

A Hermeneutics of Grace: Henri de Lubac's Reception of Hōnen and Shinran

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HENRI DE LUBAC (1896–1991) was a French Jesuit Catholic priest. Seriously wounded during the First World War, he served as a daring operative in the French Resistance during the Second World War. He was also among the greatest Christian theologians of the twentieth century. De Lubac was the *animateur* of the so-called *Nouvelle Théologie* (“new theology”)—an important, although controversial, renewal movement within Roman Catholicism prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Much less recognized and appreciated is the fact that he was an accomplished scholar of Buddhism, with a special interest in the teachings of the great founders of the Pure Land schools in Japan’s Kamakura period (1185–1333), Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) and Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263).

My purpose here is modest: I wish to document and evaluate de Lubac’s treatment of Hōnen and Shinran.¹ I claim that de Lubac’s remarkable insights into Hōnen and Shinran were made possible by a hermeneutics driven in large measure by his Christian—specifically Roman Catholic—theological convictions regarding grace. With this in mind, this essay includes an account of the unfolding of de Lubac’s study of Buddhist texts, his treatment of Hōnen and Shinran, and an assessment of his approach to the study of Buddhism. I begin with brief comments on de Lubac’s eventful life, biographical material that will prove essential in appreciating his reception of Hōnen and Shinran.

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¹ For a general guide to de Lubac’s publications on the Buddhist tradition, see Ducor 2007–8.

A Life

De Lubac was born into an old Lyonnaise family. He was educated by the Jesuits and entered the Society of Jesus at age seventeen. After ordination, he joined the faculty of the Catholic University of Lyon in 1930 to teach theology.

At the university, de Lubac began to collaborate with fellow theologians in an ambitious renewal of Catholic theology driven by a retrieval of late antique and medieval texts marginalized by the established neo-scholastic theology of the day. *Sources Chrétiennes* would inspire what came to be called the *Nouvelle Théologie*, a sobriquet that was by no means meant as a compliment, at least before 1960. De Lubac was a major figure in the *Nouvelle Théologie* movement, publishing influential contributions on medieval biblical exegesis, modern atheism, the church and, most controversially, on grace.² In June 1950, several theologians associated with the *Nouvelle Théologie* were removed by church authorities from their teaching posts and forbidden to write on topics having to do with Christian theology. De Lubac was the most prominent figure in this group. The Jesuit Superior General moved him from Lyon to Paris, where he was to live for seven years. During his time in Paris, de Lubac published three monographs on Buddhism and was planning a fourth volume when he was asked by Pope John XXIII (1881–1963) in 1960 to come to Rome to serve as a theological consultant during preparations for the Second Vatican Council. At the Council, the *Nouvelle Théologie* and de Lubac's whole theological project would be vindicated.

The Path to the Pure Land

Many presume that de Lubac came to the study of Buddhism during his years of exile in Paris. Forbidden to teach or publish in Christian theology, it was thought that he turned to the study of an exotic religion to fill his time. This is not the case. De Lubac's interest in Buddhism dates back to his arrival in Lyon as a professor of theology. In his first year on the faculty, he was asked by his dean to teach a course on the "history of religions" that would eventually include lectures on the philosophy of religion (especially Bergson and Comte), comparative mysticism, and elements of Hinduism and Buddhism. De Lubac thought his dean's request a dubious project, given his complete lack of training in Asian languages

² For de Lubac's theology of grace, see *inter alia* de Lubac 1946 and 1968.

and the meager resources for Hinduism and Buddhism available to him in Lyon. In addition to what he found in the library, his friend, the Abbe Jules Monchanin (1895–1957), provided him with a translation of the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (attributed to Asaṅga, ca. 320–390).³ And around this time, de Lubac was able to attend a lecture by the French Buddhologist Paul Mus (1902–1969) on the art of Borobudur. In his *Mémoires*, de Lubac reports that he quickly came to see Buddhism as “among the greatest human achievements” and pursued the study of the Dharma because of “its spiritual profundity.”⁴

During these early years in Lyon, however, the study of Buddhism for de Lubac of necessity was little more than an avocation. His time was largely consumed in the enormous project of editing the *Sources Chrétiennes*, developing the *Nouvelle Théologie*, and his activities in the French Resistance. In a twenty-year period lasting from 1930 to 1950, de Lubac had published three articles on Buddhism: an essay comparing early Buddhist texts with early Christian neo-Platonic theological texts from Alexandria (1937), one on the iconography of the cosmic tree in Buddhist and Christian art (1945), and another on Buddhist and Christian “charity” (1950).⁵ In 1950, after his move to Paris, he was forbidden to publish in the area of Christian theology but given explicit permission to continue to publish on the subject of Buddhism.⁶

