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# A New Direction for Comparative Studies of Buddhists and Christians: Evidence from Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross

Abraham Vélez de Cea  
*Eastern Kentucky University*

Is Nāgārjuna's emptiness a means to point out the inadequacy of logic and concepts to express the nature of the Ultimate Reality? Similarly, are John of the Cross's concepts of nothingness and emptiness examples of the apophatic path to God? In sum, is emptiness in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross comparable to the Christian *via negativa* and the apophatic path to God?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, I believe you might be interested in reading this article carefully. You are not alone; in fact most if not all previous discussions of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross in the field of Buddhist-Christian studies have assumed an affirmative answer to the former questions. The comparisons of D. T. Suzuki, Thomas Merton, and the Kyoto school between the Christian God and Buddhist emptiness, as well as the comparisons of members of the Masao Abe–John Cobb group, have greatly contributed to this apophatic interpretation of emptiness. The enormous contributions of D. T. Suzuki, Thomas Merton, the Kyoto school, and the Abe-Cobb group to the field of Buddhist-Christian studies cannot be sufficiently praised and appreciated. However, the future of Buddhist-Christian studies and Buddhist-Christian dialogue requires a new comparative direction, a shift from comparative theory to comparative praxis, from doctrinal comparisons to more ethical and spiritually relevant comparisons.

This new direction provides Buddhist-Christian studies with a more practical orientation necessary for the urgent needs of our planet as well as for the needs of a growing number of members of different religions with pluralist attitudes. By pluralist attitudes, I do not mean a relativistic standpoint, but rather an attitude of intellectual humbleness and dialogical openness toward other religions. That humble and dialogical openness seeks neither to proselytize nor to create a new religion. Rather, the objective is to build bridges of understanding and solidarity among religious communities and to be personally enriched by the contributions of all religions.

In order to justify the need for this new and more practically oriented compara-

tive direction, it is imperative to review previous scholarship in the field of Buddhist-Christian studies. A comprehensive analysis of all past scholarship would be too ambitious a goal for the purpose of this article. Thus, in the first part of this article I limit myself to reviewing those questionable hermeneutical tendencies that I have identified in former Buddhist-Christian discussions of John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna. In the second part, I continue the justification of this new direction for Buddhist-Christian studies by providing a specific example, namely, a comparison of the instrumental ethical function of emptiness in Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross.

#### HERMENEUTICAL TENDENCIES IN PREVIOUS BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN STUDIES OF JOHN OF THE CROSS AND NĀGĀRJUNA

##### *Hermeneutical Tendencies in Comparisons of John of the Cross and Buddhism*

In the case of John of the Cross, I have identified three questionable hermeneutical tendencies. The first one is to exaggerate the similarity between John of the Cross and Buddhism. Take, for example, what Thomas Merton—whose pioneering work on Buddhist-Christian dialogue deserves careful study—said in 1968: “Frankly, I would say that Zen is nothing but John of the Cross without the Christian vocabulary” (quoted in Nugent 1996: 53). This comparison suggests that the teachings of Zen and John of the Cross are virtually identical, neglecting important differences between them.

Similarly, Christopher Nugent compares John’s experience of one’s own true self to the experience of Buddha-nature, and describes *satori* as a fusion of all and nothing, and the coincidence of opposites. For Nugent, John of the Cross is not only a Zen master, but also “more Taoist than dualist” (1996: 62–64). These comparisons of John of the Cross to Zen and Taoism concepts fail to bring justice to his ideas. John of the Cross cannot be categorized a nondualist because he maintains a clear distinction between God and creatures. Similarly, from an ethical point of view, John of the Cross never addresses the coincidence of opposites. It is true that on the top of John’s drawings of Mount Carmel one can read that “*Ya por aquí no hay camino que para el justo no hay ley, él para sí se es ley*” (Here there is no longer any path because for the just person there is no law, he is a law unto himself). However, it is also true that on that very top of Mount Carmel it is possible to find several ethical virtues together with the concept of *nada* (nothingness). That is, John of the Cross’s concept of nothingness does not involve the coincidence of moral opposites, but rather a very specific view of ethical perfection characterized by both theological and cardinal virtues. The statement “*para el justo no hay ley, él para sí se es ley*” (there is no law for the just person, he is a law unto himself) does not refer, as the comparison to Taoism seems to suggest, to any transcendence of conventional moral prescriptions, nor does it mean that the will of the just person determines what is good and evil. Rather, the statement seems to refer to the internalization of natural law, the

embodiment of law and ethical behavior to the point of no longer requiring external moral impositions.

