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Moving Forward by Agreeing to Disagree: A Response to “Healing Ecology”

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Moving Forward by Agreeing to Disagree: A Response to “Healing Ecology”

Grace Y. Kao¹

David Loy has described himself here as male, Caucasian, and a U.S. citizen. We also know from his public profile that he is, among other descriptors, a Buddhist who has been authorized to teach Zen Buddhism by Master Yamada Koun Roshi of the Sanbo Kyodan lineage of Zen. Since portions of what I have to say emerge from reflecting on some differences between our social location, allow me to provide a few identifying markers of my own. I, too, am a U.S. citizen: a second-generation Taiwanese American female. Like Loy I was raised Christian and teach philosophical and religious ethics, but unlike him I never left Christianity (McFarlane and Loy). I identify today as a progressive Christian with denominational membership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and have never been a practitioner of, or academic specialist in, any variety of Buddhism. I will accordingly put aside otherwise valid questions of what kind of Buddhist soteriology has Loy presented and whether Buddhists should apply concepts such as *dukkha* and *anatta* in the ecological directions that he recommends. I will instead engage his paper through three

¹ Claremont School of Theology. Email: gkao.cst.edu. This response was delivered at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, October 31, 2010. I would like to thank the steering committees of the Comparative Religious Ethics and the Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection Groups for their invitation to participate in that joint session. I would also like to thank Richard Amesbury for helpful advice on an earlier draft of these comments.

conceptual lenses with which I am more familiar—Christian, feminist, and what might be called Maritainian or Rawlsian.

Perhaps the first question that came to my mind after reading Loy's paper is how someone like me should even craft a response, particularly since my religious tradition (for reasons of cultural hegemony) has generally been the one to set the terms of discussion on environmentalism and related matters (for example, various "religion and science" debates). Another way of asking this question is whether I ought to engage the conceptual and metaphysical questions that his paper raises or the practical and political ones. There is a respectable tradition in political philosophy that would encourage me to select the latter option, so as to allow people of diverse and even mutually incompatible final commitments to pursue common projects in the absence of agreement about underlying theory. For example, prior to the mid-twentieth century adoption by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNESCO convened a committee to study the feasibility of putting together a charter of rights for all peoples and nations. One of the most active members of that committee, the French Catholic natural law theorist Jacques Maritain, famously remarked that everyone—even delegates with "violently opposed ideologies"—could agree upon a list of rights, but "only on condition that no one asks us why" (Maritain, *Human Rights* 9).² Maritain himself was "quite certain that [his] way of justifying belief in the rights of man and the ideal of liberty, equality, fraternity [wa]s the only way with a firm foundation in truth." Still, the strength of his conviction "[did] not prevent [him] from being in agreement on these practical convictions with people who [we]re certain that their

² The fourth chapter of Maritain's *Man and State* entitled "The Rights of Man" is appropriately subtitled "Men mutually opposed in their theoretical conceptions can come to a merely practical agreement regarding a list of human rights."

way of justifying them, entirely different...or opposed to [his]...[wa]s equally the only way founded upon truth” (10-11).

Now a great amount has already been written about the wisdom of bracketing theory for the sake of praxis, as the voluminous literature on John Rawls’s comparable but non-identical notions of “political liberalism,” “overlapping consensus” and “public reason” attest.³ Rather than rehearse those arguments here, what I would like to do instead is explore how we might respond to Loy’s paper if subjected to Maritainian or Rawlsian analysis.

The answer, in short, would first require us to divide the content of his paper in two. We would understand his attempt to draw a spiritual analogy between our individual predicament on the one hand, and our ecological crisis on the other, as principally designed for, and primarily addressed to, fellow Buddhists. His co-religionists would thus have free rein to affirm or to contest the manner in which he employs the theoretical apparatus of Buddhism toward environmental ends. We would simultaneously regard his practical proposals to “heal ecology” as fit for public commentary or critique among *all* people of good will, whether they belong in some fashion to Buddhism or not.

To be clear, so long as Loy’s constructive measures could be distinguished conceptually from the particular Buddhist rationale that he provides for them, so that the former were theoretically “freestanding” to invoke the Rawlsian term, we need not assess the truth or justifiability of his underlying philosophical and religious ideas before forging ahead. We ethicists of all stripes would not first have to identify similarities within and incongruities between and among our respective traditions: Loy’s *anatta* compared to Augustine’s immortal soul compared to Hume’s

³ For Rawls’s discussion of these ideas, see especially his *Political Liberalism*, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited” in *The Law of Peoples with The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*.

“bundle of perceptions,” to name a few possibilities. Nor would we have to convince one another of the merits (or lack thereof) of one metaphysical description of the world and account of human nature against other alternatives: Loy’s description of the delusional self who needs enlightenment, or Kierkegaard’s understanding of anxiety, subjectivity, and faith, or still some other account of who we are and how we can become free from what ails us so. Before partnering together to repair the world, we would not even be required to ground Loy’s conclusions that “we are an integral part of the natural world” and that human civilization is a construct that never “left” nature on Buddhist views on dependent co-origination. Instead, others could rely upon some other conceptual scaffolding, such as biblical ideas of humanity being formed from the “dust of the ground,” of the various covenants (for example, Noahide, Mosaic) linking the people to God and nature, and of Christ holding all of creation together.⁴ These examples, of course, do not exhaust the possibilities.

