

Chapter Title: The Dance of Emptiness: A CONSTRUCTIVE COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL TRINITY

Chapter Author(s): Jon Paul Sydnor

Book Title: Comparing Faithfully

Book Subtitle: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection

Book Editor(s): MICHELLE VOSS ROBERTS

Published by: Fordham University. (2016)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1d391px.4>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Fordham University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Comparing Faithfully*

PART I

Divinity

1 The Dance of Emptiness

A CONSTRUCTIVE COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL TRINITY

Jon Paul Sydnor

Human beings respond to difference, especially religious difference, in varying ways. Some people are repulsed by religious difference and attempt to insulate themselves from it. Others are fascinated by difference and see it as an opportunity to learn more about “the other”—the one who is different from us, the one who is not “the same”—and about themselves. For these people, otherness provides an opportunity to compare, which is a powerful means of insight. For example, democracy is understood in relation to dictatorship, freedom is understood in relation to slavery, and prosperity is understood in relation to poverty. So, too, the “religious other” presents an opportunity to compare and contrast our beliefs, practices, and moods with different beliefs, practices, and moods, and to reform ourselves in the light of difference.¹

This type of comparative practice makes us aware of hidden aspects of ourselves. Our environments instill in us many of our habitual thoughts, feelings, and actions, religious and otherwise. Having unconsciously acquired them, we are rarely aware of them. They have been bequeathed to us by our culture, absorbed unknowingly from childhood to adulthood. Because these beliefs and behaviors are often unchosen, they are unfree. We are determined (unfree) whenever our thoughts or actions are instinctive rather than conscious. If we desire freedom, then we must become aware of who we are. We must bring to consciousness that which now lies hidden. Then we can analyze our beliefs and actions and revise them in accordance with consciously chosen values. This process will never be complete, but the more we do it the more free we become.

Fortunately, we can become more aware of our self, our values, our worldview, our family dynamics, and our cultural inheritance through

comparison. Indeed, one of the most powerful ways of shedding light on our deepest self is to compare it with a deep self who is “other” to us, different from us. Comparison is the interrogation of the familiar—the obvious, the assumed—by the unfamiliar. Through comparison, otherness sheds light on oneself. The other’s difference provides a contrast to our subconscious beliefs, raising them into consciousness, depriving them of their obviousness, and subjecting them to the vitalizing scrutiny of doubt.

Comparative theology is a new academic discipline that thinks across religious boundaries. For example, this discipline encourages Christians to study Buddhist doctrine, or vice versa. Comparative theology grants us greater awareness of our own faith by encountering a different faith. Once we have encountered this other faith, we have multiple options. We can leave ours the way it was, thankful for the increased awareness. We can revise our faith according to the challenge presented by the other. Or we can borrow aspects of the other faith and incorporate them into our own. We can even attempt to synthesize the two faiths into one, although this is rather difficult. Conversion is the final option, and it must be a real option for comparative theology to be effective. Comparative theology seeks to transform theology, and transformation demands risk.²

In order to gain a place at the table of theological method, comparative theology must become constructive, pastoral theology. In other words, it must produce new (constructive) theology—theology that goes beyond the history of theology or interpretations of theology—and this theology must be helpful to the church—to priests, pastors, and parishioners alike.

Commitment

When discussing Buddhism and Christianity, questions of salvation and the means of salvation soon arise. Buddhism has been characterized as offering a saving knowledge. This characterization was always inadequate, unfaithful to the Buddha’s own teachings as well as to the vast geographic and historical scope of the tradition. As a result of Christianity’s struggles with Gnosticism in the first centuries of the church’s existence, it has developed an allergy to saving knowledge. Salvation is by grace, through faith, in Christ. At times, the allergy to saving knowledge expresses itself as an allergy to any spiritual insight.

Nevertheless, as a Christian, I have found my study of Buddhist doctrine to be spiritually helpful, even transformative. I remain Christian, irresistibly drawn to the grace of Jesus Christ. He is my prophet, rabbi, hero, friend, guru, healer, and savior. For me, divinity shines through him in a peculiarly powerful manner. Yet, the Buddha deepens my experience of Christ, and Buddhism broadens my practice of Christianity. I am now a Christian transformed by encounters with the Buddha and Buddhists and Buddhist practices. Comparison has broadened and deepened my faith.

NAGARJUNA'S DOCTRINE OF EMPTINESS

This essay compares the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann's doctrine of the social Trinity with the Mahayana Buddhist writer Nagarjuna's doctrine of emptiness. It utilizes Nagarjuna's doctrine to develop Moltmann's social Trinity—not to synthesize the two into one, but to borrow from Nagarjuna to amplify Moltmann.

The Buddhist doctrine of emptiness (*sunyata*) develops from two preceding concepts ascribed to the Buddha himself—no-self (*anatman*) and dependent co-origination (*pratitya-samutpada*).³ The Buddha sought to overcome the suffering associated with sickness, old age, and death. Like many other spiritual seekers in his age, he practiced a renunciant lifestyle through which he sought to transcend the material circumstances, which, for most of us, determine our happiness or unhappiness. One aspect of this endeavor was an interior search for his self (*atman*), his eternal, unchanging, indestructible interior being.⁴ After six years of austerities, he had not found permanent transcendence or a permanent self, and he concluded that his cravings were one important cause of his suffering. In response, he preached the doctrine of *anatman*, or no-self, in order to free his followers from their own craving for self.

