NIBBANA AND THE KINGDOM
Symbols of Finality

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This essay in general articulates the power of symbols to explore the inexpressible that grounds life. As the fullness of language, symbols make present that which would be otherwise out of reach and, as such, emerge from human consciousness as a most fundamental way of getting hold of reality.

This essay specifically examines how two religious traditions, Buddhism and Christianity, attempt to make sense of the question of evil and suffering through their respective symbols of ultimacy, i.e., Nibbana and the Kingdom of God.

Be it Nibbana or the Kingdom of God in its fullness, one is confronted with what is essentially an ineffable reality. When one speaks of some unexplainable phenomenon, one immediately thinks of the Christian concept of mystery, at least in the sense Vatican II tried to describe the term, that is, a reality so profound, it cannot be captured in purely human terms. And yet, one can already see glimpses, intimations of that ultimate reality within the sphere of concrete human experience. In fact, for the Buddhist, it can be a reality in the here and now, as evinced by the Buddha’s reported enlightenment within his lifetime. Nevertheless, even the Buddha and his generations of disciples can only speak of the ineffable Nibbana.
in terms of similes. The Christian, on the other hand, while believing that the final goal of creation’s consummation toward the Kingdom of God is already beginning in history, knows that the overpowering character of that final end, and the actual form it will take in the eschaton, can only beggar the human imagination.

The consuming hope for human fulfillment in the fullest possible sense is ambivalent at best. Lily Quintos explains:

The ideal of human fulfillment in all religions is to bring man to a situation which at once and the same time sums up all his human capacities and is totally different. The mystery of human existence is the seeming contradiction of man’s infinite longing and his finite capabilities. His need for stability and security and the reality of an ever changing world of which he is part; his hope for happiness which is lasting and his constant experience of suffering and fleeting moments of satisfaction. In one way or another, every religion then places the moment of human fulfillment “outside of” the human predicament.³

A Phenomenology of Hope

More than anything else, it is the experience of evil and suffering that is characteristic of the human condition. This is the primary Buddhist premise. In most instances, human beings find themselves powerless in the face of evil. This powerlessness is experienced whether this evil is conceived as a malevolent power from without, or a force that radically shapes one’s thought and action from within, against that which is valued as good.

To hope, however, is distinctly human and fundamentally differentiates us from the rest of creatures. In other words, this capacity and drive to imagine an ideal state of being—which becomes the impetus of hope for the future—is profoundly human. Phenomenologically, one can see, in the human propensity to hope, an affirmation of that moment which promises liberation from all forms of suffering and movement towards fullness of being. Richard McBrien argues that:
Since the human condition is inevitably characterized by suffering, all action [and thought] which seeks to conquer suffering presupposes at least an implicit and vague anticipation of a possible, future universal meaning.⁴

At this juncture, it is important to note that while Buddhism explicitly rejects the positive existence of a personal God beyond the sphere of time and space, its own acceptance of the radical insufficiency of the world can nevertheless be interpreted as an implicit affirmation of the possibility of a beyond. This points to a surpassing state of being, over and beyond the world we are familiar with, but which the Buddhist refuses to call as a state of union with an all-embracing, personal, divine presence.

Everything is measured against an ideal. And this comes from a fundamental suspicion that reality as it appears is not what it “truly” is, nor what it should be. Our outrage over evil, especially in the kind of violence we inflict on one another, and our propensity to set things right, are what we can call signals of transcendence—pointers to ultimacy. In fact, some crimes against humanity are so heinous that they cry out to heaven for vengeance. Evil of diabolical proportions elicits a desperate plea for a kind of retribution that infinitely rises above the agony of this life. Our relentless predisposition to hope, then, especially in the face of untold suffering and unspeakable misery, seems to point to a dimension that far exceeds the one that we know.⁵ Indeed, at every turn, after confronting the evil in this world, and the brevity and fragility of human existence, the human being can say, “Nevertheless.”⁶

The outcry for ultimacy is reflected in a profound insight of the Second Vatican Council:

Not only is man tormented by pain... but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction.... Man rebels against death because he bears in himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to sheer matter.⁷