The second hermeneutical tendency is to understand John of the Cross through categories and concepts foreign to his framework. For instance, William Johnston, an expert in Christian mysticism whose presentations of John of the Cross are outstanding and overall very reliable, compares John of the Cross's experience of God to the Zen experience of *mu* (nothing). In Johnston's words, according to John of the Cross, "God is all in Himself but nothing to us," "the experience of God can be like nothing" (1988: 127), and "separated from God things are nothing but in God they are in a sense everything." Like Nugent, Johnston seems to suggest that for John of the Cross the experience of God involves an experience of both all and nothing. It might be correct to state that for Zen Buddhism the experience of *mu* entails an experience of both all and nothing at the same time. However, extrapolating this idea to John of the Cross's experience of God is problematic. Johnston is certainly aware of John of the Cross's familiarity with Thomas Aquinas's thought. However, Johnston's comparison seems to overlook the ontological assumptions of John of the Cross. The doctrine of analogical participation precludes an experience of God understood as all that exists, much less understood as a simultaneous experience of both all and nothing. Similarly, John of the Cross's physical assumptions exclude a simultaneous experience of all and nothing. Once the soul is emptied of all natural things, it is filled naturally and supernaturally by God "because there can be no void in nature" (Kieran Kavanaugh's translation) (lit. "*por que no se dé vacío en la naturaleza,*" "so that emptiness does not take place in nature") (A II.15.4). This philosophical assumption according to which there cannot be emptiness in nature seems to derive from book four of Aristotle's *Physics*, most probably from Thomas Aquinas's commentary on that book. Even when John of the Cross describes his experience of God together with creatures, it is never defined in terms of all and nothing. Rather, John of the Cross speaks of "knowing creatures through God and not God through creatures" ("*conocer por Dios las criaturas, y no por las criaturas a Dios,*" L 4.5). This description might be interpreted as a simultaneous experience of God and creatures, but it is important to notice that here it is neither the nothingness of creatures that is experienced together with the fullness of God, nor the unity in the sense of lack of distinction between God and creatures. Rather what is experienced is the beauty, the life, the grace, and the virtues of all beings in God, rooted in God. Since for John of the Cross nothingness and emptiness of the soul cannot be simultaneous with the experience of God, it is misleading to interpret his experience of God from a Zen perspective, where a simultaneous experience of all and nothing seems to be possible.

Similarly, Donald Mitchell, in his equally outstanding comparative study of emptiness in the Kyoto school and Christian spirituality, interprets John of the Cross from Theresa of Avila's framework. The context of this interpretation is a comparison of Theresa of Avila with Takeuchi Yoshinori's reading of the stages of meditation in early Buddhism. Mitchell explains John of the Cross's passive night of

the senses as if it were equivalent to Theresa of Avila's fourth mansion (1991: 129–130). This comparison however, does no justice to John of the Cross, whose nights do not exactly correlate to Theresa's mansions. It is true that the fourth mansion marks the beginning of infused contemplation, and in that sense, it can be considered similar to the passive night of the senses, which also marks the beginning of infused contemplation. However, the passive night of the spirit can also be considered similar to the fourth mansion in that respect, but this would be simply one of many possible correlations between nights and mansions. For instance, the passive night of the spirit could also be considered similar to the fifth mansion in that they both mark, at least to some extent in the case of John of the Cross's night of the spirit, the beginning of mystical union. Even if there were a clear correlation between mansions and nights, in my view John of the Cross deserves to be interpreted on his own terms, not from the framework of other great Christian mystics such as Theresa of Avila.

The third hermeneutical tendency is to discuss John of the Cross together with other mystics representative of the Christian *via negativa*, but without sufficiently differentiating their respective ideas and spiritualities. For instance, H. M. Enomiya Lasalle, whose pioneer work on Zen meditation for Christians deserves special mention along with his excellent comparative studies of what he calls Zen and Christian ways, tends to quote extensively from John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Ruusbroec, Tauler, the Victorines, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* without pointing out any differences between them (1974). This tendency, however, although useful to highlight common patterns within Christian mysticism, gives the wrong impression of homogeneity, as if all of them advocated the same.

Similarly, James Fredericks in his comparison of Nāgārjuna's emptiness to the Christian apophatic path and Thomas Aquinas's incomprehensibility of God, refers to John of the Cross and states the following:

John of the Cross, for instance, is famous for his insistence that God is *Nada* (nothing). John of the Cross, of course, is a mystic, not a nihilist. The nothingness of God results from the fact that all our analogies ultimately fail to capture the divine essence. God is "not this and not that." Mystics like John feel quite comfortable with the idea that the divine is revealed not only by affirming what God is like (the cataphatic path), but all the more so by affirming what God is not like (the apophatic path). (2004: 66)

The problem with this interpretation is that John of the Cross's concept of nothingness (*nada*) is never attributed to God, not even in the drawings symbolizing the ascent of the soul to Mount Carmel. Nothingness in John of the Cross is always predicated of creatures and the human soul, most generally in comparisons to the fullness of God (A I.4). When nothingness is attributed to the human soul, it conveys the idea of nakedness, emptiness, humility, and poverty of the spirit. This connection between John of the Cross's nothingness and emptiness, nakedness, humility, and poverty of the spirit appears explicitly in *Ascent to Mount Carmel* I.13. Nothingness and emptiness of the spirit are necessary means to reaching the high-

