Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies

Research Article

Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies
https://so02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/hasss
ISSN (Online): 2630-0079

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE FOR THE EARTH: ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY IN THE POETRY OF MARY OLIVER AND THICH NHAT HANH

Darin Pradittatsanee

Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Corresponding author:
Darin Pradittatsanee
darin.p@chula.ac.th

Received: *10 October 2023*
Revised: *21 December 2023*
Accepted: *22 December 2023*
Published: *30 January 2024*

Citation:
Pradittatsanee, D. (2024). Interreligious dialogue for the earth: Ecological spirituality in the poetry of Mary Oliver and Thich Nhat Hanh. Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies, 24(1), 1–13.

This paper examines the poetry of two contemporary writers from divergent religious backgrounds: American poet Mary Oliver (1935–2019) and Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022). Taking a comparative approach to examine the writers' ecological spirituality, it attempts to examine how Oliver and Nhat Hanh envision self, nature, God, and spirituality in *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (2017) and *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (1999) respectively. It demonstrates striking affinities of the two poets' visions, arguing that they are kindred spirits despite their different religious backgrounds. It examines how each writer's perception of self and nature is founded upon their religious ideas and how their spirituality is, in turn, enhanced by this ecological vision. While Oliver's spirituality is based upon her belief in God's immanence in nature and thus her view of nature as God's body, the Buddhist notion of interbeing is the bedrock of Nhat Hanh's perception of self in relation to other things. Both similarly emphasize the significance of contemplative practice in nature as a means to achieve an insight into divinity or interbeing. Furthermore, this paper shows how the reading of the two writers in juxtaposition with each other invites an interreligious dialogue of the Buddhist and Christian poets. It employs its comparative analysis of the two writers as a case study to reflect upon possibilities for a fruitful interfaith dialogue in our attempt to nurture our spiritual lives and foster our bonds with nature.

Keywords: Mary Oliver; Thich Nhat Hanh; ecological spirituality; Buddhism; Christianity

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, there has emerged an interdisciplinary field of academic study which focuses on the connection between ecology and religion. Scholars have employed various terms to encapsulate the scope of this discipline; for example, "spiritual ecology," "ecological spirituality," or "eco-theology." Pointing out the roots of this field, Mary Evelyn Tucker (2007), the co-founder of the Yale Forum on Religion and

Ecology,[1] explains that "[a]n ecological spirituality is emerging as we penetrate the Earth scientifically and technically and as we examine other cultures spiritually and historically" (p. 4). She also suggests the potential studies of world religious traditions which extend beyond "human salvation and interpersonal ethics" to search for "the models for interacting with the natural world in a mutually sustainable and non-destructive manner" (p. 5). This field promises the mutual enhancement of individuals' or communities' spiritual lives and the well-being of the earth. As Theological Studies Professor Douglas E. Christie (2013) further notes, this field embeds the "double insight," "that spiritual thought and practice is immeasurably enriched through being situated within the natural world, and that ecological understanding is given added depth and meaning by extending the ecological field to include traditions of spiritual thought and practice" (p. 5). Anthropologist Leslie E. Sponsel (2007), who defines spiritual ecology as "a diverse and complex arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interface of religions and spiritualities on the one hand, and on the other, of ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms" (p. 340), points out that it not only is an academic field but also "involves religious and spiritual sociopolitical movements" (p. 344). Furthermore, religious leaders have given increasing attention to the connection between spirituality and environmental concerns.[2] One prime example is evident in *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home* (2015). In the Encyclical, not only does Pope Francis argue that the Book of Genesis should be construed not as avowing human exploitation of nature but as emphasizing "a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature" (p. 49), but he also advocates for Christians' ecological spirituality which is grounded upon the notion of the Trinity who "has left its mark on all creation" (p. 174). To him, while such a spirituality is enhanced by our profound relationship with nature with an awareness that "*each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure*" (p. 174, italics in original), it can also "motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world" (p. 158).

Intersecting with the alliance between religion and ecology is the most recent development of interreligious dialogue. In their introduction to *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue in the Twenty-First Century* (2016), Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion, and Peter C. Phan point out that today's conflicting world calls for a necessity to "break the strangling narrowness of our own particular religious home, institution, and even community" (p. 7). They invite scholars and religious thinkers to step out of the traditional stances in comparative religion, i.e. "exclusivism," "inclusivism," or even "pluralism" (p. 7) and practice a more open-minded form of interreligious dialogue which is informed by

> a deep intellectual and spiritual humility (kenosis, or self-emptying, to use the term common in Jewish and Christian epistemological parlance) that compels one to recognize, gratefully and gracefully, that one's religion and one's faith community offers a true but ever partial insight into reality and that other religions and other faith communities can and do correct, complement, enhance, and perfect one's own. (p. 7)

In "Interreligious Dialogue in a Polarized World," published in the same book, Richard Penaskovic (2016) further points to the potential of world religions in more seriously engaging ways to solve the socio-political and environmental problems which the global community is facing. He states that "interreligious dialogue has taken on renewed importance today for at least three reasons": "global terrorism," "the fact that religion appears to be a contributing factor to conflict around the globe," and "the heightened awareness of the public and religious leaders about global climate change" (pp. 29–30). More specifically, American theologian Paul Knitter (1995) argues for the possibility of taking human and ecological well-being as a common ground for interfaith dialogue in *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*.

In light of these emerging fields, this paper examines the poetry of two contemporary writers from divergent religious backgrounds: American poet Mary Oliver (1935–2019) and Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022). Taking a comparative approach to examine the writers' ecological spirituality, this paper attempts to examine how Oliver and Nhat Hanh envision self, nature, God, and spirituality in *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (2017) and *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (1999) respectively. It will demonstrate striking affinities of the two poets' visions, arguing that they are kindred spirits despite their different religious backgrounds. It specifically examines how each

[1] Mary Evelyn Tucker is one of the leading scholars in the field of ecology and religion. She, together with her husband John Grim, organized a series of ten conferences of World Religions and Ecology at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard from 1995 to 1998. They also served as series editors for the ten volumes from the conferences published by Harvard University Press. For more information on Tucker's innumerable contributions to this field, see Ray Waddle's article "Mary Evelyn Tucker: The Flourishing of People and Planet" (2014).

