How Nonsectarian is 'Nonsectarian'?: Jorge Ferrer's Pluralist Alternative to Tibetan Buddhist Inclusivism

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Abstract This paper queries the logic of the structure of hierarchical philosophical systems. Following the Indian tradition of *siddhānta*, Tibetan Buddhist traditions articulate a hierarchy of philosophical views. The 'Middle Way' philosophy or Madhyamaka—the view that holds that the ultimate truth is emptiness—is, in general, held to be the highest view in the systematic depictions of philosophies in Tibet, and is contrasted with realist schools of thought, Buddhist and non-Buddhist. But why should an antirealist or nominalist position be said to be 'better' than a realist position? What is the criterion for this claim and is it, *or can it*, be more than a criterion that is tradition-specific for only Tibetan Buddhists? In this paper, I will look at the criteria to evaluate Buddhist philosophical traditions, particularly as articulated in what came to be referred as the 'nonsectarian' (*ris med*) tradition. I draw from the recent work of Jorge Ferrer to query the assumptions of the hierarchical structures of 'nonsectarian' traditions and attempt to articulate an evaluative criteria for a nonsectarian stance that are not based solely on metaphysical or tradition-specific claims.

Keywords Pluralism · Buddhism · Nonsectarian · Tibet · Pragmatism

Introduction

This paper queries the logic of the structure of hierarchical philosophical systems. Following the Indian tradition of *siddhānta*, Tibetan Buddhist traditions articulate a hierarchy of philosophical views. The 'Middle Way' philosophy or Madhyamaka—the view that holds that the ultimate truth is emptiness—is, in general, held to be the highest view in the systematic depictions of philosophies in Tibet, and is contrasted with realist schools of thought,

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Tibetan Buddhist Hierarchies of Truth

In the nineteenth century, a constellation of Buddhist traditions emerged in eastern Tibet that forged alliances amongst different philosophical traditions. Despite the shared aims among the traditions that came to be called the 'nonsectarian movement,' we clearly find hierarchies of philosophical views as well as strategies of marginalization laid out to show the superiority of one tradition over another. A common practice in Tibet is to set forth a hierarchy of philosophical systems and assert the superiority of one view (one's own) over another. The 'nonsectarian' movement was no exception, with the Madhyamaka view of 'other-emptiness' (*gzhan stong*) or the view of great completeness (*rdzogs chen*) commonly found at the top of these hierarchies, in contrast to what are positioned as inferior Buddhist views such as those of the 'lesser vehicle' (*hīnayāna*), and non-Buddhist schools of thought at the bottom of the ladder.

In the nineteenth century, many different traditions came to be allied in reaction to the overwhelming dominance of the Geluk (*dge lugs*) tradition. The Geluk school champions a unique view of Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka, which it holds to be not only the supreme philosophical view, but also the only correct view through which *nirvāṇa* is possible.[1] The overt exclusivism of the Geluk school contrasts sharply with the inclusivism that characterizes the other schools that came to form what is commonly associated with the nonsectarian ideal in Tibet, particularly the Kagyü and Nyingma schools.

In the Kagyü tradition, Kongtrül (*kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas*, 1813–1899) was a particularly influential figure who assimilated the works of (non-Geluk) traditions in the nineteenth century. In his encyclopedic *Treasury of Knowledge*, he assembled the views of various schools, and formulated a hierarchy of philosophical systems that notably put the Madhyamaka interpretation of 'other emptiness' above Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka, which he categorized as the doctrine of 'self-emptiness.'[2] In contrast to self-emptiness, which reflects the ultimate truth understood as a *negation* that is the emptiness of a phenomenon's

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[1] See, for instance, José Cabezón, *A Dose of Emptiness*, 217.
[2] Kongtrül *Encyclopedia of Knowledge* (*shes bya kun khyab*), 41; English trans. in Elizabeth Callahan, *The Treasury of Philosophy: Frameworks of Buddhist Philosophy* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 74.

own essence, other-emptiness is an *affirmation* of ultimate truth as an uncon-
ditioned ground that is empty of all relative phenomena.

