

## Antennae In: Manifesting a Christian Anthropology of Self-Compassion

Michele Saracino

*Christians are taught that being compassionate toward others is a virtuous aspect of existence. In the long term, however, care and concern for others may not be enough, as it could leave some feeling depleted and without enough energy to persevere in these precarious times. This essay suggests a more balanced model of Christian existence, one which values compassion for oneself as well as for others, one referred to as antennae in anthropology. Turning one's antennae in fosters practices of being kind, patient, and understanding of oneself in the most trying of circumstances. In an effort toward constructing such an anthropological model, this paper maps the challenges to, and possibilities for, self-compassion from various Christian perspectives. In addition, the wisdom of Buddhism on the importance of self-compassion, specifically the frames of being a friend to oneself, dwelling in the present, and even mothering oneself, is proposed as a way to manifest more fully an "antennae in" way of being.*

*Keywords: Christian anthropology, Buddhism, Pema Chödrön, depression, focusing, Bernard Lonergan, Audre Lorde, Thich Nhat Hanh, loving-kindness, mental health, mindfulness, mothering, self-compassion, Rima Vesely-Flad, womanist, Angel Kyodo Williams*

Concentrating solely on the needs others puts one at risk for becoming “lost in the dense forest” of life and “entangled in incessant worry and planning.”<sup>1</sup> These words by Tara Brach, a psychologist who weaves Buddhist insight meditation into her practice, make perfect sense to me now. For the better part of my life and theological career, however, I believed otherwise. As a Catholic theologian, I was convinced that being human in the fullest sense depended on being primarily focused on and responsible for others. With life experience and with world events weighing heavily on the minds and hearts of many, my perspective has shifted. I have come to think that demonstrating compassion for others is only part of the equation of being human. One also needs to turn their antennae in by showing patience, kindness, and understanding for oneself, especially when “faced with a perceived sense of inadequacy or failure.”<sup>2</sup> *Antennae in* is a metaphor I borrowed from a clinician friend of mine. It conjures images of insects pointing their antennae outward to learn about their surroundings. Human beings analogously are socialized to keep their feelers out, to pay attention to their social context and be vigilant about the needs and expectations of others. These skills are valuable in that they help humans survive. Nevertheless, in the long term, as my friend intimated, compassion for others is not enough. What is being suggested in the following pages is that in times like these, one might consider turning inward with kindness, patience, and understanding, giving way to what I call an *antennae in* anthropology. It is easy to get distracted by what is happening outside of oneself, specifically those things we cannot control, like the enormity of world events or, even more mundane, the petty judgments that others make about us. Practicing self-compassion provides a safe place from which to weather these challenges. For Thich Nhat Hanh, the iconic Zen Buddhist monk, it is quite

---

<sup>1</sup> Tara Brach, *Radical Compassion: Learning to Love Yourself and Your World with the Practice of RAIN* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Susannah C. Coaston, “Self-Care through Self-Compassion: A Balm for Burnout,” *The Professional Counselor* 7, No. 3 (2017): 285.

simple: “Build a home inside by accepting yourself and learning to love and heal yourself . . . Then you have something to offer the other person.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Christian Resistance to Self-Compassion**

While many Buddhist thinkers and mental health practitioners emphasize the benefits of self-compassion, some Christians struggle with it, at times viewing self-compassion as self-indulgent, and even worse, sinful. It is a care for self that is assumed in Christianity. The Golden Rule urges believers to treat others as they treat themselves: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” [Luke 6:31 NRSV]. The problem with enacting the Golden Rule is that it takes for granted that individuals are kind, patient, and understanding of themselves, when more often than not, they beat themselves up for not being good enough, smart enough, successful enough, loveable enough, worthy of God’s grace enough, and so on.

Put another way, although the Bible reads, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved,” to “clothe” oneself “with compassion” [Colossians 3:12 NRSV], the importance of self-compassion is often ignored, or at least devalued in comparison to having compassion for others. This is not surprising as many of the gospels highlight Jesus’s other-oriented activity, including his commitment to outcasts in the community—the sick, the poor, the tax collectors, and so on. Moreover, prioritizing other-oriented compassion extends into the tradition into stories about Mary and all the saints. For example, Jesus’s mother is a saint par excellence—an icon of other-oriented compassion; and, Christians are taught that she willingly submitted to being an unwed mother in a social environment in which such a predicament was perilous. What’s more, Mary is portrayed as a consummate caregiver—a sacrificing mother who gives up her own son. *Pietàs* with Mary holding out Jesus in display, as an offering, are physical symbols of the value and virtue of self-giving sacrifice in the Christian imagination.