[2] Examples of statements made by religious leaders and organizations on religion and ecology can be found in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (2004, 2nd ed.), edited by Roger S. Gottlieb.

writer's perception of self and nature is founded upon their religious/spiritual ideas and how their spirituality is, in turn, enhanced by this ecological vision. Furthermore, this paper shows how the reading of the two writers in juxtaposition with each other fascinatingly invites an interreligious dialogue of the Buddhist and Christian poets. It employs its comparative analysis of the two writers as a case study to reflect upon possibilities for a fruitful interfaith dialogue in our attempt to nurture our spiritual lives and foster our bonds with nature. It argues that the two writers' view of self and nature both shows how Buddhism and contemplative Christian traditions can complement each other and provide skillful means to enhance the profundity of our spiritual lives and intimacy with the natural world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper diverges from existing criticism on Nhat Hanh and Oliver in that none has taken a comparative approach to examine the two poets' ecological spirituality before. Few scholarly papers on Nhat Hanh's ecological vision include Julius-Kei Kato's "What Has Hybridity Got to Do with Ecology?: What Christian-Buddhist Hybridity-as-Hermeneutical-Lens Can Suggest to the Theological Conversation on Ecology" (2022). Kato's essay advocates what he calls "Christian-Buddhist hybridity" (p. 105) as a new paradigm which incorporates teachings from the two different religious traditions to contribute to theological dialogue on the current ecological crisis. He argues that Christian reflection on ecology, which is characterized by anthropocentrism and subsequent separation of humans from nature, can be complemented by a "nondual, unitive paradigm" (p. 112) in the Buddhist teaching of emptiness, as exemplified by Nhat Hanh's notion of interbeing (pp. 112–114).

As for scholarship on Oliver, Jonathan N. Barron (2001) notes that while Oliver had published her poetry since 1963 and won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1984, her work had gained attention from few critics (p. 242) and that Janet McNew's 1989 essay entitled "Mary Oliver and the Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry" sparked literary scholars' attention to Oliver's poetry (pp. 241–242). McNew (1989) argues that Oliver's poetry differs from the patriarchal tradition of Romantic poetry in which a male poet interacts with nature as the "mute and female" Other (p. 60) and aims at "transcending nature and its attendant mortality" (p. 62). Oliver "ignore[s] [the] defining powers" of "patriarchal boundaries," such as self and nature or soul and body (p. 68). "Instead of forsaking the natural for supernatural eternity, her poems follow the cycles of the seasons to imagine loss and the possibility for renewal" as they reveal that "we are creatures" subject to death (p. 70). Relevant to this paper are two articles which examine Oliver's poetry in light of Christianity. As Barron (2001) points out, Douglas Burton-Christie's "Nature, Spirit, and Imagination in the Poetry of Mary Oliver" (1996) is the first article which studies Oliver's poetry from a Christian perspective (p. 246). Burton-Christie argues that Oliver's poetry is characterized by a tension of "correspondence," or "the search for symbolic meaning" (para. 5) and "adequation," or "letting things be in their concrete particularity, refraining from the temptation to symbolize" (para. 6). Todd Davis's "The Earth as God's Body: Incarnation as Communion in the Poetry of Mary Oliver" (2009) points out that the poet's vision of nature is informed by the notion of "God's immanence and incarnation in the creation," which corresponds with the idea that the world is "the body of God" as propounded by Christian theologian Sallie McFague (p. 607). Finally, an interesting article which examines the poet's spiritual vision from ecological and postmodern perspectives, Laird Christensen's "The Pragmatic Mysticism of Mary Oliver" (2002) argues that her poetry "construct[s] a subject position based on ecological interdependence" to supersede the destructive idea of human independence. Christensen also points out that "the dynamic dance of energy" depicted in her poetry is "the same one that science describes less ecstatically through its laws of thermodynamics" (p. 136). These articles on Oliver's view of nature and God serve as a foundation from which this paper branches out.

3. INTERBEING: THICH NHAT HANH'S BUDDHIST ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh depicts his reflections upon life, nature and painful experience during the Vietnam War. Composed of two parts—Historical and Ultimate Dimensions—the collection begins with a short poem which deconstructs this binarism and advocates the interrelatedness of the two dimensions: "If you touch deeply the historical dimension, / you find yourself in the ultimate dimension. / If you touch the ultimate dimension, / you have not left the historical dimension" (p. 2). This poem serves as a compass to the whole collection, encapsulating the Buddhist concept of non-self or emptiness and interpenetration of all things which Nhat Hanh refers to as "interbeing." In Buddhism, since all conditioned things are always in a flux and their existence hinges upon the convening of various causes and conditions, they cannot be regarded as possessing a permanent identity independent of other things. As Peter

Harvey (2013) explains, according to the Mādhyamika school or the "Emptiness Teaching" in Mahayana Buddhism, all things are deemed as devoid of an essential self: "By 'itself,' a thing is nothing. It is what it is only in relation to other things, and they are what they are in relation to it and yet other things" (p. 118). Nhat Hanh elucidates in *Zen Keys* (1995) that "[t]o see things in their interbeing nature is to perceive their nature of interdependence, not having a separate, independent self (p. 93). He gives an example of a table which in our mind has an essential identity as a table. However, this Buddhist notion invites one to discern in what we perceive as a table the existence of "non-table elements," such as "[t]he forest, the tree, the saw . . . , the cabinetmaker," "the parents of the cabinetmaker," and "the bread that they eat" (pp. 40–41). In other words, "[t]he existence of the table demonstrates the existence of all non-table elements, in fact, of the entire universe" (p. 41).

The Buddhist notion of interbeing is the bedrock of Nhat Hanh's worldview, especially his perception of self in relation to other things. Throughout this collection, he presents the interweaving of humans and other beings, both human and nonhuman. For example, in "The Fisherman and the Fish," the fish, the speaker of the poem, reflects upon his long journey of "[h]aving undergone a thousand million lifetimes" which comes to an end when he is caught by the fisherman (p. 74). The fish expresses his understanding that his death is due to the fact that the fisherman "need[s] to live" (p. 74) and also his ability to "die peacefully / without vengeance / without despair" (p. 75). The fish's acceptance of death is based upon his wisdom about the true nature of all things: "life is made of death, / being is made of nonbeing, / all is interdependent, / and you and I, / we contain each other" (p. 75). In another poem, "Please Call Me by My True Names," the speaker presents himself as a variety of nonhuman beings: a bud, a bird, a caterpillar, a jewel, a mayfly, and a frog. Debunking the binary opposition of the oppressor and the oppressed, he even refers to himself as both "the child in Uganda" and "the arms merchant, / selling deadly weapons to Uganda"; and both a young refugee who was raped on a boat and threw herself into the ocean and "the pirate" whose "heart" is "not yet capable / of seeing and loving" (p. 72). Not only does the speaker see himself and the more-than-human world as interpenetrating, but he also employs this insight into interbeing to illuminate the darkness of the afflicted world.

In "Historical Dimension," which contains anti-war poems which vividly delineate the devastating effects of the Vietnam War upon humans and the natural world, Nhat Hanh employs Buddhist philosophy to offer consolation and hope to the afflicted. For example, "Experience" depicts the devastating effects of the war upon humans and nonhumans—ranging from villagers to "the scorched and gutted fields" (p. 10) and the vanishing "birds of our stricken land" (p. 13), the images which are reminiscent of despoliation of nature by bombs and Agent Orange that the US army deployed over rural areas of South Vietnam. In the midst of starvation, illnesses and death, the speaker offers his companionship to all that is suffering: "I have come to be with you, / to weep with you / for our ravaged land / and broken lives" (p. 10). His reflection that "Here is the impermanent / and yet continuously flowing world" (p. 12) signifies hope which is grounded upon the Buddhist notion of transitoriness which, in the poem's context, points to both life's uncertainty and possibilities for renewal. His optimism also resides in the compassion of the younger generations who volunteer to help during the war. Viewing each of them as a "tiny bodhisattva" who "holds a shovel or a mattock / and throws up earth for a bridge /or for burying the bloated dead," he asks a rhetorical question, "are they not Quan Yin[3] [a bodhisattva] in all her glory, / her charity, her fearlessness?" (p. 13).

