The Lost Self: Charles Taylor's Buffered Self and the Social Imaginary of Thich Nhat Hanh's Interbeing

Greg Mileski

Charles Taylor tracks the emergence in Western modernity of a self-conception as "buffered," separate from the body, nature, and community. For Taylor, this buffered identity chafes against the felt sense of things, leaving many in our age with a "malaise" and seeking an alternative conception. Christians especially need a new paradigm for understanding the relatedness to which Jesus points. Zen Buddhist teacher and activist Thich Nhat Hanh has explained a key Buddhist teaching, dependent origination, as "interbeing," a description of reality as based in fundamental relatedness. His understanding begins with conceiving of oneself as an inseparable unity of mind and body. From this, Nhat Hanh draws an expanding picture of relatedness—the self as one with nature and as one with the community. Here, Nhat Hanh articulates an alternative conception of the self, not as buffered, but as inseparable from all else. This paper suggests Nhat Hanh's interbeing as inspiration for a rediscovery or construction of a similar conception in Christianity.

Keywords: Buddhist, Christian, anthropology, secularity, interbeing, modernity, globalization

Introduction

Something's wrong and it's been a long time in the making. Charles Taylor aims to tell the story of our age—a secular age—in which we inheritors of a world built by Latin Christendom have come to feel ourselves quite out of place, an experience felt by Christians and non-Christians alike. There is something about how we understand ourselves and our place in the world that doesn't feel quite right. There is something, Taylor contends, out of phase between what we *think* about ourselves in the world and what we *feel* about ourselves in the world.

To describe this, Taylor traces two narratives: first, the rise and collapse of our social imaginary and, second, the corollary changes in self-conception that accompanied the rise of our imaginary but which now exist homeless without it. That is, on the one hand, Taylor tells the story of the millennia-long construction of a worldview which has ceased to function satisfactorily for a great many of us. On the other hand, Taylor describes the self-conception which has arisen within this imaginary. The worldview has collapsed, Taylor contends, but the self-conception remains—limping along, obviously out of place. And so we find ourselves in this "secular age" feeling decentered, awash in "malaise" and unsure of how it is we relate to one another or of what it is we share with each other. The edifice we once occupied is no longer inhabitable; we are homeless, deracinated from so much of what came before and unsure of which path to follow and where it is exactly we are hoping it might lead.

For Christians, Taylor suggests, this disjuncture presents a particular challenge to the expression of a viable Christianity going forward. The New Testament calls Christians to such a profound social engagement that neighbors are to be loved as one's very own self, that strangers are to be loved as one's closest family members. But without a self-conception that connects us inextricably to one another, Jesus's commandments to love each other remain only divine decrees clashing with the world as we experience it. What is needed is a new social imaginary, one in which

our felt sense of connectedness is given a home, and Jesus's command to love one another can be seen, not as a sublimation of our natural desire, but as an expression of it.

Out of the crucible of the wars in his native Vietnam, Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh began reflecting on how we can better understand the deep intimacy we share with one another and with our world, and how we might best resist the temptation to consider ourselves so separate from one another that such mass murder seems a viable course of action. Drawing on the deep roots of his Buddhist tradition, a tradition long-practiced in resisting the temptation to view the self as "buffered," Nhat Hanh came to articulate existence as "interbeing," as so deeply interwoven that the dividing lines we so easily assume—between self and community, self and nature, even between mind and body—are revealed as fictions. If the "malaise" that characterizes our position in this age is the result of a disjuncture between self-conception and social imaginary, then Nhat Hanh's interbeing can provide a pathway for putting the self-back at home in this world and so point the way toward a Christianity in which the love of neighbor is as natural as the love of the self.