est stages of communication with God and eventually mystical union. That nothingness and emptiness are qualities of the soul and not attributes of God can be inferred from John of the Cross's drawings of the ascent to Mount Carmel, which symbolize the path of the soul toward God. The term "nothing" appears several times in the central and more direct path to the peak as well as in the peak. Since the word "nothing" appears surrounded by theological virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit, it is evident that "nothing" is a quality of the soul. Since John of the Cross nowhere states that God is nothing, it is incorrect to assert as Fredericks does that John of the Cross insists on saying such things. Consequently, it is also incorrect to consider John of the Cross a representative of the *via negativa* and the apophatic path as Fredericks does for insisting on saying something that he never says. The *via negativa* and the apophatic path are traditional methods for attributing different names or qualities to God. The method consists not in affirming what God is like but rather in negating something that God is not. For instance, we come to know that God is infinite by negating that He is finite. In a way, John of the Cross's concept of nothingness might be seen as a method to know something that God is not, and in this particular sense it might be compared to the *via negativa*. However, this would be misleading. Whereas John of the Cross's nothingness is primarily a practical method to foster detachment and to know one's soul in comparison to God's fullness, Thomas Aquinas's *via negativa* is primarily a theoretical method to intellectually know God's names and attributes.

#### *Hermeneutical Tendencies in Comparisons of Nāgārjuna and Christianity*

In the case of Nāgārjuna, I have also identified three problematic hermeneutic tendencies. The first is approaching Nāgārjuna from the perspective of non-Buddhist thinkers. For instance, Michael von Brück in "Buddhist Sūnyatā and Christian Trinity: The Emerging Holistic Paradigm" (1990: 44–66) explains Nāgārjuna following the Vedantic interpretation of T. R. V. Murti. I agree with Paul O. Ingram's response to von Brück: "The problem with following Murti's interpretation of Buddhist thought, and especially the Madhyamika tradition, is that his analysis rather uncritically transformed Buddhist thought into an inferior sort of Upanishadic philosophy. Murti, in other words, read Madhyamika tradition through the philosophical assumptions of Advaita Vedānta—thus, in my opinion, completely misrepresenting Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamika" (1990: 67–74).

Von Brück also provides a good example of a presentation of Nāgārjuna that introduces his thought together with that of other thinkers without differentiating them. In a few pages von Brück explains Nāgārjuna's emptiness together with quotations from the physicist David Bohm and the New Age thinker Ken Wilber as if they were all basically advocating a similar nondualist paradigm of Advaita Vedānta. However, as I have argued elsewhere, Nāgārjuna's identity of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is not absolute but relative to the perspective of liberated beings and limited to emptiness (Vélez de Cea 2005).

The second hermeneutic tendency is to understand Nāgārjuna through later inter-

pretations of emptiness, for instance, those of the Kyoto school. For instance, Masao Abe attributes his interpretation of nothingness to Nāgārjuna in *Zen and Western Thought* (1989: 94). The implication seems to be that Nāgārjuna's emptiness is similar to Abe's absolute nothingness, which is a creative and dynamic fullness, the root and source of being and nonbeing (1989: 197, 199). The problem with this interpretation made by Abe and other members of the Kyoto school is that it does not correspond to Nāgārjuna's emptiness (Ornatowsky 1997; Jones 2004). Unfortunately, Abe fails to distinguish between his reading of emptiness and Nāgārjuna's. On the contrary, Abe refers to Nāgārjuna in order to legitimize his views of emptiness and Buddhist dialectic. One of the unfortunate consequences of this utilization of Nāgārjuna by Abe and other members of the Kyoto school is that today Christian comparative theologians tend to refer to Nāgārjuna without differentiating his view of emptiness from other views of emptiness characteristic of later forms of Buddhism. For instance, Fredericks in his comparison of the incomprehensible God and Buddhist emptiness does not point out any dissimilarity between Abe's emptiness and Nāgārjuna's (2004: 93). Fortunately, not all theologians in dialogue with the Kyoto school miss the significant differences between Abe's emptiness and Nāgārjuna's. For instance, Hans Küng, referring to emptiness, rightly notes that "Masao Abe did not propose Buddhist Ultimate Reality as all Buddhists would understand the term, but as it is understood in a very specific Buddhist paradigm: in the Madhyamika as interpreted by a specific Zen philosophy" (1990: 39).

The third hermeneutic tendency is to compare Nāgārjuna's emptiness to the Christian *via negativa* and the apophatic path to God. That is, Nāgārjuna's philosophy is primarily interpreted as a way of pointing out the transcendence and ineffability of some sort of absolute reality. T. R. V. Murti, Raimon Panikkar, and Nadjin Nagao are the pioneers of this interpretation. Here, however, I focus on the recent work of James L. Fredericks, who claims that Nāgārjuna's emptiness represents a pattern of thought similar to the Christian apophatic path. Fredericks correctly argues that Nāgārjuna's emptiness is not to be confused with the Christian *via negativa*, in which the reality of a transcendent God is always presupposed (2004: 85). On the contrary, Fredericks acknowledges that for Buddhists in Japan Nāgārjuna's emptiness entails the negation of the Christian God (2004: 95). However, Fredericks's discussion of Nāgārjuna together with the silence of the Buddha and the Christian apophatic path, as well as his subsequent comparison of Nāgārjuna's emptiness to the incomprehensible God in Thomas Aquinas, seem to suggest that the opposite might be the case. If according to Fredericks the silence of the Buddha is about the soul and God (2004: 37–38), and if Nāgārjuna's emptiness attempts to capture that silence in philosophical concepts (2004: 53), then must it not logically follow that both Nāgārjuna's emptiness and the silence of the Buddha are a form of apophaticism similar to the Christian *via negativa*? It thus appears that Fredericks is insinuating that the silence of the Buddha and Nāgārjuna's emptiness might be compatible with the existence of the soul and God.