Then, in the interpretation of Nagarjuna, the Buddha extended this concept of no-self to all of reality. Just as humans have no eternal, unchanging self that can provide permanent happiness, so all existents lack an eternal, unchanging substance that can provide permanent happiness. Release from suffering cannot come through discovering the permanent self and residing there, or from discovering permanent happiness in any feeling, object, or thought. Release from suffering can only come through giving up all craving for permanence.⁵

The Buddha's doctrine of no-self is closely related to his doctrine of dependent co-origination (*pratitya-samutpada*).⁶ This doctrine asserts that everything—all feelings, objects, thoughts—arises causally by means of all other feelings, objects, and thoughts. Everything is causing everything else and being caused by everything else, all the time, in one churning nexus of intercausality within which cause and effect are inseparable.⁷ Here there is no permanence, solidity, or stasis. There is only insubstantial motion, a dynamic, shifting web of synergies in which the one thing that can provide bliss is the paradoxical realization that there is no thing that can provide bliss.⁸

Around 100 BCE, the Mahayana Buddhist Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajna Paramita*) literature began to appear. This literature furthered reflection on no-self and dependent co-origination by introducing the doctrine of emptiness (*sunyata*). Nagarjuna probably lived in the second century CE, two or three centuries after the Perfection of Wisdom first began to appear. He pushes the doctrine of emptiness to its radical limit. In his most famous work, the *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*), he utilizes logical analysis to establish the radical impermanence, interrelatedness, and hence emptiness of all things. In so doing, he explicitly rejects the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism. That is, he denies that there is a substantive, eternal self that can achieve a substantive, eternal state of bliss.⁹ At the same time, he denies that there is nothing, that all is illusion, and that everything is unreal. Between these two poles he seeks the way of the “middle,” an English word etymologically related to the Sanskrit term “*madhya*” in Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika*.¹⁰

Nagarjuna seeks to expound the Perfection of Wisdom so thoroughly as to free practitioners from any potential for cognitive, emotional, or physical clinging. He does so by asserting that everything—all selves, all beings, all feelings, all concepts, all gods, all matter—is empty of self-sufficiency (*svabhava*).¹¹ *Svabhava* can be translated as own-being, self-existence, self-sustenance, independence, enduring solidity, inherent nature, abiding essence, or isolated substance. Because no one, no thought, and no thing has own-being (*svabhava*), everything is empty.¹² And because everything is empty, everything is non-dual—*samsara* (the unending flux into which we are repeatedly reincarnated) and *nirvana* (release from the endless cycle of dissatisfaction) are ultimately indistinguishable, ignorance and truth are ultimately indistinguishable, and even craving and emptiness are ultimately indistinguishable. There are

no distinctions, hence nothing to grasp after, hence nothing to suffer. Freedom is here already; it only requires recognition.¹³

Unfortunately, instead of realizing this pre-existing freedom, we thirst for abiding satisfaction from every thing, and we project the potential to provide abiding satisfaction onto every thing. But in truth, every thing is empty of the capacity to provide abiding satisfaction, so our pursuit is fruitless.¹⁴ Our demand of static fullness from dynamic emptiness causes our turmoil. Only the recognition of emptiness as the nature of reality, and the experiential realization of that recognition, can free us from our suffering.¹⁵

MOLTMANN'S DOCTRINE OF THE SOCIAL TRINITY

The Christian doctrine of the social Trinity is enormously complicated, misunderstood, and controversial. An investigation of the social Trinitarian theology of Jürgen Moltmann will focus this conversation. Moltmann is a German Protestant theologian active in the twentieth and twenty-first century. His social Trinitarian theology is most thoroughly expressed in *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*.¹⁶

The first hints of the Trinity already appear in the letters of Paul, only two or three decades after the life of Christ. In Paul's letters, greetings and farewells repeatedly invoke the Trinitarian formula of Father God, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit: "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always" (2 Cor. 13.13, cf. 1 Cor. 12.4–6, Eph. 4.4–6). Most New Testament scholars believe that Paul was drawing on pre-existing Christian liturgical formulations. At this point, "Christianity" was still a Jewish sect, firmly monotheistic, yet already referring to its experience of salvation triadically.¹⁷ Over the next four centuries, this Jewish sect would become a new religion. At the same time, it would try to understand why its religious life offered salvation through three persons experienced as one God.

Eventually, the larger Church, in a series of ecumenical councils, decided that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all divine, all one God. The formula of three-in-one resonated with Christians' experience of the divine, although mathematicians and logicians found the doctrine wanting. Over the centuries, various theologians offered explanations for how God could be both three and one. One such explanation is the social Trinity.

The antiquity of the concept is disputed, but many scholars find intimations of it in the Greek fathers who conceptualized the three aspects of the divine as discrete persons and suggested that the best human analogy to the divine relations is the family.¹⁸ In the West, Trinitarian thought took a different turn as Augustine found the image of the Trinity primarily in the individual.¹⁹ Although he provided multiple analogies to the Trinity, one of the most influential is the psychological analogy for the Trinity, in which the memory, understanding, and will combine as three to make one self.²⁰ Contemporary social Trinitarian theologians shy away from this individualistic conception, fearing that if the individual images God, then community becomes accidental to salvation.

