

Dialogue with Nature and Interreligious Encounter: Toward a Comparative Theology of the Sense of Wonder

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Introduction: A Surprising Convergence?

IN a lovely essay entitled “Restoring Our Connections with the World,” Daisaku Ikeda offers a reflection which concisely expresses the heart of the present study’s subject matter and our rather ambitious title. Ikeda writes:

Immersed in material concerns, clamor and bustle, contemporary humanity has been cut off from the vastness of the universe, from the eternal flow of time. We struggle against feelings of isolation and alienation. We seek to slake the heart’s thirst by pursuing pleasures, only to find that our cravings have grown that much more fierce. This separation and estrangement is, in my view, the underlying tragedy of contemporary civilization. Divorced from the cosmos, from nature, from society and from each other, we have become fractured and fragmented. Science and technology have given humanity undreamed-of power, bringing invaluable benefits to our lives and health. But this has been paralleled by a tendency to distance ourselves from life, to objectify and reduce everything around us to numbers and things. . . . The eyes of a poet discover in each person a unique and irreplaceable humanity. While arrogant intellect seeks to control and manipulate the world, the poetic spirit bows with reverence before its mysteries.¹

Here we find that relational view of reality which is integral to Ikeda’s Buddhist social analysis, and which also characterizes the many expressions of religious humanism which have emerged during the twentieth century, and which today continue to develop.² We also find in Ikeda’s essay a simple affirmation of the human relation to the natural world (which he often calls the “dialogue with nature”), and the irreplaceable role this plays in the restoration of human wholeness in an age of alienation and fragmentation.

Throughout the course of modernity’s unfolding, awareness of a profoundly detrimental change in the human relation to nature began to be

recognized. This was given seminal expression by the “father” of the Romantic movement, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1842). In the writings of the many great poets who emerged from the context of Romanticism, continuing in the poets of late modernity and into our present time, there is often a twin theme which Ikeda’s essay conveys: a lament over the growing sense of human estrangement (from self, others, and nature), this sense of the fragmentation of experience;³ but also, the poet’s enduring intuition of the wholeness of reality, the spiritual dimension of nature as this finds expression in the human response to beauty, the response of reverence in this encounter with the Mystery of existence.

The sense of reverence and wonder was also a central theme in the life of that quiet woman who became the catalyst of the modern environmental movement, Rachel Carson. She once described, in a letter to a friend, her “shock” at the unprecedented destructive power which the new “atomic science” had conferred upon humans: “I have now opened my eyes and my mind. So it seems time someone wrote of Life in light of the truth as it now appears to us. And I think that may be the book I am to write. . . . I still feel there is a case to be made for my old belief that as man approaches the [new era of technological power], he must do so with humility rather than arrogance. And along with humility I think there is still a place for wonder.”⁴ The book that Carson would eventually write was *Silent Spring*,⁵ and as one commentator has observed, “a few thousand words from her, and the world took a new direction.”⁶

The “dialogue with nature,” the sense of wonder and a relational view of reality are examples of human experience which many have sought to recover in the wake of modernity, and in the midst of post-modernity’s ambiguous unfolding. In fact, these terms represent precisely the opposite of the typical list of modernity’s pathologies: dualism, subjectivism, anthropocentrism, technocratic mastery aimed at human domination of nature, reductionism. “Abstraction” is a term which many twentieth century thinkers have used to summarize these pathologies: abstraction as the absence or distortion of the concrete relations which constitute the fullness and truth of reality, including the truth of the human person. In fact, in his social analysis, Daisaku Ikeda also has often referred to a “spirit of abstraction” which is devastating in its consequences for the flourishing of both humans and nature.⁷ Ikeda’s use of this term derives from his own reading of the French Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973), whose analysis was just one of many examples of intellectual and spiritual renewal initiated in Roman Catholicism during the first

half of the twentieth century.

This is an interesting and perhaps surprising convergence—the Buddhist Ikeda and the Catholic Marcel. After all, is it not Christianity that has been indicted as the source of the anthropocentrism and dualism which emerged in such menacing magnitude in the modern period?⁸ What was it that Ikeda found so compelling in the philosophy of Marcel?

The Aim of this Study: Exploring An Unexpected Path to Wholeness

We have become accustomed to recognizing the formative role of Romanticism in the historical development of contemporary environmentalism. Furthermore, the West's encounter with varieties of Buddhist thought reflects the search for a relational worldview which many could not find in the modern expressions of Christianity and Judaism.⁹ Interreligious dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity has flourished for decades, as Christianity critically engaged its own role in the twentieth century's crisis of humanism, society, and nature.¹⁰ The overarching theme in all of these interactions has been to call into question the fundamental characteristic of the Judeo-Christian religious heritage which has been associated with a dualistic approach to reality, namely, belief in the *transcendence* of God. "Transcendence" expresses a sense of "difference" or "otherness" (and not sameness or identity) in the Judeo-Christian understanding of the relation between the world and its Source (the Absolute, "God"). Indeed, ecologically-oriented reformulations of all varieties of Christianity seek to de-emphasize or even to eliminate transcendence, and to emphasize instead its opposite—an equally essential characteristic of the God-world relation—the concept of *immanence*. Immanence expresses the sense of God as intimately present within the created world; as Saint Augustine is often paraphrased, "God is more deeply present to me than I am to myself" (*interior intimo meo*).¹¹ In fact, classical, doctrinally "orthodox" Christianity has always maintained both transcendence and immanence (difference and identity) in its understanding of the relation of God to all that exists.¹²

The aim of this essay is to point out a common interreligious, humanistic sensibility—our recognition of the problem of fragmented relationality, a sense of "wholeness lost," but also the summons to overcome our "estrangement" through a recovery of "the poetic spirit," what we shall henceforth call "the sense of wonder." Just as the Buddhist thinker Daisaku Ikeda found in the Catholic philosopher Gabriel

Marcel an inspiring convergence of worldviews, this essay seeks to elaborate aspects of that very same East-West encounter, in hopes of celebrating a meeting of traditions at the heart of the mystery of our shared experience in life. Whenever enriching encounters occur, we discover also further grounds for common action in interreligious collaboration in service to the flourishing of all life.

