sea pirate,
> and I am the pirate,
> my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.[41]

Nhat Hanh identifies both with the victim and the perpetrator. To identify with the suffering of the undernourished Ugandan child or the terror of the raped 12-year-old is a compassionate act of honoring their lives and of standing up against the senseless violence. But why should we attempt to identify with the oppressors? Nhat Hanh's answer is that were he to be born into the life and social conditioning of an arms merchant or a pirate, he would become an arms merchant or a pirate. The existence of these perpetrators depends on a number of interdependent causes, among them their families and the whole society: from politicians, educators, and economists down to every member of society. It is because all of us could do something to prevent the existence of "pirates" or "arms merchants" that "each of us shares some responsibility for the presence of pirates."[42] When analyzing this poem, Charles R. Strain, poignantly observes: "Painstakingly he [Nhat Hanh] shows how the young girl's despair and the sea pirate's violence against her 'inter-are' with all that I am, all that I have failed to do. To become aware that I dependently co-arise with all beings is to destroy any ready identification with the victim (read: solidarity with the oppressed) that cleanses me of complicity with her rapist."[43] Taking sides does not make sense from this perspective, because every side is "our side." If we do not change our lifestyles, our economic consumption, and our spiritual and emotional responses, new generations of pirates and arms merchants will emerge. We are all part of the problem.

But we can become part of the solution as well. In the last stanza of the poem, Nhat Hanh points out that our clear identification with both the victims and perpetrators allows for awakened awareness followed by compassionate response:

> Please call me by my true names,
> so I can wake up,
> and so the door of my heart can be left open,
> the door of compassion.

By recognizing that we all contribute to the hatred and violence that permeates our society, we are on our way to awakening deep compassion. To admit not only that our society is like a "bomb ready to explode," but also that we all are "a part of that bomb," is a first step to transformation of shared suffering in a nonviolent manner.[44] Perpetrators of injustice and violence are acting out the hatred and violence present in the society. To the extent that each one of us is morally complicit in our violence against others, we are just like them. We are like a pirate who is "not yet capable of seeing and loving."

The goal of the deep compassion for the other is love of the enemy. Concurring with the teachings of Jesus and Gandhi,[45] Nhat Hanh embraces the idea that love is the only force that can liberate. This means that one is to love the enemy even in the face of cruelty, injustice, and terror.[46] Gandhi applied this principle when he refused to hate "the domineering Englishmen" and instead sought "to reform them in all the loving ways that are open to me."[47] Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in the same spirit when he said about his white opponents: "Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and . . . leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you."[48] Gandhi, Nhat Hanh, and King all agree that the true liberation is one that liberates both the oppressor and the oppressed.[49] As soon as one embraces the opponent, the idea of "enemy" disappears and one sees the humanity of the other, the fact that the other is suffering and in need of compassion.[50] Nhat Hanh challenges us to consider the following: "if we do not reach out to the opponent and do not help that person become more nonviolent, who will?"[51]

Nhat Hanh's ideas on overcoming social conflicts by love that embraces all sides is particularly manifest in his discussion of war. His experience of war in Vietnam gave him a unique insight into the suffering caused by military conflicts. From his perspective, both sides, Vietnamese and Americans, were victims of war and neither could claim victory because the cost of war is so tremendous. Millions of people are still suffering in Vietnam and in the United States. When Nhat Hanh speaks of cost of war, he does not just refer to the casualties incurred by both sides. To him, the real casualties are the emotional and spiritual scars of men and women who come home after practicing violence for many months.[52] These scars of violence mark themselves on soldiers long before the launching of the actual military combat. Much of the violence is committed in soldiers' minds in preparation for the war: "They knew that if they didn't kill, the enemy soldiers would kill them, so they used sandbars to represent their enemy, and holding their bayonets firmly, they ran, shouted, and plunged the bayonets into the sandbags. They practiced killing day and night in their hearts and minds."[53]

Nhat Hanh argues that this military training transforms soldiers into "less than human beings," because one cannot kill another human being without visualizing the enemy as less than human. This dehumanizing of the other dehumanizes oneself.[54] It is no wonder that soldiers are ready to commit atrocities after this kind of training. Fear for one's life and the tragedy of seeing one's fellow soldiers' lives taken away instigate further fear and anger. Killing and raping of children and women are subsequent costs.[55] The wounds of all these actions have long-term effects on victims and perpetrators and are transmitted to future generations. How could we then consider any side to be winning?

