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## **Iris Murdoch between Buddhism and Christianity: Moral Change, Conceptual Loss/Recovery, Unselfing**

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## **Iris Murdoch between Buddhism and Christianity: Moral change and conceptual loss and recovery**

The article discusses Iris Murdoch's philosophical relationship to Buddhism. First, we argue that Murdoch was not, and did not identify herself as, a Buddhist. Then we suggest caution regarding Murdoch's interpretations of Buddhism. On the one hand, she applies the limited viewpoint of her era. On the other hand, her approach is motivated by insights tracing affinities between Buddhism and Husserl's and Sartre's analyses of consciousness, as well as Platonic ideas of unselfing and self-purification. Murdoch's reflections on Buddhism serve primarily a complex argument about the role of religion in our moral lives, as these reflect the rapidly changing Western cultural environment. She envisages the possibility for Christianity to learn from Buddhism and move closer towards demythologisation and a radical, loving commitment to the others here and now. While Murdoch's observations may not be accurate as a 'diagnosis of our times', they serve as a valuable opening for reflecting on our lives in the suggested terms. They are also inspiring in their profound optimism that there is the possibility to learn from others (other cultures, other religions) for the better. The 'muddled' nature of our reality does not thwart this possibility of learning; it only makes its particular steps unpredictable.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch; Buddhism; Christianity; unselfing; conceptual change

The topic of 'Iris Murdoch and Buddhism' has a certain aura among readers of Murdoch's philosophy. It is primarily her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (hereafter: *MGM*)<sup>1</sup> that contains, especially in its later chapters, several remarkable passages relating to Buddhism. However, it is not easy to summarise or outline the direction pointed to by her reflections on this topic. Our contention will be that, rather than aiming at a scholarly (and academically accurate) exegesis of Buddhism, Murdoch's reflections on Buddhism serve the purpose of rethinking the role religion (by which Murdoch often, and often implicitly, tends to mean Christianity) played and can again play in shaping our moral concepts, moral perception and moral attitudes.

There are a few motifs that characterise Murdoch's general approach: there is an ongoing historical shift in people's religious sensitivities, she believes. She mentions the 'wholesale loss of religious belief'<sup>2</sup> or the fact that 'many people' have 'now' come to 'hate religion',<sup>3</sup> but she seems to mean simply 'Christianity' by these references to 'religion'. The shift that she is talking about involves a loss of the sense of some concepts.<sup>4</sup> Partly because believers can no longer accommodate the 'outdated' mythological imagery in their lives, a religion cleared of the image of a personal God and residing in the mystical spirituality of an individual is better equipped to act as a source of a genuine moral outlook in human lives. Christianity *has* this potential, but it carries a heavy mythological burden. It is from Buddhism that it can learn the required demythologisation.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to outline the actual nature of the *normative* conclusions that Murdoch draws here (if any). However, the trend she observes in Western culture and thinking worries her deeply. To this extent, it can be argued that she is expressing what she perceives as a genuine *need* to fight this development. Unlike Elizabeth Anscombe, Murdoch is not a Christian traditionalist and does not confine herself to simply stating an irretrievable loss of the *only* genuine source of moral concepts.<sup>6</sup> She does not want to return (or deplores the impossibility thereof), but rather considers viable options of moving forward. Making Christianity more *Buddhism*-like might help it to retain, or reclaim, its role as the source of a realistic, compassionate, and disillusioned moral outlook.

In what follows, we will deal with three clusters of questions, separate but connected, that emerge relating to Murdoch and Buddhism. First, was she, as a person, as a philosopher, Buddhist? Second, what was her idea of Buddhism? This is crucial for

the third question: what work does she expect Buddhism to do for Christianity? Can she expect it to do at all?

### **1. Murdoch's Buddhism?**

Was Murdoch a Buddhist? This is a partly historical, partly exegetical question. To cut a long story short: she probably wasn't. Her friend and biographer Peter Conradi learnt about Buddhism from her and became Buddhist under her influence;<sup>7</sup> he reads Murdoch as *sympathetic* to Buddhism. However, at best he speaks of her spiritual development towards a unique, individualist religious standpoint 'which shares much with Buddhism'.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, Murdoch had been reading about Buddhism since the 1940s.<sup>9</sup> In the 1970s, when her mysticism deepened, she became more interested in Buddhism. In her later novels *Henry and Cato* (1976) and *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), Buddhist beliefs play a major role. However, in a letter written years later (to Naomi Lebowitz, April 1994), she writes: 'I studied Buddhism once but have not persevered'.<sup>10</sup> In another letter to Lebowitz, she calls herself 'a perpetual Buddhist beginner'.<sup>11</sup> At some point, Murdoch must have realised the limitations of her understanding of Buddhism and the enormous difficulties inherent in her attempt at cross-cultural learning.

Her relationship to Buddhism reflects her eclectic interests: ranging from Zen Buddhism and its meditation techniques<sup>12</sup> to the Tibetan Buddhist doctrines of Bardo (an intermediate state of existence between death and rebirth) and transformation of energy (plus its picturesque legends).<sup>13</sup> Certainly, both attention and the transformation of illusive attachment have parallels in her philosophy. However, the ideas that our moral understanding and endeavour are guided by the idea of perfect goodness, and that this endeavour is hindered by ego-centric illusions preventing us from seeing others realistically (as real) – those are not necessarily Buddhist ideas. And Murdoch herself seemed to strive rather at finding a (renewed) sense in which they could be reclaimed as

Christian (drawing strongly on Platonic intuitions). ‘There is no need to be *personal* about Jesus Christ. Treat him like Buddha,’ she writes to her close friend Brigid Brophy in 1980.<sup>14</sup> In her imagination, Buddha, a figure from a very different historical and cultural context, has served as a key to a new understanding of Christ, an understanding allowing the two to merge into one.

When Murdoch identifies herself as a ‘Buddhist Christian’<sup>15</sup> this is primarily to specify the unusual kind of *Christian* she takes herself to be. (Notably, though, she elsewhere speaks of herself as a ‘partial Buddhist’.)<sup>16</sup> Christianity is the focus of her reflections. She cares about what *Christianity* needs (rather than about the needs and crises of 20th-century Buddhism); Buddhism is the source from which Christianity can draw useful inspiration. However, Murdoch is not sentimental about Christianity of the past; rather, she tries to rethink what it could become. The last chapter of *MGM* is simply called “Void”; towards the end, she writes that ‘refraining from filling voids with lies and falsity is progress’.<sup>17</sup> The very way of framing the issue has a distinctively Buddhist ring. However, we need to remember that already in her book about Sartre (written in the early 1950s) Murdoch struggled to make sense of the very modern feeling of ‘void’ and the French thinker’s insight that ‘introspection does not reveal character’.<sup>18</sup> Existentialist angst is not identical with the notion of universal ‘emptiness’ (*Śūnyatā*) in Mahāyāna Buddhism, i.e. the idea that both self and world are illusionary.<sup>19</sup> In the conclusion of *MGM*, Murdoch returns to a discussion of her own views couched in the languages of post-Wittgensteinian *European* philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Nowhere does she simply embrace a Buddhist position.