De Lubac had complained about the lack of resources for the study of Buddhism in Lyon. This situation changed dramatically with his move to Paris. Among other research centers in the French capital, de Lubac had access to the Bibliothèque National and the Musée Guimet, a museum and archive specializing in Asian art. The works of the great French Buddhologists fill his footnotes.⁷ In addition to established academic journals such as the *Annales de la Musée Guimet* and the *Bulletin de l'école française d'extrême-orient*, he also had access to relatively new journals such as

³ De Lubac 1952, pp. 221–22. Monchanin, along with Henri Le Saux (1910–1973) and Bede Griffiths (1906–1993), went on to establish a Catholic monastic community in India in 1938. For reflections on this period of his life from the vantage point of his later years, see de Lubac 1989a, pp. 29–31.

⁴ De Lubac 1989a, p. 30.

⁵ All three essays were reprinted in de Lubac (1951) 2012, pp. 109–64, 65–96, 17–63.

⁶ De Lubac 1989a, p. 73.

⁷ Among many others, de Lubac cites Louis de la Vallée Poussin (1869–1938), Paul Demiéville (1894–1979), Étienne Lamotte (1903–1983), Sylvain Lévi (1863–1935), Paul Mus, Alfred Foucher (1865–1952), and René Grousset (1885–1952), the curator of the Musée Guimet.

Monumenta Nipponica, *The Young East*, and a bimonthly magazine being edited in Kyoto, *The Eastern Buddhist*. At the Musée Guimet, de Lubac read essays in *Kokka* 國華, a periodical devoted to the appreciation of Asian art founded by Okakura Tenshin 岡倉天心 (1863–1913) and Takahashi Kenzō 高橋健三 (1855–1898).⁸ De Lubac also had access to the initial volumes of the *Hōbōgin* 法寶義林, an “encyclopedic dictionary” of the history and culture of Japan and China.⁹

In Paris, de Lubac also read Japanese scholarship, although only in translation into Western languages. The works of Nakamura Hajime 中村元 (1912–1999), Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966), and Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 (1866–1945) were prominent.¹⁰ In his materials on Pure Land Buddhism, de Lubac cites, among others, the work of Itō Giken 伊藤義賢 (1885–1969) on Rennyō 蓮如 (1415–1499) and the biography of Hōnen by Shunjō 舜唱 (1255–1335) in the critical edition of Coates and Ishizuka.¹¹ De Lubac also had access to the work of Christian missionaries, including materials in Jesuit archives in Paris. He uses these materials sparingly, relying mostly on the pioneering work of Léon Wieger, S. J., and Pierre Charles, S. J., on Pure Land Buddhism.¹²

During his years in Paris, de Lubac published three books on Buddhism: *Aspects du Bouddhisme* was based largely on his first three essays on Buddhism, supplemented by his expanded research in Paris;¹³ *Le Rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l'Occident* places the reception of Buddhism by modern Western scholars in the much wider historical context of its encounter with Christianity, beginning with Cyril of Alexandria (378–444);¹⁴ and *Aspects*

⁸ The magazine was noteworthy for the high quality of its reproductions of Asian art.

⁹ The *Hōbōgin* was published under the auspices of the Imperial Academy of Japan and directed by Sylvain Lévi and Takakusu Junjirō. The editor in chief was Paul Demiéville. The first volume appeared in 1929.

¹⁰ For Nakamura see, for example, de Lubac 1955, pp. 150–51, 153, 202, 267. For Suzuki, see de Lubac 1955, pp. 33, 50, 151, 202, 251–52, 269–70. For Takakusu, see de Lubac 1955, pp. 34, 60, 96, 114, 202. Takakusu Junjirō was one of the founders of the Taishō Tripiṭaka project, which is analogous to de Lubac's role in establishing the *Sources Chrétiennes*. For examples of works of these authors cited by de Lubac, see Nakamura 1952; Suzuki 1924; Takakusu 1947.

¹¹ For Itō, see de Lubac 1955, p. 206. For Shunjō, see de Lubac 1955, pp. 133, 163–68, 172–73, 273–74. For works cited by de Lubac see Itō 1950 and Coates and Ishizuka 1925.

¹² For Wieger, see de Lubac 1955, pp. 33–34, 87–90, 103–4, 162–63, 258–62. For Charles, see de Lubac 1955, pp. 129, 132, 192, 314. De Lubac cites Wieger 1928 and Charles 1928.