While "Experience" finds consolation in humans' loving-kindness and the mutability of all things, several poems in "Historical Dimension" accentuate the significance of nature and the Buddhist notion of interbeing as a means to cope with life's adversities. For instance, "Message" delineates the solace that the speaker who lost his brother in the war receives from nature. While "[c]arrying the dead body of my brother," he addresses the deceased's spirit: "Earth will keep you tight within her arms, my dear, / so that tomorrow you will be born as flowers" (p. 5). To assuage his sorrow, he explains that "[t]he tears I shed yesterday have become rain" and "I kneel down on the grass, / when I notice your presence" (p. 5). Through the lens of interbeing, the speaker sees that his brother has been transformed into grass and flowers, and that his own tears become the rain that nurtures these plants. The alleviation of his sadness is thus made possible by his insight into the interpenetration of all beings. Moving beyond the dichotomy of humans/nature or life/death, the speaker can make peace with this great loss. His declaration in "Butterflies over the Golden Mustard Seeds" that "If you have suffered, it is only / because you have forgotten / you are a leaf, a flower" (p. 78) similarly exemplifies this idea that an insight into the interpenetration of all things can serve as an antidote to afflictions.

[3] As Harvey explains, in Mahayana Buddhism, the *Bodhisattva* is the one "on the path to perfect Buddhahood, whose task is to compassionately help beings while maturing his or her own wisdom" (p. 151). Advanced *Bodhisattvas* are referred to as *avalokitevara*, meaning "[t]he Lord Who Looks Down (with compassion)." In China, s/he is called "Guanyin (Kuan-yin), Cry Regarder" (Harvey, 2013, pp. 176–177).

While the poems in "Historical Dimension" depict nature as perceived through the Buddhist perspective of interbeing as a refuge which enables the speaker to cope with life's suffering in mundane reality, "Ultimate Dimension" abounds with poems which present Nhat Hanh's spiritual[4] vision of nature which is characterized by his view of nature as sacred and, especially, his concept of interbeing. For instance, in the poem "April" which portrays the return of springtime, the human speaker associates the natural world in his "homeland" which is "the rainforest" with sacredness and maternal nurturance, employing the images of the "trees" that "stand / like pillars in a cathedral" and "[t]he motherly hands" which "prepared for our arrival / in the warmth and light of Spring" (p. 99). He then describes how he comes into existence and is cared for by all natural beings: "As soon as Earth and Sky brought me to life, / I was offered music by the birds / and fragrance by the trees" (p. 99). In his spiritual vision of nature, his human existence originates from, and is interwoven with, the natural world. In other words, he inter-is with nature. The speaker depicts nature as a sacred space of transformation and harmonious co-existence of both human and nonhuman beings who are granted personhood and equality. He particularly describes the gentle advent of another being, whom he refers to as "you" who "transform[s] yourself / into a tiny flower / clinging to Mother Earth" (p. 100) and reveals his discernment of the natural being as "part of this *interbeing* / that knows no beginning and no end" (p. 101, italics in original). Anthropomorphizing all natural beings, the speaker presents the "sunshine" as "play[ing] the violin" (p. 101) as "Everything is participating in the concert— / birds, flowers, trees, creeks" (p. 100). He perceives all beings as contributing their unique song in "the concert" of the forest. In addition, he views the natural environment as a space of self-restoration. Although toward the poem's end this rainforest is disrupted by "terrible explosions" and "[a] flock of iron birds" (p. 101) in the Vietnam War, the poem presents these destructions as transitory and instead highlights the natural world's ability to renew itself: "Peace is restored among the trees. / The forest is able to smile again, / and the concert resumes" (p. 102). Nature's self-renewal can be accounted for by the notion of interbeing. As all things are transitory and opposite things are, in spiritual reality, intricately intertwined, what is perceived as death or destruction actually contains seeds of rebirth within itself. In this light, destruction will eventually be transformed into renewal.

It is worth noting that the poet illuminates the vision of interbeing from the perspectives of humans and nonhumans alike, thereby suggesting that this discernment does not exclusively belong to humans alone. While "True Source" concretely depicts the interpenetration of self and other beings as the human speaker states that in him there are "a strong and graceful mountain peak," "a winding river," "a river of stars" and "a little boy" (p. 116), the prose poem "The Story of a River" relates how a river who chases after clouds has gradually come to realize that her own being "was water by nature and at the same time a cloud, the moon, the sky, the stars, and the snow" (p. 149). This insight not only brings her "freedom and happiness" (p. 149) but also an ability to "touch the home of all coming, going, being, and nonbeing" (p. 148)—which signifies the non-duality of all things.

One distinctive feature of the poems in "Ultimate Dimension" is that they not only celebrate the interweaving of all beings and things but also significantly add the Buddha, who is referred to as "the Blessed One" or "the Tathagata" to the equation and thus envision the relationships of self, nature, and the Buddha in light of interbeing as well. One salient example is "Looking for Each Other," in which the human speaker makes a direct address to the "World Honored One" and describes his long quest for this spiritual Being (p. 118). Despite his initial inability to find the Blessed One, he states, "I've always felt your presence with a mysterious certainty" (p. 118). Furthermore, he has a strong conviction that "for thousands of lifetimes, / you and I have been one" (p. 118). The poem's climax resides in his discovery of this unity in the natural world. Nature is emphasized as playing a crucial role in this epiphanic moment. To illustrate, "all the stars" offer him an assurance of the presence of the Blessed One as they "confirmed that you were there!" (p. 118). Moreover, "[l]ooking into the mirror of the moon, suddenly / I saw myself / and I saw you smiling, Blessed One" (p. 119).

[4] I use the words "spirituality" or "spiritual" throughout this paper. To discuss Nhat Hanh's and Oliver's ecological spirituality, it behooves me to provide the definition of the word "spirituality." In *Spirituality: A Brief History* (2013), Philip Sheldrake points out that the origin of the word "spirituality" lies in "the Latin noun *spiritualitas* associated with the adjective *spiritualis* (spiritual)" and that these words derive from "the Greek noun *pneuma*, spirit, and the adjective *pneumatikos* as they appear in St Paul's letters in the New Testament" (p. 2). In this context, "'spirit' is not the opposite of 'physical' or 'material' . . . but of 'flesh' . . . which refers to everything that is contrary to the Spirit of God" (p. 2). He explains that a "spiritual person" in the Bible refers to "someone within whom the Spirit of God dwelt or who lived under the influence of the Spirit of God" (p. 2). Sheldrake further discusses the contemporary meaning of this word: "spirituality" involves 1) "what is holistic—that is, a fully integrated approach to life" as this concept is linked with another concept, "the holy" or "*hālig*," "whole" or "complete" in Old English, 2) "a quest for the 'sacred,'" 3) "a quest for meaning, including the purpose of life," and 4) "the quest for ultimate values in contrast to an instrumentalized or purely materialistic approach to life" (pp. 3–4).