Those are the reasons why she keeps returning to the options of ‘repairing’ Christianity as a conceptual source of living and realistic moral experience, instead of simply getting rid of it and opting for Buddhism as a better ‘tool’. This indicates, we

think, where she saw her 'home': home is where one's concepts reside or come from and where one experiences their loss as dimming and diminishing one's life.<sup>21</sup> Conradi tells a story of his setting off for a Buddhist summer camp in the Rocky Mountains (in 1988). Murdoch's safe-travel wish to him was: 'I feel inclined to make a sign of the cross over you.'<sup>22</sup>

## **2. Murdoch's 'Buddhism'**

Murdoch's idea of Buddhism is that of an educated layperson of her era. She did not grow up in a Buddhist country or family. She was not, professionally, a scholar of Buddhism. Neither was she a practising Buddhist, with what this would usually entail in a country such as, say, Japan (nor did she consider herself a practising Buddhist in this sense). On the other hand, she was an acutely thinking philosopher with an extensive interest in the overlaps of philosophy with religion(s), culture, and the history of ideas. Some aspects of Buddhist traditions, such as meditation, were of genuine practical interest to her. This summary provides some orientation.

At this juncture, we feel the need to point out that the concept 'Buddhism' is ambiguous, elusive. Scholarship has advanced greatly since Murdoch's death. Nowadays, historians and religious scholars focus on the genealogies of different schools, the changing discursive contexts and practices, and the ideological uses of Buddhist teachings.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, philosophers combine reinterpreted Buddhist ideas with the latest insights of neuroscience or the contemporary philosophy of mind.<sup>24</sup> At the time of the peak of Murdoch's interest in Buddhism, Western academic research in Eastern philosophy (including the availability of key Buddhist texts in good translations) was significantly less developed than today. Thus, though Murdoch was actively seeking contact with scholars working on Buddhism and striving to learn from their experiences,<sup>25</sup> her familiarity with the field remained eclectic and somewhat random. Her genuine

interest in learning from both academic and non-academic resources nevertheless gives us reason to assume that if she were alive today, she would be willing to peruse the best resources available.

Murdoch was markedly interested in Zen. In *MGM*, she engages with Katsuki Sekida's book *Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy*. For Murdoch, Zen techniques are a prime example of the endeavour of moral purification. In opposition to the Husserlian description of the mechanisms of consciousness as cognitive, or sense-making operations, Sekida is aware that '[i]t is impossible to describe mind philosophically without including its moral mobility'.<sup>26</sup> Zen practice is thus not supposed to be a science of human mind or consciousness, but rather the arduous endeavour of an individual striving at 'overcoming his egoistic illusion'.<sup>27</sup> As such, it is no expert procedure, but rather a spiritual discipline caring about truth. Understanding of the workings of one's mind require seeing where one stands, as an *individual*, in relationship to the world.

Nevertheless: Sekida's book is a popular eclectic text, influenced by the Kyoto school and diverging from the training that Sekida received in temples of the Rinzai tradition. Also, there are elements of misappropriation in Murdoch's reading. Nowhere does Sekida speak explicitly about the *moral* nature of the discipline that he describes.<sup>28</sup> His opening explanation of the whole book project is that it focuses on the technique that helps one achieve the state of *samādhi*, in which one no longer sees things from the viewpoint of the Heideggerian 'Wozu' but experiences instead pure existence (one's own and that of things) untainted by human interests.<sup>29</sup> This parallels Murdoch's older considerations of the realistic, self-forgetful attention.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, a realistic and lucid insight into the complexity of *human* relationships, especially the relationships one is an active part of, differs from *contemplating* a hovering kestrel. There is little sense in envisaging a true meaning of these situations and relationships as existing purely and

independently of the various ways in which people matter to each other. Here, the purified attention should amount to a *compassionate* attitude rather than a detached one. (Though a loving parent's relationship to her child, or the Good Samaritan's to the wounded man, can be described as 'self-forgetful', it is not disinterested contemplation.)

Murdoch herself sees, however, that Sekida's main interest concerns the psychic techniques of abolishing one's ego, and that an important part of this agenda concerns removing the – essentially illusory – distinctions between subject and object. Which might not be the kind of Buddhism Murdoch would embrace *for herself*.<sup>31</sup>

Murdoch scholars have spilled much ink about her notion of 'unselfing' and its philosophical implications, including its relations to 20th-century thinking about self and subjectivity. In *MGM*, 'unselfing' represents the final goal of the sort of spiritual change favoured by Murdoch, to be achieved through moral self-scrutiny and a profound transformation of the way human beings relate to themselves. In her detailed discussions of Hume and Kant, as well as more recent thinkers (Sartre, Weil, Derrida), Murdoch's focus clearly lies on the individual person, the individual consciousness. As mentioned above, Sekida's view of Zen plays a crucial role in Murdoch's argument, and many of his insights into consciousness were gained through Buddhist meditative practices. Yet, Murdoch maintains that similar insights can also be gained through the descriptive method developed by philosophers in the phenomenological (Husserl) and linguistic-analytic (Wittgenstein) traditions.<sup>32</sup> One of her earliest philosophical discoveries has been that Husserl's *Ideas* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* 'are trying to do much the same thing, though in different ways'.<sup>33</sup> Both Wittgenstein and Husserl can be understood as having claimed (at certain points in their philosophical careers) that there is no substantial self, only a stream of consciousness or merely a limit of the world. In meditation, Buddhists would add, we can make a similar discovery.<sup>34</sup> While this is still a factual claim,

Murdoch, in *MGM*, wants to draw out *normative* implications; we *should* be ‘attentive’ and ‘obedient’ in order to overcome our egoistic wishes and, thus, achieve the final goal of ‘unselfing’.