However, in order to recognize the significance of this paradigmatic convergence between Ikeda and Marcel, we must augment interreligious understanding by showing how this common sensibility is actually found at a point which marks the greatest contrast, and which therefore should be the most difficult for Buddhist-Christian encounter: this is the concept of transcendence (difference, otherness) in the Christian understanding of the nature of ultimate reality. In this regard, our purpose is to shed light upon a path toward the recovery of human wholeness which too often is inadequately understood by both Christians and non-Christians alike. In the pages of this journal, authors S. Yamamoto and V. Kuwahara have suggested that, in an age in which the distortions of religion are often most prominent, "it would be more inspirational if we could emphasize the social contribution of a religious philosophy rather than the negative aspects."¹³ In presenting this exploration of a religious understanding of "difference" (in contrast to "identity") as a path toward wholeness and the flourishing of all life, we seek to open a conversation with the Buddhism of the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren, as this is interpreted in the intellectual tradition of the Soka Gakkai. As Ikeda's convergence with Marcel exemplifies, the founders of the Soka Gakkai (T. Makiguchi, J. Toda, Ikeda) were avid readers of the philosophical renewals in Europe and the United States, and their thought epitomizes the fruitfulness of these encounters. It is hoped that this essay will encourage continued comparative exploration of other Christian appropriations of those same philosophical movements which were of such significance to the Soka Gakkai intellectual tradition.

Specifically, this essay seeks to expand interreligious understanding between faithful practitioners and scholars of the Buddhist philosophy of the Soka Gakkai and those of Roman Catholicism, via the method of comparative theology,¹⁴ toward a deeper mutual understanding which enhances the religious humanism that each tradition embodies. In this regard, the faith-tradition of the Soka Gakkai and the faith-tradition of Catholic theology encounter each other as lived religious experience, committed to their own distinct practices while yet seeking communion and genuine transformative learning from one another, as "faith-seeking-understanding" (that common definition of "theology") in the midst of

both interreligious difference and commonality. We offer herein a preliminary study, a mere beginning, toward a comparative theology of the sense of wonder.

The Poetic Spirit and the Renewal of Metaphysics**

The reader familiar with the philosophical works of Gabriel Marcel can easily see why Daisaku Ikeda could find in him a thinker of convergent sensibilities, for Marcel was concerned to return philosophical inquiry to the concrete experience of life in the midst of modern alienation.¹⁵ His was a philosophical reflection on the modern loss of awareness of the mystery of existence (the sense of the Mystery of Being). In his Christian humanism, he insisted that humans have a *need* for, and an innate orientation toward, the transcendent Mystery of Being. It is not an exaggeration to say that, for Marcel, when humans become so self-enclosed that they are no longer even aware of this need for the greater cosmic Mystery in which they exist, they have then become tragic victims of a kind of modern dehumanization.¹⁶ The “spirit of abstraction” (in its many expressions) functions to separate persons from this first and most fundamental of relations—the relation to Ultimate Mystery, Being, Life—which forms the context and source of all other relations. Thus, this philosopher of the concrete experience of life “battled”¹⁷ against the abstracting spirit which in a basic way summarizes the dualism and anthropocentrism of modernity.

Marcel’s convergence with Ikeda brings us to the first of many ironies in this study: Both thinkers recognized that a recovery of the concept of “transcendence” was necessary to restore a truly relational worldview. More precisely, it is better to say that in a recovery of the human *experience* of transcendence we awaken again to the Mystery of Being, which is identical with our own life yet also not limited to our individual existence; for this Mystery of Being is encountered in each entity that exists, even as it encompasses all that exists. Transcendence, then, is an experience of the Ultimate Mystery of Being which is fundamentally “other” in the sense that we do not control it, it always exceeds our individual life. Only through a “spirit of abstraction” can we deny this “ever greater” Mystery of Being; only through some form of denial can we presume to exercise “power over” the very Source of our own existence. Yet even as this Mystery of Being exceeds us, we are aware that Being is that which is most intimate, most interior to us—indeed, it is our very life itself, immanent within us.

This ontological dialectic of identity and difference, sameness and

otherness, is familiar and much-rehearsed conceptual ground in the Buddhist-Christian encounter. If we remain at a descriptive level, the experience of the Mystery of Being is so similar to Mahayana terms such as Universal Life, Life Force, Ultimate Reality, Buddha Nature. Furthermore, the nature of the ontological dialectic would seem to be especially compatible with the Buddhism of the Lotus Sutra, in which *Myohorenge-kyo* designates the name of Ultimate Reality, and *myoho* the dynamic of Ultimate Reality and its manifestation in phenomena. Yet as we know, “the single word *myoho* reflects the essential oneness of the Ultimate Reality and the world as it actually appears,” and *renge* “the simultaneity of cause and effect.”¹⁸ And as we know, the Buddhist practitioner strives for continual awareness of this oneness, identity, simultaneity. This is the very basis of the Buddhist relational worldview, the sense of the unity of reality and of its wholeness.