Research into the dynamic of war and the societal costs of war supports many of Nhat Hanh's spiritual insights. In 1947, S. L. A. Marshall, an official Army historian (and combat veteran of World War I), published findings that demonstrated that only 15–20 percent of soldiers ever shot their weapons during World War II.[56] Moreover, even among those who did shoot, there is data showing that the majority of soldiers would aim high so as to avoid the actual killing. Lt. Col. David Grossman, an Army psychology professor and a soldier with twenty years of service, concludes on the basis of these findings that there is within most people an intense resistance to killing. This resistance is so strong that, "in many circumstances, soldiers on the battlefield will die before they can overcome it."[57] In spite of such a resistance, new training strategies employed by the U.S. Army were responsible for increasing the rate of firing to 90–95 percent by the Vietnam War.[58] This new high level of firing demonstrates that with proper training and conditioning, almost anyone can and will learn to kill.

How was this conditioning accomplished? In contrast to traditional aiming at bull's-eye target while lying on the field, the modern soldier is standing in a fox-hole in full combat gear. Mimicry of the modern battlefield is carefully constructed in order to desensitize the soldier into killing instantly and reflexively: "At periodic intervals one or two olive-drab, man-shaped targets at varying ranges will pop up in front of him for a brief time, and the soldier must instantly aim and shoot at the target(s). When he hits a target it provides immediate feedback by instantly and very satisfyingly dropping backward—just as a living target would."[59] To create a distance between the soldiers and the act of killing, army manuals and drill sergeants employ euphemisms for killing such as: "engaging targets," "suppressing enemy fire," and "attritting" the enemy.[60] Every aspect of killing is rehearsed so many times that when soldiers actually engage in combat, they can persuade themselves that they are in fact "engaging" another target. The creation of reflexive, robotic killers is complete.

This strategy for turning soldiers from very reluctant shooters into efficient killers has a high psychological price in the long run. Even if no killing in combat occurs, the very act of dehumanizing the enemy in training and the readiness to kill when ordered makes them feel that they have mentally killed the enemy. The mental act of violence leaves deep psychological scars.[61] In fact, killing the enemy is considered the most stressful experience even by *War Psychiatry,* the Army's medical corps textbook, which cites a company commander as saying,

"Shooting people has been harder for most soldiers to come to grips with than the death of a friend."[62] One combat veteran describes the torment coming from killing as follows: "You recognize you did the unthinkable. You blasted away a piece of yourself, violated some trust with God."[63] Still, the manual does not offer any suggestions for dealing with the aftereffects. One needs to turn to other research for data on the psychological consequences of killing. Among the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from killing are explosive aggression, drug use, suicide, divorce, anxiety, hysteria, psychotic dissociation, psychic numbing, survivor guilt, depression, and nightmares.[64] Lack of attention to the PTSD related to combat killing is widely recognized. MacNair suggests that this lack of attention might be caused by the fact that it is easier to put the blame on the enemy—that is, PTSD must result from what the enemy did rather than from what our soldiers did. Furthermore, she observes that "the nation which sends the soldiers unto combat has responsibility for them and that responsibility will feel much more like guilt if the activities necessary to combat have such an aftermath. Citizens and political leaders prefer to think that any long-lasting repercussions are the fault of the enemy."[65]

All these findings support Nhat Hanh's spiritual concerns. Training for combat and the very practice of killing leaves victims and perpetrators deeply wounded. The idea of interdependence and interlinking of all beings is evident when one considers the consequences of war. The natural tendency to not kill one's own species testifies that there is a deep sense of awareness of interrelation with all fellow humans. When this sense of affinity is broken down, another human being is transformed into a "target," a "thing," which results in dehumanizing the other and, in turn, dehumanizing oneself. A similar sense of profound connection with the other is severed in the act of killing: when one kills the other, the effects are that of killing a part of oneself.