One of the attractions that Zen had for Murdoch is, however, little related to her reflections on unselfing, and it shows something about the nature of her concern for Christianity. For Zen – at least in its intellectualised version – can be read as a movement of demythologising the older Buddhist tradition, clearing it of the confused, harmful, and falsely consoling practices, making it uncompromising in facing reality. (Here, Murdoch comes close to contemporary Western sympathisers with Buddhism, who find it sometimes difficult to accept some of its elements, in particular the belief in rebirth – if they are committed to a scientific worldview).<sup>35</sup> In this sense, the true heart of religion amounts to a metaphysical outlook on the world’s reality, which is, at the same time, a moral outlook. This move renders other aspects of religion secondary, for example *rituals*. Murdoch apparently attributes an ancillary or supportive function to rituals in executing the true essence of religion, noting, however, that ‘ritual (...) is not an essential item in “the moral life”’.<sup>36</sup> Her idea of what is essential becomes clearer on reading what she says in a letter written in 1992 to Lebowitz: ‘[m]editation must take the place of all those Christian prayers’. It is unclear how exactly she wanted this to happen, though; and she immediately doubts: ‘But can it come in time?’<sup>37</sup>

At any rate, she expected that religious practice that had strong ritual aspects could obstruct or confuse the moral drive of ‘the religious life’. For this reason, a caution about rituals is due. This kind of identification of religion with (having) a metaphysico-moral outlook on the world – and trying to purify it of other, unfitting elements – has been, throughout the history of Christianity, a distinctively *Protestant* move. Protestantism grew out of, among other roots, the (well-grounded) lack of appreciation for some too-

worldly features of Catholicism. In a sense, equating Buddhism with Zen as contained in Sekida's book – for the purpose of the lesson that Christianity needs to learn – is an analogously 'Protestant' move.<sup>38</sup>

Two notes of caution regarding Zen:

(1) Zen is not 'the last word' within Buddhism; neither historically nor as a point reached in one's spiritual development. There are many schools, some historically or popularly more successful. Some have radically different things to offer than the textbook Zen; Pure Land Buddhism for instance (a bit more on that later).

(2) Among the three jewels of Buddhism, *sangha* is the one about which Murdoch never speaks.<sup>39</sup> By 'Buddhism', she refers to the *solitary* spiritual endeavour of a person in self-reflection. Again, there is more to religion. Buddhism has its community life, the exclusion of which makes the picture misleading. For all Buddhist schools, the transformation of *my* experience through meditation should not be an isolated endeavour, but rather needs to be an integrated part of a human life led in accordance with the 'five precepts', i.e., the moral code for laypeople, including prohibitions on killing, committing theft and adultery, etc.. It is not only one's own gradually awakening mind (or a supernatural entity) but also another human being from whom an adept of Buddhism takes lessons. Things done together, common activities, play an important role in religious communities. That is why we 'take refuge in *sangha*'; these kinds of experiences represent forms of 'the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real'.<sup>40</sup>

The other important source of Murdoch's idea of Buddhism is the Tibetan Mahāyāna.<sup>41</sup> Like many other followers of East Asian Mahāyāna, Tibetan Buddhists were deeply influenced by Nāgārjuna's (ca. 150–250) reformulation of the historical Buddha's teachings, especially in his famous *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Middle treatise). Thinkers

such as Khön Könchok Gyelpo (1034–1102) and Tilopa (988–1069) argued that there is no actual difference between *saṃsāra* (the cycle of rebirths) and *nirvāṇa* (the cessation of suffering, the final state), and also that both self and world are illusionary. Like Buddhists in the Chinese, Korean and Japanese Mahāyāna traditions, they encouraged their followers to take bodhisattva vows and to work for the complete enlightenment of all sentient beings. In other words, the concern for one's own salvation needs to be postponed or even sidestepped, as an act of compassion for other living beings.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike with Zen, Murdoch does not discuss Tibetan Buddhism philosophically.<sup>43</sup> However, when she mentions 'Buddhism' unqualified as 'Zen', she often seems to have in mind something from Tibetan Mahāyāna. Not always, though; the repeated suggestions that Buddhism serves as a role model for a religion without personalised objects of devotion may hold with Zen, but less so with Tibetan Buddhism.

Murdoch's thoughts on Tibetan Buddhism pervade her fiction more than her philosophy. Conradi's interpretation of the spiritual atmosphere of *The Sea, The Sea* is that the whole narrative describes a kind of Bardo for the story's protagonist, Charles Arrowby. The narrative centres round his facing his self-enclosed ideas and illusions about his past, other people, and their relationships to him, and the challenge of converting or purifying these into a realistic spiritual insight. Charles' stay in the seaside house parallels a Bardo laboratory of dealing with the illusions generated by one's own mind. Murdoch's philosophy points here approvingly towards the *tantric* aim: the energy of the illusions does not become extinct but is transformed into fuel for genuine moral endeavour, as in the story of Milarepa referred to by the characters in the novel. The subject's success in the spiritual journey of going through Bardo decides how she is reborn, so to speak.<sup>44</sup>

Okomentoval(a): [BO1]: Milarāpa? Not sure about the right transcription of the name...

The practices of Tibetan Mahāyāna do not abhor magic and picturesque ritual as the idealised Zen for intellectuals would. So it is important to see what exactly it was that attracted Murdoch to this tradition. She wants to acknowledge the role of ritual and religious art for rousing the spirituality of religious observers.<sup>45</sup> Though rituals can alienate – by suggesting a literally understood mythology of the supernatural – from the true moral engagement with reality, neither is the technique of Zen meditation immune to various kinds of abuse. Murdoch was convinced of the good that teaching meditation to children in schools could do,<sup>46</sup> but she also mentions – without attempts at arguing against – those who point towards the vulnerability of Zen to various kinds of amoral exploitation, for example in Bushidō militarism.<sup>47</sup>

Murdoch's view of Buddhism is thus eclectic. She appreciates a bundle of aspects: the meditation techniques as exemplified in *zazen*; mysticism without worshipping any deities; the compassionate and realistic 'metaphysics' directed towards the present; occasionally a bit of picturesque ritual and magic. Hardly does any actual school of Buddhism properly impersonate all these traits. Finding a particular Buddhist school was, however, never her point. Murdoch's eclecticism also explains some of the mind-boggling generalisations, or equations that she finds between Buddhism and Hinduism.<sup>48</sup> She memorably claims that *Eastern* art is less 'thingy' than Western and that *Eastern* philosophy and religion are 'more evidently mystical'.<sup>49</sup> Or she simply hints towards 'oriental religion (that is, philosophy)'.<sup>50</sup> In the present, many readers in the academic world, who are sensitive to the local character of cultural knowledge, will condemn such descriptions as essentialist, even patronising. It is well known that, politically, Murdoch became increasingly conservative in her later years; nevertheless, we believe that her genuine interest in non-Western cultures and her broader philosophical orientation would have made her drop such outdated, even Orientalist vocabulary, if she were alive today.

Though these remarks, which make her an easy target, highlight gaps in her reading of Buddhism, her overall approach was always that of an *honest* thinker who did not want to make things easier for herself and strove to learn.