Rooting Nāgārjuna's emptiness in the silence of the Buddha, suggesting that that

silence is indeed about God and the soul, and then relating both emptiness and the silence of Buddha to the apophatic path and Thomas Aquinas's incomprehensible God is, in my view, misleading. In a previous article, I argued that the silence of the Buddha is only about nirvāṇa after death, not about the undetermined questions. Rather, the Buddha gives different answers to the undetermined questions for a variety of reasons (Vélez de Cea 2004). Only the Buddha's response to questions about liberated beings after death seems to be due primarily to apophatic reasons. However, this apophaticism derives from the limits that, according to the Buddha, have designation, language, concepts, and understanding (*Dīgha Nikāya* II.68). The apophaticism regarding the questions about the liberated one after death is also consequence of the limits that the Buddha places on his teachings; that is, he teaches only suffering and its cessation (*Majjhima Nikāya* I.140). By relating the Buddha's apophaticism about the liberated one to the question of God, Fredericks oversteps those limits and therefore contradicts the Buddhist self-understanding. Although it is true that the Pāli Nikāyas do not explicitly state "God exists" or "God does not exist," there are texts that clearly show the negative Buddhist stand on the theistic concept of God. For instance, in the *Brahmanimantanika Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* I.326–331) the Buddha challenges the belief in a God explicitly described as almighty, omniscient, provident, creator, and the father of all present and future beings. The belief in the eternal existence of this theistic concept of God is attributed to the work of Māra, the Buddhist equivalent of the Christian devil, and accordingly it is considered a product of ignorance.

Relating Nāgārjuna's emptiness to the silence of the Buddha, while insinuating that that silence is indeed about God and the soul, also contradicts the most immediate purpose of emptiness, which is precisely the abandonment of views of absolute identity in everything, including nirvāṇa and emptiness. Fredericks is right to root Nāgārjuna's middle path in the Buddha's middle path between the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. This is incontrovertible because Nāgārjuna himself roots his understanding of the middle way in that of the Buddha (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XV.7). This ontological parallelism between the middle path of Nāgārjuna and the Buddha does not relate to the question of God but rather to extreme views of absolute existence and absolute nonexistence. From the Buddhist self-understanding, the theistic God is just another example of the extreme of absolute existence, that is, an example of eternalism. Since the most immediate function of Nāgārjuna's emptiness—as Fredericks correctly notes—is detachment from extreme views of absolute existence and identity, I disagree that a comparison made with the incomprehensible Christian God, which for Aquinas has an absolute existence and identity (*ipsum esse subsistens*), is the best way to understand Nāgārjuna's emptiness in his own terms.

Fredericks is right to criticize Catholic inclusivism and fulfillment theologies for distorting other religions for Christian purposes and domesticating differences between Christianity and other religions. I would challenge the notion that Fredericks's comparison consciously pursues these questionable goals. Nevertheless, Fred-



ericks's comparisons may be seen by some as yet another example, perhaps more subtle and sophisticated, of the very thing he accuses inclusivist fulfillment theologians of doing.

Comparisons between Nāgārjuna's emptiness and the apophatic path to God are in my view textually unjustifiable, at least with Nāgārjuna's Sanskrit works. Someone may try to justify apophatic readings of Nāgārjuna's emptiness with a Chinese work spuriously attributed to Nāgārjuna, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*, or as it is known in Chinese, the *Ta-chih-tu-lun*. However, very few Buddhist scholars would consider it one of Nāgārjuna's works. Accordingly, Fredericks does not refer to the *Ta-chih-tu-lun*; he only uses Kalupahana's controversial English translation of Nāgārjuna's major philosophical work, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK). The closest equivalents to the Christian *via negativa* and the apophatic path to be found in Nāgārjuna's MMK, which to be fair, Fredericks does not mention, are the eight negations that appear in the dedication. However, the eight negations understood in context do not convey the ineffability and transcendence of emptiness. Rather, the eight negations explicate the basic implications of the doctrine of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*). That is why the eight negations appear in that dedication together with this concept, because dependent arising is the middle way between four pairs of extreme views or the eight negations. These four pairs of extreme views are:

1. Not [absolute] ceasing (*anirodam*), not [absolute] arising (*anutpādam*).
2. Not nihilism (*anucchedam*), not eternalism (*aśāśvatam*).
3. Not [absolute] identity (lit. not one thing or meaning: *anekārtham*), not [absolute] difference (lit. not many things or meanings: *anānārtham*).
4. Not [absolute] coming (*anāgamam*), not [absolute] going (*anirgamam*).