Instead, contemporary social Trinitarians such as Moltmann find the image of the interpersonal God within interpersonal human relationships. Individuals alone do not express the image of God; individuals in relation do. We fulfill our divine image by entering into community with others, forming one from many.²¹ To be made in the image of God is to be made for deep relationship, and fulfillment of that call is theosis, or divinization.²² God is three persons united by love into one divinity.²³ Humans, being made in the image of God, are called to overcome their separation from one another by uniting in love.²⁴

POTENTIAL FOR COMPARISON

Preliminarily, one may note that the doctrines of emptiness and social Trinity both place a high value on interconnection. The doctrine of the social Trinity states that God is absolutely relational. The doctrine of emptiness states that reality is absolutely relational. Both doctrines stress that human beings lack self-sufficiency. And, in some interpretations, both doctrines stress that material reality (the world, matter) is also absolutely relational. Stated another way, in emptiness all existents are empty of independence; they need one another in order to be or, more accurately, in order to become. In the social Trinity, the three persons are empty of independence; they, too, need one another in order to be or, more accurately, in order to become.²⁵

Nevertheless, this comparison is problematic. Nagarjuna's exposition of emptiness and Moltmann's exposition of the social Trinity arose in vastly different times for vastly different reasons. For Nagarjuna, emptiness served as a doctrinal medicine. He prescribed it in order to free people from the illusion that reality possesses a fullness that would

everlastingly quench their thirst. “Emptiness” refers to all that is—material reality, our individuality, other people, even the gods. None of these things can extinguish the fire of desire. Moltmann’s doctrine of the social Trinity was meant to invigorate an ancient Christian doctrine that had fallen into neglect over the past millennium. Continuing the Trinitarian explorations of Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and others, he attempts to interpret the social Trinity as a fundamental ontology of relation with ethical consequences for individuals, communities, and even nations. Hence, the origin and function of our two concepts are distinct. Nevertheless, as we shall see, each can serve as a foil to the other, enriching the other by its presence.

Because, as a Christian, I am unqualified to further develop the doctrine of emptiness, this essay will now consider how Nagarjuna’s concept might further develop the Christian doctrine of the social Trinity.

Absolute Relationality

Both concepts can be considered under the category of “absolute relationality.” Such a grouping would be dangerous if taken to insinuate that they are the same doctrine or two different ways of articulating the same doctrine. But emptiness and social Trinity are characterized by difference as much as by similarity. Even when compared, each must be considered in itself; the uniqueness of each concept cannot be lost. Indeed, this difference is the fertile soil of comparative theology. Were they the same, then they could not challenge, inform, or buttress one another. Interreligious thought needs difference; sameness is intellectually sterile.

Conceptualizing Nagarjuna’s “*sunyata*” (emptiness) as absolute relationality is both accurate and helpful. The term “emptiness” is problematic in English, in which emptiness is negative, usually suggesting the absence of some good such as meaning, purpose, or joy. To feel “empty” is to feel sad and depressed. But for Nagarjuna, “emptiness” is a positive term denoting infinite potential. Reality is empty of finality, limitation, and constraint. For that reason, some translators avoid the literal translation of “*sunyata*” as “emptiness” and turn instead to terms such as freedom, indeterminacy, the inexhaustible, and openness. (All of these terms, which are really metaphors, will play a role here.) Positively, we may imagine empty space, the sky, or the heavens as limitless realms of movement for birds in flight.²⁶ Or we may imagine an empty room

that invites us to dance. Regardless of the metaphor, emptiness is a radically positive evaluation of reality: “Everything is possible for someone for whom emptiness is possible. Nothing is possible for someone for whom emptiness is impossible,” writes Nagarjuna.²⁷

The “absolute” in “absolute relationality” is not an exaggeration. So intent was Nagarjuna on denying permanence to any feeling, thought, or existent that some scholars have translated his concept of “*sunyata*” as “nothingness” or even “absolute nothingness.”²⁸ However, Nagarjuna’s point was not that nothing exists. Nagarjuna’s point was that all things exist in relation to all other things—not some other things, not the nearest things, but all other things. Our becoming encompasses the entire universe, while the becoming of the entire universe finds expression in our own becoming. Reality is entirely kinetic.²⁹

The consequences of this universal, absolute interdependence are manifold. For one, emptiness rejects monism, the assertion that everything is one homogeneous thing and that all difference and distinction are illusion. For Nagarjuna, difference is real, but each instant of difference is perfectly related to all other instants. Additionally, absolute interdependence rejects dualism. Buddhism does have sets of concepts that can be (mis)interpreted as opposed—*samsara* and *nirvana*, suffering and release, ignorance and wisdom, the demon *Mara* and the blessed Buddha. But these conceptual opposites must not be reified into ontological, conflicting opposites. We must not suppose that *samsara*, suffering, ignorance, and *Mara* are an interdependent whole united against the opposite interdependent whole of *nirvana*, release, wisdom, and Buddha.³⁰ For Nagarjuna, all of reality is one, universal, interdependent, dependently co-originating whole. Some concepts may help us to realize this experience, but the realization of this experience will annihilate both those concepts and any opposition they seemingly exhibited.³¹ In the end, reality is empty of opposition, empty of metaphysical polarities, and empty of any conceptual essence. Indeed, it is even empty of emptiness.³²

This radical ontology of relation applies to everything—feelings are impermanent and dynamic, thoughts are impermanent and dynamic, gods are impermanent and dynamic. Even the smallest units of existence, “*dharma*s” or psychophysical atoms, are insubstantial, impermanent, and dynamic.³³

To what extent could this radical ontology of relation apply to the personal relationships ascribed to the social Trinity? Nagarjuna’s doctrine

of emptiness is a cognitive antidote intended to relieve people of their clinging by asserting that there is nothing solid enough or still enough to cling to. Moltmann's social Trinity explicates the fundamental Christian assertion that God is love. Because humankind is made in the image of God, Moltmann's theology has profound implications for his anthropology. The motives, emphases, and contexts of Nagarjuna and Moltmann diverge. Because of this divergence, no ladder-like, mechanical comparison can occur. The process will be much more intuitive than that, necessarily engaging cognitive processes such as synthesis and creativity. In this case, Nagarjuna will serve to agitate settled thinking, subvert unquestioned assumptions, interrogate lazy generalizations, and challenge subconscious evasions. Then, Nagarjuna will lend concepts and vocabulary to patch the weak spots and fill the holes.