From a purely anthropological perspective, “religion can be broadly conceived as a way of coping, theoretically and practically, with the problems of the world, nature and society....”⁸ It is an “ef-
fort to deal adequately with those aspects of human existence which are horrendous and nonmanipulable." Jack Bemporad recognizes this natural human impetus and the insufficiency of purely scientific remedies to address human suffering in all its aspects. He writes:

The effort to understand the meaning of pain [i.e., of evil as suffering] is natural, as is the human attempt to mediate painful experiences through recourse to secular and religious symbol systems.... While science, technology and social institutions have done much to alleviate suffering, these means, even at their most beneficent, can eliminate only some aspects of pain, but not all.¹⁰

Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, for example, argues that even in the face of so much material and educational progress, an ever-growing number of people are raising the most basic human questions: What is it to be human? "What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? What is the purpose of these victories, purchased at so high a cost?"¹¹ Above all, "it is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence becomes most acute...."¹² And in making sense of death, human language finds itself most wanting. Time magazine offers a rather chilling view of evil:

Evil means, first of all, a mystery, the mysterium iniquitatis. We cannot know evil systematically or scientifically. It is brutal or elusive, by turns vivid and vague, horrible and subtle. We can know it poetically, symbolically, historically, emotionally.... Evil is sly and bizarre.¹³

The Power of the Symbol

The human person, especially at the dawn of history, appealed to the whole mythical universe in response to the questions evoked by the fundamental anxiety, even the sense of dislocation, caused by the aforementioned marks of enigmatic evil.

Symbols, especially of a more religious-ritualistic nature, emerge from human consciousness as a most fundamental way of getting hold of reality.¹⁴ Myths which fall within the genre of symbol, for
instance, explain mysterious ultimates such as the genesis of life, the ambiguity of the human condition as it is characterized by both good and evil (as in the mythic-symbolic language used in the creation accounts), the experience of suffering and death, and the encounter with the sacred.\textsuperscript{15} Symbolic religious language then is, by no means, arbitrary. It expresses in a fuller way the human experience of reality in a manner that ordinary language cannot adequately achieve. Symbolic language, in other words, explores certain regions of reality that cannot be expressed, for example, in some clear, linear and logical fashion.\textsuperscript{16} Andre LaCocque describes Mircea Eliade’s contribution to the study of symbols especially in terms of myths:

Mircea Eliade has shown time and again that the central characteristic of myth is a narrative of origins. If one knows how things started and why they went awry, one finds some kind of solace, as does the patient when he learns from his physician the name of his disease. The reassurance is, however, partial at best: the essentials for living are the most precarious for man among all the creatures of the earth. Reflecting on the origins of his human condition, man came inevitably and universally to the conclusion that this present life is not what it was meant to be by the god(s) in \textit{illo tempore}. In short, from being anxious, man became unhappy, stricken with guilt feelings about an initial accident that is repeated endlessly throughout human existence and can be called “sin.”\textsuperscript{17}

The symbolic function of myth precisely admits to its power of ultimately discovering and revealing the bond between the human and what it considers sacred or divine.\textsuperscript{18} The dawn of human history marked the moment when the human being began to sense an ultimate presence—the numinous—underlying all reality. But while this presence evoked a sense of awe, it also elicited a sense of fear and terror. Human beings saw themselves as bewildered creatures crawling the earth amid the vastness of the infinite universe. And as they discovered this universe, concomitantly they discovered the “existential problem of [their] place in the cosmos, assigned to [them] by some power, for some particular reason, toward some goal.”\textsuperscript{19}

Indeed, this whole universe cries out for self-understanding, for some sense of finality that will lend meaning and an overarching
unity to the diversity and ambivalence of the human experience. C.S. Song writes:

We live in a coded world. As a matter of fact, the whole universe is made up of codes and signals of all kinds. That is why the universe is such a huge mystery... The universe, with its galaxies and of stars and infinite space, has fascinated human beings and awed them, and it will continue to fascinate and awe them.... The universe at once beckons us human beings and obstructs our penetration of it. Its immense power overwhelms us but also draws us to it.²⁰