Holy figures in Christianity are esteemed not just for their sacrifices for others, but also for their bodily self-sacrifice to the point of extreme self-flagellation. This is most palpable in Catholic Christian traditions. Take for example St. Kateri Tekakwitha, who was canonized in 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI. This 17<sup>th</sup>-century Algonquin woman is believed to have converted to Catholicism, to have remained a virgin in a context in which that was not respected, and to have devoted her life to self-sacrifice. Of the many interesting facets of her story, are the accounts of her ascetical practices, namely her punishing self-flagellation. It is written that Kateri had her friend beat her with birch rods on a regular basis as a sign of penance and allegiance with Christ. In the words attributed to Kateri, “My Jesus, I must suffer for Thee; I love Thee, but I have offended Thee. It is to satisfy Thy justice that I am here.”<sup>4</sup> This ascetical practice is quite common in hagiography. However, in Kateri’s case, there is some question about the extremes to which it was taken. Instead of being patient, kind, and understanding of oneself, self-flagellation is judgment and sentencing of oneself without any self-kindness, self-patience, or self-understanding. Integrating self-compassion into one’s spirituality—and even one’s whole way of being—sets the stage for asking other questions. For instance, is it the case that instead of paving the way for a robust spirituality, severe acts of self-flagellation hinder one’s ability to bring their

<sup>3</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *How to Love* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2015), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Darren Bonaparte, *A Lily Among Thorns: The Mohawk Repatriation of Kateri Tekahkwi:tha* (Ahkwasáhsne Mohawk Territory: The Wampum Chronicles, 2009), 93

best self to God and others? The answer to such a question is in all probability less than clear-cut, for in some cases, extreme acts of flagellation may in fact be helpful to relationships, while in others cases, they would result in harm to self and others. Unless one is given permission and encouragement to ask this sort of question in light of the importance of self-compassion, such critical conversation is improbable.

The mandate to show compassion for others first is so powerful in the Christian imagination that even if a Christian believer wants to build a home inside, and ultimately practice a more balanced spirituality that values compassion for self and others, they still may feel uncomfortable and bristle even. The aforementioned Christian stories create a “taboo . . . something we think of as forbidden, profane, or dangerous. . . [associated with] excess.”<sup>5</sup> Taboos work by keeping individuals in line with the norms of the day. Susan Wendell, a scholar in the field of disability studies, integrates insights from philosopher Michel Foucault and feminist Sandra Lee Barsky, in order to speak about disciplines of normality. These disciplines are actions and attitudes which define an individual as normal and thereby loveable. Within disability studies, the disciplines of normality that construct an individual as normal—the “preconditions of participation in every aspect of social life . . . not only enforced by others but internalized” are related to body appearance (size, shape, and posture), as well as to being able to control one’s body (ways of toileting, eating, and moving independently). Applying the concept of discipline of normality to theological perspectives on compassion, one could say that stories in the Christian imagination about sacrifice and suffering for others are “preconditions” for being considered holy, “enforced by others” and “internalized,” and arbiters of “social acceptability” as well as “self-respect.”<sup>6</sup> It follows that individuals who show kindness, patience, and understanding toward self are deemed less holy, less acceptable, and in some cases, worthy of guilt and shame.

In her work, *Step Out of Your Story*, psychotherapist Kim Schneiderman explores the powerful connection between storytelling and identity: “[T]elling our story is a fundamental way that we come to know ourselves and make meaning in our lives . . . [and] how we ‘read,’ or rather interpret, our story affects how we feel about ourselves, which can influence how our lives unfold.”<sup>7</sup> Since many of the stories in the Christian imagination relegate self-compassion to the background in order to favor stories that normalize putting others first, to move ahead with an *antennae in* anthropology one might pinpoint openings in the Christian traditions for incorporating self-compassion into everyday life.

### **Seeds of Self-Compassion in Christianity**

While other-oriented compassion is a dominant theme in Christianity, there surely are openings or seeds for cultivating self-kindness, self-patience, and especially self-understanding in the tradition. To begin, one might turn to the New Testament, and in particular, the stories where Jesus takes time out from his ministry to pray and find peace. For example, in the Markan gospel, Jesus is portrayed as leaving his group during a busy time of ministry to find a “deserted place” to “pray” [Mark 1:35 (NRSV)]. Later in the gospel of Mark, Jesus is shown to have encouraged his

---

<sup>5</sup> Bud Harris, *Sacred Selfishness: A Guide to Living a Life of Substance* (Asheville: NC: Daphne Publications, 2002), 273.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 88.

<sup>7</sup> Kim Schneiderman, *Step Out of Your Story: Writing Exercises to Reframe and Transform Your Life* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2015), 2.

disciples to take a break and rest. After the death of John the Baptist, Jesus “said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves” [Mark 6:31–32 (NRSV)]. These passages show the importance of being kind and patient with oneself. Conceivably, there was tremendous pressure on Jesus and his disciples to minister to others without respite. However, without enough space and time to recharge their batteries, they could not possibly have kept on serving others.

Also, one might turn to the Mary and Martha story in the gospel of Luke, to find seeds of self-compassion in the form of self-understanding. This story emphasizes that learning about Jesus’s message is indispensable to salvation, even if that learning puts other responsibilities on hold for a while.

He entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” [Luke 10:38–42 (NRSV)].