Avoiding open discussion of the high cost of combat killing only adds to the problem. Nhat Hanh encourages us to own our shared responsibility for the suffering brought about by war. We cannot blame the soldiers, but neither can we blame the president who decided to go to war. When speaking about the Gulf War of 1991, Nhat Hanh observes "Who is President Bush? President Bush is us. We are responsible for the way he feels, for everything he does. Eighty percent of the people in America supported him in this just war. Why blame him?"[66] We might think that if we were in charge of policies, we would have made other choices than the leader of our country. But we would be mistaken, argues Nhat Hanh. Our government makes policies that reflect our lifestyles, our way of consuming, and our way of perceiving reality.[67] Ultimately, everybody is indicted in the responsibility for war: the president, the House of Representatives, the Senate, and every civilian. To the extent that we are guided by our own prejudices, fears, and ignorance, we wage war within our own minds. Creating peace means uprooting war "from ourselves and from the hearts of men and women."[68]

This does not mean that we cannot engage in concrete actions to advance

peace in the world. Being involved in the peace movement, however, should be motivated by love and compassion rather than by anger and frustration. For example, Nhat Hanh urges peace movement participants to write letters to Congress and the president. These letters need to be different from protest letters that create the response of anger and immediate dismissal. The peace movement ought to write "love letters," letters that display loving speech and communicate in a peaceful manner, because "without being peace we cannot do anything for peace."[69]

With regard to specific conflict between countries, Nhat Hanh proposes international forums during which different countries could address their struggles and problems with each other in a peaceful manner. All nations could help to solve these conflicts.[70] Creating safety for other nations is another important principle for stability in international relations. The opposite is also true: "If we continue to create danger and instability for the other group, the danger will rebound on us."[71] Even in the case of terrorism, Nhat Hanh advocates compassion, and not a military solution. He argues that "Terrorists are human beings. They are sick with a virus called terrorism. Analyzing this virus, you see fear, misunderstanding, hate, and violence. When you act as a doctor, you do not kill the terrorist. Instead, you try to understand and transform the terrorist heart."[72] How does one transform the terrorist heart? Instead of vilifying the terrorist, one needs to recognize human fragility and suffering even in a person with such faulty beliefs. Recognizing that we all err gives us a chance to restore communication and address the needs of the terrorist.

Nhat Hanh's teaching seems to be overtly optimistic and Pollyannaish. How could one expect to engage in a loving interaction with people responsible for senseless attacks on civilians? Furthermore, given the history of human affairs, is it realistic that military and social conflicts will ever disappear? Peaceful countries usually are engulfed by more powerful nations through violent military combat. How effective are Nhat Hanh's ideas in the modern context? Can they really guarantee the successful survival of a nation or an oppressed group of people? Nhat Hanh does not offer any easy solutions, no guarantees for success in the future. Instead, his approach is deeply rooted in the present. Concerned with accessing a peaceful state of being at every moment, he writes: "Each step we make should be peace. . . . We don't need the future. . . . Everything we want is right here in the present moment."[73] While he recognizes that hope can help dealing with hardship, he also asserts: "When I think deeply about hope, I see something tragic. Since we cling to our hope in the future, we do not focus our energies and capabilities on the present moment. We use hope to believe something better will happen in the future, that we will arrive at peace, or the Kingdom of God."[74] His message appears dispiriting at best and "syrupy" and dangerous at worst. Don't the poor and oppressed need hope to face their daily sufferings? As a socially engaged Buddhist, Nhat Hanh is actively involved in the international peace movement and works on behalf of Vietnamese refugees. How could he then overlook these deep needs of the disconcerted? Nhat Hahn's

perspective is that hope is not enough; by focusing too much on the future, attention to the present effort might be lost. Furthermore, work against injustice is paramount, but what will happen to the poor and oppressed when such efforts do not result in change? When discussing his own efforts toward peace in Vietnam, Nhat Hanh admits that they did not result in success as defined by peaceful resolution or political victory. On the other hand, his actions were successful in terms of "love and nonviolence attained," and commitment to peaceful principles.[75] What counts as a real victory, a real contribution to humanity, is insistence on "doing peace" and "being peace" regardless of results. When our best efforts do not result in reconciliation, what is aimed at is proceeding, however far one can, in the direction of peace.[76] From Nhat Hanh's perspective, because we all participate in some form of violence, one cannot claim to be completely on the side of nonviolence. Thus, "Nonviolence is a direction, not a separating line. It has no boundaries."[77]