### **3. Murdoch Employing ‘Buddhism’**

What is the work that Murdoch expects Buddhism to do? As we suggested, the summary may read as follows: the roots of our moral concepts are religious, specifically Christian. But Christianity ‘now’ (the second half of the 20th century) no longer has the vigour that once motivated moral life and that is needed to sustain it. The language that religion speaks must not lose the connection to the language in which we express our everyday selves, lives, and concerns. The literal mythology of Christianity has lost it; the apparently non-mythological language of Buddhism has not. Some things in this shorthand may not work neatly.

#### ***3.1. The picture of Christianity***

Christianity has shaped ‘our’ (i.e. ‘Western’) concepts and sensitivities, but as a *way of life*, along with all its muddled, mundane, trivial, or lukewarm aspects. It is *as such* that it has acted upon ‘our’ (or, foremost, Christians’) everyday lives. It would be impossible to understand how Christianity has acted upon our moral imaginations if we ignore its very complex historical (societal, cultural) development – not only as a source of spiritual and theological ideas, but also as an institution and a bundle of practices, often anything but lofty, ideal or noble. To laypeople, what Christianity involves is to a considerable extent embodied in its representatives who effectively serve as its images. In this sense, fictional characters such as Jane Austen’s Mr Collins, a pompous and obsequious clergyman about whom there is nothing spiritual, capture *a* near-central (rather than marginal) aspect of the concept-shaping presence of Christianity in Western cultures.

Murdoch knows that Christianity has always been centrally connected to churches, which are *institutions* and carriers of various practices. Yet, for her, theology or doctrine seems central:

[C]hurches are institutions and problems of true and false arise for those in authority, and people ask their priests: is it true? Priests leave their churches because of an unbearable discrepancy between their own beliefs and the beliefs of their flock. Philosophers and theologians have to go on thinking, and laymen are driven to reflect by what they see and hear.<sup>51</sup>

The life of a religious institution does not consist only of its authority in stating what is true and what is false. For instance, the institution of the Catholic Church provides parents with the contextual environment in which their children can be baptised. Sunday Mass does not revolve round *answering questions* such as ‘Is it true that this is Christ’s body, broken for us?’, though the priest makes utterances seemingly to this effect. And so forth. Christian theology makes little sense taken out of the environment of the life of the religion.

### 3.2. *What ‘need’?*

We have already mentioned Murdoch’s worry about the loss of concepts. Its original locus, the essay “Against Dryness”,<sup>52</sup> takes on this discussion in a *different* context: that of literature. For Murdoch the impoverishment of literature comes with the (Romantic) conception of art as autonomous artefacts made out of language. This leads to the ‘languished connection between art and moral life’. To the extent that the conceptual source of our moral life is literature, the sense that ‘we need a new vocabulary of attention’ concerns a task assigned to *writers*.

Here, Murdoch reflects with considerable lucidity on what she can, or should, intelligibly expect *herself* to do. When she says that ‘we need more concepts than our

philosophers have furnished us with', she is embracing the 'we' and the 'need', because she is discussing a task for *literature*. Here, she speaks very clearly.

The vocabulary of *MGM*'s description of the moral transformation is much less straightforward. Only exceptionally does she characterise the development as something that 'we need' ('We need a theology which can continue without God.').<sup>53</sup> More typically, she *qualifies* this need, for instance as one for 'those who do not want to save the traditional God, but want religion to continue'.<sup>54</sup> Rather than about the loss of concepts, she speaks of a general 'sense of loss';<sup>55</sup> what we lose is the whole background of sensitivities and imaginations set in motion – in *practice* – in our moral vocabulary. With the trivialisation of our culture, deplored by Murdoch, our sense of our life feels shrinking, imploding, barren. But doing something about it is a massive project, the full extent of which is difficult to understand.

### ***3.3. What fulfilment, and what improvement?***

In fact, Murdoch is thinking about a (need for) transformation of one way of life into another. But *achieving* this *directly* by introducing new theological ideas only makes sense if you equate the shift in the way of life with a change of opinion in a dialogue between beliefs or standpoints. She would need a lot more, though.

Murdoch is well aware of the immense size and complexity of the challenge called 'moral development'. This is not the matter of making a point in the way in which moral philosophers are (often successfully!) arguing in their books. Some people's moral attitudes may respond to moral arguments. Other people's attitudes are sensitive to different kinds of stimuli or motivations. Murdoch is not trying to find a magical catch-all formula that would, at a stroke, act upon everyone's attitude. She is interested in the background out of which this whole variety grows. That background *is* conceptual, but it is a matter of not only what people say and how, but also what associations, imaginations,

sensitivities, and practical responses are at play when addressing situations of moral and spiritual relevance. To her, the ‘conceptual’ condition of Christianity is moribund: its language is a lifeless corpse.

‘Doing something about’ Christianity in this sense requires achieving a collective change of heart through a shift of a size and complexity that surmounts any possible cooperation or intentional directing. When Murdoch calls for such a shift, she hardly suggests what can bring about this change. She describes and analyses the urgency of the sense of loss.

In a sense, the whole of *MGM* can be read as an argument that ‘we need’ to recover the general awareness that the world out there is what matters. The peculiar nature of the ‘we’, and of the ‘need’, should help us understand the reasons for Murdoch’s hesitant wording. There is no such thing here as a task for a particular group of skilled or privileged ‘we’, to be performed on the ‘body’ of culture or society. The ‘we’ thus does not refer to thinkers, writers, philosophers, or theologians in the first place. Anyone can suffer from the condition of decayed morality. The need for recovering the concepts cannot consist in thinking philosophically about concepts; that alone makes nobody a better person, especially not another person than the thinker herself.<sup>56</sup>

The ‘need’ thus turns out to be of a strange kind: a need perceived, under the description of ‘recovering the concepts’, by a very few, yet one that concerns a great many. The many, though, do not equate to all of humankind, for the fate of Christianity-backed morality is the fate of a particular culture. Nor do the many equal to the totality of all who belong to the culture, because its immense heterogeneity and the heterogeneous positions of individual people within it and with respect to it make this a nearly-impossible task, and one for a social scientist-cum-social engineer. A revolutionary idea

or a work of art can provide the seed, but what influences (guarantees?) its growth in a particular direction is a very different thing.