Taylor's Tale and the Malaise with Which We Live

To tell this tale of how we arrived in our place of malaise, Taylor reaches back into the Axial Age and "The Great Disembedding," a story necessarily truncated here. What emerges here are the fundamental divisions well known to us today, "that between the immanent and transcendent, the natural and the supernatural."[1] There now exists a transcendent realm, "the world of God, or gods, of spirits, or Heaven," which exists as a distinction—an intentional distinction—to the world we inhabit. Whereas previously, the haunt of supra-human beings was morally ambiguous and generally unconcerned with the shape and contours of human life, this realm now "becomes unambiguously affirmative" of human flourishing.[2] This shift inaugurates a corresponding change in human activity as it relates to religious conceptions. The previous goal of flourishing in our world is no longer possible in light of this distinctly good realm. Its very existence convicts our own, after all, and reveals its deep inadequacies. Instead, "[e]ither a new goal is posited, of a salvation which takes us beyond what we usually understand as human flourishing"—some sort of elysian afterlife, say, "[o]r else Heaven, or the Good, lays the demand on us to imitate or embody its unambiguous goodness, and hence to alter the mundane order of things down here."[3] The Great Disembedding, then, erects the basic worldview we have inherited, that of a metaphysical Good to which we are drawn, either in a future realm or in a current endeavor of personal and social improvement here and now.

Alongside this disembedding emerges a new conception of the self. Prior to this, Taylor writes, the central locus of identity was the society, whether it be as a tribe or a clan. There was an "embeddedness" to human existence which placed the individual within a social order: "Human agents are embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporates the divine."[4] But with the advent of disembedding, there arose "the growth and entrenchment of a new self-understanding of our social existence, one which gave an unprecedented primacy to the

---

[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 13–14.

[2] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152.

[3] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152.

[4] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152.

individual."[5] Whereas, previously, a person "couldn't conceive of themselves as potentially disconnected from this social matrix," there emerges now the ability to conceive of oneself with a vantage point that affords a view of the rest.[6] This is the self-conception Taylor describes throughout as "buffered," one which allows the person "to abstract from his own situation, and adopt the standpoint of the 'impartial spectator.'"[7] The self who was previously embedded within a society, and within a world order, is now "disintricated" from it.

This, Taylor points out, is not without advantages. A buffered self-imbues the person with "a sense of power, of capacity, in being able to order our world and ourselves." Inasmuch as this sense "was connected with reason and science," we now enjoy "a sense of having made great gains in knowledge and understanding."[8] And apart from these valuable achievements, there is the newfound potential to observe our world and act upon it fruitfully, from one's own perspective and for one's own good. Taylor seems to have no interest in sacrificing this gain. This advance, though, has been costly.

Against this broad background, our own particular social imaginary rises and falls. By "social imaginary," Taylor means those unthought assumptions in which persons "imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations."[9] The social imaginary, then, is the way we and those with whom we live and interact inherit a common existence, a common societal shape active at a much deeper level than cultural expressions like speech, language, music, cuisine, etc. For Taylor, the social imaginary amid whose rubble we find ourselves, one which arose and fell roughly between the years 1500–2000 CE, is the Modern Moral Order, an anthropocentric worldview which assumes a rational, mechanistic world, one created by a supernatural God for the purpose of human flourishing.

This imaginary, though, had a fatal flaw. If one can step back and observe a world ordered by a supernatural God for the purpose of human flourishing, then one can judge how well the design facilitates the desired end. What happens when a world ordered toward the end of human flourishing shakes with such violence that buildings collapse?[10] Further, the rise of sky-piercing technologies that gave new meaning to the word "space," and natural sciences that revealed a world far older, and far more indifferent to human life than this anthropocentric picture can allow for, added to a sense of unsettledness. The more the world revealed itself, the less ordered by a supernatural God toward the end of human flourishing it appeared. But the challenge is not only in understanding the order and humanity's place within it, however central or peripheral one might come to view it. Even before the darkness of the universe and the arbitrariness of mass extinction events revealed themselves, "buffered selves" were beginning to feel like something had been lost, that something was missing from the picture of their world and their place within it—and so arose what Taylor describes as "the Romantic critique."

---

[5] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 146.
[6] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 149.
[7] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 232.
[8] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300.
[9] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171.
[10] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 306.