It is in this context of the unpredictability of the future outcomes that we have to place Nhat Hanh's statements. His point is that when best of efforts fail to bring hoped results, the poor and downtrodden still can experience peace. Charles R. Strain speaks of the advantage of this approach over that of classical liberation theology because it acknowledges that each oppressed person "however diminished by systemic oppression, has utter access to the utterly available Kingdom of God."[78] When faced with the discomfort of living, we do not need to think of the kingdom as the object of endless yearning, but as the present and obtainable one. Even if the social or political climate does not change, the peaceful state of being is available.

This is a frustrating message, especially to the Western ear, because the West is oriented toward the future and progress. But this message is also frustrating to the progressive forces in society, to those who demand an end to economic and political exploitation. Nhat Hanh is aware of the shock that his words might bring about, but there is no mistake here. His words are anchored in a deep conviction that true success in "doing peace" is dependent on our "being peace." Ultimately, our actions and our mindsets are inseparable, and both are needed to make a meaningful contribution to just causes: "The only way out of violence and conflict is for us to embrace the practice of peace, to think and act with compassion, love, and understanding."[79]

At the core of Nhat Hanh's teaching on achieving inner peace is his practice of mindfulness, a form of meditation that seeks to become aware of the states of one's mind. This practice aspires to instill compassion for other beings, very much along the lines of the Christian love ethic. Joanna Macy argues that while Buddhists and Christians are committed to similar tenets, the Buddhist tradition offers techniques to accomplish them.[80] Mindfulness is a practice of daily transformation, of cultivating peace within so that one can obtain peaceful relations with others and do one's best in social action. On a fundamental level, practicing mindfulness is being aware of reality in the present moment. With regard to anger, for example, Nhat Hanh advises:

> I would not look upon anger as something foreign to me that I have to fight.... I know that anger is me, and I am anger. Non-duality, not two. I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with nonviolence. Because anger is me, I have to tend my anger as I would tend a younger brother or sister, with love, with care, because I myself am anger, I am in it, I am it. In Buddhism we do not consider anger, hatred, greed as enemies we have to fight, to destroy, to annihilate. If we annihilate anger, we annihilate ourselves. Dealing with anger in that way would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield, tearing yourself into parts.... If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself. If you cannot be compassionate to yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate to others.[81]

A healthy attitude toward our negative emotions is not their negation but a gentle acceptance, a tender welcome of these feelings. Any attempt at crushing them would only result in crushing ourselves. It would also display a lack of compassion toward ourselves, and without compassion for ourselves we cannot love anybody else. Instead, Nhat Hanh recommends that when we are upset, we should stop what we are doing, abstain from saying anything, and engage in breathing in and out several times. If this simple exercise is not enough to calm us down, he advises practicing a longer meditation that focuses on one's breath and allows one to gain self-possession and awareness.[82] Looking deeply into ourselves during the meditation gives us a chance to recognize what we brought into the situation that opened us to the angry reaction. Moreover, we have a chance to realize that the person who made us angry is also suffering. These realizations allow us to dissipate the pull of negative emotions and to develop tenderness toward ourselves and toward the other. By contrast, retaliating only further escalates anger for all involved parties. By being compassionate toward ourselves and toward others, we transform a situation of conflict into an opportunity for reconciliation.[83]