Because Nāgārjuna equates dependent arising and emptiness in MMK 24: 18, the eight negations can be interpreted as referring to some extent to the ultimate truth of emptiness. However, extrapolating the eight negations to the ultimate truth of emptiness and subsequently understanding emptiness as some kind of ineffable and transcendent ultimate reality would do violence to Nāgārjuna's Sanskrit works. Emptiness is never described as an absolute reality to which the eight negations are attributed. Similarly, emptiness does not appear in Nāgārjuna's Sanskrit works as some ineffable realm beyond the conventional realm of dependently arisen and linguistic designated things. Such apophatic interpretation of emptiness as qualified by the eight negations is therefore problematic, however possible given Nāgārjuna's equation of dependent arising and emptiness as well as his understanding of conventional and ultimate truths as inseparable (MMK 24: 8).

Comparisons between emptiness and the apophatic path to God are also problematic because Nāgārjuna's emptiness and God are not functional equivalents. Fredericks has probably been influenced by the Kyoto school's tendency to compare God to Buddhist emptiness. However, as I have already said, Nāgārjuna's emptiness is different from the Kyoto school's understanding of emptiness as a dynamic absolute that is the source and transcendental condition of possibility of everything. While

emptiness in the Kyoto school could be considered a functional equivalent to the Christian concept of God, it is not so with Nāgārjuna's more negative concept of emptiness. Furthermore, the Christian question of God is a secondary issue within Nāgārjuna's framework. Descriptions of an ultimate "reality" are scarce and never a priority in Nāgārjuna's works. This attitude is consistent with most Buddhist traditions, where the priority has always been the primary reality of suffering, not an ultimate reality. The Buddhist emphasis on experience and its distrust of theoretical speculation have made Buddhists generally reluctant to speak about the ultimate goal: whether or not the liberated one exists after death, does not exist, both, or neither; whether or not nirvana is, is not, both, or neither. Nāgārjuna is consistent with this traditional Buddhist attitude. On the contrary, the Kyoto school's interests in the question of God are extremely unusual and difficult to reconcile with the more traditional concerns of mainstream Buddhism. One could justify the Kyoto school's concern with the question of God by saying that they constitute a way of acculturating Christianity. However, this attempt to interpret Christianity through Buddhist concepts has been challenged by Christian thinkers. For instance, Hans Küng has suggested in his response to Masao Abe that the notion of a God who empties himself is unbiblical (Küng 1990: 33). Similarly, Steve Odin has said that the theological considerations of the Kyoto school about the emptying of God represent a kenotic Buddhology, and not a genuine kenotic Christology (Odin 1989). Similarly, comparisons of Nāgārjuna and other Buddhist thinkers to the apophatic path and the *via negativa* are likely to be seen by Buddhists as Christian attempts to acculturate Buddhism.

In conclusion, I fully agree with Rita Gross's response to the theologian Gordon D. Kaufman's paper "God and Emptiness": "Because emptiness is so easily misunderstood, it should be studied in the context of teachings about *pratītyasamutpāda* and *tathatā* (suchness). This is the Buddhist context for understanding *śūnyatā*. In my opinion, *śūnyatā* cannot be accurately or profitably discussed apart from this concept" (Gross 1989: 193).

#### COMPARATIVE PRAXIS AND THE FUTURE OF BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN STUDIES

##### *The Need to Focus on Comparative Ethics and Spirituality: Evidence from John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna*

Comparisons of God and emptiness have been very helpful in promoting mutual understanding among Buddhists and Christians in the past. The contribution of the Kyoto school and the Masao Abe–John Cobb group cannot be underestimated. However, upon realizing the insurmountable doctrinal differences that exist between Buddhist and Christian views of an ultimate reality, it makes more sense to respect the self-understanding of each tradition and focus on comparative studies of ethics and spirituality.

It is in order to highlight the important ethical and spiritual dimension of emptiness in John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna that I have undertaken a comparison of the

ethical functions of emptiness (*vacío/nada* and *śūnyatā*). No one has hitherto compared the ethical functions of emptiness in John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna. Most scholars who have discussed the religious thought of John of the Cross in the context of Buddhist-Christian dialogue have established comparisons with Zen Buddhism as interpreted by D. T. Suzuki, Masao Abe, and members of the Kyoto school. The only exception is a study of John of the Cross and *Theravāda* Buddhist meditation, *Purifying the Heart: Buddhist Insight Meditation for Christians*, by Mary Jo Meadow, Kevin Culligan, and Daniel Chowning (1994).

Similarly, Nāgārjuna has appeared in several comparative studies of Christian and Buddhist thinkers, mainly in comparisons involving Zen Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki, Masao Abe, and members of the Kyoto school. The exceptions are Joseph Stephen O'Leary's *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (1996), which compares Nāgārjuna to Derrida, and James L. Fredericks's *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (2004), which compares Nāgārjuna's emptiness to Thomas Aquinas's incomprehensibility of God, although, as I have already said, influenced by the Kyoto school's interpretation of emptiness.