The objections of the Romantics revolved around three cleavages which were in need of reunion. First was the split within, between desire and moral aspiration. Here, they sought "a fusion of ordinary desire and the sense of a higher goal, rather than an opposition in which harmony is achieved by the relegation or subordination of desire."[11] The Romantics were reacting against the notion of the disintricated person with a selfish desire that must be sublimated in order to act fruitfully for the good of the other. Human desire, the Romantics contended, must be affirmed in its natural state. If this first objection was against a division within the person, the second was against a division of the person from the human community. This objection is seen in the proliferation of imagined utopias in this age, either as idealizations of past communities—the Greek polis, say—or in the goal of creating a great "future socialist society."[12] And thirdly, the Romantics saw this self-conception as wrongly divided from the natural world, "cut off from a great source of life and meaning, which is there for us in nature,"[13] an error which then facilitated the wrongful reduction of the natural world to human instrumental value.[14] What these Romantic objections amounted to, then, was a critique of the buffered self as a disengaged entity, separable from a surrounding environs. Taylor summarizes: "[T]he reasoning mind was divided from its own desiring nature, from the community, which thus threatened to disintegrate, and from the great current of life in nature."[15]

However, the Romantics conceded, it was not possible to simply roll back the clock and return to a previous unity. A reunion was needed, but an erasure of what had been conceived was not possible. That is, what had always been understood as one was understood as two. However, there was a recognition that what had been let out of Pandora's box couldn't simply be placed back within it. New conceptions had come to exist and couldn't be erased from society's understandings. This had an unexpected benefit, Taylor noticed, in that the Romantics were seeking "a recovered, more complex and richer unity, which resolved the opposition while preserving the terms."[16]

In fact, as Jennifer Herdt points out, Taylor sees a utility in this new understanding.[17] While Taylor is critical of an anthropology which would "feed the notion that I enter into relationships only for the sake of how these allow me to fulfill my own desires," he sees here an opening to highlight the value of relationship itself. Instead of persons engaging one another "for the sake of mutual benefit, in order to enable individuals to fulfill their own desires or pursue their own projects," Taylor recognizes in the Romantic critique an opportunity to move forward in a different direction.[18] Taylor's desire, then, is to make use of the Romantic innovation: that which has been ruptured is rejoined, but not sublimated, its new identity not erased. It is this "more complex and richer unity" that Nhat Hanh may soon help us to articulate.

---

[11] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 313.

[12] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 315.

[13] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 315–16.

[14] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 317.

[15] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 315.

[16] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 315.

[17] Jennifer A. Herdt, "The Authentic Individual in the Network of Agape," in *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, ed. Carlos Colorado and Justin Klassen (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 203.

[18] Herdt, "The Authentic Individual in the Network of Agape," 205.

And so we find ourselves, according to Taylor, living in this liminal space, within an inert social imaginary and a self-conception that no longer belongs. We maintain many of the former motivations—to discern the nature of the world and act to improve it—but can less readily articulate the imaginative infrastructure that sustains them. The Romantics saw that the unanswered "Who am I?" revealed the unanswered "Who are you and why should I care?" This is the state of the world in which Taylor envisions Christianity as "networks of agape," in which human relationships are relativized out of their natural origins and defined by a love revealed in Jesus.[19] It is these networks, Taylor seems to hope, that will express the "more complex and richer unity" now possible. Taking the Parable of the Good Samaritan as paradigmatic, Taylor envisions a new relationality "not based on kinship but on the kind of love which God has for us;" in short, Taylor wants us to love one another as a parent loves a child.[20] But how does his vision answer the Romantic critiques?

The third Romantic critique, concerning the non-human world, is left unaddressed. The second Romantic critique, concerning the person in relation to others, is answered through agape, though the means for engendering this love are left unstated. It must simply be enacted. Likewise, the first Romantic critique, concerning the reunion of self and desire, is addressed but without any transformative thrust. Desire must be transformed before it can be embraced and so result in a love which enables this network. But what is the source of this transformation? Taylor doesn't say.