Yet Marcel was not a Buddhist, and he was in fact one among many Catholic philosophers, theologians and literary figures of the twentieth century who engaged the crisis of modernity through a worldview in which the dialectic of Ultimate Reality and its manifestation in phenomena was apprehended with an intentional retention of the aspect of difference, distinction, transcendence as a path to—indeed the ultimate expression of—the unity of Reality. Again we confront an irony: These Catholic thinkers sought to overcome the dualism and anthropocentrism of modernity through a renewal of the basic mode of philosophical reflection in Catholic history, namely, metaphysics. Yet, do we not think of metaphysics as that most “abstract” of all modes of inquiry? In fact, it is a testament to the unfolding of modernity’s contradictions (and pathos) that much of modern philosophy took shape as a reaction against a “defective” era of Christian philosophy, expressions of metaphysics that had fallen away from the holistic synthesis (a synthesis of hellenistic philosophical heritage and Christian faith) that marked the achievement of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Although the twentieth century became the era in which the “destruction” and “overcoming” of metaphysics was demanded, the renewal in Catholic metaphysics sought to recover the holistic experiential inquiry which metaphysics had originally been: the wonder-filled encounter of the human with the Mystery of Being. It was precisely “the poetic spirit” which this renewal sought to revive—first, to challenge a Christianity which had forgotten its own heritage of wonder, but also, as a remedy to the experience of alienation and fragmentation of late-modern society, and therefore as a contribution of Christian humanism at its finest. These efforts at renewal in a variety of Catholic intellectual disciplines unfold-

ed over the course of four decades in the first half of the twentieth century, and prepared the way for the great, formal renewal within the Catholic Church which was the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In that Council, the Catholic Church undertook not only internal reform and renewal, but as a kind of universal humanism, sought to “offer service to mankind” out of its own religious worldview, seeking “to speak to all men in order to unfold the mystery that is man and cooperate in tackling the main problems facing the world today.”¹⁹ The profound impact of these renewals in metaphysics remains evident in the social teachings of the current Pope, Benedict XVI, whose most recent social encyclical (*Caritas in veritate*) explicitly calls for ongoing development in universal ethics based on the relational understanding of the person and all reality, and the application of this radically relational worldview to the market economy, government, and civil society.²⁰

In order to provide an overview of the significance of this renewal in metaphysics, this relational view of reality whose accent is on difference, transcendence, distinction, and which as such represents an unexpected path to wholeness, we turn to two Catholic philosophers of note. Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) was a Swiss Catholic philosopher-theologian who wrote before, during and after the Second Vatican Council. He was much loved by Pope John Paul II and was also a longtime friend and collaborator with Joseph Ratzinger, who became the current Pope Benedict XVI. His efforts in the renewal of a metaphysics of wholeness and the sense of wonder have thus had tremendous impact on the shape of these popes’ teachings. The second philosopher is Dr. Kenneth L. Schmitz, whose distinguished career in Catholic philosophy spans the decades after the Council, and whose recent book, *The Recovery of Wonder*, offers a concise introduction and profound analysis of precisely our study’s topic.²¹

The “Fourfold Distinction” and the Recovery of Wonder

Virtually all of the major renewers of metaphysics in the Catholic reforms took seriously the groundbreaking critique of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), whose searing reassertion of metaphysics as “onto-theology” indicted perhaps one of the worst failures in the history of Christian thought (which resulted in a caricature of the incomprehensibility of God, reducing God to a Being among other beings).²² Much of Heidegger’s genealogy of the “forgetfulness of Being” in Western philosophy could be accepted in its basic terms, as could his critique of technology; in fact, Heidegger’s challenge can be read as a challenge to recover the

poetic spirit.²³ Yet to the Catholic sensibility, Heidegger's philosophical recovery of Being seemed ultimately nihilistic (in spite of his warnings about the nihilism of technocratic society), and this became the point of engagement for a thinker like von Balthasar. But Balthasar's purpose was not to "defend" Christianity against Heidegger's critique, but rather, to insist that Heidegger's "project" was the most promising contemporary effort for the recovery of metaphysical wonder, and thus a philosophical effort that Catholic metaphysics must incorporate into its own renewal.²⁴

In his multi-volume analysis of the history of metaphysics in the West,²⁵ Balthasar asks: What became of the classical experience of the radiance of Being over the course of the centuries—from pre-Christian Antiquity's posture of wonder before the metaphysical depth of Being and a theophanous cosmos, through the development of Christian philosophy, the advent of modernity and its 'anthropological turn', and into the postmodern age? His answer can be summarized in simple and familiar terms: "the realm of Western metaphysics" bears witness to the history of a loss—forgetfulness of Being, forgetfulness of God. According to Balthasar's analysis, receptive openness and wonder before the dialogical structure of reality is overtaken by modernity's "anthropological reduction,"²⁶ an anthropocentrism that is inherently and progressively *monological*. Balthasar insists that Heidegger is correct in returning us to the first and fundamental question of human experience, the "authentic metaphysical question: 'Why is there anything at all and not simply nothing?'"²⁷ In the primal response of wonder expressed by this question, the human confronts the inexorable mystery of finitude and contingency. And this wonder places the human before an equally inexorable choice, to remain receptively open to genuine transcendence, to the dialogical structure of reality, or alternately, the perennial temptation to impose a "solution" to the "problem" of finitude, to assert human control over the Mystery of Being. Here we find the trajectory toward what Marcel called "the spirit of abstraction."