Nāgārjuna's concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) has been discussed in a number of studies within the fields of Buddhist studies, comparative philosophy, and Buddhist-Christian studies. There are important studies relating ethics and emptiness in the context of Buddhist-Christian dialogue (Rupp 1971, 1983; Cobb 1977, 1983; Eckel 1983; Ives 1992; Thurman 1983; Abe 1983). However, none of these studies focuses on the ethical functions of emptiness in Nāgārjuna. Similarly, John of the Cross's concepts of emptiness (*vacío/nada*) have been discussed in a number of monographs and articles within the fields of history of religions and spiritual theology. There are important studies on John of the Cross's ethical reasoning and his concept of disinterested love (Sanderlin 1989, 1993). However, the relationship between ethics and emptiness has not been examined in any particular study. A comparative analysis of the ethical functions of emptiness in John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna is therefore needed, not only because it has not been done before, but also because it has potential for opening a new front in the ongoing Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

The significance of this comparative study lies not only in its originality and potential for opening a new front for Buddhist-Christian dialogue, but also in that it brings to the forefront the ethical dimension of emptiness in John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna, counteracting in that way prevalent apophatic readings of this concept. The main reason to challenge comparisons of emptiness to God, the apophatic path, and the *via negativa* is not, as I have shown in the first section, that they do not help to understand John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna in their own terms. Rather the main objection to these comparisons is that they overemphasize the epistemological functions of emptiness and in that way neglect the ethical roles of emptiness.

Comparing emptiness to the *via negativa* seems to presuppose that the only goal of emptiness is epistemological—that is, the attainment of a better understanding of the ultimate nature of reality. While this cognitive function of emptiness is undeniable, it should never be forgotten that emptiness also performs affective functions. In other words, emptiness fosters the cultivation of both cognitive and affective vir-

tues—that is, not only wisdom, but also compassion. The purpose of emptiness is both epistemological and ethical, contemplation as well as compassionate action. The comparisons of Buddhist emptiness and the *via negativa* do not highlight these active and affective functions of emptiness. On the contrary, these comparisons reinforce the Western stereotype of Buddhism as contemplative oriented and to some extent socially passive. In the case of John of the Cross, comparisons of his concept of emptiness and the *via negativa* reinforce the stereotype of him as merely a mystical author. In this way, John of the Cross's ethical and spiritual teachings are overlooked, and only his poetic descriptions of the highest stages of the spiritual path are considered worthy of careful reading. These stereotypes contrast with the great appreciation for all the teachings of John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna in those Buddhist and Christian living communities where their works are still relevant. In these living communities, John of the Cross is much more than a mystic and poet, and Nāgārjuna is much more than a skillful dialectician and great philosopher. For instance, in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsāla, India, the official residence of the Dalai Lama, Nāgārjuna is invoked before every class of Buddhism taught by the resident lama Geshe Sonam Rinchen. Similarly, the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS), Sarnath, India, the biggest Tibetan nonmonastic university in exile, offers a required course for all students on Nāgārjuna's ethics, specifically on the Precious Garland (*Ratnāvalī*). Similarly, within the Carmelite communities of Spain and the United States, John of the Cross is revered and studied as a spiritual master, whose ethical and spiritual teachings are as important as his descriptions of mystical experiences.

The ethical interpretation of emptiness does more justice not only to the actual spiritual role of Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross in some living Buddhist and Christian communities, but also to the biography of these two classics. Both John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna are seen as active reformers in their respective traditions. Both tried to revive what they thought was the original spirit of their religious traditions in opposition to their current deviations from it. John of the Cross, following the example of Theresa of Avila, founded and spiritually directed numerous convents of the discalced Carmelite order. These convents served as a refuge for contemplatives who were interested in a religious life closer to the spirit of early Christian monasticism. The reformed convents were smaller, less mundane, and morally stricter than the large convents prevalent at that time. Similarly, Nāgārjuna reformed the kind of Buddhism prevalent at his time. According to traditional Chinese and Tibetan hagiographies, he founded many monasteries and brought to the world the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras (*Prajñāpāramitā*). The emphasis on the emptiness of everything characteristic of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras and Nāgārjuna's works is seen as an attempt to reform the doctrinal excesses of early Buddhist scholasticism.

John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna were monks, but their teachings were not exclusively directed to fellow monks. While it is true that John of the Cross's *Ascent to Mount Carmel* was written to guide fellow contemplatives, it is also true that his *Living Flame of Love* was written for a lay person. It should not be forgotten that sixteenth-century Catholic Spain had a long tradition of mental prayer practiced by

both religious and lay people. Theresa of Avila herself learned how to meditate with a book given to her by her uncle, a lay person, and Ignatius of Loyola's spiritual exercises are indebted to the exercises taught by Benedictines at the abbey of Montserrat while he was still a lay person.

Similarly, Nāgārjuna's works were not written exclusively for monks. There are no grounds to suggest, as Fredericks does, that the philosophical arguments found in his works are primarily for Buddhist monks. On the contrary, the *Precious Garland* (RV) is addressed to a Shātavāhana king, and, because it contains arguments similar to those found in the MMK, it is plausible to conclude that the MMK may have been intended for religious and lay people alike.