For his part, Taylor recognizes that this question has occupied a prominent place in twentieth-century Christian thought. He clearly sees value in the efforts of Yves Congar, Jean Daniélou, and Henri de Lubac.[21] In his own pioneering work, Gustavo Gutiérrez made frequent use of Congar, as he influentially articulated the ways in which we always already find ourselves in networks of social, cultural, and historical intersections.[22] The insights of Latin American and feminist theologians, likewise, have revealed and emphasized the prominence of relationships in the formation of our identities, offering alternative visions to our inherited self-conceptions.[23] Similarly, the pioneering oeuvre of René Girard offers an alternative anthropology that holds much promise for constructing a new conception of selfhood for Christianity's third millennium.

While all of these works—and many more here omitted—have much to commend them, what makes Taylor's work so compelling is that it is less about the theological responses to the developments of modernity and more about the felt sense of our current age. That is, the problem Taylor fingers is less with theological analyses than with the prevalent sense that our self-conception lacks a background, a home, an imaginative surrounding matrix. What is needed is a different conception of the person's place within the world. What is missing is a functioning social imaginary in which the kind of agape Taylor sees as key to the expression of Christianity is a natural extension

---

[19] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 282.

[20] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 739.

[21] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 752–53. See Fergus Kerr, OP, "French Theology: Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac," in *The Modern Theologians*, 2nd Edition, ed. David F. Ford (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1997), 107–17, for a concise summary.

[22] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Rev. Ed., trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973); cf. Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, tr. David Molineaux (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

[23] See especially Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, and Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

of the love one has for the self for the other. And it is here that Thich Nhat Hanh's conception of reality as "interbeing" can inform Taylor's conception.

The Imaginary of Thich Nhat Hanh's Interbeing

Though not a focus of his work, Taylor acknowledges the possibility of fruitful interreligious encounters for Christianity, seemingly with Buddhism particularly in mind. At the heart of both traditions, Taylor sees a radical change in identity that facilitates reconceived human relationships that allow for the achievement of a reimagined kind of flourishing. "In both Buddhism and Christianity," Taylor writes, "the believer or devout person is called on to make a profound inner break with the goals of flourishing in their own case; they are called on, that is to detach themselves from their own flourishing, to the point of the extinction of self in one case, or to that of renunciation of human fulfillment to serve God in the other."[24]

And in doing so, Taylor goes on to say, both see a revisioning of human relationships such that individual flourishing is realized in a mutuality that does not make individual flourishing central. In other words, both seem to share the paradoxical notion that in renouncing what is thought of as normal human flourishing—"that which benefits me"—a deeper, more profound human flourishing emerges as a possibility.[25] As we have seen, though, Christianity seems to have lost that which can facilitate or energize such a transformation. Buddhism, for its part, sees such a catalyst in the recognition of impermanence and the re-conception of identity as "no-self."

Whereas the religious milieu of his day posited a world of fundamental permanence—both transcendent and personal—the Buddha's enlightenment consisted in seeing that no such permanence can be found. Existence, including of persons, is impermanent, and ignorance of this is the cause of all suffering, great and small. The Buddha did not deny the existence of persons, much less their value; indeed, the remaining half-century or so of his life, spent sharing his teaching in hope of alleviating their suffering, testifies to this. But the Buddha did teach that what made persons persons, and what made persons valuable, was not found in an immaterial, eternal, permanent essence. It was found simply in their existence as persons experiencing the world. As Sallie King puts it, the teaching of no-self "means only that there is no independent, unchanging metaphysical entity within a human being. There is, however, still a perfectly real set of interdependent events, experiences, thoughts, physical processes, and so forth that constitutes human being."[26] Far from nihilism, the teaching of no-self reveals a deep intimacy between the phenomena of the world, including persons.

As with the Western monotheistic tradition of which Christianity is a part, the Buddhist tradition was birthed within the Axial Age and the Great Disembedding that privileges the individual acting within the world. With the rise of Mahayana Buddhism, however, the dualism of this disembedding was subverted and a new emphasis was placed on the inseparability of self and other, person and world. Since it is not an inherent characteristic that defines phenomena, everything exists conditioned by and conditioning all else—a reality Buddhism terms "dependent

---

[24] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 17.
[25] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.
[26] Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 21.

arising," "interdependence," or, in the philosophy-cum-activism of Thich Nhat Hanh, "interbeing."