Nature can serve as a medium which allows the speaker to discern the wondrous oneness of himself and all beings, natural and supra-natural alike.

It should be added that the poet saliently equates nature with the Buddha and dharma, his teachings, in the poems in "Ultimate Dimension." For instance, "Beckoning" succinctly states that "Flower, leaf, and pebble – / all are chanting the *Lotus Sutra*"[5] (p. 121). In "Sunflower," the speaker invites someone to "look at the clear, blue ocean of the *Dharmakaya*, / and look at the green color, / the manifestation of suchness" (p. 166). This being is "the sunflower" which "all flowers turn toward" and "contemplate" (p. 166). In a note to this poem, the poet indicates that "[T]he sunflower is *prajnaparamita*, transcendent understanding"[6] (p. 166). The sunflower that he refers to is the embodiment of the Buddha and his teachings. It is not just a physical being, but a natural being which is illuminated with an insight into interbeing. The word "*Dharmakaya*" used in the poem points to the fact that nature presented in this poem is informed by Buddhist philosophy. In *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology* (2008), Nhat Hanh explains the meaning of *dharmakaya*:

> Dharmakaya literally means the "body" (kaya) of the Buddha's teachings (Dharma), the way of understanding and love. Before passing away, the Buddha told his disciples, "Only my physical body will pass away. My Dharma body will remain with you forever." Dharmakaya also means "the essence of all that exists." All phenomena—the song of a bird, the warm rays of the sun, a cup of hot tea—are manifestations of the Dharmakaya. We, too, are of the same nature of these wonders of the universe. (p. 106)

His explanation suggests that all things and beings which constitute the web of interconnectedness are the manifestations of the Buddha's *dharma* body. In other words, nature is *dharmakaya.*

Presented at the end of "Looking for Each Other" in which the speaker addresses the "Blessed One" as "the source of well-being flowing through numberless troubled lives" (p. 119), this insight into interbeing engenders a sense of intimate communion with the Blessed One, self-compassion, as well as loving-kindness for all beings, humans and nonhumans:

> You are the source of peace,
> Solidity, and inner freedom.
> You are the Buddha, the Tathagata.
> With my one-pointed mind
> I vow to nourish your solidity and freedom in myself
> so I can offer solidity and freedom to countless others,
> now and forever. (p. 119)

Ecologically speaking, this insight thus generates love and determination to protect the environment, which is perceived no longer as existing outside of oneself but inter-being with oneself. Spiritually, it liberates the speaker from binarisms (e.g. self/other, happiness/sorrow, life/death) through which his mind illusorily perceives reality, thereby enabling him to attain inner freedom.

For Nhat Hanh, meditation or mindfulness practice serves as a means to achieve an insight into the interbeing of all things. Several poems in "Ultimate Dimension" depict the speaker's own experience of meditation or his teachings on mindfulness in relation to the natural world. For instance, in "Taking Refuge," the speaker describes breathing meditation as providing him with an insight into interbeing at physical and spiritual dimensions. Not only does this mindful practice enable him to return to "the island within [him]self" where there are "clear streams of water," "birds," "sunshine," and "fresh air," but it also brings him to a realization that the Buddhist Three Jewels—"the Buddha," "the Dharma" and "the Sangha," which he interprets as constituting "the five skandhas"[7]—are within himself (p. 191). Connecting meditation practice with nature, "Our True Heritage" presents the kind-loving voice of the speaker who invites us to embrace an abundance of happiness which the universe has in store. He reminds us that we have been living as beggars or "destitute" children whereas each of us is, in reality, "the richest person on Earth" (p. 187). We only need to breathe mindfully in order to claim this true heritage. As he puts it, "It needs you to breathe gently / for the miracles to be displayed" (p. 187). Similarly, in "Earth Touching," the speaker encourages us to practice mindful breathing

[5] The *Lotus Sutra* or the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* Sutra is one of the most important scriptures in the Mahayana tradition. It focuses on the *bodhisattva* of compassion, or *avalokitevara* as "the focus of devout worship, contemplation and prayers for help" (Harvey, 2013, p. 177).

[6] The *Prajñā-pāramitā*, or "Perfection of Wisdom" Sutras focus on the teaching of "emptiness" (Harvey, 2013, p. 114).

[7] The "five skandhas" in Buddhism mean "the five factors which go to make up a 'person'": "form," "feelings," "perception," "volitional activities," and "consciousness" (Harvey, 2013, pp. 55–57).

and walking. He delineates this activity as a spiritual communion between practitioners "who sustain the mudra [gesture] of Earth Touching" and Mother Earth who "has been waiting for you /during the last trillion lives" (p. 197) and who "will transmit to you her solidity, / her peace, and her joy" (p. 198). Meditative cultivation thus results in an ability to discern interbeing and to experience oneness with nature. It is worth noting that since this spiritual vision conceives of nature not as extraneous to our human existence but as one with it, environmental protection is, therefore, synonymous with taking care of one's being.

4. THE EARTH AS GOD'S BODY: MARY OLIVER'S CHRISTIAN ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

Published in 2017, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* includes poems which Oliver selected from her poetry collections written from 1963 to 2015. The poems in this collection depict nature as fully alive and celebrate her intimate relationship with all kinds of natural beings. They also reveal her inquiry about, and communion with, God via her immersion in nature. As the collection title suggests, these poems are testimonies of her devotions to God and the mysteries of nature. Similar to Nhat Hanh's *Call Me by My True Names*, Oliver's *Devotions* delves deeply into the questioning about self, nature, and God and demonstrates that her spirituality is grounded upon the earth.

In her poetry, Oliver anthropomorphizes natural beings and things in order to announce her conviction that they all are sentient beings endowed with thoughts and feelings like humans. In "Do Stones Feel?" she wonders about nature's capacity to experience emotions: "Do stones feel? / Do they love their life?" and "Is the tree as it rises delighted with its many / branches, each one like a poem? / Are the clouds glad to unburden their bundles of rain?" (p. 24). While the answer from "[m]ost of the world" is in the negative—"no, it is not possible"—she expresses her belief in the sentience of all things and beings in nature: "I refuse to think to such a conclusion. / Too terrible it would be, to be wrong" (p. 24).