This universe that strikes the human heart with both terror and fascination confronts the human being as an enigma. It challenges and provokes human curiosity. To unveil its secrets and its supreme destiny is the ultimate human project. Song avers:

From the dawn of human consciousness to the present era of nuclear physics, human beings have been engaged in a battle of codes with the universe. From a very early stage of human history, they have sought to make the universe yield its secrets through magic.... Beliefs, cultic expressions, rituals, and taboos of our ancestors, practiced in the great centers of early civilization—in China, in the ancient Near East, in Egypt—were mixtures of magic and primitive science. The universe was not self-explanatory. Life on earth was threatened by a source of power hidden in the depths of the mysterious universe. To understand the world around them was an urge as instinctive as it was persistent. Through magical devices, cultic practices, and ritual performances they hoped to gain glimpses of the secrets of the universe and the mystery of life.²¹

Human beings probed the mysteries of the universe and perceived an absolute presence that compelled at once both “reverence and fascination, awe and attraction.”²² Falteringely, they pursued the mystery beyond and sought union with it.²³ Song notes the universality of mythical language. He explains:

And in the thick of that quest they encountered powerful deities that they believed were clues to explain life and the universe.... We begin to understand better why each tribe, each people, each nation, almost without exception, has creation myths. We have our
creation story... derived from the Babylonian creation epic of Enuma Elish. In Asia we have an abundance of myths and stories of creation, often supreme in their poetic forms, profound in religious insights, and resplendent in their power of imagination.24

A symbol has the power of making some reality present without being identical to it. In Le conflit des interpretations, Ricoeur raises the issue of “symbol” in reaction to the more precise, univocal and technical form language has assumed in recent history. “It is in this age of discourse,” Ricoeur argues, “that we wish to recharge language, start again from the fullness of language.”25 The “symbol” is that fullness since it “explores the inexpressible region that grounds life.”26

The onslaught of modern development in the areas of education and technology ushered in what Ricoeur describes as an age of forgetfulness, that is, “of the signs of the sacred, of the loss of man himself insofar as he belongs to the sacred.”27 In other words, as we find ourselves gaining a certain degree of mastery over the world, we are less inclined to appeal to supernatural explanations of phenomena when a seemingly rational and purely scientific explanation will do.

The predisposition toward imaging and symbolic thinking, C. S. Song argues, is common among many Asian cultures. And our theologizing should be cognizant of that. Song argues:

Poets image their poems. Painters image their paintings. Should theologians too image theology? They not only should, they must. Especially theologians in Asia must be able to image their theology and not conceptualize it, for they live in the midst of rich cultures to which the power to image has greatly contributed. Ours is a culture vibrant with the rhythms of life that cannot be abstracted into definitions, logic, and formulas. Such culture must lend itself to theological imaging.28

To approach truth through imaging is to put us in touch with realities that would otherwise be out of reach. A phenomenology of evil illustrates this point.

When one begins to speak of the enigma of evil, for instance,
one can only turn to the ciphered language of symbols and the archetypal images of evil. Otherwise, the human being remains mute in the face of evil.

Paul Ricoeur, for example, approaches the enigma of evil in a manner that is expressly phenomenological, that is, a going back to the actual experience of evil as it is existentially encountered. This approach studies the phenomenon of evil, not as a thing in itself (as other scientific disciplines do) but as objects of human consciousness. One can say that just as there is no field of vision without the eye, there is no reality without consciousness. The phenomenological task is to describe those regions of reality as they appear, in order to gradually allow that reality as it is to fully emerge. This approach resonates with and is akin to the fundamentally Buddhist approach to reality, i.e., to understand everything by way of the many appearances it engenders.

If we are to understand then, much less accept, the traditionally rational explanations of evil, we have to wrestle with the ancient insights into evil as expressed in the secondary symbols of evil in myth/legend/story and its primary symbols in defilement, sin and guilt. This way, we may possibly better understand, reinterpret, and recast the traditional doctrines (on creation, sin, eschatology) which explain evil in a manner that is meaningful to our existential condition.

