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Just Peace: A Buddhist-Christian Path to Liberation

Kyeongil Jung

Buddhist-Christian Studies

University of Hawai'i Press

Volume 32, 2012

pp. 3-15

10.1353/bcs.2012.0015

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The primary goal of religion is liberation from suffering, and the state of

liberation is peace. In that sense religion is a salvific and peace-seeking path. But just as many rivers flow into one great ocean, there are many paths to liberation, that is, to peace. Since the destination is the same, peace-seekers may walk on one path, two paths, or more. I don't know whether it is due to good karma or divine grace, but I have been walking on two paths, Buddhist and Christian, since I began to pursue a spiritual-social transformation of the self and the world. This is possible, as my late friend Praveen Chaudhari said, not because the two paths are the same but precisely because they are different.

The contrasting difference I have experienced is that while Buddhism is *a path of peace to peace*, Christianity is *a path of justice to peace*. This difference has become more apparent to me as I have studied and practiced both socially engaged Buddhism and liberation theology. Engaged Buddhists seek to achieve peace through "being peace," which is an impartial and nonadversarial way of proceeding, whereas liberative Christians seek to achieve peace through working for justice, which entails a preferential and confrontational attitude. But in these differences I believe that the two approaches can complement, not contradict, each other. They can do so because Buddhism and Christianity are differently but equally salvific paths on the common ground of human suffering.

I walk on the two paths to peace at the same time. While this may not be possible intellectually and logically, in my experience it becomes possible through praxis. Liberation theologians are right that theological reflection is a "second act" that follows the first act: the praxis of liberation. In this essay I reflect on four major oppositions that have arisen in the course of my dual praxis: compassion language and justice language, peace and justice, nonviolence and violence, and meditation and action. In each case the opposition is resolved through mutual correction in view of the salvific purpose of both emphases.

Compassion Language and Justice Language

There are two languages that inspire people to respond to human

suffering, namely, the language of compassion and that of justice.

Though the two languages are spoken **[End Page 3]** by Buddhists as well as Christians, compassion language is often attributed to Buddhism and justice language to Christianity. Buddhists draw mainly on compassion language to respond to human suffering. Such language is impartial: it does not discriminate between victims and victimizers, but encourages Buddhists to be compassionate toward both. Thich Nhat Hanh gives a striking illustration of the impartiality of Buddhist compassion: "*I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate. And I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.*"¹

The two italicized "be" verbs challenge me. Though it is not always easy, I have no problem with the first "am" in the poem. I am compassionate toward the poor twelve-year-old girl. I feel her pain, shame, and despair. The compassion language does not allow me to distance *myself here* from *her there*. The girl's suffering *is* my suffering; *I am* the twelve-year-old girl. But, the second "am" takes my breath away. It is unthinkable and even immoral to identify myself with the sea pirate and to be compassionate toward him. *I am not* the pirate. Instead of compassion, I feel anger. The pirate should be punished for his heinous crime. I must take sides with the girl against the sea pirate. Why on earth is Nhat Hanh compassionate toward the evil sea pirate?

Nhat Hanh was also angry when he heard of the girl's cruel fate. However, after meditating on the tragedy, he realized that he could not simply take sides: "If I had been born in his village and brought up under the same conditions, I would be exactly like him."² He cannot take sides because he is aware of conditions in which a poor...

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
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Out of This Confusion I Bring My Heart: Love, Liberation, and the Rise of Black Lesbian and Gay Cultural Politics in Late Twentieth Century America, the axis of the rotor, as in other

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