Now the upshot of permitting plural, even if internally contradictory, bases of support by remaining noncommittal at the public level about the truth or validity of each theoretical possibility is that we could spend our collective energies instead on assessing Loy’s practical principles and proposals of action. These include putting an end to our “obsession with never-ending ‘progress’” and the patterns of overconsumption encouraged by that mindset, responsibly managing our waste products in such a way where they would not simply be moved out of sight, and collectively turning to renewable sources of natural power in lieu of reliance upon nuclear power or fossil fuels. In short, in our search for agreement on various practical initiatives to combat “climate change, ozone holes, melting glaciers, or extinction events,” we would not care at the public level if some groups internally were to cha-

⁴ See, for example, John 1:3 and Colossians 1:15-17.

racterize these and other measures as the human species becoming the “collective Bodhisattva of the biosphere,” while others were to regard it as reflecting what proper dominion and stewardship over the created order would require, and so forth.

While a full Maritainian or Rawlsian interpretation would require more elaboration than what I have only been able to sketch here, in the interest of time let me turn now to two major difficulties with the reading I have provided thus far. First, as discussed extensively in the secondary literature on political liberalism, it would be a mistake for us to believe that “political” calls for social action could really be as devoid of “metaphysical” commitments as the overall strategy of bracketing theory for praxis would imply. Consider the solution Loy offers to our energy problems. He writes: “instead of asking ‘how can we get all the energy we need?’ perhaps we should turn that around by determining how much renewable energy is available and restructuring human civilization accordingly.” His is a welcome and worthy suggestion, and one that *prima facie* involves no contentious theoretical assumptions. If we were to put his proposal into action, however, the veneer of neutrality between “comprehensive doctrines” would quickly dissipate. For even if we could actually calculate how much renewable energy there was, it would still not be obvious how we would then go about apportioning it among ourselves (for example, equally among all individuals or across all countries? A greater share to those who have financed the harnessing of natural power? “To each according to his need”?). As these possibilities suggest, the models of distributive justice that might be proposed to solve this problem would most likely entail comprehensive philosophical or religious commitments of their own.

Now the second difficulty with the Maritainian-Rawlsian reading that I have offered thus far is that it is arguably one that Loy himself would not want, as it might even do harm to the integrity of his argu-

ment. For Loy's remarks do not neatly divide into two types: those directed primarily at Buddhists on account of their (presumably) shared metaphysics and ontology, and those aimed at a general audience in light of the universality of the prescriptions and effects of his plan to heal the biosphere. Quite the contrary, Loy's central thesis is that there are common "spiritual roots" to our ecological crisis and that the Buddhist soteriological structure, when properly understood and applied from the individual to the collective case, holds the key to our way out. Loy's wish is not simply that we all "stop befoul[ing] our own nest" in the ways already mentioned, but that we all "awaken" to the true causes of environmental spoilage—our false belief in an ultimate "separation from other people and...from...the natural world" and our dysfunctional striving after "ever-increasing power and control" as a way of resolving our collective anxiety about what it means to be human. If these points weren't proof enough of Loy's unwillingness to play by any Maritainian or Rawlsian-inspired rules of compartmentalization, there is also his direct appeal to religions to change their internal lives: to "stop denying evolution and instead refocus their messages on its *meaning*" (emphasis in original).⁵

Despite the difficulties endemic to bracketing approaches in political philosophy in general and as applied to Loy's paper in particular, I would still like to encourage Loy to disentangle practical solutions to re-

⁵ Loy offers this prescription after noting that the relevance of religion would be at stake. But Loy is either mistaken about what is relevant to religious practitioners, or he means something else by the term than what is germane or applicable, because surveys in the United States have repeatedly showed not only that a majority of Americans do not believe in evolution, but also that disbelief in evolution is strongly correlated with religiosity. Witness the February 11, 2009 Gallup Poll that was conducted on the eve of the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birthday, where only 39% of Americans said that they "believe in the theory of evolution" and where those who reported attending church the most often (for example, weekly) were the least likely to report belief in evolution. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114544/darwin-birthday-believe-evolution.aspx> [last retrieved on October 28, 2010].

ducing our ecological footprint from his grand meta-narrative of why the world is now facing ecological ruin. Let me now conclude with a few reasons in support of my recommendation and let me also register my regret that I can do so only in a cursory manner here.