In John David Stewart’s analysis of Ricoeur’s phenomenology of evil, he writes:

Although pure reflection must stop with the mere possibility of moral evil, man confesses the existential reality of evil in symbols and myths. The philosopher seeking to understand the depth of man’s faulted nature must turn to this ciphered language and by means of a hermeneutics of symbols bring to speculative thought the depth of meaning presented by symbols.

Reflecting upon human experience, we realize that we usually speak of evil in terms of defilement, sin and guilt. These are symbolic articulations deeply rooted in the human consciousness that
speak of an essentially inexpressible sphere of reality. Stewart offers this explanation:

The symbols of guilt and sin are crucial for a comprehension of the ontological ground of man’s affective nature, for by using these particular symbols “it is possible to explore a whole region of human experience that would remain without language if we did not have this tremendous symbolism of evil.”

A symbol, notwithstanding, is ambivalent at best. While a symbol reveals, its power to render present that which it signifies remains precisely that: a “rendering.” On that account, the symbolic expression itself is the selfsame veil that conceals the fullness of that which is signified. “Symbolic expressions never completely capture the reality which they bring into speech. There is always something left unsaid.” This mixed texture of symbols, Peter Fink suggests, allows symbols to serve as the proper vehicles of expression for what Christian theology terms “mystery.” Symbols then, should “be engaged in such a way that they can always speak something new.” In the end, symbols can only partially, and understandably so, embody the realities they signify. Quintos explains:

Man’s eternal longing for fulfillment, which cannot become reality within the restrictions of the earthly human situation, forces him to search outside the world realm. Whether we call this fulfillment, heaven or Nibbana, whether we call it fullness of being or emptiness of self, whether we search for positive identifications or negative expressions, we have to admit that worldly concepts and experiences can only vaguely indicate the sublime reality towards which man lives his life, for which he concentrates his efforts, in which he hopes to find rest and peace.

And yet, apart from the symbols, what do we “really” have that can mediate, however incompletely, our own experience, let alone our own understanding, of reality?

Symbolism... is surely revealing: it is the very logos of a sentiment which otherwise would remain vague, indefinite, noncommunicable. We are face to face with a language that has no substitute. The symbol genuinely opens up and lays bare a sphere of experience.
Symbols of Finality

We experience things not as they are, but only as they appear to be. We don’t see reality as it is. We have only glimpses of it. The Pauline letter to the Corinthians asserts:

What we see now is like a dim image in the mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete—as complete as God’s knowledge of me (1 Cor 13:12).

The need for images, symbols, similes becomes more acute then, when one confronts, for instance, the Buddhist concept of the final goal—Nibbana. This is especially true when we find Nibbana described in such terms as: “sunnata, emptiness, voidness.”36 How can one speak of something that is essentially “no-thing,” or empty, or void. And yet, not to be able to speak of it is to render that reality infinitely removed from the range of our experience, and forever out of reach. A first century, non-canonical but authoritative Buddhist text, the Milinda-Panha, illustrates this paradox:

...show the wind by its color or configuration or whether it is thin or thick, long or short. It is not possible for the wind to be shown. For the wind does not lend itself to being grasped by hands or to being touched. But yet, that wind is. If it is not possible for the wind to be shown then the wind is not. I know that there is wind, I am convinced of it in my heart, but I am not able to point out the wind. Even so, Nibbana is, though it is not possible to point out Nibbana either by color or configuration.37

One can speak of the Christian concept of God’s rule, God’s reign—the awesome yet inconspicuous divine presence—on essentially the same level, the level of ineffable mystery. Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke:

You cannot tell by careful watching when the reign of God will come. Neither is it a matter of reporting it is “here” or “there.” Behold! The reign of God is already in your midst (Lk 17:20-21).38

While the Buddhist vision of the final human destiny may essentially differ from the Christian concept of the ultimate end, given the
more negative nature of Nibbana and the more positive nature of the reign of God, both acknowledge the inherent inadequacy of ordinary language to wrestle with the utter mystery of that which is beyond. Quintos directs our attention to the paradoxical, veiled speech of the mystic who finds no other way to describe an essentially inexpressible reality. She writes:

The language used in speaking about the content of this eternal happiness is like the language of the mystic who speaks from an experience which the ordinary mortal does not know.... The language of religion must be understood in its own particular sense. Christ is misunderstood when he speaks about "unless you become as children"; Nicodemus is surprised when he hears that "no one can enter into the kingdom unless he is born again"; Jesus is ridiculed when he tells his disciples that he is the "bread of life" and that he is the "spring of living water." He speaks a language which is not easily understood when he says that only he who "loses his life will find it" or when he tells his followers that they must die to self in order to find life eternal. In the same way, we find in the Buddha’s teaching many things which seem strange if we understand them in the sense of everyday language.

The profound wisdom of Buddhism gathers much from its closeness to nature. This is probably why it expresses and partially deciphers the nature of the final human destiny in a language couched in the symbolic imagery of the metaphorical, as this is precisely drawn from the very experience of familiar earth. The breath of fresh air, the wind, the lotus, the hills and the oceans—all seem to cast a certain spell on the human consciousness, especially at the twilight of human history, for they become indications, at least for the Buddhist, of the promise that is Nibbana. They remain, however, to be veiled expressions, symbols that disclose as well as hide. Quintos explains:

As long as it is clear to the reader that ordinary, everyday language is wholly inadequate to describe a condition which is really outside the sphere of mundane existence, it is clear that we must understand what the Milinda is really trying to say while using metaphors and similes.... To recall this to mind can give us an indication of
things to come, when such a “state” will be unending, and reach a much deeper level that we can imagine.41

It is in this light that one can understand Jesus’ parabolic discourses, that is, not simply figures of speech or linguistic devices that provoke thought, but relative expressions that speak about, indeed anticipate, the absolute future. Quintos writes:

...[Jesus] uses parables in which some of the positive elements [of the final goal] are brought about, but which must make clear that the kingdom of heaven is not of this earth. He uses terms which the people of his time could understand as symbols of that reality which surpasses man’s experience and capacity for conceptualization. Even where positive elements are elucidated, it remains clear that they will not be exactly as we know them now: it will be a reality totally unmixed with evil [Mt 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50], it will be a reality which is totally good[Mt 13:44-46]. Only by denying the evil we know can we see how that state will be. Only by transcending even the good we know can we understand the good which will be.42

The eschatological intent of the story of the fig tree, for example, is clear:

Let the fig tree teach you a lesson. When its branches become green and tender and it starts putting out leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things, you will know that the time is near, ready to begin (Mt 24:32-33).

Buddhist Simile and Christian Parable

That a fundamental concept of reality distinguishes the Buddhist from the Christian is certain. The former views the world as inherently evil, given the transitory nature of created things; the latter sees the world as created good, flawed however by human sin. And since the world can only cause untold suffering and misery, the Buddhist seeks to be liberated from it. Nonetheless, both converge on the idea that human beings have yet to become what they really are. Through “The Path,” the Buddhist seeks liberation. Through “The Way,” the Christian hopes for redemption. As the seeker of enlight-
enment finds in the lotus the image of Nibbana as a condition unsoiled by the bondage of defilement and totally liberated from all forms of anguish and torment, Christian disciples can only find solace in the words of their Savior in this account:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come
when the Lord will save his people (Lk 4:18-19).

Indeed, while the lotus betokens the bliss of Nibbana since one has become what one really is at this final moment, the Story of the Sower (Mt 13:1-9) bespeaks the joy and confidence at the abundance of the harvest in the end-time.

And while the simile of water indicates the constant possibility of renewal, “to face life again” after one keeps on dying a little in the daily struggles of life, the river Jordan points to water as a radical symbol of both life and death, a consummate sign that participates in life’s fundamental ambiguity. The Messiah’s immersion and emergence indicate water as both womb and tomb—a lone moment effects both ends, and the begetting is simultaneous with the dying. Water as womb brings forth a new genesis, a passage from death to life.

