

# Mimesis, Violence, and Socially Engaged Buddhism: Overture to a Dialogue

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**R**ené Girard's analysis of desire, mimetic rivalry, and the surrogate victim mechanism seeks to transform human consciousness in order to overcome seemingly intractable patterns of rivalry and violence. In this project the Buddhist tradition, with its long commitment to nonviolence, its age-old suspicion of ordinary views of the self, and its ancient experience of meditation as a transformative practice, exerts a claim to attention. The Buddhist tradition shares many of Girard's concerns: It denies the reality of an autonomous, independent self and calls attention to the interdependence of all realities. It challenges its followers to become conscious of the sources of their own feelings and thoughts, to accept responsibility for them, and to be liberated from violence. Like Girard, Buddhism rejects the notion that there can be "good violence" as well as bad. For Buddhists, awakening from the illusions of the autonomous self and freedom from violence are inseparable. The term, "Socially Engaged Buddhism," refers to a variety of Buddhist movements since the 1950s which seek to apply ancient Buddhist principles to contemporary social, economic, and political problems.

Powerful prejudices, however, threaten this conversation before it begins. Since the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer and Max Weber, Westerners have often seen Buddhism as a pessimistic religion, a world-negating tradition that encourages the individual to withdraw from the world and seek a solitary salvation. The belief in karma has often been

interpreted as fatalistic and inimical to social transformation. Buddhism, especially in the Mahayana traditions, has often accommodated to the dominant powers in society without exerting any effective social or political critique. Like every other major religious tradition, Buddhism has had an ambiguous history; and Westerners have often assumed prematurely that Buddhism has no history of social and political engagement whatsoever.

Girard himself, in conversation with Jean-Claude Dussault in 1981, viewed Buddhism as a withdrawal from action in the world. Girard commented:

Alors il me semble que la non-violence des religions orientales est la recherche d'une position hors de la violence, nirvana, etc., au prix de toute action. Mais cette recherche abandonne le monde en quelque sorte à lui-même. Alors il me semble que s'il fallait résumer d'un mot, ce serait un mot comme dégage-ment absolu par rapport à l'existence. ("Séminaire de recherche" 81) [It seems to me that the nonviolence of Eastern religions is the search for a position outside of violence, nirvana, etc., at the price of all action. But this search abandons the world in a way to itself. Now it seems to me that if it were necessary to sum it up in a formula, it would be a phrase such as absolute detachment in regard to existence.]

Later in the conversation, Girard expressed his own negative reaction: "Si vous voulez, je me sens profondément gréco-biblico-occidental face à ce renoncement nirvanesque total." (83) [If you please, I feel myself profoundly greco-biblical-occidental in contrast to this complete nirvanesque renunciation.] According to Girard's interpretation, Buddhism offers no constructive solution to the social problems of rivalry and violence, but only an individual escape through withdrawal.

Closely related to Girard's negative view of Buddhism is his interpretation of all non-biblical religions as channeling violence but as powerless to break the cycle of violence. He claims that only biblical revelation offers a basis for overcoming the violence of the surrogate victim mechanism: "To recognize Christ as God is to recognize him as the only being capable of rising above the violence that had, up to that point, absolutely transcended mankind. Violence is the controlling agent in every form of mythic or cultural structure, and Christ is the only agent who is capable of escaping from these structures and freeing us from their dominance" (1987,

219). Girard asserts that there is no common ground between the violence-ridden mythologies which dominate all other religions and the revelation of God in Christianity (1986, 166). Girard is almost Barthian in his exclusivistic claims for Christian revelation, viewing all other religions as products of human mimetic striving and only Christianity as the true revelation of God. This leaves little room for constructive interreligious dialogue with any other religious tradition.

One need not be a religious pluralist or a relativist to question the exclusivity of the claims Girard advances for Christian revelation. The biblical wisdom tradition acknowledged the presence of wisdom in other cultures outside of Israel (Perdue, 19-74; McKane, 1-208, 369-401; Levenson). At least since Justin Martyr in the second century, and repeatedly through the centuries, Christian theologians have acknowledged that the God incarnate in Jesus Christ is present in other traditions as well. Among others, Karl Rahner argued that God's will for the salvation of all humans necessarily implies the possibility of faith, and thus the offer of revelation beyond the borders of the Bible and the Christian tradition (11-6). Vatican II, citing this ancient tradition and influenced by Rahner, proclaimed that the Catholic Church "rejects nothing of what is true and holy" in other religions and encouraged Christians to seek out common truths and values to address the problems of the world ("Declaration" 739; see also Humbertclaude; Pontifical Council). There are clear analogies to this approach to other religions in twentieth-century Protestant and Jewish thought (see Tillich, Kasimow and Sherwin). Recently, nonviolence has been at the center of much interreligious dialogue (Beverluis, 124-252).