¹³ De Lubac 1951 (2012). For an English translation, see de Lubac 1954.

¹⁴ De Lubac 1952.

*du Bouddhisme II: Amida*¹⁵ reflects what Jérôme Ducor calls de Lubac's "second discovery" of Buddhism.¹⁶ In Paris, de Lubac began a study of Pure Land tradition, leading to an intense engagement with the teachings of Hōnen and Shinran. Prior to the publication of *Amida*, de Lubac makes only a few brief references to the notion of a "pure land" and the *Larger Pure Land Sutra*. For example, he speculated that the Amitābha cult might have originated in Iran.¹⁷ *Amida* was de Lubac's last book on Buddhism. A fourth book was planned, but in 1956 de Lubac was allowed to return to Lyon and resume teaching.¹⁸ In 1959, he resigned his position in Lyon to go to Rome to work on the Second Vatican Council in its preparatory stage at the invitation of Pope John XXIII.¹⁹

De Lubac and Hōnen

In hindsight, after his initial study of Buddhism, de Lubac seems to have been drawn inexorably to the teachings of Hōnen and Shinran. Support for this claim is strengthened by my view that de Lubac's reception of Japanese Pure Land thought was propelled fundamentally by his Christian theological convictions about grace.

In Paris, de Lubac read Shushō's biography of Hōnen in the annotated English translation of Coates and Ishizuka.²⁰ This text left de Lubac with the strong impression that Hōnen was a "non-doctrinaire mystic and a poet," who felt deeply the truth that everything in the universe was manifesting the presence of Amida and his "love that embraces all."²¹ In an earlier publication, de Lubac warns of forms of "mysticism" in India that are "amorphous and vacuous."²² In Hōnen's practice of exclusive *nenbutsu* 念仏, however, de Lubac found a mysticism that is not only "simple, popular, [and] accessible to all,"²³ but also "an intimate experience" which is

¹⁵ De Lubac (1955) 2012.

¹⁶ Ducor 2007–8, p. 94.

¹⁷ De Lubac 1952.

¹⁸ De Lubac 1989a, p. 89.

¹⁹ *Amida* may have been de Lubac's last book on Buddhism, but not his last publication. In 1970, he was asked to give a lecture on Buddhism by what is today known as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. This lecture was subsequently published as "Faith and Piety in Amidism." See de Lubac 1989b, pp. 235–70.

²⁰ Coates and Ishizuka 1925.

²¹ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 165.

²² De Lubac (1951) 2012, p. 138.

²³ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 168.

“a natural analogue to what is felt by a Christian sanctified by the Spirit of Christ,” despite the sizable divergence of doctrines.²⁴

De Lubac’s high estimation of Hōnen’s mysticism was made possible, in no small way, by the “new theology” that de Lubac and his colleagues in Lyon had been developing since the 1930s. At the core of the *Nouvelle Théologie* is a doctrine of grace. Roman Catholicism’s established neo-scholastic theology insisted on a strict separation of the natural from the supernatural, with the aim of protecting the completely miraculous and unexacted character of grace as an unmerited supernatural gift. However, this means that grace arrives as a stranger in a world that knows nothing of grace prior to its advent. Grace is something added from without to what the neo-scholastic theologians called a “pure nature,” an understanding of the human person that is fully intelligible and sufficient in itself, apart from grace. De Lubac investigated this problem initially in *Surnaturel*, a series of historical studies of classic texts that proved quite controversial.²⁵ De Lubac rejected the notion of a “pure human nature” as an implicit dualism of the natural and supernatural, unacceptable to Christian theism. He also argued that the Christian bishop-theologians of the late antique period and the great scholastic theologians of the high middle ages, most notably Thomas Aquinas, also rejected a theology of grace based on a dualistic view of the natural and supernatural. Human beings have no actual experience of a world untouched by grace. Grace has no existence in the world that is unmediated by created things, most importantly, human nature itself. Therefore, de Lubac argued that we encounter grace as a paradoxical mystery: the supernatural is always inseparable from the natural, without being reducible to it. Thus, at its heart, our deepest grasp of reality entails an awareness of the comingling of grace and nature.²⁶ The awareness of this non-dualistic comingling of nature and grace, the divine and the human, forms the background to de Lubac’s respect for Hōnen’s “mysticism.”

In Anesaki’s *History of Japanese Buddhism*, de Lubac found one of Hōnen’s poems.

In every land, there is not a small village,
No matter how humble and remote, which the silver moon
Does not touch with its beams. And when a man

²⁴ De Lubac (1955) 2012, pp. 288–89.