However, evidence from the life and the actual role of John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna in living communities is not enough to justify the ethical interpretation of emptiness. In order to convincingly justify the ethical interpretation of emptiness it is necessary to provide evidence from the primary sources. Owing to space limitations, in what follows I analyze just one of the three ethical functions of emptiness I have been able to identify. I leave a more comprehensive discussion of emptiness, its three ethical functions, and the comparative methodology I have used for another article. Here I point out that the methodology underlying the present comparison is inspired by Raimon Panikkar's concept of homeomorphic equivalents, presupposes linguistic and philosophical/theological competence in the primary sources of the two thinkers under comparison, and requires the actual practice of interreligious dialogue with members of living communities where these sources are still relevant.

#### *The Instrumental Ethical Function of Emptiness in John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna*

For John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna emptiness is a means to foster detachment, and through detachment the cultivation of cognitive and affective virtues. The kind of detachment that emptiness fosters is also cognitive and affective. In the case of John of the Cross, the affective goal is to detach our appetites from inordinate affections for creatures in order to direct those appetites and affections toward God alone, detachment that will eventually facilitate union of likeness through love. Cognitively, the goal is to detach our faculties from objects disproportionate to God and therefore inadequate as means for union. If the soul does not detach itself from sensory objects, images of the imagination, and ideas of the intellect, it might deceive itself with false experiences of God.

In the case of Nāgārjuna, the goal is to detach oneself from views of absolute identity in order to stop or abandon these views, as well as the proliferation of concepts (*prapañca*) that make them possible. Although Nāgārjuna's emptiness is formulated mainly in cognitive terms, it certainly presupposes the affective cessation of attachments. It is true that the MMK concludes with a verse venerating the Buddha (lit. Gautama) who out of compassion taught the good Dharma in order to abandon all views (*sarvadṛṣṭīprahāṇāya yaḥ saddharmam adeśayat, anukampām upādāya taṃ namasyāmi gautamam*). Similarly, in MMK 13: 8, Nāgārjuna writes that accord-

ing to Buddhas (lit. conquerors), emptiness is the stopping of all views (*śūnyatā sarvadṛṣṭināṃ proktā niḥsaraṇaṃ jinaiḥ*). However, this cognitive abandonment and relinquishing of views of absolute identity is inseparable from the affective cessation of attachment to the absolute identity of persons and things. As MMK 26.1 indicates, the cessation of ignorance is conditioned and conditions the second link of the twelve-link chain of dependent arising, namely, mental formations (*saṃskāra*). The wider term “mental formations” refers to a variety of mental phenomena, many of them affective. For instance, the mental consequences of ethical actions (six kinds of karma)—attachment (*upādāna*), inordinate desires such as greed (*lobha*) and its opposite nongreed or generosity (*alobha*), negative emotions such as hatred (*dveṣa*), and positive emotions such as compassion (*karunā*)—all fall under the category of mental formations. Since the cessation of ignorance or wisdom is inseparable from the cessation of mental formations, it is evident that the attachment that emptiness undermines is not only cognitive but also affective.

Accordingly, the virtues to be further cultivated after the detachment that *śūnyatā* delivers are not only cognitive but also affective in nature. In other words, detachment in Nāgārjuna is not just a means toward the cultivation of cognitive virtues and the perfection of wisdom. The abandonment of views is also a means toward a more selfless and compassionate ethical practice, which in turn will lead to the perfection of compassion and other virtues constitutive of the Buddhist ideal together with the virtue of wisdom.

The fact that in RV 38–114 the arguments to establish emptiness are not only preceded but also followed by ethical advice seems to suggest that the philosophy of emptiness is intended to enhance ethical practice. The ethical practice that emptiness enhances is more compassionate, detached, selfless, and other-regarding than preliminary ethical actions, that is, actions performed without enough familiarity with emptiness. Not surprisingly, the RV speaks for the first time of compassion only after the arguments to establish emptiness, in verse 175. Interestingly, compassion appears there together with wisdom and the altruistic aspiration to enlightenment as the roots of a variety of ethical practices that one must continue to cultivate. Similarly, in RV 298 we read of the need to cultivate wisdom together with compassion in order to attain enlightenment. In RV 396 the means of achieving enlightenment are said to have emptiness and compassion as their essence. The wisdom and compassion of the *Mahāyāna* path are exalted in RV 378. The six perfections of giving, morality, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom appear again together with compassion in RV 379, 435, and 436. Since all these texts are placed after the arguments to establish emptiness, it seems that after the abandonment and stopping of absolute views of identity it is necessary to keep cultivating affective virtues, though now supplemented with a stronger virtue of wisdom.