It would be misleading to pretend that Buddhism and Girard are "saying the same thing." There are profound differences between Buddhist and Christian perspectives on the universe and human existence. Girard shares the Christian belief that the universe is a creation of God, and this structures all his religious language about God and humans, including the naming of sin, the process of revelation and salvation, and the final goal of existence. This belief contrasts sharply with the Buddhist sense of the universe as dependently co-arising. Buddhists stress the radical interdependence of all realities without putting faith in a transcendent divine source or ground. While the differences between the traditions are far-reaching, there are nonetheless important similarities in the dynamics of transformation of life in the two traditions that offer a foundation for dialogue (Lefebure 1989, 1993).

### The social dimension of early Buddhism

Socially Engaged Buddhism finds its roots in the example and teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha himself. The early accounts of the message of Shakyamuni Buddha in the Pali scriptures contain the principles for a new society freed from the illusions of separate, individual existence and from the resulting struggles for domination and power (see Rahula; Nakamura; Nagao 1987; Nhat Hanh 1991; Drummond). While these concrete social principles have long been familiar to Theravada Buddhists, they have not always been as prominent in Mahayana Buddhism, and they have often been neglected in the West. With the teaching of no-self or no-ego, the Buddha rejected the underlying assumptions of the caste system and laid the basis for the liberation of women and men alike.<sup>1</sup> He denied that caste membership was based upon birth and asserted that all four castes are equally pure (de Bary 49-51). He also established a new form of monastic community that brought together people from different castes on an equal footing, and he may have been the first person in history to organize a cenobitic community for women. Buddhist monks begged food from persons of all castes, and thus the begging bowl became a symbol of the interdependence of all people in society.

From the beginning, Buddhism saw the reordering of human consciousness as inextricably linked to reordering society; and the Buddha's teachings include questions of social ethics, right livelihood, economic justice, and the responsibilities of the king (Ling, 149-80; Rahula, 76-89). In the Sigala Sutta, one of the best-known of the Pali scriptures in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, the Buddha responds to the questions of a young householder and sets forth the duties of lay practitioners. The basic principle for human relations is the Middle Way, which avoids excess and envy and stresses mutual responsibility (see Sizemore and Swearer). For its part, the Buddhist Sangha, the monastic community, was to provide a model for the development of a new organization of the social world. Far from abandoning the world to itself, the Sangha had special responsibilities to the king and to lay Buddhists (see Henry and Swearer).

The early Buddhist tradition spoke of the two wheels: the socio-spiritual wheel (*dhamma-cakka*) and the socio-political wheel (*anacakkd*). Where the Buddha was the supreme realization of socio-spiritual authority, the just universal monarch was to be the ruler in the secular socio-political

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the original context of the doctrine of no-self, see Steven Collins.

sphere. The king was to be the agent through which the eternal, universal Dharma (moral law of the universe) was made effective, and the Buddha set forth ten duties of a king, beginning with generosity, even to the point of giving his life for his people (*Jataka* 1:260, 399; 2:400; 3:274, 320; 5:119, 378; see Rahula 84-6, and Cowell). Other responsibilities included nonviolence, freedom from hatred, austerity in habits, and non-obstruction of the people's will. Where the earlier brahmanic tradition often attributed a divine or semi-divine status to the king, the Buddhist scriptures identify the first king as simply a human leader chosen by the people for the sake of the common good (de Bary 45).

Two kings of North Indian states, King Pasenadi of Koshala and King Bimbisara of Magadha, became life-long friends, supporters, and disciples of the Buddha. The Buddha served as an adviser and social and political theorist in contact with the problems of these two kingdoms, and he offered advice on how to apply the principle of righteousness to matters of policy. The later Buddhist Sangha inherited the responsibility of continuing this role. In the Kutadanta Sutta, a great king wants to offer sacrifice to insure his continued prosperity (Ling 175). His Buddhist chaplain advises him not to waste time and money on sacrifice but to spend the money to remove the economic causes of discontent. The Kutadanta Sutta set aside the practice of brahmanic sacrifice as ineffective, wasteful, and cruel, and reinterpreted the meaning of sacrifice in five forms: offering alms to holy persons, building dwelling places for monks, going to the Buddha as a guide with a trusting heart, taking the five Buddhist precepts, and finally, entering the Sangha as a monk.