The intuition that ‘we need’ to recover the consciousness that the world out there is what matters relates back to Murdoch’s emphasis on unselfing. Let us only add a few further comments on this connection. For Mahāyāna Buddhists, the realisation that ‘I’ do not possess a substantial, persistent, unified self will lead one to gain insight into ‘emptiness’, referring not to a sort of absolute, permanent reality, but rather to the cessation of ignorance and the deepened awareness of the groundlessness of everything (there is no single, true description of the world). We haven’t found any sign that Murdoch ever held such a view. ‘Our chief illusion is our conception of ourselves,’ as Brendan Craddock puts it in Murdoch’s *Henry and Cato*. This is one crucial part of Murdochian ‘unselfing’. But she also wants us to truly acknowledge the *reality* of other human beings (instead of seeing them as an illusion), and, ideally, they will acknowledge *our* reality in return. She thus doesn’t seem to want us to abolish the idea of selfhood.

Contemporary culture demonstrates a heightened awareness of the collective nature of human beings’ self-understanding, which needs to be taken into account in understanding what ‘unselfing’ and the recognition of the reality of another person means. This does not find much explicit reflection in Murdoch’s writings, as, in certain passages in *MGM*, she clearly wants to defend a liberal, individualistic understanding of selfhood against the proponents of ‘French theory’. To many today, her formulations thus suggest that Murdoch was a neo-traditionalist. Yet, her writing is often open-ended, and there are ways of convincingly reinterpreting her ideal of ‘unselfing’ as decisively *progressive* far beyond the horizon of traditional Christianity,<sup>57</sup> and, in this sense, a part of the options of conceptual recovery she envisaged.

### 3.4. What is religion? Christianity again

There is a selectiveness that compromises Murdoch's view on religion (a *philosopher's* view), prioritising those aspects of religion that have to do with *ideas*, while being in two minds about *practices* such as rituals. Murdoch appreciates rituals as rousing our moral sensitivity, but her appreciation does not reach much further. Her relative lack of interest in religious practices that do not centre round a *theology* may thus curb her view of how religion acts upon our moral lives.

Remember again the emphasis on *theology* and the characterisation of the church as the authority on what is true and false. Theologies, as well as statements of the truth, can engage with each other in one particular way difficult to apply to practices: they can enter into an explicit conversation, dialogue, discussion.

This explains something of the strong connection, repeatedly stated by Murdoch, between morality and religion.<sup>58</sup> The problem is that 'morality' is a far less heterogeneous concept than religion. There seem relatively wide agreement that by 'morality' we refer to a complex of perception, beliefs, attitudes, and judgements revolving round the question of the goodness of (or in) one's life and actions, with respect to what one owes to others (to the world) and to oneself as a person. In this sense, projects such as having a dialogue between, say, Aristotelian and Confucian ethics are intelligible without greater problems.

However, some of the phenomena inherent to what even *Western* religious science refers to as 'religions' have little to do with morality in this sense.<sup>59</sup> Consider one such phenomenon that is commonly classified as a religion, but such that a particular kind of ceremony plays a central role in it – the Navajo spirituality and its Blessing Way ceremony. The question is, what kind of dialogue can there be between structurally different *practices* of independent genealogies? The idea of a dialogue presupposes a confrontation of beliefs, or values. This does not work neatly even with *stories*. We don't

see the point of a 'dialogue' between Diné Bahane' and the Book of Genesis if its aim was to establish which narrative is the true(r) one. They are not there for the purpose of competing in truth in the same sense.

Murdoch claims: 'Religion is a mode of belief in the unique, sovereign place of goodness or virtue in human life'.<sup>60</sup> We are not saying that Buddhism (or Navajo spirituality) is not interested in promoting beliefs of this kind, but such a straightforward equivalence impoverishes the fullness of religious life, with its dimensions of ritual and practice. Yet, only if we rely on this equivalence can we start with a dialogue or comparison of *beliefs* – complexes of propositions.

Murdoch, of course, sometimes suggests much more: that *theology* will help a shift in society, inventing new modes of speech.<sup>61</sup> She is probably right that religion needs to speak the kind of *language* that would 'fill the churches with people'. But is this language necessarily a *theology*? One might just as well say that religion needs a visible presence in the space where the people it strives to address live. It needs to come forward as an embodied engagement with the issues of everyday life under the description and in the sense intelligible and attractive to those who live this life. For instance, Brazil, once one of the world's bastions of Roman Catholicism, has been recently moving towards evangelical churches. Is it because these have offered a better, demythologised theology? Is it because of anything connected to any *theology* they have been offering?

Murdoch indicates that she can imagine a revitalisation of Christianity coming from such a spirit as liberation theology, which has been practised in Latin America.<sup>62</sup> Her understanding of this spirit is apt: it truly turned from a metaphysics of the supernatural, engaging more directly with the world of the here and now where the true place of 'live and present Christ' is. This *is* a turn of demythologising the figure of Christ

and of its mystical re-enactment: ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Here, one does not seem to need a purification of consciousness or intellect through an arduous discipline or a critical reflection on theological shortcomings. A relative advantage lies in the specifically Christian conception of the ‘heart’ (in contrast to the more intellectual terms *hṛdaya* or *xin* 心, as employed in East Asian Buddhist scriptures) and its ‘purity’. Being a person of a pure, good heart, attending to the needs and wounds of this or that ‘least of Christ’s brothers’ simply *is* the thing – you cannot get any more Christian. Living without the consolation of the afterlife awaiting us ‘somewhere’ also means being prepared to die likewise: in the poverty and dirt of the here and now. The history of post-war Latin-American Catholicism, which grew more everyday and more political, is full of cases of priests murdered because they stood up for the poor against the powerful. (With the notable exception of Óscar Romero, they are mostly ignored in beatification and canonisation procedures.)

Unfortunately, field research does not confirm Murdoch’s psychological insight and hopes for this particular variety of demythologised Christianity. In Brazil, the evangelical Universal Church of the Kingdom of God seems to have prevailed over Catholicism, despite the latter’s invigoration by liberation theology. It also seems to have happened exactly because it embraced, literally, the mythology of demons and angels and applied it to everyday life, interpreting it as a projection of these supernatural influences. More mythology, less philosophy of the mystical everyday.<sup>63</sup>

As we said, Christianity is extremely heterogeneous. It makes sense that more intellectually minded Christians, or ‘Christian fellow travellers’, feel the need for a demythologised religious language and thought. But it also makes sense that it is exactly this demythologisation that proves indigestible for other kinds of Christians, as seems to

have happened in Brazil. Murdoch herself identified those Christian sub-traditions that are (or were) capable of providing the source for the required revitalisation of Christianity: Eckhartian mysticism and liberation theology. What she seems to ‘expect’ from Buddhism could just as well be expected from these two inspirational sources, *inherent* in Christianity. But the influence of Eckhart or liberation theology never managed to transform the landscape of Christianity widely, and this failure (if it can be called failure) could hardly evade Murdoch’s notice. Unless she was relying on the charm of novelty, the ‘need’ to learn from Buddhism about something that already is, in an analogous form, inherent in Christianity doesn’t feel like a promising suggestion.