²⁵ De Lubac (1946) 1991.

²⁶ After his historical studies, published in 1946, De Lubac subsequently published *Le mystère du surnaturel*, a theological reflection on the historical studies of 1946. This theological reflection has been translated into English. See de Lubac 1998.

Opens his window and looks far away,
The truth of Heaven enters and dwells with him.²⁷

De Lubac's embrace of Hōnen's poem is buoyed by his Christian theology of grace. The world is saturated with grace, which cannot be restricted to the church and its sacramental rites. This includes, apparently, the silver moon and a humble human being looking out his window into the distance. Even more to the point, the ubiquity of grace and its non-dual working include Hōnen himself. His understanding of grace will not allow de Lubac to draw a sharp line separating the realm of grace from the "purely natural" world outside the church and its sacramental rites. De Lubac must expect to find grace already at work within the world in the suffering and hopes (and mystical poems) of all human beings. This means that the working of what Christians recognize as supernatural grace cannot be excluded from the interior life of a Buddhist like Hōnen. De Lubac's response to Hōnen, therefore, must be placed in sharp contrast with the rejection of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism by Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968). De Lubac must take Hōnen (and as we shall see, Shinran) seriously because of his theology of grace. Barth can dismiss both Hōnen and Shinran because of his own, very different, theology of grace.²⁸

De Lubac also refers to Hōnen's Pure Land path as a "little way" (*petite voie*).²⁹ This comment may seem innocuous, or perhaps even condescending. This would be to misunderstand de Lubac. De Lubac is well aware of the Western scholarship that dismisses Pure Land Buddhism as a form of the Dharma debased in the process of being accommodated to the needs of the uneducated. De Lubac reports that, in some Western scholarship, the Buddhism of the Pure Land is seen as "second class" (*seconde zone*), "sentimental," and a "poor relation" (*figure de parent pauvre*) to other lineages within the Three Vehicles.³⁰ De Lubac will have none of this. In fact, he is proud to claim that his monograph is the first in the French language to

²⁷ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 165; Anesaki 1930, p. 174.

²⁸ Karl Barth, in a discussion of Pure Land Buddhism, infamously claimed to know that the grace of Amida was inefficacious *a priori*. Grace is available only in the name of Jesus Christ. For de Lubac's critical comments on Barth's dismissal of Pure Land Buddhism, see de Lubac 1955, pp. 158–59.

²⁹ De Lubac 1955, pp. 162, 188.

³⁰ De Lubac 1955, p. 8. However, De Lubac does criticize Chinese Pure Land Buddhism as "a simple and popular cult which does not measure up to the greatness of Buddhism." See de Lubac 1955, pp. 254–55.

treat the Pure Land tradition in depth and seriousness.³¹ Therefore, when de Lubac speaks of Pure Land Buddhism as a “little way,” he is not pushing it aside to give pride of place to lineages such as Mādhyamika, Yogācāra, Tendai, or Zen. He is referring to an influential Catholic mystic, Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897).

Marie Françoise-Thérèse Martin became a contemplative nun at age fifteen at the Carmelite Monastery of Lisieux in Normandy, taking the name Thérèse. She died eight years later of tuberculosis and was canonized in 1925, in no small measure due to the immense popularity of her spiritual memoir, *L’histoire d’une âme*.³² In *L’histoire*, Thérèse speaks of the simplicity, practicality, and concreteness of her Christian practice as a “little way.” When de Lubac writes of Hōnen’s teachings as a “little way,” he has this passage from Thérèse’s *Histoire* in mind:

You know, Mother [Superior], that I have always wanted to become a saint. Unfortunately, when I have compared myself with the saints, I have always found that there is the same difference between the saints and me as there is between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and a humble grain of sand trodden underfoot by passersby. Instead of being discouraged, I told myself: God would not make me wish for something impossible and so, in spite of my littleness, I can aim at being a saint. It is impossible for me to grow bigger, so I put up with myself as I am, with all my countless faults. But I will look for some means of going to heaven by a little way which is very short and very straight, a little way that is quite new. And so there is no need for me to grow up. In fact, just the opposite: I must stay little and become less and less.³³

Sister Thérèse was aware of her diagnosis when she wrote these lines. She knows that it will be “impossible for me to grow bigger” and overcome her “countless faults.” So she has chosen a “little way” for herself. In de Lubac’s view, Hōnen, like Thérèse, practices a mysticism that is a “little way,” not only in its simplicity and lack of pretention, but perhaps more importantly, in its awareness of the evanescence of life and the nearness of grace in things that are concrete and ordinary.³⁴

³¹ De Lubac 1955, p. 8.