The ideal of the righteous king found its most complete actualization in the conversion of the Emperor Ashoka in the third century B.C.E. from his earlier path of violent conquest to Buddhist ideals (Thurman 111-9; on the later legendary tradition, see Strong). Ashoka's principles included nonviolence to humans and animals alike, support for education, openness to a variety of religions, a state welfare policy that included hospices for the poor and sick, and encouragement of meditation practice as the most important way to advance in Dharma.

Socially Engaged Buddhists today stress that the Four Noble Truths are not a means of escape from this world but the diagnosis of a disease and the promise and prescription of a cure in this world. Both the disease and the cure embrace all aspects of life in this world.

### Girard and Buddhism

While the Christian assumptions and context of Girard's mimetic theory differ radically from either ancient or contemporary forms of Buddhism, there are, nonetheless, a number of similarities that suggest a conversation may be fruitful. Both Girard and the Buddhist tradition see our usual self-awareness as an illusion rooted in a false sense of autonomy and ensnared in a web of desire, and both note the irony that the allegedly autonomous self looks outside itself for security and fulfillment. Girard claims: "Every hero of a novel expects his being to be radically changed by the act of possession" (1966, 53). What the hero really seeks, however, is not the object itself but the very *being* of the mediator of desire, the model who becomes an obstacle when approached too closely. This double bind imprisons humans in a hell of their own making. The more adept learn to hide their desires in order to succeed in business or in love, but they do not escape from the cycle of deceit and desire. Feigned indifference promises but cannot deliver the freedom and peace of self-mastery (1966, 53).

The Buddha identified the illusion of an autonomous, permanent self as the fuel that feeds the fire of craving. By drawing a sharp line between ourselves and others, we create a world of clinging, craving, envy, injury, and revenge. According to the Buddhist scriptures, the illusion of a separate individual existence sets up the distinctions between "me" and "mine" and "you" and "yours." Once this distinction is made, desire is engaged; for "I" almost inevitably want to acquire what is "yours." The "I" does not exist as a separate being, however, and thus is always insecure and in need of reassurance. No amount of power, money, or prestige is ever enough. We seek permanence and security through possessing people and positions and things, but the very thought that we can possess things is itself an illusion based on the denial of impermanence. In the *Acts of the Buddha*, the Buddha teaches his charioteer the meaning of impermanence: "Since this world is in a state of continuous separating, therefore the feeling that 'this is mine' is improper with regard to a coming together that is transitory as a dream" (Ashvaghosha 6). In the *Dhammapada*, an early collection of sayings, the Buddha quotes a fool who seeks to reassure himself: "These are my sons. This is my wealth." The Buddha comments: "In this way the fool troubles himself. He is not even the owner of himself: how much less of his sons and of his wealth!" (62).

The Buddha's teaching of "no-self" (*anatta*) is neither a nihilistic denial of the value of human life nor a withdrawal from involvement with others. Rather, it denies the independence and autonomy of any thing and

stresses the interdependence and impermanence of all beings. Nothing is anything in itself, apart from its relationships. Later Buddhists often used the image of the jewel-net of Indra to convey this perspective (see Cook). The net has been hung across the universe, stretching out to infinity in every direction. At every crossing of the net, there hangs a sparkling jewel. Every jewel reflects every other jewel in the net. The net represents the cosmos, and the jewels in the net are all the beings in the cosmos. The image of the jewel-net suggests that we live in mutual interdependence, reflecting and being reflected by every other being in the universe.