### **3.5. *Buddhisms as inspirational pictures***

Murdoch sees that there is no true conceptual change that would not be, at the same time, a *social* change. If Buddhism *offers* a source of energy for recovering moral concepts, it does not do this as theology, or metaphysics, but as a source of images and stories.<sup>64</sup> More or less the same doctrine can be found in *books* about Tibetan Buddhism and in the Dalai Lama’s public speeches. Yet the latter’s exemplar has far greater inspirational power. The Dalai Lama’s successful Western mission does not rely on demythologised theology; it tells a story of an inspirational way of life (courage, compassion, and humanism against the callous and exploitative brutality of the Chinese state).<sup>65</sup>

Any consideration of Buddhism as a possible alternative vehicle of social change needs to take it into account as a practice just as broad and internally diverse and just as ‘muddled’ as Christianity is. It is from this messy Buddhism that the *images* and stories are born. Buddhists can be socially *progressive* (many followers of Theravada, especially in Thailand), but also rather *conservative* (many groups in Japan or Taiwan who promote Confucian family values). In many cases, Buddhists have criticised capitalism, yet quite a few also flourish under the economic conditions of today’s highly unequal societies,

especially in the United States.<sup>66</sup> The violence against the mainly Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar, which has a Buddhism-related background, can, as an image, threaten the reputation of Buddhism as a source of a viable moral outlook more than any doctrinal inconsistency. It is easy to say, ‘These particular Buddhist ideas I like, philosophically.’ But is there a particular tradition of *practice* of Buddhism that resembles the required moral shift that Murdoch has in mind? Something not only located in compassionate attention to the here and now but also, *as such*, popular and successful?

What would have served her as a realistic and illuminating ‘object of comparison’ – but there is no evidence that Murdoch was ever interested in this tradition – is the Japanese Pure Land school (*Jōdo Shinshū*). Shin, and not Zen, is by far the most popular form of Buddhism in contemporary Japan. The sources of this popularity are multiple. Demythologisation is *not* one of them; on the contrary, among forms of Buddhism, Amidism is markedly close to the Christian-like devotion to a deity residing in a metaphysical ‘elsewhere’. What makes Shin attractive is its relative lack of institutionalisation: Shin lays the least emphasis on monastic structures, monastic discipline, or celibacy. Its popularity also derives from the nature of its requirements. Shin does *not* require an arduous discipline of mind, like Zen does; it calls for a decision of the heart to surrender oneself to Amida’s mercy. It thus does not face a lay Buddhist as a *challenge*, but instead represents *hope*, an offered hand.

The popularity of Shin among lower-class people, the poor, even those living at the margins of society (criminals, prostitutes), derives from its firm stance of not denying salvation to anyone. The ‘wicked people’ (*akunin*) are the real recipients of the mercy of bodhisattvas; consider Shinran’s famous paradoxically-sounding claim ‘even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will’.<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere, he says:

That people of the countryside who do not know the meanings of written characters and who are painfully and hopelessly ignorant, may easily understand, I have repeated the same things over and over. The educated will probably find this writing peculiar and may ridicule it. But paying no heed to such criticisms, I write only that ignorant people may easily grasp the meaning.<sup>68</sup>

Shin may thus be called a populist religion, one whose vocabulary or discipline is not designed for elites, and one that does not adopt an oppressive stance towards those who evade the norm.

To return to Murdoch's framework and vocabulary, the followers of Shin are fully aware of the imperfect and irreparably flawed nature of people. Yet its message does not amount to pardoning immorality;<sup>69</sup> *calculating* with the power of *nembutsu* makes as little sense as calculating, while committing a crime, with salvation through later atonement or aspiration towards the Good. It offers hope in the form of the possibility of one's perfection, the purpose of which is compassion towards others (rebirth as a bodhisattva).

Shin thus combines a message with which Murdoch's ethics might chime in, and a broadly appealing vocabulary. It has been sometimes compared to the Quaker movement due to its egalitarianism and tolerant spirit.<sup>70</sup> However, notably, the position of Quakerism within Christianity is nothing like the position of Amidism within Buddhism – one more reason why the 'Buddhismification' of Christianity may not simply work as desired.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Murdoch does not propose a social policy, or an *objective* cure for a moral corruption in 'our' society.<sup>71</sup> This is not to say that what some (including, perhaps, herself – to an extent) perceive as the corruption is not real. For her, what Buddhism (as she understands

it) has, compared to Christianity (as she understands it), is what is needed to envisage an intelligible move of moral perfection.

She was no social scientist or social *engineer*, suggesting an expert intervention into the language of the society to bring about its internal transformation. Nobody has this kind of influence on how an idea, perhaps as introduced in a particular novel or movie, will ‘unpack’ in the culture and life.

The spirit of Murdoch’s remarks is not simply retrospective or prospective, despite occasional remarks suggesting one or the other. For her, one way of making sense of what Christianity lacks is to describe it using the analogy with various forms of the reality-directedness of Buddhism. When Murdoch speaks as a ‘Buddhist Christian’, she is neither regretfully looking back to the lost past (as Anscombe) nor lining up the armies of morality towards an organised, better future (as Nussbaum).<sup>72</sup> She enters *a* future of *imagination*, one that did not happen to occur during her life. ‘We need X’ thus does not mean ‘X can happen’, or ‘X will happen’. To someone who wants to imagine a cure for the deep trouble she sees, this might mean that X is the best or the only thing she sees that ‘should happen’, rather than an estimate of whether it can, or will happen. The person is wondering, what kind of meaningful future for Christianity as the source of viable moral concepts there can be for us to imagine and pursue. Charles Taylor, who was influenced by Murdoch early in his career, has pursued a quite similar project of ‘recovery’ in his magisterial book *A Secular Age*. His emphasis on both the plurality of forms of belief and their fragile nature demonstrates the essential openness of Christianity to non-Christian beliefs; his descriptions of the experience of fullness today can be understood as an attempt to *imagine* Christianity in a way that is acceptable to believers and non-believers alike.