Consider a piece of paper, Nhat Hanh invites us:

> If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper . . . If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*.[27]

He goes on to lift up the sunshine which fed the growth of the tree, the laborers who harvested and milled it, the food which sustained their work, and on. These are not incidental or secondary to the paper's existence. All these are not incidental or secondary to the paper's existence, nor is this merely a chain of events after which there finally exists something, in and of itself, that can be called paper; rather, all these inter-*are* the paper: "This sheet of paper is, because everything else is."[28] This is interbeing: "As thin as this piece of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it."[29] In this way, interbeing becomes a descriptor of all of phenomenal reality, a way of conceiving of the world as it is. Reality can be described as such because the Buddha's teaching reveals any conceived duality as false.[30] This leads Nhat Hanh to describe the reality of persons as a radical integration of thought and body, person and community, and person and nature.

While we might think of ourselves as having an "inner" and "outer" reality, a world of thoughts and feelings and a world of physical matter, a mind and a brain, Nhat Hanh brings this duality to heel:

> Our body—blood, flesh, bones—belongs to this 'outside world.' In fact, our brain and nervous system do not escape it either . . . Is our mind in the 'inner' world? Where is mind to be found? Can you identify it in space? . . . Continue to examine and you will find that everything seems to belong to the 'outside world.' But outside of what? How can there be an 'outer' without an 'inner'?[31]

The thinker and the thoughts are not two. Any conception which separates a portion of oneself from the rest of oneself is only a conception. Like the Romantics, Nhat Hanh finds usefulness in understanding these elements, in observing and witnessing them. But this separation must be qualified; upon analysis, it reveals itself to be a fiction.

These observations extend to the person in community, as well. Just as the person cannot be defined separately as thoughts, so too can a person not be understood apart from the human community in which she is found, by which she is shaped, and with which she is in constant interaction. Sallie King describes the relationship envisioned here this way: "[T]he individual

---

[27] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, ed. Arnold Kotler, in *The Thich Nhat Hanh Collection* (New York: One Spirit, 1991), 95.

[28] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 96.

[29] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 96.

[30] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 100.

[31] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart: Reflections on Mindfulness, Concentration, and Insight*, tr. Anh Huong Nguyen, Elin Sand, and Annabel Laity (Berkeley, CA: Parallax, 1988), 41–42.

contains society within himself and society is constructed of individuals. We are children and mothers of society and society is our mother and our child. We produce each other."[32] There is no self-contained existence for the person, but rather persons exist in this conditioned and conditioning flow. If the Romantics were concerned that their relationships to others were unfounded, Nhat Hanh answers forcefully: "Do you see the link between you and me? If you are not there, I am not here. This is certain."[33]

The same observations about reality as interbeing integrate the person just as completely with the non-human world as well. While one might easily leap to seeing symbiosis with a person and oxygen-producing plants, or even with the microbial biome within oneself, Nhat Hanh orients us even cosmically, drawing a powerful parallel between one's heart, without whose beating "the flow of our life will stop," and the sun at the center of our universe: "If it stops shining, the flow of our life will also stop, and so the sun is our second heart, our heart outside of our body."[34] Human life is inseparable from non-human life; a human being existing without the non-human world, even for a moment, is inconceivable. Our very bodies cannot be reduced to the boundary of our skin, but in this light are seen to expand. Human beings do not exist *within* nature; human beings *are* nature.

Such a conception also chastens any attempt to reduce the physical world to narrow self-interest. For Nhat Hanh, such a reduction misunderstands interbeing. Any instrumentalism of this kind would require a separability which does not exist. "When we see that humans have no self," Nhat Hanh writes, "we see that to take care of the environment (the non-human elements) is to take care of humanity . . . To protect living beings, we must protect the stones, the soil, and the oceans."[35] Persons exist, but with necessary qualifications without which we misunderstand our inseparability, our deep intimacy, with all else. To draw an ultimate boundary, to make a meaningful distinction that posits any as existing in and of itself without the other, is rendered nonsensical. But neither does personal identity dissolve into a collective mass.