Difference within the Social Trinity

One striking aspect of Nagarjuna's doctrine of emptiness is its inclusion of difference within a radically relational reality. Emptiness excludes nothing and includes everything. Properly understood, every thing in emptiness is constituted by the entirety of all other things in emptiness, and every thing in emptiness is resident within the entirety of the universe. We, all of us, are the universe, both through expression and impression.

As noted previously, Moltmann's doctrine of the social Trinity asserts that God is three persons united by love.³⁴ Love must have an object, because all love demands a beloved. Hence, all love is love *of*. There is no pure love, no love itself, without an external toward which that love can be directed. Love twisted back upon itself disappears into a black hole of egoism, collapsed under its own solipsistic weight. For there to be love there must be relationship, and for there to be relationship there must be an other. Most importantly, there must be difference.

So, when John asserts that "God is love" (1 John 4.8), he simultaneously and necessarily asserts that God is relational. Indeed, if he asserts that God in Godself is love, then he asserts that God in Godself is relational—internally relational, inherently relational, at least more than one.

Yet if God is more than one, then how can we balance this biblical assertion with the earlier, foundational monotheism that Christianity inherited from Judaism? "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is

One” (Deut. 6.4). Here God is referred to with the proper name of Yahweh, which intensifies the assertion of singularity as well as the problematic of conceptualizing God as many. For the author of Deuteronomy 6.4, the Hebrews’ beloved Shema, God is not only one deity but one personality, a unified personality deserving of a proper name—Yahweh.

Christianity has inherited the paradoxical assertion that God is one and many, singular and plural, an entity and a plurality. This inheritance presents Christianity with its greatest challenge and its greatest opportunity: the opportunity to worship, think, act, and feel as many who are becoming one, as many persons unified as one personality.

ANALOGY OF RELATIONS

Analogies for the Trinity draw on human experience to understand the means by which the divine can be three and one.³⁵ Although critics assert that this move privatizes theology and fragments the communal experience of the church,³⁶ Moltmann anticipates such criticisms and attempts to obviate them by thoroughly grounding his relational analogy in the Bible, thereby associating it with the long history of Judeo-Christian revelation rather than his own progressive agenda. The Bible itself utilizes analogies from human experience to confer knowledge of God: It speaks of God as a rock, shepherd, mother hen, potter, king, and father. The following analogical forays presume that the use of analogy to understand God is as legitimate as the Bible’s. Analogy does not project human reality onto God.³⁷ Instead, it interprets our reception of God in this-worldly terms. Revelation flows from God to us, but our expression of that revelation must always be poetic.

Mary and Doug

Mary and Doug were two parishioners in my former church. Mary had been married to Doug for 60 years. They had an extremely loving relationship, one of those rare marriages that is near-perfect—same values, same desires, almost no arguments, great sex life, four children, unfailingly kind to one another, cheerful and supportive in each other’s company, always praising each other. Then, Doug got sick and, after a three-month battle, died. Mary was devastated.

I was having lunch with Mary a few months later. When I asked her about life without Doug, she smiled gently and said that she felt like “half

a person.” She no longer felt complete. She wasn’t whole once separated from Doug. Her self was lacking.

Mary’s statement was both tragic and fascinating. She was saying that the two of them had become one, so that when one of the two was lost, the one who was left only felt like a half. They had a Trinitarian relationship, in a sense. Of course, they were not three; they were two. But their twoness produced oneness so that they were neither two nor one, but two in one, just as the three persons of the Trinity become three in one, through love.

Crucially, this union was predicated upon their difference, not their sameness. Mary and Doug did not fall in love or continually deepen their love because they saw themselves in the other. They loved one another because they saw someone different in the other. They were attracted to one another’s uniqueness, not sameness. Certainly, they shared values, ideals, and goals that made their marriage work. But neither saw the other as an extension or reflection of the self. They saw each other as free selves, deeply united.

Mary and Doug’s relationship achieved nonduality—they were neither one nor two—because neither sought to protect any aspect of her self or his self from the other. Using Nagarjuna’s language, they embraced their *sunyata*, which might here be translated as openness.³⁸ Conversely, they denied their *svabhava*, which we can here translate as own being. *Svabhava*, applied to this situation, becomes a protected area of the self, a withdrawn portion of the soul, an invulnerable hardness in the psyche that shallows our relationships. Nagarjuna asserts that it does not exist in truth, but that craving for it conjures its illusion. And that illusion causes self-assertion, self-obsession, and ultimately self-suffering.

The Christian Soul and Buddhist No-Self

When the Buddha asserted the doctrine of *anatman*, or no-self, he rejected the existence of any pure, isolated, monadic self. But he was not asserting that each person is a nothingness. Instead, he asserted the existence of a dynamic, changing, impermanent, thoroughly related self. In other words, he did not assert that the self does not exist, but that all selves exist, together. We are not one self, but many selves, as one—one web, one nexus, one interconnected, interrelated, pulsing becoming.

This doctrine of absolute relationality, as derived from the Buddhist concept of no self, certainly challenges Christian concepts of God as an

unchanging substance. It may seem to be in conflict with the traditional Christian belief in the soul, if the soul is seen as an unchanging substance. Indeed, Nagarjuna developed his doctrine of emptiness at least in part in order to oppose the belief of certain Buddhist schools (the Sarvastivadins) in a pudgala, a transmigrating personality that carries one's karma from one life to the next. If we have a pudgala, Nagarjuna worried, then we might be concerned to care for it, attend to it—we might even become attached to it. The doctrine of emptiness offers freedom from such attachment.