To illustrate this teaching for a Chinese Empress, the Chinese Buddhist philosopher Fa-Tsang (643-712) set up a hall with mirrors on each wall, the ceiling, the corners, and the floor and an image of the Buddha and a burning torch in the center. The reflections of the Buddha's image in the mirrors illustrated the principle of interpenetration: "In each and every reflection of any mirror you will find all the reflections of all the other mirrors, together with the specific Buddha image in each . . . one in all and all in one" (Fa Tsang, *On the Golden Lion*; quoted in Chang 24). Girard's mimetic theory of the self stresses the universal role of models in constituting our desires (1966, 1-112). Our desires, which seem to be most personal and distinctive within us, actually reflect the models we see around us. Like Girard, Buddhists warn that denying our interdependence does not release us from the network of our relationships or make us self-sufficient; ignorance only imprisons us in unnecessary suffering. Girard, like the Buddha, stresses the interdependent nature of human identity on every level; and he identifies the role of models and the triangular nature of desire more explicitly than the Buddha. According to Girard, the illusion of autonomy hides from us the power of models in constituting our desires. For Girard, the path to freedom leads through self-knowledge, especially the acknowledgment of the role of models in constituting our desires. For Buddhists, insight into no-self accepts the interdependent, impermanent nature of our existence, abandons the grasping at "being" out there, frees us from the bondage of craving, and brings peace within and compassion for the sufferings of others.

Buddhists could well accept Girard's term "interdividual." Indeed, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, uses the term "inter-being" to interpret the ancient principle of dependent co-arising and describe the network of relationships that we are. According to Nhat Hanh, "we cannot just be. We can only inter-be" (1987, 61). Both Girard and the Buddhist tradition deny that there is an independent, autonomous self that

constitutes itself apart from the network of social relationships, and both propose a social theory of the self as a step toward liberation from violence. Both the Buddha and Girard warn that social and personal conditionings program us to react to stimuli in definite patterns, usually dominated by competition, envy, and rivalry, leading sooner or later to suffering, loss, and the desire to get even. As long as we take these patterns for granted, they operate behind our backs and imprison us unawares in destructive patterns of desire, envy, and revenge. Invidious distinctions set up the world of comparisons, from which so much suffering arises.

The world of rivalry and envy repeatedly turns to violence to resolve crises. Girard and Buddhists also agree that when we turn to violence to drive out violence, we do not truly resolve the underlying problem but only deepen our own entanglement in the cycle of violence. While there may appear to be short-term gains in the use of "good violence," in the long run we are perpetuating a vicious cycle. Girard rejects the age-old justifications of violence in light of the Gospels' vindication of the victims; the Buddha challenges his followers to renounce violence absolutely because it injures victor and victim alike: The first precept of the Buddha is not to take the life of any sentient being.

While the Buddha does not link violence with mimeticism and scapegoating as explicitly as does Girard, he does warn against thinking of human relationships in terms of rivalries to be won or injuries to be avenged, and he urges his followers not to imitate the example of those who wrong them, thereby breaking what Girard calls the cycle of mimetic violence. Shakyamuni Buddha quotes the words of an injured party: "He insulted me, he hurt me, he defeated me, he robbed me." But the Buddha himself warns: "Those who think such thoughts will not be free from hate" (*Dhammapada* 3). Shakyamuni Buddha then repeats the words of the injured man and adds: "Those who think not such thoughts will be free from hate. For hate is not conquered by hate: hate is conquered by love. This is a law eternal. Many do not know that we are here in this world to live in harmony. Those who know this do not fight against each other" (*Dhammapada* 4-6)

Girard's analysis of scapegoating challenges us to abandon the age-old quest for a guilty party whom we can blame and to accept responsibility for our own thoughts and actions. The search for victims is a flight from responsibility: "rather than blame themselves, people inevitably blame either society as a whole, which costs them nothing, or other people who seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable reasons" (1986, 14).

According to the Buddha, we ourselves bear responsibility for the world we inhabit, for the thoughts we harbor create the world we live in: "What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind" (*Dhammapadam*). Buddhist meditation trains the practitioner to become more and more conscious of one's thoughts, feelings, and actions arising from them, and to accept responsibility for one's own development: "It is you who must make the effort. The Great of the past only show the way" (*Dhammapadam* 276). For the Buddha, awareness of interdependence and acceptance of responsibility increase in direct proportion to each other. Avoiding responsibility and blaming others for our troubles only makes matters worse.

Girard sees nonbiblical religions as turning to epiphanies of the sacred to resolve social crises. The primitive sacred demands violence and justifies it, and this dynamic gives birth to rituals of sacrifice (1977, 1-67). The Buddha's response to the suffering caused by rivalry and violence was rigorously practical and nonviolent: The Four Noble Truths name the problem of the unsatisfactoriness of life, diagnose the origin of the problem in craving, promise a remedy, and prescribe a cure. The Buddha claimed no divine revelation to authorize his discovery. He neither sought nor proclaimed an epiphany of the sacred; and his prescription for liberation was not dependent on ritual, sacrifice, a relationship to the gods, or the expulsion of victims.