Dismantling our anthropocentric proclivity, Oliver deems nonhumans and humans as belonging to the same family.[8] The speaker of her poems, supposedly Oliver herself, demonstrates an ability to listen very deeply to the voice of nature and communicate with the natural world. The special sensibility is evident in "Meadowlark Sings and I Greet Him in Return" in which the speaker addresses a singing meadowlark, feeling heartfelt intimacy with the bird. As she converses with the bird, "when you sing it's as if / you lay your yellow breast upon mine and say / hello, hello" (p. 111). Rhetorically asking, "are we not / of one family, in our delight of life?" she glorifies the sustained experience of joy which bonds her and the bird throughout their lives (p. 111). Moreover, she accentuates the paramount significance of humans and nonhumans' ability to profoundly communicate:

> You sing, I listen.
> Both are necessary
> If the world is to continue going around
> night-heavy then light-laden, though not
> everyone knows this or at least
> not yet,
>
> or, perhaps, has forgotten it
> in the torn fields,
>
> in the terrible debris of progress. (p. 111)

These succinct lines insinuate that interspecies communication is indispensable for the continuance of the earth's ecological rhythms. Since contemporary society is blind to the destructiveness of what it misperceives as "progress," she laments that it is, perhaps, deaf to, and unaware of, this important message.

Several of her poems give prominence to the heightened sensitivity to the visual and auditory presence of nature. In "From This River, When I Was a Child, I Used to Drink," the speaker laconically depicts environmental deterioration in the image of the river of her childhood which she, upon her return, found "dying" (p. 109). One voice questions, "Did it speak?" and the other replies, "Yes, it sang out the old songs, but

[8] It is, however, worth noting that some of Oliver's poems also call our attention to the separation between human and nonhuman worlds. For example, "Entering the Kingdom" captures the speaker's experience of impinging upon the world of the crows. She dreams to "lie down by a slow river" and "stare at the light in the tree" in order to enter the state of "being nothing" but "the rich / Lens of attention." Nonetheless, the crows chase her away: "They know me for what I am. / No dreamer, / No eater of leaves" (p. 406). Her wish to blend into the natural world is pitted against the reality that she belongs to a different species and that she is yet to completely let go of her human-ness.

faintly" (p. 109). Capable of listening to the dying river, the speaker also proclaims the paramount value of nature for human life as she puts it that she will "grieve" "For the river. For myself, for my lost / joyfulness" and also "For the children who will not / know what a river can be—a friend, a / companion, a hint of heaven" (p. 109). The ecological ruination is thus equivalent not only to the loss of her happiness and friend but also to the deprivation of spiritual sustenance.

This idea of a river as "a hint of heaven" (p. 109) exemplifies Oliver's view of nature as associated with divinity. To begin with, the poet's nature is reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalist view of nature. Emerson invites his audience to look at nature as God's instrument. As he propounds in *Nature*, first published in 1836, "the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it" (p. 77). Similarly, Oliver perceives natural creatures as God's creations and messengers. For example, in "The Chat," the speaker expresses her wish to be a singing yellow-breasted chat-thrush and thanks God for "a lesson / you send me / as I stand / listening / to your rattling, swamp-loving chat / singing / of his simply, leafy life" (p. 140). Her ending lines—"how I would like to sing to you / all night / in the dark / just like that" (p. 140)—suggest that the bird serves as a lesson to her as he epitomizes a devotional life of simplicity whose existence is to glorify God.

However, whereas Emerson seeks to alter the axis of his vision in order to discern the transparency of nature and be able to ultimately transcend the physical world and achieve a communion with God, Oliver advocates the significance of the materiality of nature. To put it differently, whereas Emerson privileges the view of nature as spirit, body matters to Oliver in her relationship with nature and God. As Todd Davis (2009) keenly points out, Oliver's poetry reveals her belief in "God's immanence and incarnation in the creation," (p. 607) which aligns with theologian Sallie McFague's "contention that 'as the body of God, the world is a sacrament, *the* sacrament, the incarnation of God'" (as cited in Davis, p. 607).[9] Davis quotes from "On Thy Wondrous Works I will Meditate" to substantiate his point: "So it is not hard to understand / where God's body is, it is / everywhere and everything; shore and the vast / fields of water, the accidental and the intended / over here, over there. And I bow down / participate and attentive" (as cited in Davis, p. 606). Davis sees Oliver as "reveling in the immanence and unity not only of her own flesh and spirit but of all bodies that comprise the body of God on earth" (p. 608).[10]

Since she perceives God's self-disclosure in everything and is aware of the sacramentality of nature, Oliver's spiritual life is inseparable from her earthly existence. Along the same line as critics who argue that Oliver's poetry deconstructs the binarism often found in nature poetry penned by male poets, we further see that her poetry demonstrates the convergence of the mundane and the spiritual. It is worthy of note that she employs the language of religiosity to limn her interactions with nature. For instance, in "This Morning," she delineates the hatching of the redbirds' eggs and the advent of the chicks into the awaiting world, and she calls this event "a miracle" (p. 4). Another poem, "It Was Early," similarly depicts her morning ritual of contemplatively "looking at" and "listening into" the natural world. Having seen her fellow beings/creatures such as "the owl," "the pink light," "the mink / with his bristle tail" who "was stalking / the soft-eared mice" and the pine "cones," she feels awed by these beings, whom she refers to as "gifts" (pp. 71–72). She poses a question, "What do they mean?" (p. 71). The answer is suggested by her diction. In her description of the cones as "heavy, / each one / ordained to open" (p. 72), the word "ordain" she employs associates the pinecones with ministers ordered by God to manifest themselves to the world. The lines—"Sometimes I need / only to stand / wherever I am / to be blessed" (p. 72)—also imply the speaker's perception of the world as divine blessings and of herself as receiving holy gifts as she converses with nature in her daily lives.

The notion that Oliver's spirituality is grounded upon the earth is clearly manifested in "Six Recognitions of the Lord" which depicts her struggle as a Christian desperately seeking God and supplicating for His mercy. The speaker confesses to God that her life is now teeming with sins: "When I first found you I was / filled with light, now the darkness grows / and it is filled with crooked things, bitter and weak, each one bearing my name" (p. 125). Having prayed for God's mercy, she "run[s] away over / the green fields wanting your voice," "but having to do with only / the sweet grasses of the fields against / my body" (p. 125). It is worthy to note that the speaker's spiritual epiphany is earth-based as it takes place at a very moment when her physical body is in touch with the materiality of nature, which is God's body. The poet "lie[s] back" on the grass "until I

[9] As Anne Peterson (2003) points out in her essay "In and of the World?: Christian Theological Anthropology and Environmental Ethics," the ancient Christian tradition believed in human separation from nature, and there exist ambivalent attitudes towards nature throughout its history. Peterson also discusses Christian re-evaluations of nature in modern times, especially in the work of Protestant theologians such as Sallie McFague and Shannon Jung as well as of Catholic eco-theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Thomas Berry (pp. 319–333).