This particular context of Nagarjuna's innovation presents complications to Christian theologians, such as myself, who wish to apply it to Christian concepts such as the Trinity and, by way of extension, the soul. Because human beings are made in the image of God, our concept of God is relevant to our concept of humanity, and vice versa. To complicate the effort further, "the soul" itself is an enormously abstract concept with multiple permutations. Over the centuries, theologians have argued that:

1. The soul is good and the body is bad, and the soul needs to be freed from the body. (This Gnostic claim is contrary to standard Christian theology.)
2. The soul resides in the body and goes to heaven when the body dies.
3. The soul and body are one, unified entity. Neither is separable from the other.
4. Any discussion of the soul inevitably devalues the body, so all soul-talk should be avoided.³⁹

Given the preceding list, any discussion of the soul in the Christian tradition can be controversial. Still, because most Christians do believe they have souls, and because Christian soul-talk is linked to Christian God-talk, we must discuss this doctrine in relation to the Buddhist doctrine of anatman, no-self or no-soul.

If Christians take the Buddhist doctrine of no-self and Nagarjuna's intensified doctrine of emptiness seriously, then must we forego belief in the soul? I argue that we do not, and that arguments to the contrary are based on a misunderstanding of the human soul. This misunderstanding is caused by the belief that the soul is, in some way, an independent, self-existing, substance. According to this view there is a part of us, the soul, or at least a part of that soul, which is not related to the universe.

We see the soul as a discrete substance that grants us individuality, that carries our sin and forgiveness, and that bears our eternal destiny. The soul, thus conceived, cannot be “empty” because it is so full of portent and individualized consequence.

Moreover, one might object, according to traditional doctrine this soul is also an expression of God since that is the part of the human being that is made in the image of God. Since God is unchanging (according to traditional theology), the soul must be unchanging. Therefore, it must be inert and static. It may be sustained by God, but it has no necessary relationship to other souls, its own body, the external universe, or time. Hence, it cannot be deeply relational. If God is an eternal, unchanging substance, then God must be characterized by fixated, unchanging subjectivity, and we as the image of God must also be ultimately characterized by fixated, unchanging subjectivity. Relationality is but an accidental property of this monad.⁴⁰ Conceived thus, the Christian doctrine of the soul resists conversation with an *anatmavadin* (no-soul-teacher) such as Nagarjuna.

The Relational Soul

Fortunately, the soul need not be conceptualized as monadic, inert, and unchanging. Instead, we can conceptualize it as our locus of relationality. That is, the soul is not a substance so much as a place through which we interact with the world, from which our individual difference arises, within which we find our greatest potential, and toward which other souls yearn, just as we yearn toward them. As such, the soul images a single person of the Trinity who is open and vulnerable to the other two persons of the Trinity. Hence, it becomes the portal through which we establish sacred relations with other souls.

As our locus of relationality, the soul is as vital as it is related. The more isolated the soul is, the more dead it is. The more related the soul is, the more alive it is. The relatedness of the soul draws us into divine life, which is itself fundamentally relational. God is not being itself or the ground of being. God is relationality itself, and if there is a ground of relationality, it is relationality again.⁴¹ Thus, if human beings are made in the image of the social Trinitarian God, then fixated subjectivity is a harmful craving that must, for therapeutic reasons, yield to dynamic intersubjectivity.⁴²

The Vulnerable Soul

A deeply related soul is an emotionally vulnerable soul. My own advocacy of relationality and vulnerability rightfully opens me to socio-economic criticisms of privilege. My own vulnerability is much less dangerous than the vulnerability experienced by developing world workers, abused women, and political dissidents. I am safer than they are, as are the people that I love. Tragedies rarely happen in my world. So, it might be arrogant to prescribe vulnerability from my safe suburban home. In order to address this legitimate concern, I turn to the assistance of Toni Morrison.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* grants a literary example of human openness under conditions of horrific suffering. In that novel, two former slaves disagree about the extent to which a human being should love in a racist, violent world. The maternal character, Sethe, is willing to risk love, while her lover Paul D recoils from such vulnerability:

Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one.⁴³

Paul D, understandably, wants to protect himself from the vagaries of an unreliable world and the cruelties of white slavers. The invulnerability that he pursues leaves him protected from loss, even the horrible losses experienced by blacks in mid-nineteenth-century America.

But Sethe disagrees. She understands that invulnerability, *svabhava*, is a dead zone. As inert substance it is safe but joyless, protected but remote, guarded but indifferent. It expects vitality of itself but only feels its lifelessness.

Yet, according to Sethe, this absolutely relational conception of human existence does not annihilate the self. Instead, it opens up the self to the other from whom it receives and to whom it gives love. The true self wants to live and give life, and it does so by giving and receiving love. The extent to which it can give and receive love is the extent to which it is alive.

Crucially, such self-donation is not self-annihilation. Self-donation is predicated upon differentiation between self and other, so that even perfect self-donation resists any disappearance into monism, or the identity

of self and other.⁴⁴ Self and other can be perfectly unified, but they cannot be identified, or else all self-donation and other-reception would cease. Consummation resists absorption. The self finds its true self to be a boundlessly interrelated self, an infinitely open self that finds its being by becoming love.⁴⁵

Chord

Nagarjuna's concept of *sunyata* has also been translated as interdependence because all things exist only in, through, and with all other things.⁴⁶ This interdependence is total. There is no aspect, part, or portion of any thing that is not absolutely interdependent with all other things. The universe is a shimmering web of connected synergies in which a change in one produces a change in all. There is no thing that is not influenced by all things, and all things are influenced by every thing.

