

# *The Apollonian*

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies  
Open-access | Peer-reviewed

*Vol 4, Issues 1&2* (March-June 2017)

Submission details and instructions for authors: <http://theapollonian.in/index.php/submission-guidelines/>

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To cite this article: Anh Vo, Huynh Van. "Equality: Catholic Liberation Theology - Buddhist Pure Land Dialogue for the Poor." *The Apollonian* 4:1-2 (March-June 2017): 27-37.

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*The Apollonian*

ISSN 2393-9001

<http://www.theapollonian.in/>



## Equality: Catholic Liberation Theology - Buddhist Pure Land Dialogue for the Poor

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**ABSTRACT** Since the fifth century B.C., Buddha propagated the egalitarian idea of a classless world for all people. It reached the climax when Mahāyāna sects came up with the thought of Pure Land (*Sukhāvātī* in Sanskrit) which aimed at establishing a realm in which all living beings share the common happiness. The movement of Liberation Theology, which began in the 1960s called for the same ideas to improve the living conditions of the poor. This paper focuses on three points in the dialogue between Pure Land Buddhism and Catholic Liberation Theology, viz. spiritual responsibility, reformation of this world and the peaceful way. First and foremost, equality must be reflected on the mirror of holy teachings by Buddha and Jesus, to avoid the political secular extreme. Secondly, both are concerned with the other world in a revolutionary sense. That is to say, people in countries belonging to the first, second and the third worlds are equalized and unified in one world. Thirdly, Buddhism suggests a way for Christians to reorganize the world without armed conflict and struggle for sustainable development, offering new ways to ensure human rights and equality.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Catholic Liberation Theology, Altruism, Pure Land.

The Buddhist-Christian dialogues started in the nineteenth century to discover doctrinal affinities between Śākyamuni's and Jesus' teachings about which John D'arcy in "Buddhism and Christianity as Indigenous Religion" pointed out several interrelated dimensions (16). This paper concerns Altruism, the core teaching in both religions, in terms of equality and concern for the poor. Buddha promoted the Bodhisattva path to end suffering, check oppressions and establish equal principles. Christ, too, stood with the poor to construct the kingdom of God where social strata are effaced. Since the 1960s, Catholic churches in Latin

America started struggling for the liberation of the oppressed from socioeconomic injustice. Vietnam Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh placed the first brick for Engaged Buddhism in 1964 that had sided with Catholic efforts to reconstruct the peaceful, civilised and progressive world, the *Sukkhāvātī* concept of Buddhist Pure Land, one of Mahāyāna sects. The interfaith dialogue about equality interprets actualisation of Catholic liberation theology through the Buddhist idea of Pure Land with three aims, i.e. transforming secular liberation to noble salvation, economic base to spiritual peace and political stance to non-political movements.

### Saviours of the poor

Being born in a royal family, Siddhartha witnessed inequality in the form of the hierarchy of caste in India. To him, there could be no real happiness in such society even for those who hold the high position as his royal Śākya clan. He renounced the throne to pursue principles of equality for all. In the light of twelve conditional factors of life that he realised at Bodhi tree, one learns that this miserable life resulted substantially from ignorance and greed. The first sermon at Sarnath contents four actual facts: suffering (*Dukkha*), causes of suffering (*Samudaya*), peace (*Nirodha*), Way of Peace (*Magga*). Buddha defined *Dukkha* in eight types, including physical and mental, of which conflict of five aggregates, disease and death are experienced by the oppressed and poor. To save people, he advised his disciples to care for the beggarly. For instance, the rich layman Anathapindika was a prominent figure who served the needy. Buddha found the monastic community by a moral standard, annihilating caste concerns. Upali, a barber, was ranked higher than monks of royal descent for his higher meditative practice. Five centuries later, Jesus himself, son of the carpenter Joseph, grew up in an artisan family, also attempted to save the poor. God(father) descended to earthly life in Jesus (son) form to witness and deliver compassion to the poor as well as the outcast (Mathew. 4: 24-25; 9: 9-13). Therefore, his earliest apostles were fishers (Matthew. 4: 18-22;), and he taught with focused concerns for the needy. As the Gospel says, “any movement that lacks in caring for the needy is a condemnation” (Matthew 25: 31-46).

