Buddhism and the Vatican

In *Crossing the Threshold of Faith*, Pope John Paul II sought to clarify the doctrinal differences between Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. He stated that the doctrines of Buddhism have a “negative soteriology” and that enlightenment is essentially a “conviction that the world is bad” (ID 52). These remarks quickly received rebuttals from various Buddhist sources, including the Dalai Lama. While I agree with these rebuttals that the Pope’s statement was not nuanced properly, I will argue in this paper that the Pope’s basic position is correct. Both Buddhism and Roman Catholicism hold love as a virtue. But in the Catholic view, love necessitates a certain amount of clinginess, whereas Buddhism asserts that love can be void of clinginess. This major doctrinal difference has ramifications for ethics and political theory within each tradition.

The remarks made by Pope John Paul II in *Crossing the Threshold of Faith* are bold. At once, he seems to be making two claims about Buddhism.

The first claim that Pope JP II makes about Buddhism is that Buddhism views the world as metaphysically evil or bad. Pope JP II states that enlightenment is nothing more than a “conviction that the world is bad, that it is a source of evil and of suffering for man” (ID 52). And in comparing Catholicism to Buddhism, Pope JP II states that in Buddhism “there is essentially a different way of perceiving the world. For Christians, the world is God’s creation, redeemed by Christ … For Christianity it does not make sense to speak of the world as a ‘radical’ evil” (ID 54). Here the implication is that Buddhism speaks of the world as some ‘radical’ evil, though we will see that this is not necessarily the case. Regardless, Pope JP II is certainly making the claim that Buddhism sees the world as metaphysically evil.

But Pope JP II also makes another claim about Buddhism in *Crossing the Threshold of Faith*: he makes Buddhism appear quietist. According to Pope JP II, salvation is achieved in Buddhism by a negative enlightenment: “an awareness of the evil which exists in man’s attachment to the world through the sense” (ID 53). This is compared to Christianity’s positive enlightenment, which consists in a “revelation of the living God” (ID 54). Where Buddhism’s salvation is focused on knowledge of the world’s rotten character, Christianity focuses on union
with the living God, through “faith, hope, and, above all, love” (ID 54). Whereas in Buddhism “man must break away from [the world],” Catholicism gives a “constant impetus to strive for [the world’s] transformation and perfection” (ID 54). Ultimately Pope JP II accuses Buddhism of “Gnosticism,” which I take to mean a religion which saves through knowledge (ID 55). Perhaps more pertinently, he is accusing Buddhism of being a religion which can save isolated individuals at exclusion from everything else. Pope John Paul II’s main point seems to be that Buddhism is a form of quietism.

Responses to John Paul II’s work are quick to attack the first of these two claims. In an interview, the Dalai Lama remarks that the pope’s statements were polemical and superficial, and I must agree with the Dalai Lama on this matter (ID 87). As the Dalai Lama goes on to make clear, Buddhism does not view the world as evil; “the world itself is basically neutral” (ID 87). The problem, according to the Dalai Lama, is “the attitude of grasping, or attachment, selfish attachment, stemming from ignorance” (ID 87). We then see that Pope John Paul II’s account of Buddhism is rejected by the Dalai Lama.

On the other hand, other Buddhist sources seem to corroborate the claims of Pope John Paul II; Mark Siderits makes the argument from a Buddhist perspective that pain is intrinsically bad. He states “pain is impersonally bad – its badness is still there even when we remove all false beliefs about a self” (IE 290). According to Siderits, this view is prevalent in the Mahāyāna tradition (IE 289). If, in fact, Buddhism holds that pain is intrinsically bad, and that existence is dukkha, as their four noble truths proclaim, then Pope John Paul II’s first statement is correct. All the same, Siderits’ position regarding the objectively evil nature of pain seems to contradict the second noble truth dukkha sumadaya, that suffering is caused by thirst, or clinging. While the view proposed by Siderits might be widespread, it cannot be called central to Buddhist doctrine.

The negation of the statements made by Pope John Paul II is further evidenced by Buddhism’s teachings on mettā and karuṇā. Karuṇā is sometimes translated into English as pity, while mettā is translated as loving compassion, or agape. After enlightenment, Buddha rejected a life of quiet enlightenment and spent his remaining time on earth in teaching and ministry, thereby showing the importance of mettā and karuṇā. While supposedly the Buddha did not have to do this, and could have remained as a pratye kabuddha, or a Buddha unto himself, he chose to teach the dhama to the ignorant world. Walking the middle path, Buddha chose to embrace the world and its occupants, and not to reject the world as evil. This act of compassion by the
Buddha is evidence of a love for the world and the people in it. This being the case, there can be no place for a metaphysically evil world in Buddhism. To conclude, I must agree with the Dalai Lama that the Pope John Paul II was being reductionist and polemical in his commentary on Buddhism, at least through his first claim.