But how is it that such a concept as "the dialogical structure of reality" is defended? Is this not simply another metaphysical abstraction, a merely fanciful notion? In fact, the dialogical structure of reality—which means the relational structure of reality—is the most concrete of experiences. Here Balthasar makes a startling turn toward simplicity: The dialogical structure of reality is the most fundamental experience of human life, and it begins not with the sophisticated language of a scholar, but instead, with the precious and universal experience of childhood. And thus, the renewal of metaphysics, the recovery of wonder, must

reflect an experience that is accessible to everyone, and that is faithful to human experience. Let us see how Balthasar describes this fundamental experience of relationality as the structure of reality:

The fact that I find myself within the realm of a world and in the boundless community of other existent beings is astonishing beyond measure and cannot be exhaustively explained by any cause which derives from within the world.... [The child's] "I" awakens in the experience of a "Thou": in its mother's smile through which it learns that it is contained, affirmed and loved in a relationship which is incomprehensively encompassing, already actual, sheltering and nourishing. The body which it snuggles into, a soft, warm and nourishing kiss, is a kiss of love in which it can take shelter because it has been sheltered there *a priori*. The awakening of its consciousness is a late occurrence, in comparison with this basic mystery of unfathomable depth. It finally sees only what always has been, and can therefore only confirm it. A light which has been perpetually asleep awakens at some point into an alert and self-knowing light. But it awakens at the love of a Thou, as it has always slept in the womb and on the bosom of the Thou. The experience of being granted entry into a sheltering and encompassing world is one which for all incipient, developing and mature consciousness cannot be superseded....The fact that [the child] experiences Being (*Sein*) and human existence (*Dasein*) ... as the incomprehensible light of grace, is the reason why it engages in play.... It gives itself to play because the experience of being admitted [receiving the gift of existence] is the very first thing which it knows in the realm of Being. It *is*, in so far as it is allowed to take part as an object of love.²⁸

This first experience, awakened through the smile of the mother, "contains what cannot be surpassed," the primal awareness of "the graciously-opened whole in which every space is granted to tumble around as one wills: existence as play."²⁹ This primal experience of origins, and of communion in the relations of our existence, is nothing less than a disclosure of the dialogical, relational structure of Ultimate Reality, a disclosure of the nature of that-from-which Being derives—God.

This basic dialectic of otherness and relationality in the experience of childhood forms the starting point for metaphysical reflection and the recovery of the poetic spirit. To articulate this, Balthasar incorporates the legacy of a thinker whose influence upon Daisaku Ikeda marks another profound convergence—this is the figure of Goethe. In fact, in a famous interview in which Balthasar was asked to describe his own

approach to theology and philosophy, he summarized the essence of his method in one single name: Goethe.³⁰ In a term reminiscent of Goethe's own language, Balthasar describes the child's awakening to self-consciousness in terms of a "fourfold distinction." For both Goethe and Balthasar, the Mystery of Being, our concrete experience of existence, unfolds as a dynamic of polarity, otherness-in-relation: Balthasar develops four fundamental "distinctions" which comprise the structure of Being: (1) the distinction between self and other existents, (2) the distinction between Being and all existents, (3) the distinction between essence (*essentia*) and existence (*esse*), and (4) the distinction between God and world. Let us examine again the awakening of the child, explained now in terms of these metaphysical distinctions:

If, as Balthasar has it, "in the beginning was the word with which a loving 'Thou' summons forth the 'I,'" then the subjective correlate to this summoning is the primal experience of wonder in the discovery of the other, and the world, in which and through which the self awakens to awareness. Metaphysical reflection on this wonder opens the possibility of discovering the first stage of the fourfold distinction, recognition of the difference-in-relation which pertains between the self and the other, paradigmatically for Balthasar, the child awakened by the loving smile of the mother. But the discovery of the self in relation to other existents permits the realization that all other finite existents stand in the same relation to Being, that all participate in Being but do not exhaust it. In this second stage, in which the distinction between Being and existents is recognized, it becomes evident that, even as the existent is dependent upon Being for its actuality, Being itself attains actuality only in the existent—pointing to the non-subsistence, dependence, and contingency of each. This non-subsistence, the mutual dependence of Being and existent, leads to a third stage, in which the distinction between essence and existence is recognized. The essential forms and entities of the world, in all their abundance, complexity, beauty, cannot be attributed in their origin to Being in its non-subsistence.

This wonder before the mystery of "Why anything exists?" opens out upon a fourth, final, and definitive distinction: an intuition of an *infinite, subsistent* Source of Being in which non-subsistent Being and existents participate, a Source whose presence (immanence) and reality is "reflected" (*imago Dei*) in the mystery, beauty, goodness of Being and existents; yet this Source, as infinite, remains ever greater, Absolute Mystery (transcendence). The fundamental relation of otherness points to the dialogical, relational structure of all existence, a relation which is experienced as our Origin in Love, the Christian understanding of God

as Trinity. As Balthasar summarizes it: “In trinitarian dogma, God is one, good, true, and beautiful because God is essentially Love, and Love presupposes the one, the other, and their unity. [If God’s essence is unity-in-difference] then the otherness of [the world] is not a fall, but an image of God, even as it is not God.”³¹ In all this, we find Balthasar’s renewal of the ‘Catholic thought form’ of analogy (*analogia entis*) in which the distinctions in our experience of the structure of Being convey and uphold the integrity of real relationality, the positivity of difference (ultimately, in the God-world relation), otherness and not identity as the condition of possibility for love as the authentic meaning of Being.