As in Charles Taylor's telling, that which can be conceived remains, though in Thich Nhat Hanh's hands, the person is restored to a place of belonging, with the "more complex and richer unity" Taylor hoped for.[36] With this reorientation of self-understanding comes a reorientation to the world, casting desire, love, and compassion in new light. Since the person exists in this qualified way, as an interbeing with the elements of personhood, with the surrounding human community, and with the surrounding natural world, loving action toward others isn't born of the generosity of the actor, or of a sense of moral obligation to fulfill a divine command, but simply is the result of conceiving reality appropriately. "When you understand," Nhat Hanh writes, "you cannot help but love. And when you love, you naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of people."[37] The desire for self-improvement, self-care, self-love, cannot now be conceived as separable from other-improvement, other-care, other-love. The agency, the sense of responsibility for the world

---

[32] Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 93.
[33] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 116–17.
[34] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 62.
[35] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax, 1993),133–34.
[36] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 315.
[37] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 80.

inherited from the disembedding of the Axial Age, remains but the mistaken notion of one's ultimate separability which requires the reformation of an inherent selfish desire does not.

Nhat Hanh's interbeing, then, provides a powerful tool for reconceiving one's desire such that any conception of one's own good and a greater good—and vice versa—become inseparable. A unity between self-love and other-love seems newly possible when self and other are not ultimately distinct from one another. The boundaries between desire, love, and compassion all seem to shimmer and dissolve, just as those between self and other; desire, love, and compassion inter-exist with one another, just as self, community, and nature inter-exist with another.

Conclusion

Charles Taylor knows that Christians are called to a love that makes no distinction between kindred and stranger, one that reorganizes human relationships such that the Good Samaritan's actions are a natural extension of his identity. The self-conception under which we are laboring, however, stands as an impediment to such a transformation. Those of us who have inherited the views of Western Christendom have been left in a malaise, with a desire to care for the other but lacking a means to understand how or why, a means to see the love we have for ourselves and our family as naturally applicable to others. We can conceive of ourselves as entities who want to act lovingly in the world but carry with us also a false sense of separateness that hinders our efforts. Our buffered and disinticated selves need new identities in which self-flourishing, human flourishing, and world flourishing are interwoven with one another. Taylor's vision is in need of a background, an imaginary, which defines the person as an individual-in-ineluctable-relation, as one inseparable from others, such that a person's desire is transformed so wholly that self-interest and other-interest coinhere; in this way an ever-expanding relationship of agape can be initiated.

Thich Nhat Hanh's conception of reality as interbeing stands as an alternative social imaginary, one rooted deeply in an Axial Age religious tradition but articulated anew in a way that subverts that disembedding that results in the disjuncture Taylor articulates. The person still exists within the world and is moved to act fruitfully upon it, but one's own good cannot be conceived of as separate from the good of the other. The love and desire one has for one's own self and kindred, then, need not be sublimated to fruitfully love the other, but only extended as a natural outgrowth of reality properly conceived.

What lessons can be drawn from Thich Nhat Hanh's interbeing, how—and indeed, if—such a conception can be translated into Euro-American Christianity, to say nothing of Divine relationality, is another project. But the self as whole and integrated, as individual and community, as person and environment, stands as a marker of what is possible. Could such a conception, or one comparable, serve as a new social imaginary for Euro-American Christianity? If so, the seeds for networks of agape may yet find fertile soil.

Greg Mileski is a second-year PhD student at Boston College, where he works with Mahayana Buddhist philosophies and Christian theologies around the issues of selfhood and cosmology. He began his academic career with a BA in Religious Studies from the University of Pittsburgh and, after a stint in Teach For America, earned an MDiv from Trinity Lutheran Seminary and an MA in Religious Studies from the University of Colorado-Boulder. He has published on aspects of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity in the journals Resonance, NEXT, *and* Glossolalia.