First, the urgency of our myriad environmental problems combined with the “fact of reasonable pluralism” leads me to believe that we cannot and should not wait for universal enlightenment about something as contestable as the true origins of environmental devastation before taking action.⁶ Doubtless I share Loy’s conviction that technology alone should neither bear the blame for our current situation, nor be our sole hope for a better future. My worry, however, is that any environmentalism that is conditional upon human civilization becoming “awakened” from its illusory worldviews is going have to wait a dreadfully long time before becoming actualized, if ever. For however ultimately false the socially-constructed distinctions between selves and others, egoism and altruism, and nature and culture are or may be, these ways of thinking are firmly entrenched and dominant today. On *this* side of (spiritual or secular) *nirvāṇa*, then, I submit that environmental campaigns will stand a greater chance of success if they strategically work *within* those paradigms, even if by appealing directly to people’s selfish desires and “illusory” assumptions, than if they insist upon first trying to liberate us all from them.

Second, I am slightly troubled by the gendered dimensions of Loy’s analysis of the problem as well as some of the language he uses to describe humanity’s relation to nature (*viz.*, umbilical cord imagery,

⁶ I do not mean to imply that Loy himself was suggesting this (i.e., that we suspend practical action until we all agree upon theory), but only to emphasize the dangers of paralysis if the two were inextricably connected if and when enlightenment about underlying theory were not forthcoming.

“earth as mother, “mother earth”⁷) and thus am concerned about what practical consequences for feminism might follow. Loy has repeatedly characterized our anxious, delusional selves as incessantly trying to “identify with [an] ‘outside’ [of] us that (we think) can provide the grounding we crave.” But most of his examples of the ways we generally try to fill our existential lack involve what many feminists have alleged are more reflective of male experience (*viz.*, through “money, material possessions, reputation, power”) than of women’s experiences (*i.e.*, through relationships with others). It stands to reason, then, that his dual call that we abandon our incorrect understanding that there is a “‘me’ that’s separate from others” and accordingly “tak[e] care of ‘others’” might have gendered implications as well. To be clear, whether directed at Loy’s Buddhist soteriology, Reinhold Niebuhr’s sin as pride theology,⁸ or secular care theorists who promote an unpoliticized ethic of care, my overarching concern is that any normative theory that valorizes other-regard and the negation of self may inadvertently serve the purposes of denying the moral agency of, and justifying endless self-sacrifice among, certain classes of people who need to be exalted instead: namely, those who either are already in powerless, subordinate positions or are operating under forms of self-hatred such as internalized misogyny. To be sure, I am aware that Buddhist feminists themselves have ways of reconciling the (real or apparent) tension between the overarching feminist sociopolitical agenda of promoting women and the Buddhist

⁷ For a discussion of the concerns that “earthcare” or “ecomaternalist” discourse raises, see, for example, Kao.

⁸ In Christian social ethics, this was essentially the concern that Valerie Saivings raised against Reinhold Niebuhr’s concept of sin as pride. She noted in her path-breaking article, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” that women were tempted more by “underdevelopment or negation of the Self” through “triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one’s self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards” and so forth than the sins of “pride” and “will to power” that were more representative of male experience (Saivings 37).

metaphysical denial of discrete unified selves.⁹ What I'm wondering, then, is whether Loy is sympathetic to that line of work and if so, how he might qualify his remarks accordingly.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention my own reservations about the *practical* value of providing somewhat ahistorical explanations for what I take to be historical problems. As you all know, much attention has been directed toward global climate change and the need for the industrialized world to make drastic changes in transportation, be it through efficient mass transit or "greener" commuter alternatives to the personal car. To the surprise of many, however, a recent report by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (UNFAO) found that the global livestock sector generates even more greenhouse gas emissions than does the worldwide transport sector and that the former is also a major source of land and water degradation and loss of biodiversity (Steinfeld et al.). Now, the reasons why we Americans in particular since the mid-twentieth century have been steadily increasing in our consumption of meat are quite complex (*n.b.* we Americans consumed roughly 200 pounds of meat per person in 2005, which is 22 pounds more than in 1970 and 68 pounds more than in 1945).¹⁰ They involve diverse factors such as the intensification, industrialization, and corporate consolidation of farming in the U.S. (for example, the rise of the "factory farm"), improvements in refrigeration technologies, increasing urbanization, U.S. food policy from the 1970s onwards, myths about the superiority of animal protein to plant protein, what ecofeminist Carol Adams has identified as the "sexual politics of meat,"¹¹ and so forth. In this case of environmental destruction through the global pro-

⁹ See, for example, Gross and Ruether as well as, Dalmiya 61-72.

¹⁰ These figures are taken from February 15, 2007 statistics of the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS).

¹¹ For a discussion of the gendered dimensions of meat-eating, see Adams.

duction of meat (and perhaps in others), I am simply not sure that the origins are ultimately reducible to a timeless spiritual one. I'm also concerned that Loy's spiritual diagnosis may inadvertently obscure important political and economic dimensions of these problems in his attempt to identify one root cause.

In any event, Christian theologian and ecofeminist Rosemary Radford Ruether has observed, correctly in my view, that "an ecological crisis of global proportions can mean nothing less than a true dialogue and mutual enrichment of all spiritual traditions."¹² So may you, David Loy, receive my comments in the spirit of interreligious dialogue and as one earthling to another who is also attempting to find ways to heal the biosphere and ourselves. Thank you.

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¹² See Ruether *Deep Ecology* 232.

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