By way of analogy, the Trinity is three persons who "interanimate" one another.⁴⁷ Joy Ann McDougall's term "interanimation" is an excellent term for the social Trinity and, ideally, for human communal becoming. To the Latins, the *animus* was that part of the person that lent it vitality, energy, and life. The *animus* was associated with spirit and courage. So, to "interanimate" one another is to grant one another more vitality, energy, spirit, and courage. We have more life in relation than we can alone, and the deeper the relations the greater the life.

Nevertheless, the eternal threeness and oneness of the Trinity remain, at first glance, mathematically and logically problematic. From an objectivist or materialist perspective, it is impossible to be three in one or one in three. Rocks can't do it and, according to some rigorist forms of human cognition, if rocks can't do it then humans can't do it—not to mention God.

But it is possible to be three and one or one and three in human experience. Earlier in this chapter, the relationship of Mary and Doug demonstrated two in one and one in two. Another profound instance of interanimation is a musical chord. Imagine a C chord played on a piano. The three notes of C, E, and G make up the chord. They are three different notes that together constitute one thing. We can experience them separately as three or, more richly, together as one.

The beauty of this harmony, its experiential power, is predicated upon the tones' difference. The symphonic abundance of the C chord is not experienced *despite* the tonal differences between C, E, and G; it is

experienced *because of* their differences. The three different tones interpenetrate each other to create a triunity.

Crucially for the concept of interanimation, to change one tone is to change the experience of each tone. Classically, lowering the E to an E flat converts the C major chord into a C minor chord, with a new mood of drama or sadness. The C and G, which had once contributed to an almost trite, happy mood, now sound dour. (Indeed, the German musical term for “minor” is “dur,” the cognate of “dour.”) Their interpenetration is so absolute that changing one changes them all, experientially. Hence, no tone is self-defined. Every tone is other-defined and other-defining, becoming more in the presence of the others and granting those others their own amplification.

The Dance of Emptiness

Nagarjuna’s sunyata has also been translated as “freedom” and “indeterminacy” rather than “emptiness.” The released self, the self that has realized its lack of own being, is an absolutely free and undetermined self. If we are controlled by external realities, that is a result of ascribing permanent solidity to them and to our selves. The illusion of permanent solidity, coupled with a craving for certain arrangements of the self and the world, causes self-assertion over against a resistant reality.⁴⁸ We try to get the world into an order that we like and keep it in that order, but the world does not cooperate. We become frustrated and try to force cooperation, but any pleasing success we achieve quickly falls apart. When an imagined solidity tries to coerce another imagined solidity into a permanently pleasing configuration, only turmoil can follow. In this situation dissatisfaction will be permanent.

However, if we realize our emptiness, then we will realize our freedom and indeterminacy. Because there is nothing solid or permanent anywhere or anytime, there can be no coercion, frustration, or disappointment. Whatever the situation is, that situation will soon be gone, so we need not fret over our situational emotions.⁴⁹ We can act skillfully within a situation, always knowing that those actions will soon be gone, and our future actions will be free.⁵⁰ Emptiness is a dynamic, unceasing movement into which we are invited. It presents ever new opportunities for new experiences and new actions.

Perhaps “dance” would be an excellent translation of “sunyata.” In comparison, Moltmann applies the Greek term “perichoresis” to the

three persons of the Trinity.⁵¹ Although the etymology of the word is debated, it can be interpreted as “dancing around” or “dancing with.” Moltmann does not explicitly embrace this translation, although the metaphor of dance almost perfectly dovetails with his explication of perichoresis. Other social Trinitarians, such as Catherine Mowry LaCugna, explicitly embrace this extraordinarily apt metaphor.⁵²

The three persons of the Trinity dance. When a skilled couple dances, the observer cannot detect who is leading. There is no compulsion. Their movements appear spontaneously generated or, to use Buddhist language, dependently co-originated. Each defers to the other to produce perfectly synchronized action, action so spontaneous that it bodies forth freedom.⁵³ So it is with the Trinity. They dance freely, spontaneously, always in relation to one another but never determined by one another, co-originating one another in joyful mutuality, in perichoresis.⁵⁴

Perichoresis is a beautiful term to describe the divine synergies of the social Trinity as well as, we might imagine, the experience of emptiness. Dance creates beauty out of motion, thereby creating grace out of time. Dance renders impermanence playful. The unique motions of the dancers unite to form the one harmony of the dance, so that the sum is greater than the parts. Interactions are (or appear to be) spontaneous, the product of trust, attentiveness, and communion.

We, being made in the image of God, are made to dance, both with God and with each other. In other words, our being is invited into God’s dance and God’s dance is invited into our being. Just as importantly, we are called to share God’s dance with one another, to relate to one another freely and joyfully and equally, spontaneously effecting one another in a ballet of love.⁵⁵

The energy of this love feels inexhaustible. Without the hindrance of obstinate self-assertion, energy multiplies itself logarithmically. An unexpected quantity of joy arises. But all of this can only occur if we first empty ourselves of *svabhava*, of “self-nature,” of an unchanging essence.⁵⁶ And this emptying cannot be partial. It must be total, without remainder.