Thus, Buddha and Jesus are saviours of mankind: “suffering” or “poor” basically is in both material and spiritual senses. Buddha and Jesus struggled to protect people against all manners of suppression. Economically, Buddha had special relation with the emperors and the rich like Bimbisara, Pasenadi, Anathapindika and suggested to them to donate and help the less privileged. Although Jesus did not have a direct relation with contemporary rulers, and was instead crucified by prefect Pilate at the age of 36, he always desired to establish God’s kingdom for

the oppressed. Modern activities redraw the picture of Buddha's and Jesus' life by liberation theology and Pure Land salvation. Christians keep in mind that "the poor have the potential for evangelisation ... apart from the poor, no salvation" (Sobrino 11). The meantime salvific ideology of Buddha set the foundation for recent Pure Land Buddhist charitable activities. Buddhist like Shinran, the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, said Amita selects the foolish and small being to bestow them (Takeda 10)

### Equality: Socio-ethical rather than Political

There are two historical pieces of evidence to suggest that the idea of Pure Land is non-political. Firstly, Huì-yüan founded White Lotus society in China to serve groups who desire freedom from the contemporary disunited situation. In 412 C.E, he gathered people on mount Lúshān to practice Amitābhasmṛti praying for peace and salvation as various troops battled for sovereign and dominated separate lands. People inevitably suffered at the hands of rebels and plunderers. So the most important aspiration for another world was simply to avoid witnessing secular evilness by not serving politics. Secondly, in India, Śākyamuni introduced to Queen Vaidehi of Magadha kingdom the kṣetra of Amitābha Buddha called *Sukhāvātī* where any misery did not exist. King Bimbisāra and Vaidehi desired to abandon their political role to practice for rebirth in Amitābha Pure Land where conditions for all living beings are shared equally. 'Pure Land' is a translation of the original Chinese word *Jing-dù* (淨土); it has Sanskrit source *Sukhāvātī*, characterising a paradise in which there exist only peace, happiness, justice and prosperity. Amitābha, who used to be the king in the past, left his throne to observe Dharma, now is the lord of *Sukhāvātī* not in the political role but religious spirituality. Buddha is king of Dharma, just as Jesus is the leader of God's kingdom in the sense of morality.

Building the world of equality means to reform present outrageous conditions where social hierarchy is formed by political stance rather than moral criteria. The rich exploit the moneyless, female serves male, black is inferior to white. Such ideology unethically and illegally distinguishes one group from the other and violates humanity. It breaks humankind relations and causes a series of conflictions, war, destruction, etc. During the second half of previous century, liberation theology emerged as a revolutionary step to appeal for justice, civilised and progressive support. Medellín in 1968 analysed Latin America's actual facts of poverty as well as worldwide socioeconomic changes to improve life conditions comprising social-economic role, labouring, lifetime, health. The word "Liberation theology" first appeared in G. Gutierrez's book to explain Liberation in theological terms, a new

way to combine evangelized theology with socialisation. In its content, private property must be universalised to save the ill-fated. This movement, he thought, could enable to reshape Latin America economically, identifying with reinforcements of basic human rights, an alternative to rebel or political revolutionary measures. Accordingly, theologians aimed at requesting capitalists to dispense their property to ameliorate the underdeveloped Christian countries. They side with Pure Land Buddhists to build future equal society under the light of spiritual faith. Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra mentions that worry is the common feature of life for both the rich and the poor. (Takeda 10) In short, equality in the sense of liberation concerns objectively the actual situation of people, the “suppressed” to encourage the rich to reorient their minds themselves, open their hearts to embrace the needy. By merit, equality can empower all, with nobody having to serve the oppressors but working for the sake of developing our world.

### Realms for Equality: Buddha-Kṣetra and Kingdom of God

Buddhist Dukkha-Satya remarked on the situation for all living beings without exception. Injustice Dukkha reminds us of the relevance of Catholic liberation and Buddhist salvation in Pure Land. *Dukkha* in Buddha’s explanation shows how the poor become poorer and get more suffering. Metta-Karuna in Buddhism matches Christian Love caring for the needy. For Catholics, liberation theology carried out “no innovation of Christian doctrine but simply applies principles of early Christianity” (Feroz, “Liberation Theology: The response of Latin Americans Catholic to socioeconomic problems” 54) to free the subjects from spiritual and physical troubles. For them, salvation is to transform this world to the better, viz. Buddha-Kṣetra and Kingdom of God.