³² Thérèse de Lisieux 1898.

³³ Thérèse of Lisieux 2011, p. 113.

³⁴ In *Amida*, de Lubac also speaks of Hōnen’s mysticism as “the freshness of spring” (*la fraîcheur printanière*). This is also an oblique, and somewhat playful, evocation of this

De Lubac and Shinran

The ninth chapter of *Amida* is given to a study of Shinran. If de Lubac finds an affinity with Hōnen because of his mysticism, he embraces Shinran because of his deep awareness of the existential paradox of faith, also a central theme in de Lubac's Christian theological writings.

Like his notion of "mysticism," faith understood as existential paradox is a corollary of de Lubac's understanding of the non-dual working of grace. If the natural and the supernatural are not two juxtaposed things, then reality, in our deepest grasp of it, must be paradoxical through and through. This means that paradox, for de Lubac, is not merely a rhetorical flourish on the surface of things. In *Paradoxes of Faith*, he writes, "[paradox] specifies, above all, then, things themselves, not the way of saying them." Therefore, he continues, "paradox exists everywhere in reality, before it exists in thought." In fact, "paradox, in the best sense, is objectivity."³⁵ Therefore, for de Lubac, paradox is forever wedded to faith understood as a way of being-in-the-world. Faith is the grace-enabled practice of existential surrender to the paradoxical nature of reality itself. Faith can be understood as this existential practice only because reality is never simply natural. It is always touched by supernatural grace. Therefore, de Lubac looks on faith as the most genuine form of human self-transcendence—a transcendence in which we do not escape our finitude but rather realize this finitude in the form of eschatological hope. "[Faith] establishes us in Being," de Lubac writes, "and this, which alone matters, only faith can do."³⁶

In introducing Shinran and his sense of paradox, de Lubac quotes at length these touching words by Shichiri Kōjun 七里恒順 (1835–1900):

Even when you understand that the Nembutsu is the only way to salvation, you often hesitate reflecting within yourselves, "Am I all right now? Is there something more to be done?" This is not quite right. Better be fully confirmed in the thought that your karma has no other destination but that for Naraka [hell]. When you are fully confirmed in this, nothing will be left for you but to hasten forward and take hold of Amida's helping hands. You

Catholic mystic. A favorite nickname for St. Thérèse of Lisieux is "the little flower," a reference to one of the meditations in *L'Histoire*. See de Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 162.

³⁵ De Lubac 1987, p. 10. His comment on paradox as objectivity begs comparison with Shinran's use of the phrase "true and real" regarding the *nenbutsu*. On "true and real," see Hirota 2006.

³⁶ De Lubac 1987, p. 18.

may then be assured of your rebirth in his Pure Land. Have no scruples in your minds thinking how to curry favour with Amida or whether you are really to be embraced by him. These scruples come from not having fully abandoned the thought of selfhood. Resign yourselves to the grace of Amida and let him do what he chooses with you; whether you are to be saved after or before all your sins are wiped clean, is the business of Amida and not yours.³⁷

De Lubac cites Shichiri Kōjun as a way to introduce a famous passage from the *Tannishō* 歎異抄, having to do with the principle of “the evil person as object of Amida’s salvation” (*akunin shōki* 悪人正機):

It is usually said that the wicked can be reborn in Paradise, and with stronger reason the good. That is to reverse the terms, for want of understanding the power of the original Vow. We must say on the contrary: if the good can be born in Paradise, with how much stronger reason the wicked.³⁸

De Lubac looks on this passage as a *locus classicus* for Shinran’s keen sense of paradox. If the paradoxical is the state in which synthesis has been placed in abeyance, then Shinran is drawing our attention to a paradox of profound importance to his insight into the working of Amida’s Vow. When our grasp of our existential state is what Shinran calls “true and real,” then all pretense to synthesis must be put aside in order to make room not so much for incomprehension, but for wonderment. “If the good can be born in Paradise, with how much stronger reason the wicked.”

Shinran’s teaching leads de Lubac to reflect on his own religious tradition with new insight into the paradoxes of faith. After citing this famous passage from the *Tannishō*, de Lubac recalls the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth: “It is not those in good health who need the doctor, but the sick,” and “I am not come to save the righteous, but sinners.”³⁹ But now, in light of Shinran’s delight in paradox, de Lubac understands these teachings as irony: the

³⁷ De Lubac (1955) 2012, pp. 209–10. De Lubac found this passage in an essay published by D. T. Suzuki in the *Eastern Buddhist*. See Suzuki 1924, p. 96. Shichiri Kōjun was an influential friend of Fukuzawa Yukichi 福沢諭吉 (1834–1901). They met in 1864 and remained friends for the next thirty-five years.