The Dialogue with Nature and Human Wholeness

In the “fourfold distinction,” Balthasar expresses Goethe’s fundamental understanding of the relational structure of reality, a dynamic of polarity, which Goethe called “morphology.” This was Goethe’s way of ‘seeing the whole’, of reverently approaching the mystery of existence, especially as encountered in the living forms of nature. Georg Simmel describes Goethe’s approach to the relational structure of reality as “[seeking] the unity of the subjective and objective principle, of nature and the spirit, within the appearance itself.”³² Goethe famously rejected the mechanistic and reductionist features of modern scientific method, and equally rejected the fundamentally anthropocentric “systems” of the idealists (Hegel, Fichte—whose thought, according to Balthasar, reduced the cosmos to the “anthropophanous”³³). Another commentator describes Goethe’s understanding of the fundamental dynamic of difference, relationality, distinction: “At the foundation of his morphology, Goethe posits a certain polarity, a unity-in-distinction of two poles: the pole of an inner core of being which expresses itself externally, and the pole of an external medium which is united by this expression: expression and form (*Gestalt*).”

It is Goethe’s “morphology” which Balthasar appreciates as expressing (in a non-Christian way) the profound meaning of “difference” which was given its classical Catholic metaphysical formulation by Thomas Aquinas in his articulation of the “real distinction” between essence and existence. This intersection between Goethe and Aquinas carries crucial importance for the recovery of the poetic spirit and the Catholic understanding of the dialogue with nature. As Kenneth Schmitz describes its significance:

In Thomas Aquinas’s thought, the most radical and original distinction

is that between *essentia* and *esse*...between the way a thing is and the fact that it exists at all [essence and existence].... It raises the question to the level of absolute being and non-being....Why being at all? The distinction arises from the conviction and experience of the radical contingency of things....[The entities of the world] contain within themselves basic and essential otherness, as *form* is other than *matter* ...and existence [is distinct from] *essence*.³⁴

It is this dynamic of “inner” spirit and “outer” matter that confers upon everything (animate and inanimate) the composite wholeness and integrity of a subject. For they are “subjects of being” (*suppositum entis*) within a living *cosmos*, whose very structure reflects “the received generosity inherent in them.”³⁵ This is the Christian perception of existence as Gift. All that exists does so as “members of the community of beings,” not as objects “standing over against human consciousness which [in modernity] is now the sole subject.”³⁶ In the unfolding of modernity, the turn toward anthropocentrism demanded objectification, abstraction from this living depth in nature. It was in this sense that Goethe’s “reverent” attention to the manifesting forms of nature expressed his desire “to do justice to existence.” Indeed, Schmitz insists that the recovery of wonder is (for him as a philosopher) “a work of intellectual justice.” “Wonder,” Schmitz tells us, “is the middle term that joins our freedom to the dignity of things [the entities of nature].”³⁷

Returning now to the Goethean dimension of Balthasar’s metaphysics and theology, we are not surprised to find that in the “fourfold distinction,” the entities of non-human nature are not simply a kind of background scenery—rather, the forms witness to the beauty, mystery, radiance of existence-as-gift. In virtually every analysis of this topic, Balthasar includes the role of non-human nature in the human awakening to self-awareness. Balthasar insists that non-human nature “remains a singularly illuminating touchstone” and source of wonder before the glory and abundance of Being, not comprehended abstractly, but “precisely in beetles and butterflies”³⁸ and the miraculous variety of nature’s forms. He insists that the “truth of the human” is only to be comprehended within the relations which constitute the wholeness of the “truth of the world.” Indeed, in Balthasar’s “fourfold distinction,” in which the child awakens to self and world through the smile of the mother, the receptivity which characterizes this primal inter-subjectivity is a model for the human relation to non-human nature:

If he can only become truly himself when awakened by the love of

someone else, then he will become a knowing, self-comprehending and reflecting spirit insofar as he gives himself, in love and trust, i.e., in faith, to the other person. And the more profoundly he learns through this act of surrender what existence and Being itself are, then the more can understanding create a new surrender, which is now a venturing forward in trust on the basis of experiential knowledge....Whoever grasps this can also open himself receptively to non-human nature and, thus, *learn things from natural beings—from landscapes, plants, animals, stars*—which a purely cognitive ('scientific') attitude never discovers. The depths of the significant shapes of nature, the meaning of its language, the extent of its words of revelation can only reveal themselves to one who has opened himself up receptively to them.³⁹

This analogous inter-subjectivity between the human and non-human takes on profound, even startling dimensions of reciprocity. For example, the human subject is "configured" receptively to the non-human entity of nature, and these in turn are "receptive" to their "idea" in God which at once is immanent in them yet transcends them. Again, throughout his analysis the influence of Goethe is explicit, as Balthasar presents concrete examples of plants and animals, landscapes, ecosystems, and not solely human inter-subjectivity. This attitude of reciprocity and welcoming receptivity reflects the dialogical structure of reality and calls the human to 'reverence' before the manifesting, non-human other.

The freedom of the human subject is configured to the freedom of the non-human entities of nature, the inherent nobility of their self-manifestation, for "there is no being that does not enjoy an interiority, however liminal and rudimentary it may be."⁴⁰ Again, recalling Goethe, Balthasar explores levels or 'degrees of interiority' in the ascending complexity of nature's entities: "Even on the lowest level of life," before the living entity's self-manifestation, "we should fall back, blinded" before the mystery of this living totality.⁴¹ A 'scientific' exactitude which purports to explain away the mystery "touches the sacred core of life with profane fingers." In the animal world, the intimate character of Being, this inner space, "begins to grow light, to become luminous and accessible to itself." The animal "represents a completely new fact that radically changes the situation of epistemology: the object is now itself a subject."⁴² To classify animals as "reflex mechanisms" Balthasar deems "unworthy of serious natural science."