And as the antidote marks the restoration to full health, the healing of one’s wounds and the experience of peace that only Nibbana can give, the gentle Shepherd can only have compassion for the shepherdless sheep (Mt 9:36) and the people wearied by the travails of life:

Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light (Mt 11:28-30).

The ocean, vast and boundless, can never be filled even if all the rivers flow into it. One need not think of a simile or a story to
describe the utterly immense nature of the ultimate end. One need only to look at the boundless skies and the infinite universe to realize that what we have now is but a sip, just a morsel of things to come. *Nibbana* accommodates everyone who so much as seeks it. Truly, in our Father’s house there are many rooms (Jn 14:2).

*Nibbana* is like a mountain peak open to everyone who can climb it to reach its summit, but only the skilled and the constant survive. “Only those who fare rightly along (the path of *Dhamma*) are awakened, but those who were faring wrongly will fall.”46 Indeed, the gate to life is narrow and the way that leads to it is difficult and only a handful find it. The gate to perdition, on the other hand, is wide and the path that leads to it is easy. But the road to life is a road less travelled (Mt 7:13-14).

...even though the road is open it may still be that not all can reach the end of the path, and it is even more questionable whether the end will be reached by all.47

*Akasa* is ageless, deathless. The lovely fragrance of *Nibbana*, like the sandalwood, seems to linger forever. “There is no arising and it is hard to master; but it also does not depend on anything and cannot be carried off by thieves.”48 It is wise to work for things that will outlast them:

Do not store up treasures for yourselves here on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and robbers break in and steal. Instead, store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy and robbers cannot break in and steal. Remember, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Mt 6:19-21).

**Sunnata**

While a seemingly irreconcilable difference exists between the Buddhist *sunnata* (emptiness) and the Christian *pleroma* (fullness in union with the divine), there remains the possibility that both point to the same ineffable mystery.
The "uncomprehended and intractable mystery" of which Rahner speaks is God.... God and emptiness are sometimes seen as intimately connected. This is not the case when dogmatics comes into question, however, but when the mystics, through their utterances, are brought into the picture. Again and again, to the end of his life, Nishida identified God and absolute nothingness when considering the mystics, but this identification was less a verbal one bound to the word "God" than it was an existential one that led into the realm of the unspeakable....

While, for the Buddhist, the ground of existence is nothingness, since sannata can never be objectified, such considerations can be carried over to the experience of the Christian mystic:

It may not be wrong to say that... the Godhead in which one is united is the "Emptiness" of the indefinable One. The words "nothing, nothing, nothing" fill the pages of The Dark Night of the Soul, written by St. John of the Cross. For him nothingness meant "sweeping away of images and thoughts of God to meet Him in the darkness and obscurity of pure faith which is above all concepts."

The Wisdom of Wisdom

Far from inaccurately rendering reality intelligible, symbolic thought explores those regions of the human experience that rational language can never reach. And yet, even with any form of knowledge—whether gnosis or myth—one is ultimately silent in the face of unutterable mystery.

Indeed, we can only use terms and concepts drawn from everyday experience to be able to speak of human finality. In the end, however, we may have to negate the very expressions we use, for what is described before us is an essentially unspeakable reality. Nibbana, it should be remembered, is "no-thing-as-things-are-in-this-world." Jesus thus speaks in John:

I have used figures of speech to tell you these things. But the time will come when I will not use them anymore. When that day comes, you will not ask me for anything. You are in the world, but you do
not belong to it. My kingdom does not belong to this world, it does not belong here (Jn 15-18).

That is why we return to the problem of evil—that which is but should not be, the very cause of human longing to totally fulfill hu-
man need. We have said that myth does not argue the way reason does. It presents. This suggests that we have to go beyond any form of knowledge—including the mythical and the symbolic, it would appear. Ricoeur makes this critical point regarding the wisdom of Job:

Myth recounts a story, Wisdom argues. It is in this sense that we see the Book of Job question explanation in terms of the just man who suffers. If the Book of Job occupies a primary place in world literature, it does so first because it is a classic of Wisdom’s argumentative mode. But it is so because of the enigmatic and even perhaps deliberately ambiguous character of its conclusion.

We learn much from the wisdom of Job in the face of the enig-
matic justice that characterizes the divine.