³⁸ De Lubac found this passage in Demiéville 1929, p. 22. This *Hōbōgin* passage is based on section 3 of the *Tannishō*.

³⁹ Mark 2:11 and Luke 5:32.

one who thinks himself healthy is sick and the one who thinks himself righteous is a sinner. In effect, de Lubac concludes that, if even the healthy and the righteous can be saved, how much more the sick and the sinner.⁴⁰

De Lubac also is fascinated by an event recounted in the *Tannishō*. In section nine, Yuienbō 唯円房 asks Shinran why it is that, when he recites the *nenbutsu*, he feels no joy lifting his heart and no great desire to flee this world of suffering for the Pure Land. In Shinran's answer to Yuienbō, de Lubac finds an "expression of our humanity" so profound in its paradoxical truth, that we can all find our own lives reflected therein, despite Shinran's historical and cultural distance from us. We can be assured of our birth in the Pure Land, Shinran tells Yuienbō, precisely because we lack this feeling of joy in our *nenbutsu* practice. Our blind passions may separate us from the joy that lifts the heart, but the Buddha understands this truth. For our part, we must only try to understand the great paradox of faith: Amida has fulfilled his Vow specifically for sentient beings such as those who cannot feel joy over the Pure Land and cling to the world of suffering.

De Lubac is deeply impressed by this teaching and comments on the ninth section of the *Tannishō* by paraphrasing Shinran's first words of response: "You too, Yui-embo [Yuienbō], now ask this question!"⁴¹ De Lubac sees in these words something "deeply moving": a cry of "joyous astonishment over the discovery of a shared misery" arising from the heart of "this old Buddhist master, long convinced that fundamentally, all is suffering."⁴² De Lubac then cites Nagarjuna's comment that life is "like an illness, like an ulcer, like an arrow driven into the body, like a torment."⁴³ De Lubac recognizes that Shinran's teaching reflects an existential paradox: the "stubborn thirst for life" (*goût persistant de la vie*)⁴⁴ even in the midst of our suffering. De Lubac associates this "stubborn thirst" with "the Greeks and the Jews."⁴⁵ Presumably, he is thinking of Greek tragedy and the Hebrew Psalms. But the paradoxical character of Shinran's teaching leads de Lubac to affirm that the stubborn thirst is actually "found in everyone."⁴⁶ If Christian faith, understood as an existential paradox, is a prominent theme in de Lubac's theological writing, then it is Shinran's

⁴⁰ De Lubac (1955) 2012, pp. 210–11.

⁴¹ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 212.

⁴² De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 212.

⁴³ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 212.

⁴⁴ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 212.

⁴⁵ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 212.

⁴⁶ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 212.

paradoxical understanding of *shinjin* 信心 that draws him to “this old Buddhist master.” *Shinjin* translated often but misleadingly with the generic term “faith,” is the infinite mind of Amida arising within the finite mind of ignorance of the one who recites the *nenbutsu*.⁴⁷ Commenting on the *Tannishō* passage, de Lubac notes that Shinran “paradoxically turns things inside-out” as is his custom and explains that when thinking about Amida’s Pure Land, if one were to be “transported by fervor, then this would be the time to be afraid.”⁴⁸

De Lubac sees correspondences with Catholic spiritual masters in this paradox. He compares Shinran with François Fénelon (1651–1715), one of the founders of the French School of Spirituality, being careful to note the immense differences in ascetic practices and doctrinal teachings that separate Fénelon from Shinran. Fénelon felt deeply a “terrible fondness for sensible goods” even as he sought to expose this attachment in those who came to him for spiritual guidance. Fénelon came to see, however, that his difficulty in “detaching himself from life” was the concrete existential state in which he was touched by grace.⁴⁹

De Lubac’s Hermeneutics of Comparison

De Lubac devotes a lengthy section of his second book, *Le Rencontre*, to a criticism of his fellow theologians for either their lack of interest in Buddhism, or their purely apologetic treatment of the Dharma.⁵⁰ Buddhism, he argues, imposes on Christian theology a demand for reflection that cannot be eluded. This conclusion, once again, is driven by de Lubac’s theology of grace. The working of the supernatural cannot be confined to narrowly specified sacramental rites or miraculous events. Grace is to be found in the world, beyond the confines of the Christian church. This is especially true of the cultural, intellectual, and religious activities of human beings.