Jambudvīpa is not Buddha’s kingdom but a place for those who live a life full of covetousness, hatred and ignorance. It is distant from the Kingdom of God that, distant from Egypt, where Jesus witnessed oppression and inequality. Promised Land must be Pure Land in which communities develop new ways of sharing the land to use and to share the products of labour (Cavanaugh, “The Ecclesiologies of Medellín and the Lessons of the Base Communities” 10). The relationship between the other world and this earth is defined in words of world transformation by Christians and Buddhists as actualise the primal vow of Jesus and Amitābha, respectively. For Christian liberation theology, the poor is the way to God (Gutiérrez, “Theology from Experience of the Poor” 31). The Holy Father blesses all in the Kingdom of God, the very Promised Land in Jesus’ ideal “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:23; 13: 15-53; 18: 1-5), where there is material satisfaction for all. Similarly, Amitābha’s kingdom is constructed by seven kinds

of jewel widely to satisfy the masses. To build the Buddha-kṣetra, practitioners prepare necessary merit by Dānaparamita. Charitable associations like Cí-jì, Fó-quāng-shān, Soka Gakkai have been established and globalised to build the Pure Land.

### Reconstructing the world

The boundary between this world and other world requires Buddhist-Christian movements to reconstruct the society to liberate the oppressed in four ways, viz. social justice, quality of life, humanism and transcendental after-life.

Christian Theologians agreed with Karl Marx's explanation that bourgeois in North America and Europe have to be responsible for any revolution against injustice since economic and political structures of capitalism cause inequity and conflict. In the age of industrialisation, the poor play a significant role in development of modern society by actual labour. Being well-behaved, they would contribute more to economic achievements. Otherwise, exploitation is the major cause of rebels, therefore Pius XI encouraged corporation of labour and capital. In the context of these relations, Amitābha Sūtra describes sentient beings in Sukhāvātī producing merit through daily works and in turn Buddhas in ten directions bless them equally.

From the same recourse of blood and flesh, God delivers the same conditions to all people and only their role in society makes the difference. Undoubtedly, the world is not only for the rich. Reading Luke 12: 4, theologians advise the rich to voluntarily distribute the land and other instruments of labour to the poor, giving them opportunity to work by providing financial resource to invest in their business. In Buddhist view, by this way, the rich free hapless workers from slavery since Charity (Dāna) means to aid, not naively giving gifts. Private accumulation of wealth is criticised as the major factor of inequality therefore Kingdom of God is the rich country but not the country of the rich. Amitābha constructs the whole realm of seven precious materials sharing peace and Dharma in Sukhāvātī communally to everyone, even the least meritorious person (Amitābha Vow 28).

Some scholars disagree with liberation theologians who borrow Karl Marx's idea of class struggle. However, what Marx's attempt was to challenge bourgeoisie and to construct the third world by placing the working class in the leading position. It again creates another polar that intensifies confliction. Theologians on the one hand recognised that armed subversion is forced in Latin America. (Forrohar 4) On the other hand, they believed that God always blesses activities to mobilise a kingdom of spirituality where God organises a classless community. This is similar to the Buddhist idea that after reincarnating in Pure Land, all are equal non-regressive Bodhisattva (Amitābha Vow 22, 23, 24). CELAM meeting at Puebla in

1979 judged that a small number of people enjoying luxury is a suffering to the vast community as “a scandal and contradiction in Christianity”. In the Buddhist mind, the rich equalizes the poor in the opportunity to see Buddha and achieve Dharmakāya in Sukhāvātī. (Vasubandhu’s Commentary on Rebirth in Pure Land) Discrimination of classes is not the nature of life but the phenomena resulting from political conflicts.

To improve the quality of life here means whatever the rich hold in hand should also be for the poor including food, clothes, residential house, estate, etc. The investors make their workers comfortable and at the same time feel comfortable themselves. In the Bodhisattva path, to construct the Pure Land, practitioners must serve other beings. Buddha’s world has no poverty, beggars, robbers, stealers because everything is available all the time, appeared as requesting (Amitābha Vow 38). In the first vow, Amitābha desired to constitute his realm without three evil ways (hell, hunger ghost, animal). The whole infrastructure of Sukhāvātī is constructed of precious materials (Amitābha Vow 32). Chapter nineteen of Sukhāvātīvyuha Sūtra describes that merit produces excessive wealth. Liberation theologians have argued for the same. Certainly, the owners’ caring attitude can help workers to be comfortable and also enhance the quality of manufacture. Economical changes prevent poverty, epidemic, unemployment, illiteracy, homelessness and protect people from calamity, etc. The employers must care about the life-health of employees as they do for themselves to secure a sustainable development. Like theologians, Jōdo Shinshū priests are ready to engage in business for income generation. In turn they invest in social causes and charity.