Here Jesus is portrayed as advocating for the individual who cares for herself, who takes time for herself, and who develops herself. This is a difficult passage to digest because, in many ways, the reader is empathic to Martha’s complaint regarding her having to do all the housework. In all honesty, I find myself wishing Jesus rebuked Mary instead, for taking care of and prioritizing herself. In that visceral reaction, I stumble over my own internalization of gender roles, in which women are normed to be caretakers. I have to remind myself that women are not naturally caring, and instruct myself that Mary, Martha, and countless others would fare better with less judgment and more compassion from themselves as well as from others.

In addition to scripture, there are numerous accounts of saints, mystics, and prophets who experience *antennae in* contemplative periods, glorified with prayer, meditation, and solitude. St. Antony of the Desert achieves spiritual perfection battling demons in the desert.<sup>8</sup> St. Theresa of Avila theologizes about the lived experience of an *Interior Castle*.<sup>9</sup> In these stories, and in countless others, self-understanding through contemplation functions as a sign of one’s holiness. As a result, beside asceticism and social justice, contemplation occupies an esteemed place in the Catholic Christian imagination. In many ways, like the way rest and relaxation functioned for Jesus and his disciples, for some of these *antennae in* spiritual role models, their contemplative life supported their service activities. Taking time for oneself through prayer and reflection created the energy to work on behalf of others. This is certainly the case with St. Teresa of Avila, and is also evident in the life and work of St. Ignatius of Loyola, whose Spiritual Exercises have become the basis for

<sup>8</sup> See St. Athanasius, *St. Antony of the Desert*, trans. Dom J.B. McLaughlin, O.S.B. (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> See St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle* or *The Mansions*, trans. The Benedictines of Stanbrook, Revised with *Notes* and an *Introduction* by the Very Rev, Fr. Benedict Zimmerman, O.C.D. (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2011).

grounding social justice activity in prayer and contemplation.<sup>10</sup> For these thinkers and many others, turning one's antennae in has the capacity to strengthen one's capacity to be other-oriented.

It is worth questioning whether contemplative spiritualities are regarded as virtuous and worthy of imitation only to the extent that they are directed outward for the ultimate benefit of God and others. Some might say that anything less than a divine-oriented focus, runs the risk of being deemed self-serving, or even worse, a display of navel-gazing, "an end in itself . . . when we become preoccupied with our own emotions, thoughts, and internal world at the expense of relating to others."<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the *antennae in* anthropology proposed here accentuates the best sense of self-discovery: it "is about self-awareness; we explore our thoughts, feelings, preferences, talents, and vulnerabilities so that we might see ourselves as others do and improve our ability to relate with others and succeed in the world."<sup>12</sup>

### **Contemporary Theological Resources for an *Antennae In* Way of Life**

Beyond scripture and contemplation, there are contemporary theologies that support self-compassion and an *antennae in* way of living. Returning to the field of Catholic spirituality, the work of Constance FitzGerald figures prominently here as she is a contemporary contemplative who points to the urgency for a "spirituality for our . . . in-between time."<sup>13</sup> According to FitzGerald, grave issues of the day, which would in all likelihood include, global conflict, political polarization, economic and racial injustice, and environmental degradation, result in "impasse" in which an individual "must find a way to identify, face, live with, and express" the suffering and precarity of today's world.<sup>14</sup> With its commitment to put spirituality in conversation with the pressures of the day, FitzGerald's work bolsters an *antennae in* approach, in which one must turn inward in order to not only survive, but also to flourish.

In terms of theological method, one modern thinker that comes to mind when thinking about an anthropology connected to self-compassion and most specifically with self-understanding is the work of Bernard Lonergan. His work on authentic subjectivity uplifts a sense of personhood that develops in being attentive to one's experience, intelligent about one's understanding, reasonable about one's judgements, and responsible about one's decisions, and in many ways echoes Buddhist thought on maintaining awareness or *payu*, which is Tibetan for an "awareness" or "attentiveness."<sup>15</sup> Lonergan's slow and thorough process for being engaged with oneself and the world allows one to discover problems in a non-judgmental way, and to make any necessary corrections about one's self-understanding as one moves forward.

---

<sup>10</sup> See St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius or Manresa* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Schneiderman, *Step Out of Your Story*, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Schneiderman, *Step Out of Your Story*, 38.

<sup>13</sup> Constance FitzGerald OCD, "Transformation in Wisdom: The Subversive Character and Educative Power of Sophia in Contemplation," in *Desire, Darkness, and Hope: Theology in a Time of Impasse, Engaging the Thought of Constance FitzGerald, OCD*, ed. Laurie Cassidy and M. Shawn Copeland (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), 231.

<sup>14</sup> FitzGerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," in *Desire, Darkness, and Hope*, 80.

<sup>15</sup> See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971). For more on awareness, see Pema Chödrön, *Welcoming the Unwelcome: Wholehearted Living in a Brokenhearted World*, ed. Joseph Waxman (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2019), 15.