This ability to arrive at a serene state of self-possession has important implications for social action. That is, "Meditation is not to get out of society, to escape from society, but to prepare for reentry into society."[84] The current situation in the world, filled with danger and injustice, creates anxiety in many people. But he warns that "in this kind of situation, if we panic, things will only become worse. We need to remain calm, to see clearly."[85] We are the most effective when we can collect our thoughts and communicate with others in a peaceful manner. Rita M. Gross's transformation is a testimony to this healing effect of meditation. As a feminist, Gross found emotional relief when she would "vent verbally" through extreme sarcasm and cutting remarks whenever the issue of gender inequality arose. This, however, began to change, because "the relief was not as reliable and I began to see that in any case my anger was not doing anything to alleviate the general misery brought about by patriarchy and misogyny. I began to realize personally the Buddhist teaching that aggressive speech and actions always produce negative counterreactions. I began to see

that people tuned out when I vented my angry feelings, that my fits of aggressive rhetoric only caused further mutual entrenchment rather than any significant change."[86]

When she was no longer driven by anger, Gross was able to become a more effective spokesperson for feminism. It is not that she became less concerned with feminist issues, but she began to express herself in less polarizing, less aggressive ways so that people paid attention to what she was saying. In her own words: "I discovered a middle path between aggressive expression and passive acquiescence, and sometimes I have been able to bring about major changes . . . because I simply maintained my position without aggression."[87] In Nhat Hahn's language, Gross was able to act in a peaceful manner because she became a peaceful person.

But even if one "is peace" and becomes a more effective social activist, this does not guarantee sure victories in either the political or the social realm. At the same time, one can question the "effectiveness" of the aggressive military responses that leave the world with profound emotional, physical, and spiritual costs. Nhat Hanh's belief that reconciliation and peaceful negotiations would be more fruitful than military escalation has the support of many sociologists, political theorists, and social activists. Many point out that we frequently neglect peaceful techniques of conflict resolution as more-violent methods became deeply entrenched in our culture. Thus, Kurtz and Turpin argue that the "peace through strength" approach has dominated much of human history and produced institutional infrastructure and technical support for carrying out violent conflicts. Around the world, daily military spending amounts to approximately US$2 billion (half of that spent by the United States), but "very little is spent on nonviolent means of conflict [resolution] and on research to address the causes of war and violence."[88] Likewise, Gene Sharp argues that nonviolent strategies have been overlooked and undervalued throughout the history.[89] He traces the history of nonviolent struggle from the Chinese boycott of American goods in 1900 to the most recent examples of effective nonviolent action in eastern Europe. The history shows that people are "capable of resisting without violence" and that many of the nonviolent actions were effective in various situations.[90] The past also testifies to the fact that countries steeped in the tradition of armed resistance, such as Poland, are still able to enter the nonviolent path.[91] Likewise, historical examples of postconflict reconciliation between nations and groups display a nonviolent realization that "without forgiveness there is no future." Among these are inspiring examples of efforts by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Polish Solidarity's rejection of vengeance as a means to deal with Communists and collaborators. The possibility of forgiveness and repentance between nations and groups, as well as recent attention to love and respect (or the integrative system of power) as the most significant force injustice disputes, all demonstrate the growing awareness of peaceful conflict resolution.[93]

Another model for a peaceful approach comes from the feminist group Women in Black, a movement that embodies a reconciliatory perspective of

reaching "across borders and even across so-called enemy lines."[94] Since 1988, Palestinian and Israeli women dressed in mournful black have been staging vigils in protest of Israeli occupation. Now the movement is spread all over the world: German Women in Black protest neo-Nazism, xenophobia, and racism, while South Indian Women in Black oppose the poor treatment of women by Hindu fundamentalists. A heroic group of Women in Black in Belgrade criticized their government's militant and racist policies in ex-Yugoslavia.[95]