Respect and love that define humanity have been ignored by capitalists around the world. Industrialism bereaved the slave of almost basic conditions for a man to live. Draconian policies, merciless behaviour, unmatched wages and so on threw the ill-fated into inhuman environment. Catholic liberationists in Latin America remind this point through actual movement that they have led to try in their way to resettle human rights in the new age. Pure Land suggests that we construct a realm in which all beings are at the same level of humanity, neither in higher or a lower position. There is neither distinction of superior-senior nor suppressor-oppressed nor harmfulness in the pure land.

Both the rich and the poor are sinful, need to be saved by God Almighty (Luke 7: 22; 5: 32; 10: 1-10). Hōnen said to Shinran that all rich and unfortunate people are equally saved by lord Amitābha if they follow genuine Faith. Liberationists view the bourgeoisie as sinful in their nature of greed and selfishness while Buddhists criticize covetousness (Rāga), hatred (Dosa), ignorance (Loma) as three backgrounds of every immoral deed. Jesus comes to this world in human form,

actually he unifies with God's spirit, for the sake of bestowing liberty, light, satisfactory conditions on the oppressed (Luke 4: 18-19). His kingdom of God is for any follower. Amitābha always prepares the seats in Sukhāvātī for those who deeply believe and desire rebirth, even a person with evil karma. Departure from this world for the other world, in fact, engages one in a process of transformation by actual deeds. 'This world' is the dark, corrupt, inhuman one. In contrast 'Other world' is bright, equal, civilized. Pure Land Buddhism connects the two in present life, not waiting for rebirth after death. Without innovation, there can be no equality in the world. So to bring change, it is important to connect secular society with religious realm. Both Pure Land and Christian canons regard the annihilation of one world for the emergence of the other as a widespread way for liberation, but the difference, in H. Nakamura's view is that "In Christianity vicarious atonement is effected by Christ alone, whereas, in Buddhism it is affected by many Bodhisattvas" (81-82).

### Dialogue for the Perfect Liberation Movements

Awakened by the impact of the Cuban revolution in 1959, Liberationists inevitably borrowed Marxist political ideas that in class struggle the workers lead the movement against employers demanding their rights. Dialogue between Buddhists and Liberationists can present the model for arguing for a religious viewpoint of equality between the poor and rich rather than political rebellion because so long as the movements attempt at political purposes, the cruelty would still remain unsolved. Shinran promoted Pure Land for socio-spiritual emancipation, not political insurgency. Actually, to liberate the oppressed people is salvation by removing the sin of greed and selfishness (Gutierrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation" 247-8). Explaining liberation at three levels, Gutierrez combined Marx-Hegel as a mutual transformation between this (materialism) and other worlds (Theism). He placed political role at the lowest and considered sin as the key theme of liberation in order to establish the Kingdom of God without fighting to establish the kingdom of God where there would be no "king", military, or police as there would be no crimes, social crises, illegal actions. Jesus had said "my kingdom is not this world" (John 18:36).

Revolution causes more serious conflict between classes until struggling classes bear in mind that social justice is the precondition to God. As an alternative to atheist Marxism where economic contradiction is only solved by material struggle, Buddhists encourage theologians to highly evaluate the ethical principle of nonviolence in New Testament to change social order in religious light. Liberation theology bears two characteristics, viz. 1) ceasing the injustice in various di-

mensions of secular life and 2) through the activities of the church, Bishops are also responsible for social works to bring justice (Perhaps we can mention Pope Francis' attempts, and also the work of Indian Christian theologians in this context). Materialist philosophy can achieve present material profit but nobody can assure that disunity, brutality and more poverty would be extinguished. Evidently, after the World War II, military conflicts still continue in some areas and during the cold-war, many countries suffered poverty and deprivation.. This reason particularly makes Gutierrez prefer theological liberation to secular development. In Segundo Galilea's words, Christians serve for liberation from sinfulness that causes under-development and injustice. Christian theologians recognised Pope John XXIII's suggestion that the church should not only protest against inequality in daily life but should show concern for heavenly happiness too. (We can add "This is a positive intervention in suffering by taking into account the psychological and emotional paradigms of poverty and violence"). Similarly, Buddhist Pure Land takes people gradually far from worldly pleasures. One would not attain true happiness if he remained centred on mundane life whose nature is greed, envy, ignorance, competition and other sins. Here, "Pure Land" refers to the place that purifies the totality of sinfulness.