Openness to change is at the heart of Christian discipleship, as *The Lord's Prayer* upholds the importance of asking for forgiveness and forgiving others: *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*. What Lonergan's theology underscores is that forgiveness toward oneself is also possible. When we make discoveries about ourselves that do not correspond with the person we wish to be, we have the graced nature to forgive ourselves if necessary and change. This insight has the potential to be quite liberating. For if one feels like they have to be certain about themselves, others, God, or the future, then they have very few options in a turbulent world. However, if there is the acceptance that all is provisional, there is less pressure to get things perfect, greatly reducing feelings of shame and self-loathing that thwart healthy connections with others. Importantly, for Lonergan, one's self-understanding and hence their relationship to the world can be altered with new information as well as by overcoming what he calls biases.

In Lonergan's discussion of individual bias, for example, there is a delicate balance between paying attention to the experience of others and paying attention to oneself. According to Lonergan, individual bias creeps in when one is so focused on oneself and when "others [are imagined] to be inferior and unworthy of his or her concern."<sup>16</sup> An *antennae in* way of being resists this impulsive and desperate egoism, by paying attention to one's feelings, thoughts, and stories in relation to another. So, as an *antennae in* anthropology refuses to apologize about being kind, patient, and understanding of oneself, it at the same time acknowledges the danger of a self-serving posture. Lonergan leans on Aristotle—particularly, his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 9, Chapter 8—in order to strike a balance between being self-oriented and being other oriented. Lonergan writes: "In his *Ethics* Aristotle asked whether a good friend loved himself. The answer was that while true friendship excluded self-love in a popular sense, nonetheless it demanded self-love in a higher sense . . . [and so] taking care of oneself and contributing to the well-being of others have their legitimate place and necessary function."<sup>17</sup>

Robert Doran, a Lonergan scholar who integrates depth psychology into this theology, pushes Lonergan's largely intellectual project about self-understanding to the affective realm.<sup>18</sup> While Lonergan is known for his analysis of intellectual, moral, and religious conversion, Doran asserts another form of conversion, namely psychic conversion, which "emerges into consciousness in the form of dreams, images, and affects . . . permeate[s] intentional operations

---

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Flanagan, S.J., *Quest for Self-Knowledge: An Essay in Lonergan's Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 82.

<sup>17</sup> Mark D. Morelli and Elizabeth A. Morelli, eds., *The Lonergan Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 129. In addition to individual bias, for Lonergan, dramatic bias also impedes healthy living, loving, and hoping—it clutters the home within oneself. Lonergan describes dramatic bias in terms of scotosis, "an unconscious process" which leads to a "blind spot" or "scotoma" (*The Lonergan Reader*, 116). These blind spots are caused by psychological factors—feelings, events, dreams, memories, patterns, and situations. Unconscious happenings, such as repression may result in censorship in which one stops being inquisitive and asking relevant questions, squandering the potential for insight and understanding. If insights lead to "correction and revision," for Lonergan, then dramatic bias unconsciously prevents that change (*The Lonergan Reader*, 118). In order to overcome dramatic bias, one is encouraged to attend to these blind spots before they permanently erode the ability to be free and diminish the quality of one's relationships with others. This process seems to intersect with Buddhist thought on practicing mindfulness.

<sup>18</sup> See Robert M. Doran, *Subject and Psyche* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994).

in the form of feelings” impacting “interpersonal relations.”<sup>19</sup> Self-kindness, self-patience, and self-understanding are at the heart of psychic conversion. Interestingly, Doran’s work is influenced by Eugene Gendlin, whose therapeutic practice of “focusing” changed the landscape of psychotherapy.<sup>20</sup> For Gendlin, the body holds “wisdom”; and human beings can tap into that wisdom by focusing inward thereby creating a bodily awareness. It is thought that by focusing on sensations in the body: “you come to understand how you are living a situation, a relationship, a problem or a challenge. As you search to give words for what you feel, there is often a wonderful result . . . new possibilities emerge from what had been ‘stuck’ places.”<sup>21</sup> Gendlin asserts that part of the process of focusing is being friendly and sympathetic when we turn inward, instead of as one usually might look at oneself, “like a sadistic prison guard.”<sup>22</sup> In many ways, these theological, philosophical, and psychological resources together provide scaffolding for the self-understanding aspect of self-compassion.

Probably more than anyone else, womanist theologians have created a space for embracing self-compassion in Christian spirituality. The seminal work of individuals like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and of course, Alice Walker, whose statement that a womanist “Loves herself. Regardless,” inspired many Christian theologians to deconstruct the ways that black women are socialized to be other-oriented at the expense of themselves.<sup>23</sup> For example, there is the groundbreaking work of womanist theologian, Delores Williams, specifically her book, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, in which she problematizes the story of the slave woman Hagar in the book of Genesis. Williams argues that throughout history black women have been abused much like that of Hagar, and hence, must reject the stories that replicate exploitative caregiving and surrogacy, while favoring the ones in which women of color are kind, patient, and understanding of themselves.<sup>24</sup>