Shakyamuni Buddha claimed that his insight was the result of a disciplined search for a Middle Way between asceticism and hedonism. He invited his followers to follow the path that he recommended and to learn for themselves the wisdom of his teaching. To those who doubted his teaching, he did not argue but only pointed to the way. When competing teachers threatened to draw him into mimetic rivalry, he responded with the Noble Silence of the Buddha, a positionless position outside the bickering of rival factions. One cannot capture the wisdom of the Buddha in a theory or a doctrine, but one can demonstrate it in the transformed awareness and conduct of one's life.

Girard and the Buddhist tradition agree in rejecting violence, including sacrificial violence which claims to be necessary for the preservation of social or cosmic order. For Girard, "The illusion that there is a difference within the heart of violence is the key to the sacrificial way of thinking" (1987, 266). The Buddhist tradition does not name the scapegoat mechanism with the same level of precision as Girard, but the Buddha did reject

the brahmanic system of sacrifices, replacing it with the precept of nonviolence and the practice of generosity. In the Rig Veda, the creation of the world comes from the dismemberment of the cosmic giant, Purusha, the primeval male who is the victim in a Vedic sacrifice (10:90 [O'Flaherty 29-32]; on the context in early Brahmanic religion, see Basham 24-6). From his members the gods fashion the four social classes: the mouth became the Brahmin, the arms the warrior caste, the thighs the people, and the feet the servants. Purusha is both the victim that the gods sacrificed and also the divinity to whom the sacrifice was offered, both the subject and the object of the sacrifice. This hymn set the model for early Hindu rituals and visions of human society: cosmic and social order is born from a sacrifice, and humans must imitate this order to survive.

The Buddha's teaching on nonviolence and no-self undermined this entire worldview and the social order it supported. He denied that sacrificial violence is in any way good or necessary to maintain the order of the cosmos or society. For the Buddha, violence does not drive out violence; it only perpetuates violence. Thus the Buddhist promises not to take the life of any sentient being. Early Buddhism replaced the Brahmanic sacrificial rites with the social virtue *oidana*, giving or generosity.

More recent justifications of violence use rather different arguments than the Rig Veda, but they continue the age-old pattern of seeing violence as "necessary" and "justified" for the good of society. Contemporary Buddhists have drawn upon the assumptions of early Buddhism to describe social conflict, with results sometimes strikingly similar to Girard's analysis. Ken Jones, a British Buddhist, describes the social patterns of negative judgements in terms very close to Girard (90-104). Describing the process in which well-intentioned people can reach the point of justifying violence, Jones warns of the danger of weighted polarization in social conflicts: we distinguish people and issues into polarities which we then evaluate as good or evil, for us or against us. Even working for a just cause all too easily leads to antithetical social bonding, the shaping of a group's identity by defining itself in opposition to another group that is rejected. We begin to think: "Our" group is right and is fighting for a "good" cause, for "peace and justice." The "other" group is wrong and is fighting for "oppression and injustice." We invest our own sense of ourselves in the issue and the group, and we experience opponents as threats to our very selves. As tensions mount, individuals and groups often see themselves as forced to take stronger action against the threat posed by their polar opposite. Eventually, violence presents itself as the only realistic option.

We have to win because we are right. The dynamic plays itself out over and over again on both the individual and the collective level. Jones's analysis recalls Girard's theory of exclusion and violence as the basic bonding power in societies.

From a Buddhist perspective, Jones warns that a religion of good warring against evil often becomes a battlefield of the ego fighting desires for not being good enough. Either the ego loses and feels guilty or it wins and represses unpleasant desires, leaving the nagging suspicion of self-deception. Either way, the conflict within us festers, inevitably affecting all those we meet and setting the stage for external uses of violence. Until we make peace within ourselves, we cannot shape a peaceful world.