By uncovering historical examples of nonviolence, demonstrating current peaceful initiatives, and depicting the high price of violence, political theorists and social activists encourage us to rethink our positions on military conflicts. They do not necessarily follow Nhat Hanh's teaching that doing peace should stem from being peace, nor do they have to share his approach that one must love the enemy to bring true peace into the world. As Gene Sharp eloquently asserts, "Some Buddhists, Christians, and others have argued that 'nonviolence' properly flows from compassion, and that hatred or malice should therefore have no place in nonviolent action. In practice, it may not always be necessary to set such high standards. . . . While it is true that the impact of the nonviolent technique is often enhanced when activists are able to refrain from hostility, that same technique has been successfully applied by people who hated their opponents and desired to coerce them."[96] Sharp has a good point: people of different convictions should all join forces to advance the cause of nonviolence. While Sharp argues that nonviolent action is often enhanced by a loving attitude, he does not think that love of the enemy makes a strategic difference in practice. Successful accommodations can be reached by the opponent's realization that "it is too costly or too threatening to continue to fight."[97] Likewise, widespread, nonviolent protests might coerce the opposing faction to agree to a settlement. All of these are significant victories whether in the context of social or political injustice. I think Nhat Hanh would consider all of these methods as moving in the direction of nonviolence as well. At the same time, Nhat Hanh's insistence on loving the enemy requires careful reflection. In a world that is threatened by the global piracy of multinational corporations, unjust governments, and terrorism, and where the majority of the First World is not willing to accommodate to the dire needs of the Third World, the question of the efficacy of our current approaches needs to be reconsidered. Could it be that dualistic thinking, whether in politics, social action, or religion, divides the world into "us" versus "them" and, in effect, undermines the possibility of dealing with the root problem? Can we afford to wait any longer in refusing to address the fundamental problem of our estrangement from the other?

Whether in theology or in the social arena, the more holistic approach is a needed corrective. Neither the defeat of the powerful (as some liberation theologies advocate) nor the defeat of the national enemies are the final goals. As common interest theology suggests, both oppressors and the oppressed are in need of liberation. Nhat Hahn argues, however, that more than the correction of systemic injustice is in order. Moving beyond the concern for justice and truth, he

anchors social justice in a peaceful dialogue that stems from compassion for all involved parties. Recognizing the limited scope of all of our visions and our co-responsibility for the suffering of others, getting others to recognize the rightness of our conclusions should not be our aim. Steven Batchelor aptly surmises that the goal is to seek not the right thing to do, but the compassionate thing to do.[98] Informed by Buddhist insights into conflict resolution, Sharon Welch describes this new ethos as characterized by the honest recognition of the limits of our own knowledge and "of the unsettling and refreshing possibility of the new."[99] This openness to the possibility of others being in the right presumes a compassionate awareness of our own foibles. For example, Welch speaks of her own transformation when talking about Jesse Helms, whose politics she used to "abhor." Buddhist meditation helped her in coming to the realization that "we [she and Helms] belong to the same world, and the success of his appeal to bigotry and fear cannot be separated from my failures and the failures of other liberals and progressives to reach fearful people with compassion, vitality, humor, and insight."[100]

Compassionate consideration for the other facilitates a dialogue that avoids dogmatism, prevarication, and unnecessary polarization. At the same time, this new ethos does not camouflage relativism or indifference. We are to bring into conversation our deep convictions while at the same time being genuinely open to surprising shifts in perceptions. Because we have no control over the outcome of the exchange, we need to engage in a flexible, open-minded dialogue that displays concern for all sides. In Welch's words, "Our model for political action is neither the ringing judgment of the prophet nor the confident witness of the martyr."[101] Instead, she is encouraging us to follow the audacity and the virtuosity of the jazz musician playing "with skill and verve the rhythms and risks of life."[102] A jazz musician welcomes the possibility of varied choices, the limitations involved in the collaborative playing, and the risk of failure. Likewise, rejecting moral certitude and judgmental spirit opens us to the possibility of new insights that might move us in the direction of harmony and well-being for all. Such a collaborative approach is not free of risks or limitations and takes plenty of audacity. Nonetheless, employing the old dichotomy of "us" versus "them" only fuels our deeply entrenched beliefs of moral certainty and affirms the superiority of our conclusions. The inflated sense of "being in the right" leads us to reify the separation between just and unjust that historically led the West to "punishment, conflict, revenge, and even war."[103] Our current global context demands that we reconfigure how we view our opponents. In light of our violent past, compassion toward the enemy might provide the startling shift of perception that we so desperately need.

NOTES

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