The stopping and abandonment of views to which emptiness leads should not be identified, at least in Nāgārjuna’s works, with the highest stages of the Buddhist path. Nāgārjuna speaks of the elimination of identity views (*satkāyadrṣṭi*), a technical Buddhist term equivalent to views of absolute identity, at the fourth Bodhisattva ground (RV 448). It is at that ground that the light of right understanding arises

(*samyagñānārcirudbhavāt*) (RV 447). However, the perfection of wisdom is not yet attained. Nāgārjuna speaks of the arising of skillfulness in knowledge of the subtle meaning of the four noble truths and so on (*āryasatyādisūkṣmārtha-jñānakauśala-sambhavāt*) at the fifth Bodhisattva ground (RV 449). Because the knowledge of the four noble truths is also related to the virtue of wisdom, it is evident that the elimination of identity views does not constitute the perfection of wisdom. Nāgārjuna only speaks of the sphere of infinite wisdom at the tenth Bodhisattva ground (RV 460)—that is, six stages of the spiritual path after the elimination of identity views at ground four. In sum, the ultimate purpose of Nāgārjuna's emptiness is the further cultivation and eventual perfection of both cognitive and ethical virtues.

Similarly, in the case of John of the Cross emptiness of the soul leads to the development of all virtues, cognitive as well as affective. For him the appetites weaken a person's virtue (A I.10.2). By mortifying and pacifying our appetites, especially the four natural passions (joy, hope, fear, and sorrow), great virtues arise. In other words, emptiness, nakedness, and poverty of everything in the world for Christ lead to great virtues (A I.13.5). Whenever these passions of the appetites reign, the soul lacks the tranquility and peace required for the wisdom it can receive naturally and supernaturally (A III.16.5–6). Conversely, by bridling the passions and curbing the inordinate appetites, one attains tranquility, peace, repose, and moral virtues, which for John of the Cross are the moral good. Emptiness of the soul and the attainment of the moral good, tranquility, peace, and repose are intertwined (A III.5). He does not deny that there can be virtues when there are passions (A III.22.2); he simply suggests that the lack of passions allows the soul to grow prosperously in virtue. For instance, emptying the soul of a passion such as rejoicing in natural goods prepares the soul for the love of God and other virtues such as humility toward self and general charity toward one's neighbor (A III.23).

Emptiness of the soul conserves the virtues already acquired and increases them (A III.26). During the dark night of the spirit the faculties are dry and empty. However, because of that emptiness and aridity, all virtues, theological, cardinal and moral, are exercised (D I.13.5). The emptiness of faculties that occurs in the dark night of the spirit leads to humbleness and self-knowledge. This humility and self-knowledge of one's own misery is the foundation on which the knowledge of God arises because one extreme is clearly known in light of the other. John justifies this idea with a quote from St. Augustine's *Soliloquia* 2.1.1: "Let me know myself, Lord, and I will know you" (D I.12.5).

Emptiness of the faculties is also inseparable from the three theological virtues (A II.6). The most effective means for achieving complete emptiness of the soul and the best preparation for union with God are the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Faith causes darkness and emptiness of understanding in the intellect. Hope begets an emptiness of possessions in memory. And charity produces in our will the nakedness and emptiness of affection and joy for all that is not God (A II.6; see also (D II.21.11)). The more the soul is emptied of all internal and external things, the more it is infused by faith and, consequently, by love and hope, because

these three theological virtues are united and increase together (lit. *andan en uno*) (A II.24.8; see also A III.32.4). The purer a soul is in faith, the more infused charity it possesses. Consequently, the more charity the soul has the more the Holy Spirit communicates its gifts. Charity is both the cause and the means for the communication of those gifts, a communication through which the soul receives, though in a general way, all the wisdom of God, which is the Son of God (A II.29.6). John of the Cross's emptiness of the soul does not destroy ethical practice but rather reinforces it. Emptiness of the soul leads to general loving awareness of God; God's communication, which includes the three theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit; and eventually to union of love or identity of one's own will with the will of God (lit. *hecha una misma cosa con la voluntad de Dios*) (A III.16.3).

#### CONCLUSION

In the first part we examined questionable hermeneutical tendencies found in some of the discussions of John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna in the field of Buddhist-Christian studies. Both John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna have been interpreted through concepts and categories foreign to their respective frameworks, sometimes from the perspective of other religions, and other times from the standpoint of other fellow Christians or Buddhists. Similarly, both John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna have been compared to the apophatic path to God and the Christian *via negativa* in ways that are not faithful to their respective views of emptiness.

In the second section we explored a new direction for subsequent Buddhist-Christian comparisons of John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna and, by extension, for future comparative studies of Buddhists and Christians. That new direction focuses on ethical and spiritual comparisons of functional equivalents, and, methodologically it presupposes not only linguistic and philosophical/theological competence in the primary sources of the two thinkers under comparison, but also the practice of interreligious dialogue with members of living communities where those sources are still relevant. As a case study, we have compared one of the ethical roles of emptiness in John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna. We have seen that there are enough textual grounds to claim that emptiness in John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna performs an instrumental ethical function in that it leads to more advanced kinds of ethical practice as well as to further cultivation of all virtues, cognitive and affective, wisdom as well as compassion. In sum, we have seen that comparisons of John of the Cross and Nāgārjuna to the apophatic path and Christian *via negativa* overemphasize the cognitive and epistemological function of emptiness and in that way neglect the important ethical dimension of emptiness.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

MMK	<i>Mūlamadhyamakakārikā</i>
RV	<i>Ratnāvalī</i>



- A        *Ascent to Mount Carmel*  
 D        *The Dark Night of the Soul*  
 L        *Living Flame of Love*

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