Girard makes a dramatic plea for renouncing violence: "The definitive renunciation of violence, without any second thoughts, will become for us the condition *sine qua non* for the survival of humanity itself and for each one of us" (1987, 137). From its origins, the Buddhist tradition has shared the goal of eradicating violence at its roots.<sup>2</sup> The Middle Path of the Buddha seeks to end the entire cycle of striving, envy, competition, blaming, and vengeance. As long as we seek happiness from someone else or blame someone else for our suffering, we have not yet understood who we are. Harmony and joy are not found in outward circumstances; they cannot come as a gift from someone else; they cannot be taken away by anyone else. No one else can cut through our attachments and conditionings. In the account of his last instructions to his disciples in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha stressed self-reliance through the transformation of awareness: "Take refuge in nothing outside yourselves. Hold firm to the truth as a lamp and a refuge, and do not look for refuge to anything besides yourselves. A monk becomes his own lamp and refuge by continually looking on his body, feelings, perceptions, moods, and ideas in such a manner that he conquers the cravings and depressions of ordinary men and is always strenuous, self-possessed, and collected in mind" (de Bary 29).

Awakening from the illusion of a separate self paradoxically strengthens our self-reliance. The more we become aware of ourselves and accept

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<sup>2</sup> Just as Christians have not always been faithful to the call of the Gospel, Buddhists have not always been consistent in carrying out the Buddha's program of nonviolence. The tradition of self-immolation, which has been accepted in some forms of Buddhism and condemned in others, is a notable example of inconsistency with the first precept of the Buddha. See Charles D. Orzech (137-60).

ourselves and rely upon ourselves, the more we realize our interdependence with everyone and everything in the universe. This realization involves both a new consciousness and also the concrete actualization of wisdom and compassion in the world (see Nagao 1991, 205-7). Precisely in accepting our interdependence we come to accept responsibility for our own feelings and desires. To accept the challenge of Buddhist self-reliance is to abandon the quest either for a scapegoat or for a mediator who will confer "being" upon us. The quest itself is the problem.

In accordance with these principles, Buddhists renounce mimetic violence (Nhat Hanh 1987; 1993). For Buddhists, becoming angry with someone else and seeking to get even is a loss of awareness and wisdom. Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, has lost his country; possibly a million to a million and a half of the Tibetan people have been killed by Chinese Communists since 1959; and yet he is not angry with them. He explains: "Anger cannot be overcome by anger. If a person shows anger to you and you respond with anger, the result is a disaster. In contrast, if you control anger and show the opposite attitude—compassion, tolerance, patience—then not only do you yourself remain in peace, but the other person's anger will gradually diminish" (5).

Buddhists agree with Girard in rejecting the claims of those who justify violence in the name of religion. Girard insists that the biblical God does not justify violence but rather takes the side of the innocent victim, the scapegoat, against oppressors (1986, 114-6; 147). Buddhists do not rely on God; but they insist that the wise extend compassion to all sentient beings, oppressed and oppressors alike. Girard's theory does offer a greater level of specificity than the Buddhist tradition in identifying the dynamics of the scapegoat mechanism; but his proposal for overcoming it tends to remain on the level of general insight, with relatively few specific proposals for transforming awareness and feelings. Girard hopes that when we see through the scapegoat mechanism by learning from the Bible or later literature inspired by the Bible, the surrogate victim mechanism will begin to lose its effectiveness.

### **Buddhist response: meditation practice**

Buddhist meditation practice, even though not based on as detailed a description of the scapegoat mechanism as Girard's mimetic theory, offers very precise techniques for overcoming the problem. From the perspective of practical implications, one of Buddhism's greatest contributions to Girard's agenda lies in the tradition's concrete strategies for accepting

responsibility for one's feelings and desires, acknowledging envy and jealousy, and overcoming the urge to strike back in anger and vengeance.

Buddhist meditation practice is not a struggle against desire but rather a heightening of awareness of desire. One Buddhist maxim advises: "Stay with your desires." Continued practice offers freedom in relation to one's desires. Freedom does not always mean renunciation, but rather the genuine choice of whether or not to act on desires. Continued observation of desires offers the practitioner a freedom from manipulation by outside stimuli, so that one is not always reacting. The Middle Path is neither the extreme of asceticism nor the indulgence of hedonism, but a moderate enjoyment of the world freed from craving. Prior to his enlightenment, the future Buddha had experimented with rigorous austerities and concluded that this path was a subtle form of selfishness not conducive to lasting freedom (Ashvaghosha 7,12)