[10] Oliver sees God in everything, including the ravaged earth. In the poem "At the River Clarion," she adds the issue of environmental problems to her portrayal of God in nature. She muses that God resides in "[i]ce caps that are dying," and she "pray[s] for the desperate earth" (pp. 87–88).

am / inside the cloud" (p. 125). Her statement that she "enter[s] the place / of not-thinking, not-remembering, not-wanting" (p. 125) indicates that her communion with nature results from the momentary dissolution of her individual self and desires. As she states in "At the River Clarion," an ability to comprehend the language of nature hinges upon the emptying of ego, distracting thoughts and cravings: "You don't hear them [the voices of nature] at all if selfhood has stuffed your ears. / And it's difficult to hear anything anyway, through / all the traffic, and ambition" (p. 86). Furthermore, this experience of being "inside the cloud, or, perhaps, the lily floating / on the water" metamorphoses her life as she puts it that she returns to "town, / to my own house, my own life, which has /now become brighter and simple, some- / where I have never been before" (p. 126). The divine light she receives during this communion thus illuminates her life even when she is away from nature.

The speaker also makes it clear that this recognition is not unprecedented; she has been aware of God's omnipresence in the world. She fully describes the process of her spiritual transformation in stanza 4:

> Of course I have always known you
> are present in the clouds, and the
> black oak I especially adore, and the
> wings of birds. But you are present
> too in the body, listening to the body,
> teaching it to live, instead of all
> that touching, with disembodied joy.
> We do not do this easily. We have
> lived so long in the heaven of touch,
> and we maintain our mutability, our
> physicality, even as we begin to
> apprehend the other world. Slowly we
> make our appreciative response.
> Slowly appreciation swells to
> astonishment. And we enter the dialogue
> of our lives that is beyond all under-
> standing or conclusion. It is mystery.
> It is love of God. It is obedience. (pp. 126–127)

This stanza restates her conviction in God's immanence in everything and thus the sacramentality of physical nature and the human body. While God is the fortress which Christians lean on, Oliver takes nature as her refuge because her God manifests Himself in the physical world. If God is salvation, so is nature as God's body. Concomitantly, nature is, for Oliver, also where salvation takes place. In McFague's words, "creation is the *place* of salvation" for the poet (2004, p. 263).[11]

Her depiction of the communion with God also points to the fact that while she seeks the divine and embraces "the other world," she continues to maintain "our mutability" and "physicality." In her spiritual experience, body and spirit, ordinariness and divinity, as well as transience and eternity co-exist. This idea is further enhanced in the following stanzas. In stanza 5, the poet invokes the Holy Spirit to "feed" her with "the fragrance of the fields and the / freshness of the oceans which you have / made, and help me to hear and hold / in all dearness those exacting and wonderful /words of our Lord Christ Jesus, saying: *Follow me*" (p. 127). In this light, while God and the Holy Spirit mystically endow the poet with inner strength through gifts of creations, Jesus Christ who employs his words to call upon his disciples also resides in nature whose beckoning voices she carefully listens to. In addition, the final stanza depicts the seasonal cycle and affirms that despite change, the speaker who is in deep touch with physical nature will definitely find an abundance of divine gifts in this world: ". . . but in summer there is /everywhere the luminous sprawl of gifts, / the hospitality of the Lord and my / inadequate answers as I row my beautiful, temporary body / through this water-lily world" (p. 128).

Oliver not only revels in her intimate relationship with the natural world but also accentuates the significance of the mindful appreciation of nature. In "Sometimes", she proclaims that to "*[p]ay attention*," "*[b]e astonished*," and "*[t]ell about it"* constitute "[i]nstructions for living a life" (p. 105). Her statement in this poem is elucidated by her discussion on a special bond between herself as a poet and the natural world in an autobiographical essay in *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems* (1999):

> For me the door to the woods is the door to the temple. Under the trees, along the pale slopes of sand, I walk in an ascendant relationship to rapture, and with words I celebrate this rapture. I see, and dote upon, the manifest.

[11] McFague (2004) elucidates that creation means "our everyday world of people and cities, farms and mountains, birds and oceans, sun and sky" and that it "is the place where it all happens and to whom it happens" (p. 264).

> . . . I am forever just going out for a walk and tripping over the root, or the petal, of some trivia, then seeing it as if in a second sight, as emblematic. By no means is this a unique way to live but is, rather, the path found by all who are mystically inclined. (pp. 98–99)

Since her interaction with nature is tantamount to a rapturous communion with God, she thus needs to be mindfully attentive to nature as God's body. Just as Nhat Hanh's practice of mindfulness leads him to an insight into interbeing, so Oliver's acts of "pay[ing] attention" and "be[ing] astonished" open her eyes to the mystical presence of God in wondrous nature.

The life instructions are fleshed out into an actual experience in another poem, "Invitation" in which the poet asks her audience whether they "have time" to "linger / for just a little while / out of your busy / and very important day / for the goldfinches / that have gathered / in a field of thistles / for a musical battle" (p. 107). She describes that the birds sing "not for the sake of winning" but "for sheer delight and gratitude" (p. 107). To her, the birds also say that "it is a serious thing / just to be alive / on this fresh morning / in this broken world" (p. 108). She accentuates the mindful contemplation of nature when she pleads with her audience to pay attention to this seemingly trifling thing in nature and points to its miraculous significance to one's existence.

> I beg of you,
>
> do not walk by
> without pausing
> to attend to this
> rather ridiculous performance.
>
> It could mean something.
> It could mean everything.
> It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:
> *You must change your life.* (p. 108)

Oliver's poems also elaborate on various dimensions of the moral and spiritual influence of one's attentiveness to nature. Addressing her audience, Oliver in "North Country" calls their attention to a "shy," "humble" thrush whose song will make "the very elements of your soul" "shiver" (p. 157). She evinces her belief in the transformative power of the bird which potentially brings about changes in his listeners' moral character: "You listen and you know / you could live a better life than you do, be / softer, kinder" (p. 157). In addition to cultivating loving-kindness, Oliver stresses that joyful meditation on nature profoundly affects one's spiritual life. In "Mindful," the poet depicts her practice of savoring "the ordinary" or "the daily presentations" in nature and connects it with the purpose of her existence: "It is what I was born for— / to look, to listen, / to lose myself / inside this soft world— / to instruct myself / over and over / in joy, / and acclamation" (p. 173).