Amitābha Buddha blesses all creatures equally and by his powers rebirth of justice and peace takes place. Similarly, without a reference to Father God, liberation movement of inequality would never succeed. Gutierrez reads the gospels as foundation for the struggle for justice because liberation theology of inequality is "inherent in the life of faith and the life of church". Kingdom of God requires the three elements of faith, hope and charity. Similarly, Jōdo Shinshū advocates that the three conditions for rebirth in Pure Land are faith, vow to rebirth and actual practice of Nenbutsu. Three elements unify power of self (Jiriki) and other (Tariki). In their dialectic relation, right belief and right action are stimulated by self-power, while the eventual salvation needs the power of Amitābha and God.

Faith in Pure Land is of two characteristics, viz. true and pure. To qualify for rebirth, one raises absolute belief in Amitābha and his staff, his world as well as self-power. Theologians read Bible of Faith in Christ and God. Those who have doubts about Christ and Word will be not chosen to the Kingdom of God.

Theologians mobilized the poor to struggle for their benefit, upholding their aspirations of equal life. Buddhists provide knowledge of Āryamaṅgala (path of sage) including three ways viz. right deeds, right speech and right livelihood that lead to liberation in peace. There is no sustainable solution except changing their mind through the activities of the church. Buddhists agree with M. Foroohar that the purpose is to free from sin rather than continuing to carry out violence (Foroohar

48). Only through the compassion of Amitābha and God, movements stimulate peaceful solutions to properly cease dictatorship as well as tyranny.

Salvation here is the beautiful synonym for theological liberation in two manners, viz. by self power (Jiriki) and other power (Tariki). According to Shinran, existence of human is the existence of sin (Nakamura 85-87). So, on the one hand to be saved by Amitābha is to take rebirth in Sukhāvātī, the sinless paradise. On the other hand, salvation is nothing else than changing impure mind to brighter. Rahner regarded Gutierrez's opinion as originally evangelical as reflected in the Bible according to which salvation is common for all because Christ dwells with and in us (John 4: 17). In Christian Charity and Love, Gutierrez himself coupled human love with God love. Pure Land practitioners advocate Buddha-nature as the most precious pearl in each individual. In short, Buddhist salvation means living beings unite with Buddha just as Christians come to oneness with God in the light of Bible "the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14: 10).

Liberation theology is a historical experience. To avoid abusing religion for political activities, liberationists can work towards converting the ideology of capitalists rather than siding with the Third world to fight against them. The central teaching of Buddha and Jesus talks about compassion for the whole, especially to those who are ignorant, poverty, unpeaceful. Apart from the suffering and injustice in the world, there exists another place where there is complete bliss brought about by the power of Amitābha and Almighty God's compassion. The opportunity to enter this land is equal for all beings if they follow religious instructions. To meet Amitābha lord in Pure Land, one must fulfil true and pure faith first. Then he must practice holding Buddha's name to accumulate Modern liberation theologians and Pure Land Buddhists are constructing two worlds of equality through three aspects. Firstly, destiny of the poor is vastly diverse including exploited workers, underdeveloped communities, sinners and so forth. Equality manifests in Buddhist-Christian universal love by replacing slavery with modern technological inventions and encouraging capitalists to recognise the new role of labour.

Secondly, removing all barriers between groups, communities, classes or parties will resettle society. One is not respected due to rich properties, political position and fortune but meritorious deeds. The principle of equality regulated in *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* and Gospels by Mark, Mathew, Luke and John display prominence of 'other-power' to evaluate the equal salvation for virtuous people. Finally, equality is necessarily based on the particular operation of social work. It is time for Buddhist Sangha and Christian bishops to step out of the church to work for society. As the spiritual leaders, they perfectly know how to serve people, how

to do merit and how to establish a peaceful life in Buddha and God's words.

*Notes:*

1. Buddha could not see any distinction between two people in same-red blood because all cried in suffering life. He indicated that Vaiśya and Śūdra bear the Buddha-nature and capacity to become an enlightened one as the upper classes (Brahman, Kśatriya) do. Buddha-nature does not increase nor decrease among diverse clans, is the very human nature.
2. The varna system classifying people as Brahman, Kśatriya, Vaiśya, Śūdra according to Vedic literature.
3. Pāli word Pañcakkandha pinpoints the life as a heap of five factors: form (Rūpa), sensation (Vedāna), thought (Sañña), volition (saṅkhāra) and consciousness (Viññāṇa). Of them, Rūpa consists of totally physical organs, the rest four are mental elements.
4. Gold (Survaṇa), silver (Rupyā), lapis lazuli (Vaidūrya), crystal (Sphaḷṭika), pearl (Muktā), red coral (Lohitikā), agate (Mūsaragalvā).

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