There are two classic types of Theravada meditation: *vipassana* meditation and *metta* practice. *Vipassana* means "insight," and this practice develops insight into the present moment through increased awareness (see Goldstein 1987, 1994; Culligan). *Metta* means "loving-kindness," and this practice extends loving-kindness to all beings. *Metta* practice is also variously called the Brahma-viharas, the Four Heavenly Attitudes, the Four Sublime Dwelling Places or the Four Abodes of the Buddha. This practice is a method for transforming the human heart into loving-kindness. It patiently exposes and heals the envies, resentments, hatreds, jealousies, annoyances, and impatience that distance us from others. *Metta* practice directly aims at overcoming the classic temptations identified by Girard.<sup>3</sup>

The basic principle of the practice is found in the Metta Sutta in the Sutta Nipata: "This [is] the thought that one should always hold: 'May beings all live happily and safe, and may their hearts rejoice within themselves.' . . . Let no one bring about another's ruin, and not despise in any way or place. Let them not wish each other any ill from provocation or from enmity. Just as a mother at the risk of life loves and protects her child, her only child, so one should cultivate this boundless love to all that live in the whole universe" (Sutta Nipata 143-52; quoted in Meadow 23).

In *metta* practice the practitioners extend lovingkindness to all beings. *Metta*, like *agape* (love) in the Gospels and the letters of Paul, is point by point the opposite of mimetic rivalry. Like the evangelical command to

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<sup>3</sup> For an adaptation of *metta* practice for Western Christians, see Mary Jo Meadow.

love one's enemy, the Buddha's practice of *metta* extends lovingkindness to all, especially to those making our lives miserable at the present moment. In both traditions, love of one's enemy renounces violence and refuses to respond to provocation by imitating the foe. Buddhists enter this practice by making peace, forgiving all beings that they have harmed and asking forgiveness for any hurt or harm that they have caused. It is not necessary to *feel* lovingkindness toward the persons intended, but it is important to *will* to be able to feel lovingkindness. One cannot force feelings, and one does not judge negative feelings. Instead, Buddhist meditation patiently accepts all feelings without judging them and works to transform them.

The second step is compassion (*karuna*), which feels the suffering of all other beings. Compassion embraces all beings, including those toward whom we harbor grudges, those with whom we have been in competition, those we cannot stand, and those we think deserve their suffering. Practitioners imagine the suffering of others and will to extend compassion to them without exception. Socially Engaged Buddhists insist on including one's oppressors and social enemies in this practice to avoid the danger of driving out one's opponent.

The third moment is sympathetic joy in others' success and well-being (*muditha*). Sympathetic joy is the overcoming of envy and rivalry. This is perhaps the most difficult and the most important of the four Dwelling Places for practice. We can feel sympathetic joy easily enough for people we are not in competition with. For little children or figures above us we can feel sympathetic joy, but it is often difficult for those closest to us. Again, Buddhist practice does not judge feelings, but continues the meditation, willing to extend sympathetic joy even to our most bitter rivals. We are urged primarily to rejoice in their spiritual progress.

The fourth Dwelling Place of the Buddha is equanimity (*upekkha*). Equanimity is balance, the state of being peaceful in all outward circumstances. This is the peace of mind that frees one to work with and for others in society without clinging to results. Whether one's specific efforts are successful or not, meditation provides a source of equanimity for the path. One comes back to the practice over and over again, not worrying about success or failure, not being preoccupied with results, not judging oneself. This virtue is especially important in relation to other people who do not think or act as we think they should. We relinquish our need to control others and have them think and act they way we want them to. Taken together and practiced patiently over time, the Four Sublime Dwelling

Places structure a conversion of consciousness, thought, feeling, and behavior that corresponds in many ways to the conversions that Girard finds in the Bible and modern novels.

The other principal form of Theravada meditation is *vipassana* or insight meditation. The central act of insight meditation is to free the practitioner by deconstructing the illusion of the permanent, independent self. This is a paradoxical project because as long as our ego is trying to accomplish it, the ego becomes stronger and stronger. We cannot will to become selfless without increasing the strength of the ego. Even spiritual practice can become the focus of mimetic rivalry. To respond to this danger, insight meditation focuses awareness not upon the ego or the will but upon the present moment.