There are numerous other womanist contributions to the conversation. Kendra Hotz, in a compelling article entitled “‘I Can Do For Me’: Race, Health, and the Rhetoric of Self-Love and Suffering,” details the lives of black women who have had to recondition themselves to love themselves enough to care for themselves. Hotz describes the situation of a woman named Georgia, who was socialized from a young age to be a caregiver, and whose Christian upbringing normalized other-oriented being at the expense of herself:

[Georgia] reports simply “I was everybody’s caregiver” . . . Growing up, she had been taught that “loving yourself was vain,” . . . Her family, her church, her society provided a framework about what it meant to be a woman, to be a black woman, to be a mother, a spouse, a faithful Christian and a caregiver. Her body had a story and that story did not include loving and caring for her, except as a

---

<sup>19</sup> Robert M. Doran, “Two Ways of Being Conscious: The Notion of Psychic Conversion,” *Method: Journal of Loneran Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 1–17 at 7.

<sup>20</sup> See Eugene T. Gendlin, *Focusing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> For more on the therapeutic technique of focusing, see <https://focusing.org/felt-sense/learning-focusing>.

<sup>22</sup> Gendlin, *Focusing*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, 1983), xii. See also Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Lessons and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, 2007) and bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 108.

means to better care for others . . . “I had to learn,” Georgia explains, that “a loving heart doesn’t mean a doormat.”<sup>25</sup>

Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, a womanist social scientist, argues that the norms to care for others run so deep for women of color because of a prevalent stereotype that black women are strong.<sup>26</sup> For Beauboeuf-Lafontant, to call a black woman strong is neither a compliment nor helpful. On the contrary, it is oppressive and restricts one’s agency: “the construct of strength is rooted in a set of problematic assumptions: that strong black women are the stark and deviant opposites of weak and appropriately feminine white women, that strength is a natural quality of black women and a litmus test of their womanhood, and that being strong accurately characterizes black women’s motivations and behaviors.”<sup>27</sup> Because black women are idealized as “strong,” according to Beauboeuf-Lafontant, then they are thought to be most capable of caring for others. This leads to other potentially destructive assumptions. For example, since it is easier for them than for others to do the caregiving, then they should not complain about it. If they do complain, they risk being viewed by themselves and others as selfish. The shame in admitting feeling used and/or not up to the task of caring leads to silence and physical and mental distress, and according to Beauboeuf-Lafontant, contributes to the proliferation of depression in black communities.<sup>28</sup> In the face of this oppressive “construct of strong,” womanist theologian and preacher, Melva L. Sampson in her widely popular sermon on Ester and Queen Vashti entitled, “Hell No!”, explains how black women in particular have to resist saying yes to those in power and those in their community that attempt to use them up. For Sampson, saying Hell No! has the power to transform one from “the sin of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation to the virtues of self-acceptance and self-development.”<sup>29</sup> For these womanist thinkers, self-care, self-love, and self-compassion are acts of political resistance and building blocks toward creating change on the structural level.

---

<sup>25</sup> Kendra Hotz, “I Can Do For Me’: Race, Health, and the Rhetoric of Self-Love and Suffering,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, No. 3/4 (2015): 137.

<sup>26</sup> Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “You Have to Show Strength’: An Exploration of Gender, Race, and Depression,” *Gender and Society* Vol. 21, No. 1 (Feb., 2007): 28–51. See also Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “You Have to Show Strength’: An Exploration of Gender, Race, and Depression,” 31.

<sup>28</sup> Concerns about depression and mental health have given way to more openings in Christianity to the value of self-compassion as some Christian scholars are uncovering how theological rhetoric works to deny individuals suffering from depression a compassionate pastoral response. In *Dust in the Blood: A Theology of Life with Depression*, Jessica Coblenz explores how some Christian scholars frame hopelessness and the despair of depression as a sin—“a disordered relationship with God” and as a “denial of the resurrection.” See Jessica Coblenz, *Dust in the Blood: A Theology of Life with Depression* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022), 58. See also Monica Coleman’s powerful memoir, *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman’s Journey with Depression and Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 181—wherein she critiques Christian leaders who think of depression as the work of the devil: “Is this what ministers tell people? Is this what they tell people like me who finally muster up the courage to share? That it’s our fault? That the devil is making us sad? That taking blame onto ourselves or doing some kind of exorcism will heal us!” By writing about their personal struggles with depression and mental illness, these theologians model encouraging self-compassion in the face of life’s challenges.

<sup>29</sup> Melva L. Sampson, “Hell No!” in *Those Preaching Women: A Multicultural Collection*, eds. Ella Pearson Mitchell and Valerie Bridgeman Davis, foreword by Katie G. Cannon (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2008), 28.



## **Buddhist Wisdom on Self-Compassion**

Surveying scripture, the work of contemplatives, and contemporary theology reveals that the seeds for an *antennae in* anthropology are dormant in the Christian tradition, and perhaps might be grown with a richer dialogue with Buddhism. This doesn't make for a watered down Christianity—but rather, for a way of being that attempts to meet the challenging signs of our times. Buddhists connect compassion for others and compassion for self without apology in myriad ways. One way of practicing self-compassion from a Buddhist perspective is by becoming one's own best friend. This may sound corny, and not all that theological, but actually is profoundly challenging and if mastered, a key to life-affirming relationships with all others. Make friends with yourself so you have enough to give in your relationships with others. Like one would do in their most intimate of friendships, one practices self-compassion by paying attention to one's feelings, needs, and stories in a non-judgmental way, not with shame or regret—but with acceptance of what is, and with an understanding of why it is.