That being said, the second claim of Pope John Paul II about Buddhism, namely that Buddhism is quietist in nature, is quite correct. I will endeavor through the rest of this paper to show that Buddhism and Roman Catholicism differ centrally on the social nature of salvation, and the meaning of love.

In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI describes the Roman Catholic position on love using the terms *agape* and *eros*. Benedict describes the difference between these two forms of love as follows: *eros* is used “as a term to indicate ‘worldly’ love” and *agape* is a term used to describe “love grounded in and shaped by faith” (DCE 7). Benedict goes on to further illustrate these terms: *agape* and *eros* “are often contrasted as ‘ascending’ love and ‘descending’ love. There are other, similar classifications, such as the distinction between possessive love and oblative love” (DCE 7). However, in the end, Benedict argues that both *agape* and *eros* are necessary components of love. He states: “eros and agape—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized” (DCE 7). Then for Pope Benedict XVI, *eros* is a necessary and vital aspect of love.

This emphasis on *eros* reflects the communal nature of salvation in Roman Catholicism. Pope Benedict XVI is not merely arguing that Christians should care deeply about each other; he is arguing that Christians must deeply long for each other and desire passionately for each other’s safety and salvation. As Cyprian is famous for arguing, there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church is saved as a single entity, working in love for each other’s benefit. Any who would seek their own salvation, apart from the salvation of the church, forsake themselves in leaving. Pope Benedict argues the same way: if love were to be deprived of *eros*, of a deep desire for community, then “Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life (DCE 7).” Then we see just how vital *eros* is to the Catholic message. Without *eros*, there is not Church. Without the Church, there is no salvation.
For Buddhism however, the notion of eros is unacceptable. Pope Benedict XVI has
defined eros to be a form of love which passionately desires. Under the second noble truth, such
love is a form of desire, which leads to suffering. Then any Buddhist seeking to attain
enlightenment would surely need to be void of eros. No proper Buddhist could cleave unto the
Christian God for support, nor unto the Catholic Church, nor even unto their community. A
proper Buddhist must be able to attain enlightenment without these things.

This is not to say that a Buddhist is incapable of participating in a community; I
mentioned the concepts of mettā and karuṇā earlier, both acceptable forms of love in Buddhism.
These are often translated as agape and pity respectively. Neither one, however, is comparable to
eros. Neither one can truly be categorized as the longing for closeness which is so fundamentally
necessary in Roman Catholicism, because both are defined to exclude attachment. Any Buddhist
who was dependent on his or her community would not truly understand the four noble truths,
and any Catholic who insisted upon salvation apart from the community or God would be
heretical.

This differentiation in doctrine is readily apparent in a comparison between the ethics of
Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. The epic tale of the Buddha includes a narrative in which the
Buddha leaves his wife and child on his quest for enlightenment. Within the context of the
Buddhist tradition, this is considered acceptable because it was a necessary action for the Buddha
to attain enlightenment. In principle, this necessity could apply in other situations as well.
Richard Gombrich has gone so far as to declare liberation from suffering to be the one
deontological duty in Buddhism (IE 237-238). For a Boddhisattva, anything which leads to
enlightenment can be considered ethical, even giving away one’s children to slavery, as a
previous incarnation of the Buddha (visvantara) is said to have done. This principle is embodied
by the phrase *katam karaniyam*, or “what had to be done is done” (IE 238). In contrast,
Catholicism would never emphasize a salvation independent of the community. This would be
the heresy termed quietism.

Ultimately we see major doctrinal differences between Roman Catholicism and
Buddhism. While the claims made by Pope John Paul II in *Crossing the Threshold of Faith* were
superficial and polemic, his basic premise was correct. The first claim made by Pope John Paul
II, that Buddhism sees the world as metaphysically evil, is not entirely true. Certain comments
made by Buddhists such as Mark Siderits might lead the Pope to hold this view of Buddhism, but
this view is not necessarily held by the majority of Buddhists, nor its religious leaders. However, the second claim made by Pope John Paul II, that Buddhism is a religion of isolation, is true. In Catholicism, love is vitally attached to its object. Without that attachment, a Christian cannot properly love his community or God. While Buddhism does speak of detached love such as mettā and karuṇā, these are not enough for Catholicism. Any Buddhist unwilling to get attached to the Catholic Church or God would be suspect of quietism or pelagianism.
Works Cited


Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love.

There are other, similar classifications, such as the distinction between possessive love and oblative love.