Thus, in terms of the natural world, every entity, "is laden with meaning;" "every flower, every mountain, every [person]" bespeaks the freedom of the Source of Being Who bestows existence as Gift:

You are never finished with any being, be it the tiniest gnat or the most inconspicuous stone. It has a secret [*geheime*] opening, through which never-failing replenishments of sense and significance ceaselessly flow from eternity.⁴³ The whole world of images that surrounds us is a single field of significations. Every flower we see is an expression, every landscape has its significance, every human or animal face speaks its wordless language. It would be utterly futile to attempt a transposition of this language into concepts. Though we might try to circumscribe, even to describe, the content these things express, we would never succeed in rendering it adequately. This expressive language is addressed primarily, not to conceptual thought, but to the kind of intelligence that perceptively reads the *gestalt* of things. [Conceptual thought] enters upon its task only when [this kind of intelligence] has fulfilled its function.⁴⁴

This relational metaphysics makes the human dialogue with nature a matter of human wholeness, a crucial developmental dimension of our personhood. The characterization of Balthasar's relational anthropology by a recent commentator applies analogously to the human relation to non-human nature: "In Balthasar's Trinitarian theological anthropology, personhood is not defined in terms of a quality possessed, but as a gifted event. One is a person only in kenotic relations of freedom as love....A self who enters relations is not the same as a relational notion of self."⁴⁵ Therefore, it is not a "choice," a preference of temperament or taste which enjoins attentiveness toward non-human nature—it is a matter of the objective "truth of the world," and thus of human wholeness. And the attitude of the human subject in this regard must remain that of service, self-gift, the attitude of a lover to a beloved other. In this "service to the object" [entity of nature] the subject is formed, in the sense of *formation*, becoming as Balthasar says, "cosmoform" because more and more informed by the truth of the world.⁴⁶ The subject in a sense earns the right of creative action only in direct proportion to its receptivity and service to these other subjects of Being. Thus Balthasar states, "the first lesson that existence teaches the [human] subject is the lesson of self-abandonment, not domination in the pursuit of [self-]interest"⁴⁷—here, as so often, echoing Goethe who has said, "he who seeks to understand the world should begin not by constructing but by observing."⁴⁸

Conclusion: Toward a Comparative Theology of the Sense of Wonder

In this essay, we have attempted to demonstrate in great detail (but still

only at a descriptive level) the manner in which a renewal in Western metaphysics as undertaken by Catholic thinkers reveals a surprising path to wholeness through an emphasis on “difference.” In this recovery of wonder, we see how it is that Catholic social teaching asserts that the human relation with the world of nature is “constitutive” of a person’s identity.⁴⁹ Yet the fundamental contrast between the Buddhist worldview (emphasis on identity) and the Catholic (emphasis on transcendence, difference) remains in the midst of these convergences.

In an award-winning book on interreligious dialogue, Catherine Cornille describes a sense of “interconnection” between religious faiths as a necessary condition for dialogue. “Interreligious dialogue thus presupposes a conviction that, in spite of important and ineradicable differences of belief and practices, religions may find one another in a common ground.”⁵⁰ She describes three areas of interconnection which we can readily observe as present already on the basis of our study: (1) a common concern with social challenges such as world peace or the environmental crisis; (2) a perception of some profound dimension of shared religious experience which invites dialogue and encounter—for example, our exploration of the sense of wonder, the poetic spirit; and, (3) a common desire to further understand each other’s conception of Ultimate Reality, its convergences and contrasts for each religious practice—as in our fundamental contrast between transcendence (difference) and identity. It remains for us to consider the implications of these “interconnections,” and there are three areas which invite further comparative exploration.

First, as Cornille suggests, accurate interreligious understanding is necessary for the development of opportunities for engaging together the challenges which society faces, and which are the concern of each religious tradition in its humanistic orientation. On the question of the environmental crisis, it is necessary to understand the variety of expressions of Christian ecological ethics, of which the Catholic twentieth century renewal in metaphysics represents one little known but very important strand. This metaphysical renewal forms the basis of the orientation of the past three decades of papal social teaching, and has been accorded even more authority through the recent social encyclical of Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*.⁵¹

Our second implication is tied to this dimension of social teaching and the metaphysical basis of Catholic doctrine, for these are the central principles by which Catholic universities orient their missions—that is to say, their understanding of humanistic education and its role not only in the formation of the person, but in the integral development of society

and the flourishing of all life. It is here that the need for deepened comparative theological study becomes evident. The historical emergence of the Soka Gakkai from the context not only of the Buddhism of the Lotus Sutra, but also of humanistic educational philosophies of the twentieth century makes this convergence of religious humanism and humanistic educational traditions a remarkably fruitful area of encounter. In this we find the two inseparable dimensions which each religious tradition understands deeply: the integral spiritual formation of the human person, which extends from the developmental and familial context into the formation which is the domain of education. In this regard, the principles found in Makiguchi's *The Geography of Human Life*, which "examined the two-way relationship between humans and their natural environment as an educational means of developing student's social, moral and academic capabilities" invites comparative study.⁵² Of course, the vast corpus of writings by Daisaku Ikeda which articulates the inseparability of the concept of "human revolution" and the educational mission of the Soka Gakkai is so fertile an area for comparative study that it defies summary.⁵³ But the reader familiar with the Soka Gakkai and Ikeda's thought will surely recognize—and it is hoped, offer welcome—to the Catholic sensibility presented herein, as did Ikeda himself in his reading of Marcel. If, indeed, interreligious encounter is a factor in educating for peace, then surely the convergent missions of the Soka Gakkai's educational programs and Soka University can appreciate the common sensibilities expressed in the Catholic renewal of metaphysics of wonder as this shapes the mission of Catholic universities as a context of interreligious dialogue and educational collaboration.