This being the case, it is remarkable what de Lubac does not do in his publications on Buddhism. On occasion, he engages in apologetic arguments against Buddhist teachings. This is to be expected of a Catholic theologian writing, for the most part, in the 1950s. His apologetic moments are also genuine contributions to our understanding of both Buddhism and

⁴⁷Curiously, de Lubac has very little to say anywhere in his publications about *shinjin*. Instead, he consistently speaks of Pure Land “faith” (*foi*).

⁴⁸De Lubac (1955) 2012, pp. 212–13.

⁴⁹De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 212.

⁵⁰De Lubac 1952, pp. 180–202.

Christianity. Fundamentally, however, his purpose is not to refute Buddhist arguments. Instead, de Lubac prefers to examine specific similarities and differences that arise through limited exercises in comparison. This is remarkable. He pursues these comparisons, according to Jérôme Ducor, in order to “secure for the believer an understanding of his own faith that is more clear and at the same time, one that will push us past all mediocre interpretations.”⁵¹ For example, de Lubac explores what he sees as the quasi personhood of Amida at some length, with the aim of reflecting with new depth on the personal quality of the Christian God.⁵² This is also true of his treatment of what he calls “Buddhist charity.”⁵³

If there is a relative absence of apologetics, de Lubac also resists the temptation to wedge Buddhism into an encompassing Christian theology of religions in which it appears as a pale reflection of Christian revelation. This is the second remarkable thing that de Lubac does not do in his publications on Buddhism. Thus, he never refers to Buddhists as “anonymous Christians,”⁵⁴ or states that Buddhism provides a “merely natural” experience of the God witnessed to in the Christian tradition by means of supernatural revelation. In this, he also resists the notion that Buddhist tradition can be essentialized into an unambiguous totality. Instead, he looks on Buddhism as a river of lineages, texts, practices, and teachings that are more or less reconciled to one another. Thus, he addresses himself to “aspects of Buddhism,” often in comparison to limited aspects of Christianity.

As a result of these refusals, de Lubac comes to the Dharma with a sizable hermeneutical problem. How is de Lubac to understand Hōnen and Shinran in such a way that his own theological presuppositions, including his presuppositions about the non-dual working of grace, do not overcome the “otherness” of Buddhism? De Lubac’s strategy is three-fold. First, he insists that we recognize Hōnen and Shinran as authentic representations of Mahayana Buddhism. Second, he rejects theologically extreme Christian claims about Buddhism. Third, in his comparisons, he struggles to maintain a tension between similarity and difference. This entire strategy is required, and buoyed, by his theology of grace.

The first element of de Lubac’s overall hermeneutics of comparison is his affirmation of the authentic character of Hōnen and Shinran’s teachings

⁵¹ Ducor 2007–8, p. 89.

⁵² De Lubac (1955) 2012, pp. 263–68.

⁵³ De Lubac 1988.

⁵⁴ This phrase was coined by Karl Rahner, S. J., as part of his theology of religions. See Rahner 1966.

as Mahayana Buddhism. The faith of Hōnen and Shinran arise out of the heart of the Mahayana. As noted above, he is also aware of those who disparage Japan's Pure Land Buddhism as an accommodation to the needs of those untutored in the Dharma. Is Pure Land Buddhism a type of theism? A complete reversal of Śākyamuni Buddha's teachings? Is it a Buddhism of salvation? Is the Mahayana doctrine of *bodaishin* 菩提心 (aspiration for enlightenment) compatible with the notion of faith in Amida's Vow? Can faith in the Pure Land and the practice of the *nenbutsu* be traced back to the person of Śākyamuni Buddha? De Lubac raises all these questions. In addition, he also takes note of Christian commentators on Pure Land Buddhism who see it as an approximation of Christian theism,⁵⁵ and attempts by Buddhists to present their tradition using Christian categories.⁵⁶

De Lubac advises that we take all these considerations with caution. He is aware that multiple Pure Land Buddhists have rejected these interpretations of their tradition and insists that Christians are duty-bound to pay attention to their complaint.⁵⁷ He then makes a noteworthy statement about the teachings of Hōnen and Shinran:

In its basic teachings, the cult of Amida retains a meaning which removes from it essential resemblances to the Christian religion. . . . At the same time [these teachings] make of the tradition something quite other than a vulgar religion or a simple bundle of superstitions. Thus, this cult recovers its place inside Buddhism; it reenters Buddhist orthodoxy.⁵⁸

In defense of this claim, de Lubac argues his point. He notes that Amida is not a savior deity and that the tradition includes neither a Christian theology of merit nor salvation through redemption. There is no sense of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in the teachings. Neither do Hōnen and Shinran have a properly Christian sense of hope.⁵⁹ Reflecting on Santideva's praise for the great bodhisattvas in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, de Lubac reminds us that all the "sovereign Buddhas have been flies and grubs!" and that Amida Buddha is no exception.⁶⁰ De Lubac is keenly aware that

⁵⁵ De Lubac (1955) 2012, pp. 250–52.