Being a friend to oneself begins with embracing a fundamental teaching in philosophical Buddhism—namely, that there is no self. This may seem contradictory, for how can one be a friend to oneself if there is no self? For Buddhists, it is more the case that there is no fixed identity; individuals are really a collection of personality traits—referred to as aggregates—that change with time and environment. So when one says that in Buddhism there is no self, what this means is that “the self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of ‘me’ and ‘mine’, selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism . . . is the source of all troubles.”<sup>30</sup> This doctrine emerges from Buddha's first sermon to his colleagues, *The Four Noble Truths*, where he sketches the root cause of suffering which is largely craving an impermanent sense of self. He speaks of the Noble Eightfold Path, which are practices that help alleviate suffering and cultivate wisdom and compassion. So while self-compassion does not really fit Buddhist language, in Buddhism being kind and compassionate to oneself sets the stage for being kind and compassionate to others. When one focuses on their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and experience in the moment, in a welcoming and non-judgmental way, like one would a friend, they open the door for life-giving relationships with others.

It is noteworthy that in Mahayana Buddhism, there is an emphasis on the Bodhisattva, the one who forgoes nirvana in order to save all beings. The Bodhisattva has the wisdom to know that one does not have a self that needs to be liberated and the compassion to realize that others suffer because they do not know there is no self. The Bodhisattva is “one on the path to perfect Buddhahood, whose task is to compassionately help beings while maturing his or her own wisdom. In his wisdom, he knows that there are no ‘beings’, just fluxes of empty ‘*dharmas*’, but his ‘skillful means’ enables him to reconcile his wisdom with his compassion.”<sup>31</sup> Here, in the discussion of the Bodhisattva, is a middle ground for thinking of the dynamic interplay between loving self and loving others for Christian models of human existence. This is the missing piece of the Golden Rule. To treat others like oneself rests on the premise that one treats oneself with

---

<sup>30</sup> Wapola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, revised and expanded edition with texts from *Suttas* and *Dhammapada* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 51.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 121.

kindness and compassion. Only in becoming a friend to one's impermanent ever-changing self can one become a friend to others. An important Buddhist nun of our time, Pema Chödrön, states this simply: "Our journey of making friends with ourselves is not a selfish thing. We're not trying to get all the goodies for ourselves. It's a process of developing loving-kindness and a true understanding for other people as well."<sup>32</sup>

### Being Present in the Middle

Making friends with oneself begins by paying attention to what one is experiencing without judgement. Buddhists refer to this as being mindful of the present. This is the essence of an *antennae in* anthropology because it accepts oneself where they already live, namely in the middle—in the middle of life, in the middle of relationships, in the middle of personal triumphs, in the middle of failures, in the middle of grief, in the middle of love, and so on. "The middle" serves as a placeholder for being present in the here and now—in all its messiness and precarity. The middle is not equidistant between the beginning and the end. Moreover, the middle neither testifies to an idyllic origin nor predicts a fairytale finish. It is simply, here and now. In the middle, one is compelled to shed any preconceptions of what the past was and what the end will be. Nhat Hanh asks readers to think about how obsessing about the past is like being imprisoned and how pursuing a certain future is like chasing a ghost. For Nhat Hahn, life is "found only in the present."<sup>33</sup> Incorporating this notion into Christian anthropology, one might befriend oneself in the present by paying attention to their feelings, needs and stories and move with God and others from there. Being present in the middle, Christians might work on practicing *payu*, which again is an "awareness" or "attentiveness," so, in the words of Chödrön, they might become "more intelligent" about how they live.<sup>34</sup>

In *Time for Hope: Practices for Living in Today's World*, Christian theologian Flora Keshgegian brings together feminist, ecological, Latina/o, and Buddhist voices to underscore a sense of time that is not "neatly linear."<sup>35</sup> For Keshgegian, the present is sacred, in her words, "hallow."<sup>36</sup> We need to honor the hallow middle by witnessing to it in all its complexity. We need to pay attention to what is, instead of what we wish it to be. From that middle, we are transformed to "imagine the future," which for Keshgegian is "open-ended, in time that is undetermined and ongoing . . . [in which] there is no predetermined closure or resolution."<sup>37</sup> In attesting to the changing state of middleness, one will experience a myriad of feelings, needs, and stories, some of which unfold as positive and others as negative, and at times, multiple, contradicting feelings, needs, and stories will be present at once. Some aspects of this discussion might be unsettling. In the words of Keshgegian, "To suggest letting go of the end, of a *telos*, in any fixed sense, may seem blasphemous."<sup>38</sup> Christians are taught that hope extends beyond everyday life into the transcendent realm—encouraged to hope for God's mercy, for eternal salvation, and for

---

<sup>32</sup> Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Loving Kindness* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1991), 6.