Finally, Ikeda's writings demonstrate the need for deepened interreligious scholarly encounter, for the "descriptive" study presented herein is based upon a body of Catholic doctrine and scholarship that matches the scope of the Mahayana Buddhist context which the Soka Gakkai represents. These specific theological and philosophical elements of each tradition are precisely the domain of comparative theology. For it is this study's contention that Buddhist-Christian dialogue and comparative scholarship have yet to recognize and appreciate the unique heritage of the Soka Gakkai in its convergences with the religious recoveries of wonder, the poetic spirit, and a Catholic version of the dialogue with nature begun more than eight decades ago. While the more familiar Buddhist concepts such as *esho funi* and Dependent Origination (*engi*) may seem to have been amply explored in other Buddhist-Christian scholarship and popular interpretation, there are important new comparative dimensions yet to be developed. This is demonstrated by the prolif-

ic scholarship of Shuichi Yamamoto in this journal, whose consideration of, for example, the Consciousness-Only Doctrine (in particular, the alaya consciousness) offers compelling possibilities for interreligious consideration.⁵⁴

By way of conclusion, perhaps the fundamental elements expressed by Daisaku Ikeda in his dialogue with nature and the recovery of wonder represented in Catholic metaphysics converge in two terms: Value Creation and (the metaphysical apprehension of) Existence as Gift. Both evince a celebration of the mystery of existence in its goodness and beauty, even in the midst of the tragedies which no one escapes in life. It is here that the poetic spirit in a sense “recreates the world” by reviving and conserving the sense of wonder in every age. Returning to the opening essay by Ikeda, we read:

The poetic spirit can be found in any human endeavor. It may be vibrantly active in the heart of a scientist engaged in research in the awed pursuit of truth. When the spirit of poetry lives within us, even objects do not appear as mere things; our eyes are trained on an inner spiritual reality. A flower is not just a flower. The moon is no mere clump of matter floating in the skies. Our gaze fixed on a flower or the moon, we intuitively perceive the unfathomable bonds that link us to the world. In this sense, children are poets by nature, by birth. Treasuring and nurturing their poetic hearts, enabling them to grow, will also lead adults into realms of fresh discovery....A poet is one who offers people words of courage and hope, seeking the perspective—one step deeper, one step higher—that makes tangible the enduring spiritual realities of our lives.⁵⁵

This convergence of poetry, wonder, childhood, and a life of value creation recalls the words of Rachel Carson, who once said: “If there is poetry in my books about the sea, it is not because I deliberately put it there, but because no one could write truthfully about the sea and leave out the poetry.”⁵⁶ Balthasar was an appreciative reader of Rachel Carson until her untimely death from cancer in 1964. More than anything, she had wanted to complete the manuscript for a book devoted to the fostering of wonder in children and its meaning for the wholeness of human life. “The wonder book” as she called it, was published posthumously as *The Sense of Wonder*.⁵⁷ In its original manuscript, she wrote:

A child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed

vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength. If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in....What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder, this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence? I am sure there is something lasting and significant. Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life....Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.⁵⁸

In interreligious encounter and comparative studies, we share the mystery of our “original encounter” with nature, and “we recover in an intellectual mode [and in a humanistic mode] the wonder that is the poetry of the world.”⁵⁹ The Catholic dialogue partner thus can rejoice with the Buddhist partner, and honor the wisdom of the Lotus Sutra’s many profound dimensions of “wonder” conveyed in *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. In our mutual devotion to this wonder, we together honor the legacy of all those who have sought to live a life of value creation, in the service of wonder, including the legacy of Daisaku Ikeda in his passionate belief that “we must all be poets.”⁶⁰

Notes

**Use of upper-case letters in terms such as Being, Mystery, Ultimate Reality, Life Force, God, Source, etc. intends to highlight for the reader the sense of ultimacy or transcendence these terms carry in their respective religious usages.

¹ Daisaku Ikeda, *Embracing the Future* (Tokyo: The Japan Times, Ltd., 2008) 50–56, at 50–51.

² See, for example, Don S. Browning, *Reviving Christian Humanism: The New Conversation on Spirituality, Theology, and Psychology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); and Ronald Modras, *Ignatian Humanism: A Dynamic Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004).

³ For a comparable discussion, see Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms*

of *Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁴ *Always Rachel: The Letters of Rachel Carson and Dorothy Freeman, 1952–1964*, ed. Martha Freeman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) 249.

⁵ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962). Available in Japanese translation.

⁶ Paul Brooks, *Speaking for Nature: How Literary Naturalists from Henry Thoreau to Rachel Carson Have Shaped America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980) xvi.

⁷ Jason Goulah, “Daisaku Ikeda’s Environmental Ethics of Humanitarian Competition: A Review of His United Nations Peace and Education Proposals,” *Peace Studies Journal* 3.1 (April 2010) 1–23, at 3.

⁸ Shuichi Yamamoto pointed to the significance of Lynn White’s famous 1967 essay, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967) 1203–1207; see Yamamoto, “Contribution of Buddhism to Environmental Thoughts,” *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 8 (1998) 144–173, at 144.

⁹ For a critical but important overview of the encounter between Buddhist thought and the post-Enlightenment West, including the legacy of Romanticism and the development of ecologically-oriented philosophies and spiritualities, see David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2008), chapters 5 and 6.