Such is a 'charitable' reading of what Murdoch seems to be trying to do in *MGM*, though we cannot deny that her remarks often resemble simplistic attempts at a 'diagnosis of our times', for example, when she talks about the degrading influence of TV. But even if we opt for the charitable reading, there are still issues concerning Murdoch's view of the 'Buddhist inspiration'. The image of Buddhism with which Murdoch works may just as well present an obstacle, rather than a boost, to her project of reflecting on the loss and recovery of concepts. While even people not quite like Murdoch can take and learn a lot from her reflections, we cannot dismiss the fact that she indeed speaks the voice of people rather like herself. People highly educated, liberal, and, to an extent, secularised, often identifying themselves with the noble concerns of ecumenical and interreligious dialogues. Whether or not a group so characterised represents, or largely overlaps with, 'Christians' or people sympathetic to Christianity is a different, difficult question. As suggested above, Murdoch hopes that achieving valuable mutual understanding may be significantly prompted by the efforts of intellectually critical and interreligiously open *theology*. Murdoch thus apparently gravitates towards the identification of religion with *ideas* centrally reflected from the viewpoint of theology, instead of acknowledging religion as a heterogeneous lived practice (which, to be sure, includes also components that are of utmost interest for theology), as religious studies – a social science – would describe it. Much of the developments of religion in the sense of a lived practice follows paths rather discontinuous with the paths of theological developments.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, the possible tensions within Murdoch's suggestions show themselves more clearly only now, when we have the benefit of hindsight. On the one hand, she puts emphasis on an idiosyncratic and highly demanding project of revitalising one's spirituality by means of employing other traditions' living concepts. This is unquestionably legitimate, and the Buddhist inspiration (whether or not Murdoch

understood Buddhism ‘properly’) can illuminate the unmistakable value offered by Murdoch’s pursuit. Yet, on the other hand, what she was concerned about clearly had to do with a widespread *cultural* crisis (just think of her novel *Message to the Planet* from 1989), and she was thus exploring options of ‘doing something’ about this crisis. For *that* purpose, the particular kind of inspiration that Murdoch took from Buddhism may not be straightforwardly productive, at least not now. One reason might be that it appears quite difficult – much more than Murdoch would have imagined – to neatly disentangle 1) the (mostly honest) endeavour of *Western* philosophical and religious traditions to learn from *Eastern* philosophical and religious traditions from 2) peculiar instances of the trend of the *Global North*’s exploitation of the *Global South*.<sup>74</sup>

However, of a deeper and less obvious significance may be Murdoch’s compassionate optimism itself – the optimism with which she was imagining the possibility of learning from other religions for the better. The unpredictable nature of reality and its developments makes it practically impossible to identify particular significant lessons and the ways in which they will have influence. But the very fact that such optimism is credible and thriving when rooted within the messy unpredictability may intimate something about human nature, something that Murdoch sensed.

Thus, coming back to our global, hybrid, and (to use one of Murdoch’s favourite words) quite ‘muddled’ present: we simply do not know how newly developed Buddhist practices will transform Western societies in the future. They may become part of a new movement to question economic inequalities and the degrading effects of digitalisation on human experience.<sup>75</sup> People may be more willing to change their behaviour and become less selfish in the future. Other cultural contexts will emerge, in which large populations, especially in East Asian countries, will be empowered through artificial intelligence, digital currencies, and political changes. The words ‘Christian’ and

'Western' may become niche, minority identifiers in philosophy. European and North American philosophers might even, at a certain point in time, begin writing their books in Arabic or Chinese. Murdoch could not have anticipated this particular future. But she certainly knew that, ultimately, human reality is more complex than *any* account or story can capture. She struggled with this insight as both a novelist and a philosopher; and the struggle is a part of what makes the power of her imagination appealing to readers in the present and probably in the future, too.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter: *MGM*.

<sup>2</sup> *MGM*, 419.

<sup>3</sup> *MGM*, 487.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "Against Dryness", in her *Existentialists and Mystics* (hereafter: *EaM*), 290.

<sup>5</sup> *MGM*, 431–2, 458–9.

<sup>6</sup> Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy".

<sup>7</sup> Conradi, *Going Buddhist*.

<sup>8</sup> Conradi, *The Saint*, p. xiv. He even observes that 'she could never relinquish Christianity', though she disliked its literal metaphysics of the otherworldly (Conradi, *Going Buddhist*, 21).

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<sup>9</sup> See Horner and Rowe, *Living on Paper* [hereafter: *LoP*], 570n. We have no reason to question this claim.

<sup>10</sup> *LoP*, 589.

<sup>11</sup> June 1992; *LoP*, 575.

<sup>12</sup> See Okada, “Iris Murdoch”.

<sup>13</sup> A version of Tibetan Buddhism with its care for the world (rather than for abolishing one’s ego, or subject, in the first place) was close to Murdoch’s heart. See Conradi, *The Saint*, 108; also Robjant, “As a Buddhist Christian”.

<sup>14</sup> *LoP*, 481.

<sup>15</sup> *MGM*, 419.

<sup>16</sup> *LoP*, 575.

<sup>17</sup> *MGM*, 503.

<sup>18</sup> Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, 81–89.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hough, “Would Sartre Have Suffered?”

<sup>20</sup> *MGM*, 504–512.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *MGM*, 260. Milligan (“Suffering and Contentment”) characterises the angle of her approach to Buddhism as the approach from the *outside*, pointing aptly to the crucial fact that ‘her own spiritual past happens to be a Christian past rather than anything else’.

<sup>22</sup> Conradi, *Going Buddhist*, 145.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism*, Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*.

<sup>25</sup> One good example is her relation with Andrew Harvey, the Anglo-Indian scholar, poet and novelist. Harvey had been taught by Murdoch’s husband, John Bayley, and later became a fellow of All Souls College at Oxford. In 1983, he dedicated his *Journey in Ladakh* to Murdoch. Moreover, in October 1990, he introduced her in Paris to the Dalai Lama, who then blessed her in Tibetan. In a letter to Conradi in November 1991, Murdoch specifically mentioned Harvey’s autobiography, *Hidden Journey: A Spiritual Awakening*, published that year (*LoP*, 570).

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<sup>26</sup> *MGM*, 241.

<sup>27</sup> *MGM*, 242.

<sup>28</sup> It is the book's translator, A. V. Grimstone, who mentions, in the introduction, Murdoch and her conception of moral endeavour a few times; see Sekida, *Zen Training*, 22–3. Could this be an influential factor in rousing Murdoch's interest in this particular book about Zen meditation (among the many available at the time)?

<sup>29</sup> Sekida, *Zen Training*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> E.g. "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts", in *EaM*, 369ff.

<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, exactly in this respect the less intellectualised and more ethical stance of the (Tibetan) Mahāyāna was directly relatable for Murdoch: because it promoted *sidestepping* (rather than abolishing) one's ego in an act of compassion for other living beings, i.e. acknowledging their reality (instead of seeing it as an illusion). See Robjant, "As a Buddhist Christian", 1005; compare Kapstein, *Tibetan Buddhism*.