Once the dance of emptiness begins, there is no coercion and no oppression. Indeed, there is no law. True, each dancer enters into the dance autonomously, freely, “self-lawed.” But once the dance begins, all law disappears along with all constraint and compulsion. Autonomy is not lost, but it is surpassed as the dancer’s movements become interdependent with her partner’s, and vice versa. But this interdependence does not

make her motions heteronomous, or “other-lawed,” because the partners co-originate each other’s dance simultaneously, fluidly. Even from a theistic perspective, the dancers cannot be called theonomous, “God-lawed,” because theonomy suggests the continued constraint of law, even divine law. But dance is antinomian, “against law.” It embodies joyful freedom in community.⁵⁷ It expresses mutuality. It proves that two can dance together more gracefully, freely, joyfully, and spontaneously than one can dance alone. Through love, all law disappears and the music takes over, expressed through dance.

Law prevents self-assertive human society from degenerating into violence. Dance raises human society into beauty.

Freedom For

Such a concept of human social nature redefines freedom. Freedom is no longer characterized by autonomy, or freedom *from*. Autonomy frees us from external coercion, but this is only a preliminary step on the way to ideal sociality. The next step, which is dependent on but supersedes autonomy, is mutuality. Autonomy grants us freedom from the coercive other but leaves us in fragmented isolation. The isolation produced by autonomy must become the mutuality produced by interdependence. Freedom *from* best expresses itself as freedom *for*. The end of subjection allows the beginning of community.⁵⁸

Including Difference

With reference to Doug and Mary, the C chord, and dance, we infer that the social Trinity is love unifying difference.⁵⁹ As such, the Trinity is a great symbol of hope. Only love can *unify* difference. Power can repress the frictions of difference to create a forcibly peaceful plurality. But true unity is only achieved when difference voluntarily unites into a differentiated unity.⁶⁰ According to emptiness and the social Trinity, human reification of difference is morally wrong because it is ontologically askew. Nationalism denies the possibility of communion with the other. Sexism asserts the inferiority of the female and her subservience to the male. Racism asserts the perpetual externality of difference. Heterosexism denies homosexuals’ need for emotional intimacy. Co-religionism asserts tribal self-sufficiency.⁶¹ All worldviews that valorize sameness and control create an artificial chasm between human and human, between

culture and culture. Into this chasm we then fall, at the bottom finding a swamp of disgust and fear.

For the Trinity to be true, the Trinity must be open, and not just slightly open, but infinitely open. Indeed, this infinite openness is symbolized by the third person of the Trinity, precisely as the *third* person of the Trinity.⁶² There is love of self and love of other. Just as importantly, there is the joy one experiences in the love of other for other, a third-party joy. Buddhists call this *mudita*, or sympathetic joy. This joy is a particularly selfless joy, since the self is not loved or loving, but perceiving love. It is also a particularly pure joy because it cannot be tainted by selfishness.

The necessity of the third person of the Trinity struck me one day while driving my two young sons to school. They were in the back seat playing with each other, tickling each other, laughing, giggling, playing, singing. I listened to them, occasionally glanced in the mirror to watch them, and was flooded with joy at their love for each other. I then became aware of the peculiar power and ecstatic movement of my third-party, sympathetic joy. I experienced it as a willing self-emptying, a movement toward the other two. I did not wish to disrupt their relationship or even join their relationship at that moment. I simply wanted to revel in it—in my perception of it, as third party—more fully.

The third person of the Trinity symbolizes openness to the love of an other for an other. However, the third person of the Trinity symbolizes more than just openness to two others. The third person symbolizes the infinite openness of the sacred to all that is, to the interdependence of all reality. We revel in all relatedness, not just our particular relatedness. We celebrate universal interdependence, not just those upon whom we are dependent or who are dependent on us. The third person of the Trinity, as *third* person, is the symbolic window through which the light of infinite relatedness flows.

MECHANICAL AND ORGANIC COMPARISON

This paper began by presenting the doctrines of emptiness and social Trinity separately, as two different concepts from two different traditions. They shared some promising similarities while offering fruitful differences. As the comparison began, the two doctrines remained discrete as we mechanically moved back and forth between the two, searching for cross-fertilization. But as the comparison proceeded, they gradually

became less discrete and the comparison less mechanical. By the end of the essay, beginning with the section entitled “the dance of emptiness,” the two doctrines resonated, suggesting the possibility of an integrated worldview. The totality of each was not synthesized into a new totality, à la Hegel. Instead, the comparison of their particulars produced a new particularity. So, the essay provides an experience of discrete, mechanical comparison at the beginning and concrete, organic comparison at the end.

Which works better? Specifically, which mode of comparison produces constructive theology that is more helpful to the church? The answer to this question should engender much debate, not only about comparative theology but also about interreligious relations generally. If comparative theology fuses religious concepts, then it might foster an interreligious syncretism in which all religions are indistinguishable within one world religion. But if we insist upon artificially maintaining doctrinal boundaries between the religions, then the pastoral promise of comparative theology may be lost.

We may apply our comparison of emptiness and social Trinity to this dilemma. The insistence on preserving religious distinction may reflect a fearful clinging to religious *svabhava*, or own being. As such, it will necessarily result in self-assertion and compromise the promise of interreligious relationality. Religions that conceptualize themselves as self-sufficient will see no need for other religions. But religions that see themselves as *sunyata*—open, free, dynamic, and unafraid—will seek out dialogue. This dialogue will necessitate risk because transformation necessitates risk, and faith is the daring quest for transformation.