<sup>33</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Our Appointment with Life: Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2010), 3–4, 47–48.

<sup>34</sup> Chödrön, *Welcoming the Unwelcome*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope: Practices for Living in Today's World* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 145.

<sup>36</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 151.

<sup>37</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 165.

<sup>38</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 165.

communion with God and all the saints. These beliefs are helpful to some. However, tools are necessary for mustering hope in the here and now. Too many of us feel stuck today and are plainly languishing. A theological account of being human that is going to be most helpful ought to consider giving up on an anticipated salvation history plotline, and just embrace the messy middle. As Keshgegian puts it, the “story line is not set; the outcome is not known. The characters may change, as may the plot.”<sup>39</sup> In the middle, one is called to be kind, patient, and understanding of oneself.

### **Importance of Nourishing Oneself**

Much of what has been said of self-compassion here relates to being one’s own friend and just plainly nourishing oneself in the present through self-patience, kindness, and understanding. Nourishing oneself overflows onto others. Again, in Buddhism this is because the separation between self and other is an illusion. One way to conceptualize this teaching is by accepting that “there is not a stable ‘self’ but rather, that which one is constantly shifting in an environment that is perpetually changing.”<sup>40</sup> These “empty fluxes” struggle with a thirst for self, a craving which gives way to suffering. Becoming awake means accepting that all selves are impermanent, that everything is changing, ephemeral, and interconnected. Accepting that unlocks the potential for liberation and an end to suffering. So, when one is happy, they have the potential to buoy the spirits of those around them. When one is suffering, they have the potential to negatively impact others in their midst. Being compassionate toward oneself then inevitably has a positive effect on others. This is an important lesson for Christians, especially as they are working so hard to show compassion for others.

Nhat Hanh, in his book *Being Peace*, makes the link between attention to self and attention to others quite simple as he recalls a poignant story from the Pali Canon. In this narrative, there is father-daughter circus act where the father places a long bamboo stick on his forehead and his daughter climbs up and balances herself on it. Nhat Hanh explains that the father tells his daughter that they should take care of each other so they can continue to make a living. The daughter wisely responds otherwise:

Each one of us has to take care of himself or herself, so that we can continue to earn our living. Because during the performance, you take care of yourself only. You stay very stable, very alert. That will help me. And if, when I climb, I take care of myself, I climb very carefully, I do not let anything happen to me. That is the way you should say it, Father. You take good care of yourself, and I take good care of myself. In that way we can continue to earn our living.<sup>41</sup>

One concrete way to care and show compassion for oneself is by saying “no” to individuals, groups, and institutions that ask for more than one can or should give. This was already mentioned in regard to Sampson’s “Hell No!” sermon and is also emphasized in Buddhist writings. Again the work of Nhat Hanh figures prominently, this time in his book, *How to Love*:

---

<sup>39</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 176.

<sup>40</sup> Rima Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation* (New York: NYU Press, 2022), 40.

<sup>41</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*, introduction by Jack Kornfield (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press; 2nd edition (September 10, 2005), 43.

Loving someone doesn't mean saying "yes" to whatever the other person wants. The basis of loving someone else is to know yourself and to know what you need. I know a woman who suffered very much because she couldn't say "no." From the time she was young, whenever a man asked her for something, she felt she had to say "yes" even when she didn't want to. It's important that loving another person doesn't take priority over listening to yourself and knowing what you need.<sup>42</sup>

By creating a space to be present in everyday life and by being kind, patient, and understanding of oneself, even if that means having to say *no* to another, Christians might become energized and even resilient in the face of stressful times.

In moving toward a way of being that values self-compassion—an *antennae in* anthropology, one takes on the role of their own mother so to speak. This insight resonates with Buddhist reflections on universal love<sup>43</sup>, emerges in Lorde's famous work, *Sister Outsider*, and resurfaces in contemporary Buddhist scholarship. For Lorde, "Mothering ourselves means learning to love what we have given birth to by giving definition to, learning how to be both kind and demanding in the teeth of failure as well as in the face of success, and not misnaming either."<sup>44</sup> Rima Vesely-Flad, in her important work, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation*, highlights Lorde's use of mothering in relationship to building connections among black women. Vesely-Flad writes: The nurturing that Lorde identifies must first be directed toward oneself, for in the cultivation of self-compassion one develops a more expansive heart that allows one to see the suffering in Black Sisters."<sup>45</sup> Like one would mother another, one mothers oneself—with kindness, patience, and understanding. Two decades earlier, Angel Kyodo Williams, in *being black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*, wrote about the importance of nurturing oneself, claiming it is "common sense" and a "necessary place to start practicing good."<sup>46</sup>

It is noteworthy that both Kyodo Williams and Vesely-Flad explore the importance of Buddhist teachings in helping black communities heal from the traumatic effects of systemic racism. Vesely-Flad explains: "Buddhist teachings and practices liberate Black people from psychological trauma."<sup>47</sup> Since a good bit of this discussion on self-compassion flows out of a particular context of experience and oppression, there is a danger of appropriating the tenets of these critical race thinkers without pause. As with my engagement of the work of womanist thinkers, I am not attempting to co-opt these approaches with a blind spot to that reality. My efforts are far more modest, namely to suggest that Christians who feel stuck by the precarity of the day may find inspiration in the trailblazing efforts of scholars of color from Christian and Buddhist perspectives on the importance of self-compassion. While some individuals and groups experience the pressure to other-oriented to a greater degree than others, that does not undermine the possibility that self-compassion might prove to be beneficial to many people and

---

<sup>42</sup> Nhat Hanh, *How to Love*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 97.