<sup>32</sup> Murdoch summarises her analysis of Husserl's and Wittgenstein's understanding of consciousness as 'comparison and contrast' of the two thinkers (*MGM*, 233). In fact, there are many differences between their respective accounts, yet they are deeply intertwined in *MGM*.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to Hal Lidderdale, spring 1948 (*LoP*, 109). She arrived at Cambridge 'with the intention of writing on Husserl' (*LoP*, 93).

<sup>34</sup> Fasching, *Phänomenologische Reduktion und Mushin*.

<sup>35</sup> Thus, Owen Flanagan (*The Bodhisattva's Brain*) has suggested that Buddhists should get rid of certain metaphysical background assumptions, especially the beliefs about karma and rebirth.

<sup>36</sup> *MGM*, 433.

<sup>37</sup> *LoP*, 575.

<sup>38</sup> This (widespread) mistaking of Zen for Buddhism has been deplored by many – not only as simply factually flawed but also as driven by a potentially harmful political agenda (cf. Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida*, 'Preface').

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. the humorous communication between himself and Murdoch reported by Conradi, *Going Buddhist*, 153.

<sup>40</sup> “The Sublime and the Good”, in *EaM*, 215.

<sup>41</sup> Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, 544f; Robjant, “As a Buddhist Christian”, 1005.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Westerhoff, *Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka*; Powers, *A Concise Introduction*.

<sup>43</sup> In one of her letters to Conradi (written in June 1983), she refers to John Blofeld’s *The Way of Power*, originally published in 1970 as *Tantric Mysticism of Tibet: A Practical Guide (LoP*, 501).

<sup>44</sup> Conradi, *The Saint*, 309ff, 314–5.

<sup>45</sup> E.g. *MGM*, 307.

<sup>46</sup> *MGM*, 337.

<sup>47</sup> *MGM*, 248. Murdoch quotes Arthur Koestler, whose interest in Zen was that of a journalist (rather than an academic philosopher); but cf. also cases reported by Covell, *Japanese Temple Buddhism*, 70ff. For an influential discussion of the relation between Japanese Buddhism and militarism, see Victoria, *Zen at War*.

<sup>48</sup> *MGM*, 431f.

<sup>49</sup> *MGM*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> *MGM*, 432.

<sup>51</sup> *MGM*, 459.

<sup>52</sup> *EaM*, 291ff.

<sup>53</sup> *MGM*, 460, 511.

<sup>54</sup> *MGM*, 418.

<sup>55</sup> *MGM*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> This ambiguity is reflected in Forsberg’s (“A New Conception?”, 282f) Murdochian analysis of conceptual loss and recovery: while ‘[t]he proper inheritance of a concept (...) consists not of expanding one’s glossary, but of struggling to make clear to oneself how this concept should be inflected in order to justly capture features of our lives in language’, the moral

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endeavour of working on oneself is the matter of ‘com[ing] to see what kind of person I am, what I aspire to be, and what kind of future I am hoping to enter’.

While Forsberg tends towards identifying these two endeavours, we are less sure.

Also, in our understanding, Murdoch is not committed to a substantialist view of the self, so, strictly speaking, she doesn’t presume a definite answer to the question ‘what kind of person am I?’ – but is concerned with a gradual realisation that self as a substantive entity cannot be recovered.

<sup>57</sup> For such an attempt, see Hämäläinen, “Reduce Ourselves to Zero”.

<sup>58</sup> *MGM*, 426, 469, 487. Murdoch’s remarks on religion and morality point in several directions at once, often not clearly compatible. Thus, she does not fail to register that religion has further agendas than morality, such as those related to ritual (see *MGM*, 433, 451).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. an illuminating comment by Rhees (“Belief in God”, 62): ‘We have developed moral expressions and moral ideas in coming to think that certain ways of acting and living were important. (...) Religion, we might say, is concerned not so much with *ways* of living and acting as with the fact of living itself. (...) It is the question of how and why life is important. And this is where it leads to the question of how the world is important, or what *sense* there is in the world.’

<sup>60</sup> *MGM*, 426.

<sup>61</sup> *MGM*, 487.

<sup>62</sup> *MGM*, 460.

<sup>63</sup> For more about this, see Birman and Pereira Leite, “Whatever Happened”.

<sup>64</sup> [With the possible exception of the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna \(CE 150-250\) and those traditions of philosophical argumentation he helped to establish.](#)

<sup>65</sup> The 1997 movie *Seven Years in Tibet* certainly helped, as a beautiful piece of cinematography, to spread this image, despite the fact that various critics pointed out its inaccuracy regarding both the historical facts and the representation of Tibetan Buddhism and its spiritual leader. See, for example, Abramson, “Monks, Mountains and Mandalas”.

nastavil formátování: Angličtina (Spojené státy)

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<sup>66</sup> For more on the relation between Buddhism and leftist thinking see Priest, “Marxism and Buddhism”; and Boon et al., *Nothing*.

<sup>67</sup> *Tannishō* 3.

<sup>68</sup> “Notes on ‘Essentials of Faith Alone’”, in *The Collected Works I*, 469.

<sup>69</sup> *Tannishō* 13.

<sup>70</sup> Amstutz, “Shin Buddhism”, 739ff.

<sup>71</sup> There is something bizarre about the idea that a general moral improvement of a society could be arranged for by taking targeted measures with (openly) this very intention. Cf. Nussbaum’s (*Political Emotions*, chap. 9) thoughts on establishing new festivals to unite the nation.

<sup>72</sup> See the previous endnote.

<sup>73</sup> Everyday religious practices tenaciously refuse to give up personally (‘who’ rather than ‘what’) construed gods, deities, or spirits, just as the practitioners refuse to classify their talk of the existence of gods or spirits as *metaphorical*. Murdoch’s preference for depersonalised, demythologised forms of religious attitudes may partly be the child of a particular historical era with a particular dominant philosophy of social science. The historical contingency of this philosophical standpoint is reflected by the later ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology and religious studies. Cf. Bowie, “Experience and Ontology”.

<sup>74</sup> For instance, when Buddhism-inspired meditation techniques entered the *broader* Western cultural context (not just among educated intellectuals interested in philosophy and spirituality) and brought about a certain change, it was in the form of *mindfulness* techniques and courses. There are reasons for assuming that Murdoch might not consider these as a good example of the ‘arduous’ endeavour to overcome one’s egoistic illusions, that is, a spiritual discipline taking into account the mind’s ‘moral mobility’. (For the threat of dishonesty intrinsic to *mindfulness* and related to its commercialised nature of a ‘business model’, see the criticisms propounded by Forbes, *Mindfulness and its Discontents*, or Purser, *McMindfulness*.)

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Priest, “Marxism and Buddhism”.