Such is wisdom’s argument. From God, there is no unequivocal response to Job’s tragedy nor a solution to the end of human predic-
ament. Ronald Green writes:

...the book’s most decisive response... borders on the radical disso-
lation of the theodicy problem. Answering Job out of a whirl-
wind, God asks, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (38:4). A litany of God’s mighty deeds in nature and history follows, with the question that man is too puny a creature to question his maker’s justice. Job repents his presumption: “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (42:3).

It is in enduring evil, that one might understand it. Christ himself did not explain it. He absorbed it. And in so absorbing it, probably came to understand it. The great Christian lesson is that suffering can always have a meaning. It can ennoble, it can inspire a resolve to move on. While Buddhist thought may negate suffering, we can learn much from the kind of indispensability it bestows upon human
effort, the responsible use of freedom and the mindful use of one’s energy, to see things ultimately as they really are and be liberated from the seeming absurdity of human suffering.

Is the wisdom of Job precisely found in the abandonment of the very effort to comprehend?\textsuperscript{57} Can a creature ask its maker to render account?\textsuperscript{58} Less radically, of course, we can always say that we cannot, should not, get ahead of our own reality, and that answers have to be deferred until the unknown, albeit certain future comes to a head. Is it because we are unprepared here and now to comprehend the hidden designs of the transcendent? Probably.

The most effective solution to the problem of evil, apparently, is not to argue anymore but to transform the very nature of the quest for explanation. After everything is said and done, “evil is simply what should not but does exist.... To transform desire... is to give up any consolation, at least for oneself, by giving up the complaint itself.”\textsuperscript{59}

“Symbol gives rise to thought” is the great Ricoeurian insight. Symbolic language is key to human understanding, especially of mysterious absolutes. But “do symbols invite thought only to silence it?”\textsuperscript{60} A quote from Quintos gives a fitting conclusion to our examination of evil and our symbols of finality:

Whatever falls under our experience, the things we see and hear, the things we smell and touch and taste, are not really “things”; they are only appearances, which for the sake of convenience we call by name. Everything, even the person giving the name, even the reason of the person, is contingent, impermanent. To think otherwise is the cause of dukkha. It is precisely the recognition of this which constitutes wisdom, enlightenment, the beginning of Nibbana. The nature of Nibbana then is sunnata, emptiness, voidness. That is why only silence can be the correct attitude, not because there is no answer to the question, but because the question itself is realized as “non-sense,” and there can be no answer if there is no question.\textsuperscript{61}
Notes

1*Nibbana* describes the state of emancipation from all suffering, extinction of the causes of evil, i.e., greed, hatred and delusion. This state of liberation is attainable within one's lifetime. Once achieved, one is released from further becoming and, after death, return no more. See Lily Quintos, R.C., *The Moral System of Buddhism According to the Milinda Panha with a Christian-Theological Reflection* (Manila: Cardinal Bea Institute, 1977) 203. The more popular term “nirvana” indicates the same final state of happiness that overcomes and transcends all sorrows, the causal nexus or the moral law of cause and effect (“karma” or *kamma*) and the cycle or rebirth (*samasara*). See *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (1997), s.v. “nirvana.”

2Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium* speaks, for example, of the Church as a mystery since it is imbued with the hidden presence of God. It lies, therefore, within the nature of the Church to be open to deeper and greater exploration. See “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (*Lumen Gentium*) in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter Abbott, S.J. (New York: Guild Press, 1966) par. 1. Hereafter cited as *LG* with paragraph number.

3Quintos, 135.


7“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*) in *The Documents of Vatican II*, par. 18. Hereafter cited as *GS* with paragraph number.


11*GS* 10.

12*GS* 18.

14 Susanne K. Langer, for example, sees symbols as necessary for human access to, and interpretation of, reality in general. See her *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures* (New York: Scribner's, 1957) 130.