⁵⁶ De Lubac (1955) 2012, pp. 256–57.

⁵⁷ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 257.

⁵⁸ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 257.

⁵⁹ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 258.

⁶⁰ De Lubac (1955) 2012, p. 261. *Bodhicaryāvatāra* VII, p. 18. De Lubac does not provide further bibliographic information for this passage.

the doctrine of karma, despite certain appearances in Pure Land tradition, remains intact in its teachings. Dharmākara Bodhisattva established the Pure Land in the West as a result of meritorious practices, not some sort of divine status.

The second element of de Lubac's overall approach to Hōnen and Shinran is to reject what he considers to be extreme Christian theological interpretations of Pure Land Buddhism. For example, he rejects comparisons of Hōnen and Shinran to Protestant Christianity. He considers such comparisons superficial, even though these comparisons began with Francis Xavier (1506–1552) in the sixteenth century and persist to the present day. Resemblances, of course, are easy to enumerate: the elimination of devotions, the total trust in Amida, the rejection of meritorious works, contemplation, and monastic asceticism—all these find what de Lubac calls “exact parallels” in Protestant Christianity.⁶¹ The more Hōnen and Shinran are located in their proper context in Mahayana Buddhism, however, the more these resemblances seem superficial. But in addition, de Lubac also rejects interpretations of Pure Land Buddhism that seek to remove from it any resemblance to Christianity.⁶² This too must be seen as extreme. He is thinking of Karl Barth. Barth recognized the formal similarities linking Pure Land Buddhism with Protestant piety but also insisted that grace is available only through faith in Jesus Christ. Taking refuge in the Name of Amida is futile. As a result of Barth's very different theology of grace, de Lubac notes that Barth is not able to engage in any “comparison which would permit a pronouncement on the content of the faiths.”⁶³

In his long study of Buddhism, de Lubac establishes a tension from which he refuses to release himself. This is the third element of his overall hermeneutical approach to the study of Buddhism by a Christian theologian. The first pole of the tension is established by de Lubac's deep conviction regarding the theological significance of Buddhism for Christians. A proper Christian theology of grace requires de Lubac to recognize that the teachings of Hōnen and Shinran are leavened with a profound meaning for Christian theology that demands exploration and interpretation. The second pole of the tension is established by his refusal to domesticate Buddhism as a pale version of Christianity. In maintaining this side of the tension, he constantly returns to the deep roots of Japanese Pure Land teachings in

⁶¹ De Lubac (1955) 2012, pp. 262–63.

⁶² De Lubac (1951) 2012, p. 257.

⁶³ De Lubac (1955) 2012, pp. 158–59.

Mahayana Buddhism and simultaneously refrains from wedging Buddhism into an encompassing Christian theology of religions in which Buddhism appears merely as a version of Christian truth. This aspect of the tension is all the more remarkable given the fact that precisely a theology such as this was an important theme for his colleagues promoting the *Nouvelle Théologie*.⁶⁴ By maintaining this tension, the Buddhism of the Pure Land remained for de Lubac what he called a “spiritual fact” and, indeed, “the most vast and complex spiritual fact in the entire history of world, with the exception of Judeo-Christian revelation.”⁶⁵ Maintaining the tension between Pure Land Buddhism’s genuine theological significance to Christianity and its authentic character as Mahayana Buddhism enabled the Dharma to remain a “spiritual fact” for de Lubac. In refusing to overlook this “spiritual fact,” de Lubac has made a lasting contribution to the encounter between two religious traditions.

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⁶⁴ Karl Rahner’s theology of religions might also be mentioned again. His sweeping view that other religions make available the same grace witnessed to by Christians has been widely embraced, by Roman Catholics at least, since the 1950s. De Lubac’s more nuanced, more restrained, and hermeneutically more sophisticated approach to religious diversity has been eclipsed—at least until recently. In current Roman Catholic theology, there is impatience with theories of religion in general and increasing interest in limited exercises in comparison based on careful textual studies of other religions as pioneered by Henri de Lubac. See, for example, Fredericks 2004 and Clooney 2010.

⁶⁵ De Lubac 1989a, p. 94

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