<sup>44</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 173.

<sup>45</sup> Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, 215.

<sup>46</sup> Angel Kyodo Williams, *being black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2000), 94.

<sup>47</sup> Vesely-Flad, *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition*, 1.

communities. Wherever one is in their life, self-compassion is one possible path to freedom and flourishing.

Ultimately, the simple wisdom that Buddhists offer Christians, and anyone really, is that self-compassion is connected inextricably to compassion for others. If everything is connected, then it goes without saying that when one is at peace, this positively impacts those around them. This is evident in much of Nhat Hanh's teaching on interbeing. Like with the father-daughter circus act, what happens to one impacts another. If one is burnt out, depleted, and languishing because of the current state of affairs, then it negatively impacts others. Much of this essay has been focused on developing practices of attention, patience, kindness, and understanding, as an antidote in a way to the other-oriented focus of many Christian threads. Even as the reader is asked to consider the ways in which Buddhist thought on compassion might enrich Christian models of existence, there are differences between Buddhism and Christianity, and multiple forms of each, that ought not be glossed as one move's toward embracing an *antennae in anthropology*. For one, many of the seeds of self-compassion in the Christian traditions, particularly in relation to the Catholic contemplatives, situate self-understanding in relation to a personal God. It is as if self-understanding through prayer better prepares ones for relationships for God and others. In the Buddhist examples noted here, understanding is a way to liberation. There is no personal God to direct compassionate being; rather, dwelling in the present with an eye toward nurturing oneself connects one to others and energizes one for the community. Paul Knitter, renowned Catholic theologian and expert in Buddhist thought, frames this perfectly when he writes that most Buddhists "are non-theists because the image of God as a supreme, transcendent Person who creates the world out of nothing just doesn't fit what Buddha discovered under the Bodhi tree."<sup>48</sup>

Another significant difference between religious worldviews that has been noted previously is related to claims about selfhood. Clinging to a sense of a fixed self only leads to suffering according to Buddhism, whereas fundamental Christian teachings point to the notion of a soul that stays with one from the beginning of life unto the afterlife. This inextricably is connected to a third difference between Christian and Buddhist teachings, again already mentioned, namely that of teleology. Unlike in that of the many Christian anthropologies which are based in a hope for humans to live in the here and now toward a salvific end in which one is in communion with God, for most Buddhists, the mentality is "rather than hope for the future, live in the moment." However, it also should be noted that, again from Knitter's perspective, "although Buddhists don't hold to a final end to the world, they do share with Christians the conviction that this world cannot only be different (because of impermanence), but it can also be transformed into a world where there is greater wisdom and greater compassion."<sup>49</sup>

Certainly, these three differences, and probably more, complicate incorporating Buddhist wisdom into Christian anthropology. Nevertheless, they are not necessarily deal-breakers, meaning they do not undermine putting various strands of Buddhism and Christianity into fruitful dialogue. It is my hope, that Christians might acknowledge these divergent views at the same time as they strive to incorporate the practices of self-patience, self-kindness, and self-understanding in their everyday lives, With practice, being a friend and mother to oneself in the

---

<sup>48</sup> Paul Knitter and Roger Haight, *Jesus and Buddha: Friends in Conversation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 78.

<sup>49</sup> Knitter and Haight, *Jesus and Buddha*, 108.

spirit of Buddhism wisdom, at the very most has the potential to remake our being. At the very least (which is still a lot), it clears a space for us to imagine ourselves worthy of much, resilient in the face of uncertainty, and hope for the things still unknown.



*Michele Saracino is professor of religious studies at Manhattan College in Riverdale, New York. She enjoys teaching and research. Her books include Christian Anthropology: An Introduction to the Human Person (Paulist Press, 2015), a textbook that emphasizes the sacred relationship between human and non-human animals; and Being about Borders: A Christian Anthropology of Difference (Liturgical Press, 2011), for which she won the 1st Place Book Award in Theology in 2012 from the Association of Catholic Publishers. Additionally, she has coedited Enfleshing Theology (Lexington Books: 2018), which is a collection of essays on the distinguished Catholic theologian, M. Shawn Copeland. She has also published essays on a variety of topics, among them a recent article about her passion for swimming.*

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)* are the authors' own and do not reflect or represent those of the *JIRS* staff, the *JIRS* Board of Advisors, or *JIRS* publishing partners.