¹⁰ Perhaps the finest example of this early interreligious encounter as an expression of twentieth century Christian renewal and social analysis is found in the writings of the Catholic-Trappist monk, Thomas Merton.

¹¹ *Confessions*, III, 6, 11.

¹² This dynamic of transcendence-immanence (the relation of the world to God) is a central theme in the writings of the Christian mystics, prominent among them Meister Eckhart. For a fine exploration of this, see for example, Tatsuya Yamazaki, “Die transzendente Struktur des göttlichen Seins und die Seligkeit bei Meister Eckhart,” in *Wahrheit auf dem Weg, Festschrift für Ludwig Hödl zu seinem fünfundachtzigsten Geburtstag, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, Neue Folge, Band 72*, ed. Manfred Gerwing & Heinrich J.F. Reinhardt (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2009) 273–287.

¹³ Shuichi Yamamoto and Victor S. Kuwahara, “Symbiosis with the Global Environment: Buddhist Perspective of Environmental Education,” *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 16 (2006) 176–185, at 176.

¹⁴ “Comparative theology is a reflection on faith that, while emanating from a particular religious tradition, recognizes and advances interreligious exchange so that every aspect of its theological constructions are affected and transformed, whether in doctrine, polemics, spiritual exercise, ritual, or ethical commitment. Like other forms of theology, comparative theology is an academic discipline, but may also be about or for the sake of the experience of God or, more naturalistically, the ultimate mystery toward which life points. In comparative theology then, faith and practice are explored and transformed by attention to parallel theological dimensions or construals of other religious traditions, examined historically or in contemporary context.” This description is excerpted from the American Academy of Religion’s Comparative Theology Group (available at Religious Studies News Online, 2011 Annual Meeting Call for Proposals http://rsnonline.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=383&Itemid=461

For a fuller presentation, see Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, “The Return of

Comparative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78.2 (June 2010) 477–514.

¹⁵ See, for example, Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, *Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G. S. Fraser (London: The Harvill Press, 1951) 41.

¹⁶ The French title of his famous work, *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G.S. Fraser (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962) indicates better this dehumanizing element: *Les hommes contre l'humain*.

¹⁷ Ibid. 1.

¹⁸ Daisaku Ikeda, *Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and Death* (Santa Monica: Middleway Press, 2003) 171, 179.

¹⁹ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 10

²⁰ Drew Christiansen, SJ, "Metaphysics and Society: A Commentary on *Caritas in veritate*," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010) 3–27.

²¹ Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Recovery of Wonder: The New Freedom and the Asceticism of Power* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005).

²² See, for example, Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, in which Heidegger condemns the very "distinctions and difference" which this essay describes as a path to wholeness. English translation by Joan Stambaugh: *Identity and Difference* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

²³ Michael Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991): 449–450.

²⁵ Ibid. and *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 4, *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

²⁶ Balthasar, *Love Alone* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 25.

²⁷ *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* 613

²⁸ *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* 616

²⁹ *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* 617

³⁰ "Geist und Feuer: Ein Gespräch mit Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Herder Korrespondenz* 30 (1976) 72–82, at 76.

³¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Retrospective: 1988," in *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993) 115.

³² Georg Simmel, *Kant und Goethe: Zur Geschichte der Modernen Weltanschauung* (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag, n.d.) 20–21.

³³ *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* 587

³⁴ Schmitz, 54–56.

³⁵ Ibid. 31.

³⁶ Ibid. 64.

³⁷ Ibid. 11.

³⁸ *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* 620–621.

³⁹ Balthasar, *Man in History: A Theological Study* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968) 93–94.

⁴⁰ Balthasar, *Theo-logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 1, *Truth of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000) 84.

⁴¹ *Truth of the World* 85–86.

⁴² Ibid. 89.

⁴³ Ibid. 102.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 140.

⁴⁵ Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Person, *Kenosis* and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation," *Modern Theology* 19: 1 (January 2003): 41–65, at 52 and 58.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 70–71.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* 371–372.

⁴⁹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, "Chapter 10: Safeguarding the Environment," no. 452 (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2004) 198.

⁵⁰ Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008) 95.

⁵¹ For an overview of Pope Benedict XVI and John Paul II on the environment, see Connie Lasher and Msgr. Charles Murphy, "With Generous Courage: Promise & Poignance in the Legacies of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI," in *Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives*, ed. Jame Schaefer (forthcoming, Marquette University Press, December 2011).

⁵² Goulah, 5.

⁵³ The convergence is admirably conveyed in Goulah's fine essay, but it is readily apparent in virtually every text of Ikeda, so integrated are these elements in his thought and the identity of the Soka Gakkai.

⁵⁴ Shuichi Yamamoto, "Mahayana Buddhism and Environmental Ethics: From the Perspective of Consciousness—Only Doctrine," *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 11 (December 2001) 167–180.

⁵⁵ Ikeda, *Embracing the Future* 53–54.

⁵⁶ Rachel Carson, in her acceptance speech at the National Book Award, presented to her for *The Sea Around Us*, as quoted by Frank Stewart, "Small Winged Forms Above the Sea: The Life of Rachel Carson," *Orion* 14 (Winter 1995) 14–18, at 16.

⁵⁷ Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). Also available in Japanese translation.

⁵⁸ Rachel Carson, "Help Your Child to Wonder," *Woman's Home Companion* (July 1957) 25–27, 26–48, at 28 and 48.

⁵⁹ Schmitz 127.

⁶⁰ Ikeda, *Embracing the Future* 55.