The mindful, rapturous appreciation of nature is her *raison d'être* that will lead to self-relinquishment and spiritual cultivation. In "On Meditation, Sort of," in which she pits traditional meditation practice with "a certain strict posture" against her informal contemplation of the natural world, she describes how an activity of "just loung[ing] under a tree" enables her to experience an epiphany regarding her existence: "Of course I wake up finally / thinking, how wonderful to be who I am, / made out of earth and water, / my own thoughts, my own fingerprints— / all that glorious, temporary stuff" (p. 22). These lines interestingly resonate with Nhat Hanh's portrayal of one's interbeing with other beings/things in nature and his emphasis on non-duality. To Oliver, there is no separation between religious practice and daily existence. Her delightful meditation on nature induces her to realize that what she conceives of her individual existence is, in fact, composed of and thus nurtured by, natural elements such as earth and water. While she discerns her physical and mental forms as "glorious" or partaking of divinity, she simultaneously refers to them as "temporary," thereby suggesting the transitoriness of her existence. Her vision of self, God, and nature here seems to be a fascinating blend of Christianity and Buddhism.[12]

Oliver weaves the mystery of her ontological insight into the fabric of ordinary life. Similar to Nhat Hanh's "The Fisherman and the Fish," in which the fish's comprehension of the interbeing of all things enables him to embrace death, Oliver's "The Fish," for instance, delineates how the human speaker's acts of catching a fish and eating him prompt her to grasp the mystery of life. Her choice of words in the depiction of the fish as "suck[ing] / at the *burning* / amazement of the *air*" and "dy[ing] / in the slow pouring off / of *rainbows*" (p. 380, italics mine) suggests that the existence of the fish is created out of, and thus radiates, miraculous energy. As

[12] My point here corresponds with Todd Davis's statement (2009) that Oliver's poetry "can only be described as a fusion of Transcendental, Buddhist and Christian thought grounded firmly in the earth" (p. 606). He, however, does not fully elaborate on the blending of the three belief systems in her poetry.

Christensen (2002) observes, Oliver attempts to familiarize the reader with the world seen through "ecologically informed eyes" (p. 136). He elaborates that the recurrent image of the "dynamic dance of energy" celebrated in her poetry corresponds with physics' notion that "the atomic building blocks of matter are actually tightly interwoven whorls of energy" (p. 136). The image of energy is reiterated at the poem's end when the speaker who eats the fish identifies herself with him and envisions their demise, which is, in reality, the giving back to the great pool of energy:

> . . . I am the fish, the fish
> glitters in me; we are
> risen, entangled together, certain to fall
> back to the sea. Out of pain,
> and pain, and more pain
> we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished
> by the mystery. (p. 380)

Ecologically speaking, birth and death as well as food chains constitute the whole process of energy exchange. This ecological reality can be construed in Buddhist terms as akin to interbeing—the interrelatedness of all things in which nothing can be considered as having definite individual identity. In light of Christianity, this miraculous entanglement and interdependence of all lives bespeak the immanence of God and His amazing grace in everyday existence.

Another interesting poem which demonstrates the similarity between Oliver's vision and that of interbeing is "Rice." Oliver commences the poem with the description of rice which "grew in the black mud" and "under the tiger's orange paws" with "[i]ts leaves like the feathers of egrets, but green" (p. 300). She then calls rice "blood of the tiger" (p. 300). This portrayal of rice suggests the vision in which the existence of rice hinges upon the coming together of various elements, such as black mud and the tiger's blood. The speaker then invites "you," her reader, not "just to eat, and be content" but "walk out into the fields / where the water is shining, and the rice has risen" (p. 300). She further urges, "I want you to stand there, far from the white tablecloth. / I want you to fill your hands with the mud, like a blessing" (p. 300). The poem can be interpreted as attempting to awaken the reader to realize the interbeing of rice with other things and to embrace the food as "a blessing" (p. 300). Simultaneously, it illustrates Oliver's view of nature as God's body. That is, the acts of venturing out into the paddy fields and filling one's hands with the mud can be construed as not only being granted a divine blessing but also immersing the human body into God's body. In this light, an ordinary act of eating rice vividly becomes a profoundly sacred communion with nature and God.

Finally, it is worth noting that Oliver, similar to Nhat Hanh, expresses her belief that the immanence of God in the ordinary is perceived by humans and nonhumans alike. In "At the River Clarion," she describes her experience of sitting in the river and spending her whole afternoon listening to "the voices / of the river talking" (p. 86). Her attentive communion with nature miraculously endows her with an ability to hear nature's voices: "And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me / What they were saying. / Said the river: I am part of holiness. / And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered / the moss beneath the water" (p. 86). Based on her mystical discernment, she understands that these natural beings are fully aware of the presence of divinity in them. Similarly, the speaker realizes divine presence within her and her reader as well. As she puts it, "Yes, it could be that I am a tiny piece of God, and / each of you too, or at least / of his intention and his hope" (p. 87).

5. TWO KINDRED SPIRITS IN DIALOGUE

Although Nhat Hanh's and Oliver's poetry are founded on different cultural backgrounds and couched in different terminologies, there are commonalities between the two writers' works. Their spirituality is underpinned by their intimacy with the natural world. To both, nature is the source of moral and spiritual wisdom. More importantly, just as the Zen monk views nature as *dharmakaya*, so the Christian poet envisions nature as God's body. Nhat Hanh's insight into interbeing parallels Oliver's discernment of nature's sacramentality. Both similarly emphasize the significance of contemplative practice in nature, whether it be traditional meditation or mindful appreciation of nature. Their poetry reveals that their attentive communion with nature leads to an experience of spiritual transformation which entails self-relinquishment and interbeing with other beings or oneness with divinity.

Our reading of the writers' works in juxtaposition with each other invites an interreligious dialogue of the Buddhist and Christian poets. In addition to their commonalities, we have seen that the Buddhist notion of interbeing helps illuminate Oliver's poetry and that her vision of nature resonates with this Buddhist concept. Furthermore, if we look into the Christian contemplative tradition, we will further find interesting points of

convergence between the Christian practice and the Zen master's spiritual relationship with nature. In *The Blue Sapphires of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*, Douglas E. Christie (2013) argues that the Christian contemplative tradition can be brought to bear on the current environmental crisis. That is, contemplative practice mysteriously results in "a radical transformation of consciousness" which can foster our genuine bond with nature and help us heal the wounds in ourselves and in the world (p. 54). The principal practices that Christie highlights include *penthos* or compunction and the mysterious flowing of tears as a gift (p. 74), *topos* or "to discover one's place in the world" while being "prepared to become a stranger" (p. 121), *prosoche* or "attention" (p. 142), *logos* or listening to the voice of God who speaks from everything in the world (p. 180), *eros* or "desire in rekindling a relationship with the other" (p. 227), *kenosis* or "self-emptying" (p. 273), and *telos* or living in the fragmented world with an awareness of a "hidden wholeness" (pp. 316–317). It is noteworthy that Nhat Hanh's poetry accentuates the practices similar to *prosoche*, *logos*, and *kenosis* as it advocates living mindfully in the present moment with attentiveness to nature, which is perceived as the body of the Buddha's teachings, and the letting go of one's sense of self with an awareness of emptiness and interbeing. Moreover, the Christian tradition of "*theoria physike* or natural contemplation" (Christie, p. 158) not only captures Oliver's and Nhat Hanh's spiritual practice but also brings to the fore the similarity of the two poets' approach to nature.