*Vipassana* practice takes the form of sitting and walking meditation during alternating periods of time. The practitioner focuses on the breathing and attends to any experience that presents itself without reasoning, interpreting or evaluating. Mindfulness, watchfulness, and acknowledgment are the constant watchwords. In meditation we acknowledge and accept all thoughts, feelings, physical sensations without clinging to them or pushing them away. This is the most powerful way of acknowledging and owning our projections upon others. Whenever anger, jealousy, greed, lust, or hatred arise, the practitioner notes the arising of the emotion and returns to the breath. Personal and social conditionings, the ingrained habits of our responses, will all present themselves in time. All are accepted into conscious awareness. As the thoughts that fuel the emotions are acknowledged, they dissolve; as the underlying emotional state is noted, it gradually transforms itself. Strong negative emotions are often symbolized as ferocious beings that seek to upset the practitioner. The Tibetan Buddhist Milarepa told the story of fierce, ugly demons and monsters coming to his meditation hut. When he opened the door, they shook their fangs at him and threatened him. He welcomed them graciously and invited them in. They asked: "But aren't you afraid of us?" Milarepa replied: "No. I have been expecting you. Please come in and have some tea."

The acceptance of negative emotions undoes the quest for perfectionism and the danger of mimetic rivalry. The practitioner acknowledges the strength and power of envy and jealousy and the desire for revenge. All these arise within. Projections are acknowledged and traced back to their origin in the illusory self. The notion of the self deconstructs itself in the flow of awareness. We are not the same for two minutes in a row. When we try to stabilize our mind, it runs away from us. Even the most tightly held

resentments and the most entrenched patterns of thinking and feeling in time begin to flow and dissolve in the movement of awareness.

This, in Buddhist practice, is the answer to the reign of envy, jealousy, and violence. We become aware of the distrusted, disowned sides of ourselves that we project onto others. Wisdom is insight into our interrelationship with all other beings, and this means that exclusion and scapegoating are impossible. Once we see the truth, we see through our illusions as though awakening from a bad dream, and we do not have to fight them any more. As soon as we are awake, it seems silly to still be afraid. We overcome the false boundaries that separate us from others; and we embrace all sentient beings and the entire cosmos, including the people who most irritate us, with compassion. This is an experience of conversion and increased awareness that is analogous to the conversion experiences that Girard finds in the Bible and at the root of the great novels of Cervantes and Dostoevski (1966, 1-52, 229-314). The novelistic heroes understand the bondage of metaphysical desire and renounce it. Girard describes this transformation in terms strikingly reminiscent of the fruits of Buddhist meditation practice, even referring to a traditional Asian tale:

Deception gives way to truth, anguish to remembrance, agitation to repose, hatred to love, humiliation to humility, mediated desire to autonomy, deviated transcendency to vertical transcendency.... The hero triumphs in defeat; he triumphs because he is at the end of his resources; for the first time he has to look his despair and his nothingness in the face. But this look which he has dreaded, which is the death of pride, is his salvation. The conclusions of all the novels are reminiscent of an oriental tale in which the hero is clinging by his finger-tips to the edge of a cliff; exhausted, the hero finally lets himself fall into the abyss. He expects to smash against the rocks below but instead he is supported by the air: the law of gravity is annulled. (1966, 294)

Teachers of *vipassana* meditation and Zen masters are familiar with the experience of facing despair and nothingness and letting go of all that has seemed most secure in life. The great Rinzai Zen master Mumon advised his students to enter into the Great Doubt and the Great Death; they are to "inquire, with their heart and soul, what it is to transcend yes and no, you and I. They are to cast their whole being, from head to foot, into this inquiry and carry on with it. There will be no world, no self, but just one Great Doubt" (Shibayama 27). This letting go is at the heart of Buddhist

liberation. Life can never continue in the same pattern as before. As Girard notes, once Madame de Clèves has seen through the pattern of metaphysical desire, she "finally perceives the future which lies ahead of her. She refuses to take part in the infernal game; by leaving the Court she is escaping from the world of the novel and its metaphysical contagion" (1966, 175). The Buddhist practitioner similarly sees a future of endless suffering based on illusion and refuses to take part. Compassion, however, draws the Buddhist into a new form of engagement with the world, freed from the cycle of rivalry and craving.

There are, to be sure, many fundamental differences between Buddhist and Christian worldviews that remain to be addressed in interreligious dialogue. On the practical level, however, the centuries-long tradition of Buddhist meditation can be a very powerful tool to increase awareness of the dangers that Girard names and to let go of them. Buddhists themselves often insist that the experience of transformation through meditation is the heart of Buddhist life and practice and is more important for Christians than accepting or debating Buddhist ideas and concepts.

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