15 In other words, myth, which should be distinguished from its popular associations with fiction and fantasy, is a definite way of communicating symbolic truth. The primary intent of myth is to speak not of some scientifically verifiable fact, but of a fundamental human experience in such a way as to lure the hearer back to the same, to affirm and embrace it. "Myth tells in a fuller way the same truth as the more primitive symbols from which the myth evolved." See Peter E. Fink, S.J., *Worship: Praying the Sacraments* (Washington: The Pastoral Press, 1991) 35. One recognizes in the history of religions that myth is "not a false explanation by means of images and fables, but a traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time.... [This narration of the genesis of life, in turn, establishes] all the forms of action and thought by which man understands himself in his world." See Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967) 5. Myth as primordial event that took place at the beginning of time is considered a sacred story, a "true history." The myth of creation is true insofar as the existence of the earth proves it. The myth of the origin of death is true since mortality proves it. See Wendell C. Beane and William G. Doty, eds., *Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 3. See also Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. William R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 1-6. The language of myth simply presupposes a symbolic approach to reality, a way of understanding and thinking that "sees" in realities perceptible to the senses something deeper than what they seem to reveal at first glance.

16 See Dennis M. Doyle, *The Church Emerging from Vatican II: A Popular Approach to Contemporary Catholicism* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991) 48. The onslaught of modern development in the areas of education and technology ushered in what Ricoeur describes as an age of forgetfulness, that is, forgetfulness "of the signs of the sacred, of the loss of man himself insofar as he belongs to the sacred." See John W. van Den Hengel, S.C.J., *The Home of Meaning: The Hermeneutics of the Subject of Paul Ricoeur* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982) 117. As we find ourselves gaining a certain degree of mastery over the world, we are less inclined to appeal to supernatural explanations of phenomena when a seemingly rational and purely scientific explanation will do. See McBrien, 88.


LaCocque, 325.


Ibid., 9.


Ibid.

Song, 9. Examples include the ancient creation chant of the Maoris of New Zealand and creation hymns drawn from the Rig Veda of India. Ibid., 9-10.


Ibid., 117.

Ibid.

Song, 61.

McBrien, 118.


Ibid., 34. This is particularly evident in the language employed by Vatican II when it speaks of the Church as mystery “imbued with the hidden presence of God,” becoming thus a reality so deep it cannot be captured and expressed fully in human words. It is within the nature of the Church, therefore, to be forever “open to new and greater exploration.” See *LG* 1, note 1. As mystery, the Church is not merely some reality open to observation and critical analysis, but something one can believe in and love, for it contains the profound reality of God’s presence. See Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (Manila: ECCCE and Word and Life Publications, 1997) par. 1357. Cf. Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education, *Maturing in Christian Faith: National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (Pasay, Daughters of St. Paul, 1994) par. 200, 230.

Fink, 34.

Quintos, 155.

36 Quintos, 192.


38 This echoes LG’s definition of mystery as something already imbued with the hidden presence of God. See LG 1.

39 Nibbana as emptiness, as no-thing, distinguishes itself from the more positive reality expressed by a range of Christian concepts such as of union with God, human fulfillment, ultimate rest, and ultimate self-possession. “The Christian ideal is one of union, of divinization, where the self is important [and in the first place, presumed].” See Quintos, 196. On the other hand, the Buddhist ideal denies the premise of self and goes so far as to identify it as the source of suffering. Ibid.

40 Ibid., 194.

41 Ibid., 151.

42 Ibid., 192.

43 Ibid., 142.

44 Ibid., 144.

45 Ibid., 144-45.

46 Ibid., 148.

47 Ibid., 152.

48 Ibid.


50 Ibid., 141. Notwithstanding the apparent affinity between sunnata and the Christian mystical experience, many mystics address “that which is beyond all affirmation and all negation” as a personal subject, a “Him.” Many Christian mystics, in fact, call God “Thou.” For the Buddhist, especially of the Zen tradition, that which is beyond affirmation nor negation should not be a “Him” or a “Thou.” Where it is the case, when one begins to name that which is Ultimate Reality, it ceases to be ultimate. See ibid.

52 Quintos, 191.

53 Ibid., 156.


56 McBrien, 345.

57 Green, 435.

58 Ibid.


60 Stewart, 587.

61 Quintos, 192.