Finally, our comparatist analysis of the two poets' ecological spirituality points to a possibility of an interreligious dialogue for the healing of the earth. Both poets' visions of self, nature, and God have significant implications upon our commitment to caring for the earth. In discussing the contemporary revisions of Christian theology in light of an environmental crisis, John E. Haught points out that "the sacramental approach," which we have seen in Oliver's poetry, is one of the important directions which enhances ecological responsibility (2004, pp. 235–239). As Haught explains, with this new interpretation of traditional Christian teachings, divinity is comprehended as being revealed in the cosmos. To put it differently, the earth is revered as "the body of Christ" (p. 237). Haught argues that this sacramental vision in Christianity and other religions contributes to nature preservation (p. 238). In addition, as Richard Grigg (2006) explains, theologian Sallie McFague presents her model of the world as God's body as "operat[ing] pragmatically and metaphorically" and having an "ability to effect the ecological effect that she champions" (p. 61). He quotes McFague's statement that faith in God "is not so much correct thoughts about God . . . but appropriate, responsible action to help a planet, created and loved by God" (p. 61). In McFague's own explanation of her argument that "creation is the *place* of salvation" (2004, p. 263), spiritual salvation not only is intricately interwoven with but also hinges upon, and is tantamount to, the ecological survival of the earth: "Creation as the place of salvation means that the health and well-being of all creatures and parts of creation is what salvation is all about—it is God's place and our place, the one and only place" (p. 264). In a similar vein, as Stephanie Kaza (2003) notes, the Buddhist law of dependent originality, to which Nhat Hanh refers as "interbeing," corresponds with "[e]cological understanding of natural systems" (p. 197). The Buddhist concept of the emptiness of self also counteracts "the traditional Western sense of self as a discrete individual" which results in anthropocentrism (p. 198). Kaza also adds that the Buddhist practice of "compassion," "mindfulness," and "non-harming" play a crucial role in environmental protection and activism (p. 199).

Given their commonalities, as shown in Oliver's and Nhat Hanh's poetry and their ideas which are conducive to ecological commitment, Christian and Buddhist traditions can join hands in engaging us to take on our shared responsibility to take care of the earth, which is, in reality, God's body and interrelated with all beings' existence. As we have seen in the two poets' works, their Christian and Buddhist ecological spirituality enables them to simultaneously nurture their spiritual growth and deepen their bonds with nature. To them, taking delight in the earth's miracles is part of religious practice leading to salvation or enlightenment. Caring of the earth and tending to the suffering of the earth's inhabitants become meaningful acts of spiritual cultivation, compassion and devotion. The two poets thus exemplify kindred spirits who reveal a wondrous possibility of an interreligious dialogue between the different religious traditions for the spirit and for the earth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my special thankfulness to Captain William S. Whorton and the two readers for kindly taking the time to carefully read the manuscript and providing me with valuable comments.

REFERENCES

Barron, J. N. (2001). Mary Oliver. In J. Parini (Ed.), *American writers: Supplement VII* (pp. 229–248). Charles Scribner's Sons.

Burton-Christie, D. (1996). Nature, spirit, and imagination in the poetry of Mary Oliver. *CrossCurrents, 46*(1), 77–87. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24459404

Christensen, L. (2002). The pragmatic mysticism of Mary Oliver. In J. S. Bryson (Ed.), *Ecopoetry: A critical introduction* (pp. 135–152). University of Utah Press.

Christie, D. E. (2013). *The blue sapphire of the mind: Notes for a contemplative ecology*. Oxford University Press.

Davis, T. (2009). The earth as god's body: Incarnation as communion in the poetry of Mary Oliver. *Christianity and Literature*, *58*(4), 605–624. https://doi.org/10.1177/014833310905800408

Emerson, R. W. (1968). *Nature*. Chandler Publishing Company. (Original work published 1836)

Francis, Pope. (2015, May 24). *Encyclical letter laudato si' of the Holy Father Francis on care for our common home*. The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Grigg, R. (2006). *Gods after God: An introduction to contemporary radical theologies*. State University of New York Press.

Harvey, P. (2013). *An introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Haught, J. F. (2004). Christianity and ecology. In R. S. Gottlieb (Ed.), *This sacred earth: Religion, nature, environment* (2nd ed., pp. 232–247). Routledge.

Kato, J. (2022). What has hybridity got to do with ecology? What Christian-Buddhist hybridity-as-hermeneutical-lens can suggest to the theological conversation on ecology. *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, *42*, 105-117. https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2022.0005

Kaza, S. (2003). To save all being: Buddhist environmental activism. In R. C. Foltz (Ed.), *Worldviews, religion, and the environment: A global anthology* (pp. 193–207). Wadsworth.

Knitter, P. F. (1995). *One earth many religions: Multifaith dialogue and global responsibility*. Orbis Books.

Latinovic, V., Mannion, G., & Phan, P. C. (2016). New pathways for interreligious dialogue. In V. Latinovic, G. Mannion, & P. C. Phan (Eds.), *Pathways for interreligious dialogue in the twenty-first century* (pp. 3–14). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137507303_1

McFague, S. (2004). The scope of the body: The cosmic Christ. In R. S. Gottlieb (Ed.), *This sacred earth: Religion, nature, environment* (2nd ed., pp. 262–272). Routledge.

McNew, J. (1989). Mary Oliver and the tradition of romantic nature poetry. *Contemporary Literature*, *30*(1), 59–77. https://doi.org/10.2307/1208424

Nhat Hanh, T. (1995). *Zen keys: A guide to Zen practice*. Doubleday.

Nhat Hanh, T. (1999). *Call me by my true names: The collected poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*. Parallax Press.

Nhat Hanh, T. (2008). *The world we have: A Buddhist approach to peace and ecology*. Parallax Press.

Oliver, M. (1999). *Winter hours: Prose, prose poems, and poems*. Houghton Mifflin.

Oliver, M. (2017). *Devotions: The selected poems by Mary Oliver*. Penguin Books.

Penaskovic, R. (2016). Interreligious dialogue in a polarized world. In V. Latinovic, G. Mannion, & P. C. Phan (Eds.), *Pathways for inter-religious dialogue in the twenty-first century* (pp. 29–40). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137507303_3

Peterson, A. (2003). In and of the world? Christian theological anthropology and environmental ethics. In R. C. Foltz (Ed.), *Worldviews, religion, and the environment: A global anthology* (pp. 319–333). Wadsworth.

Sheldrake, P. (2013). *Spirituality: A brief history* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

Sponsel, L. E. (2007). Spiritual ecology: One anthropologist's reflections. *The Journal of the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, *1*(3), 340–350. http://dx.doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v1i3.340

Tucker, M. E. (2007). The ecological spirituality of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, *7*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2007.0020

Waddle, R. (2014, October 1). *Mary Evelyn Tucker: The flourishing of people and planet (2014)*. Yale Divinity School. https://divinity.yale.edu/news/mary-evelyn-tucker-flourishing-people-and-planet