So, comparative theology risks conversion to the other. But, from the perspective of emptiness and social Trinity, this is not the most probable outcome. It is also not the most frequent outcome historically. The most frequent outcome is a transforming self within differentiated community. In other words, Christianity interdependent with Buddhism does not become ChristoBuddhism. It remains Christianity, but a Christianity that is constantly renewing by means of Buddhism’s challenge and stimulation. Christianity will be reformed, and always reforming.⁶³

Within this framework all doctrine is impermanent. As soon as we state our current beliefs, we are called to outgrow them. This theological kinesis expresses theosis, the divine call to human divinization. For finite humans in deep relationship with the infinite God, change is vocation and stasis is sloth. The proposition “Jesus of Nazareth is the Son

of God” might always hold true for the faith. Still, its interpretation by the church as a whole, and each individual within, must always deepen, as the church and its members accept the grace of God more thoroughly and reflect upon that grace intellectually. Other religions spur us to such deepening. In Christian terms, they serve as media of divine grace. Like the three persons of the Trinity, the religions may co-originate their best selves, calling one another into a blessed community of difference united by love. Then, at last, we may dance with one another and with our dancing God.

Notes

1. I would like to express my extraordinary gratitude to Joy Ann McDougall and, posthumously, Frederick J. Streng, for their assistance in understanding and comparing Moltmann and Nagarjuna, respectively. They have both achieved a penetrating understanding of their subjects, to which I am indebted. Any interpretive errors in this essay will be my own, not theirs.
2. David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 73.
3. Ewing Chinn, “Nagarjuna’s Fundamental Doctrine of Pratityasamutpada,” *Philosophy East and West* 51, no. 1 (January 2001): 64.
4. I am not following the usual practice of italicizing “foreign” words here. Such italicization would endorse a foreign/native dualism in an essay that rejects all such dualisms.
5. Mark Siderits and Shoryu Katsura, *Nagarjuna’s Middle Way: Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013), 168–69.
6. Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), 58–59.
7. Jan Westerhoff, *Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27–28.
8. The term “synergies” was proposed by Theodor Stcherbatsky in *Buddhist Logic*, as quoted in Streng, *Emptiness*, 53.
9. Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Chapter 4. References give chapters instead of page numbers. The chapters are very short and consistently numbered from the Sanskrit version of the text.
10. Kenneth K. Inada, *Nagarjuna: A Translation of His Mulamadhyamakakarika with an Introductory Essay* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1993).
11. Siderits and Shoryu, *Nagarjuna’s Middle Way*, 81–82.
12. Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Chapter 15.
13. Streng, *Emptiness*, 159–60.
14. Westerhoff, *Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka*, 101.
15. Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 237–44.

16. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980).
17. Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 178.
18. Joy Ann McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love: Moltmann on the Trinity and the Christian Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118.
19. McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 104–5.
20. McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 104–5.
21. McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 116–17.
22. Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 215–16.
23. Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 95–96.
24. McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 116.
25. Michael von Bruck, “Buddhist Shunyata and the Christian Trinity,” in *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity*, ed. Roger Corless and Paul Knitter (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 49–59.
26. Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: The Foundations of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1980), 65.
27. Nagarjuna, *Vigrahavyavartani: Averting the Arguments*, in *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning*, trans. Frederick J. Streng (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), stanza 70: 227.
28. See, for example, Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness*.
29. Streng, *Emptiness*, 36–38.
30. Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Chapter 22.
31. Siderits and Shoryu, *Nagarjuna’s Middle Way*, 302–3.
32. Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Chapter 27.
33. Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Chapter 1.
34. Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 58–59.
35. McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 102.
36. Eric O. Springsted, “Theology and Spirituality; or, Why Theology Is Not Critical Reflection on Religious Experience,” in *Spirituality and Theology: Essays in Honor of Diogenes Allen*, ed. Eric O. Springsted (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 53–59. For more on these methodological issues, see McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 9.
37. Paula M. Coe, “Emptiness, Otherness, and Identity: A Feminist Perspective,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 17–19.
38. See, for example, Nancy McGagney, *Nagarjuna and the Philosophy of Openness* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1997).
39. Geddes MacGregor, “Soul: Christian Concepts,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 12 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 8561–66, Gale Virtual Reference Library, March 19, 2013.
40. Christopher Ives, *Zen Awakening and Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 46.
41. McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 80.
42. See McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 97.
43. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 45.
44. Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 57–58.

45. Joy Ann McDougall, "The Return of Trinitarian Praxis? Moltmann on the Trinity and the Christian Life," *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2003): 187.
46. John D. Dunne, "Nagarjuna," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 9 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 6392.
47. McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 97. See John Donne's "The Ecstasy" for an earlier use of the term "interanimate," lines 40–45.
48. Streng, *Emptiness*, 87–88.
49. Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Chapter 19.
50. Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Chapter 17.
51. Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 174–76.
52. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 270–78.
53. Jürgen Moltmann, "God Is Unselfish Love," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994), 123–24. Again, Moltmann refers to the metaphor of spontaneity, not the metaphor of dance.
54. Here, we stray from Moltmann, who continues to insist on the monarch Father as origin of history of salvation, including the Son and the Spirit. See Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 177–78.
55. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 299.
56. Mark Siderits, "On the Soteriological Significance of Emptiness," *Contemporary Buddhism* 4, no. 1 (2003): 9–10.
57. Richard Bauckham, "Jürgen Moltmann and the Question of Pluralism," in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 158.
58. McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 188.
59. Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1984), 135–36.
60. Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 148–50.
61. McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 138.
62. McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love*, 86.
63. Jürgen Moltmann, "Is 'Pluralistic Theology' Useful for the Dialogue of World Religions?" in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), 153. Moltmann experienced this intensification of self-understanding and other-understanding during open Christian-Marxist dialogue.