Along with Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka and the 'other-emptiness' interpretation of
Madhyamaka, another tradition that is commonly found at the capstone of philosoph-
ical hierarchies in Tibet, in the works of Kongtrül and followers of the Nyingma
tradition in particular, is the Great Perfection. Some scholars connect the Great
Perfection with 'other-emptiness,'[3] but other scholars, including Mipam (*'ju mi pham
rgya mtsho*, 1842–1912), associate Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka with the way of ap-
proaching the empty aspect of reality in the Great Perfection.[4] For Mipam, the
philosophy of Prāsaṅgika can be said to be primarily concerned with determining the
indeterminacy of the ultimate.[5] That is, Prāsaṅgika denies any conceptual formulation
of ultimate truth, and sharply contrasts with the traditions of 'other-emptiness,' which
represent the experiential content of ultimate reality in affirming language.

We may wonder why 'other-emptiness' is held to be superior to 'self-emptiness' by
some traditions in Tibet, or why Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka or self-emptiness is held
above other-emptiness by others?[6] In the next section, I aim to probe the logic of these
hierarchical schemes and show the demands that are placed by a more openly "non-
sectarian," or pluralist, stance.

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[3] For instance, Getsé Paṇchen (*dge rtse paṇ chen*, *'gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub*, 1761–1829), stated that
'The abiding mode of the Great Perfection singly accords with the Great Middle Way of other-emptiness.'
Getsé Paṇchen, *Ornament of Buddha-Nature*, 95.4: *rdzogs pa chen po'i bzhugs tshul dang/ gzhan stong dbu
ma chen po gcig tu mthun*. Getsé Paṇchen, *Ornament of Buddha-Nature*: *A Discourse Ascertaining the
Manner of the Definitive Meaning Middle Way* (*nges don dbu ma chen po'i tshul rnam par nges pa'i gtam bde
gshegs snying po'i rgyan*). Collected Works, vol. 1, 75–104.

[4] Mipam, *Words That Delight Guru Mañjughoṣa*, 76; English trans. in Doctor, *Speech of Delight* 85. Mipam,
Beacon of Certainty, 19; English trans. in Pettit, *Mipam's Beacon of Certainty* 209. See Duckworth, *Mipam on
Buddha-Nature*, 39.

[5] Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka is variously represented by different traditions in Tibet, and Mipam characterized
Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka as 'discourse that emphasizes the uncategorized ultimate free from assertions.' The
'uncategorized ultimate' is the nonconceptual ultimate, in contrast to the 'categorized ultimate,' which is a
conceptual understanding of the ultimate, a concept or idea of emptiness. See Mipam, *Words That Delight
Guru Mañjughoṣa*, 99; English trans. in Doctor, *Speech of Delight* 117. See also Duckworth, *Mipam on
Buddha-Nature*, 33.

[6] For instance, one way this plays out is stated in the works of a Nyingma scholar, Lochen Dharmaśrī, who
suggests that Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka can be said to be 'better' than the Madhyamaka of other-emptiness if
the criterion is set to be the one that is the best means for establishing the ultimate nature things as free from
conceptual constructs in study. However, if the criterion is the one that is the best means of setting forth the
way ultimate reality is understood as an experiential presence in meditation, other-emptiness is better. Lochen
Dharmaśrī states: "If one thinks, 'In the scriptures such as the *Treasury of Philosophies* and the root and
[auto-]commentary of the *Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, is it not a contradiction that: (1) in the context of
identifying what is to be ascertained by means of study, Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka is established as the
pinnacle of the Causal Vehicle of Mahāyāna, and (2) in the contexts of ascertainment by means of meditative
experience, individual reflexive wisdom free from perceived-perceiver [duality] is asserted?' There is no
contradiction because it is difficult for an ordinary being to deconstruct the reifications of the mind at the time
of ascertaining the view by means of study and contemplation. Therefore, in negating these [reifications of the
mind] through the supreme knowledge that arises through study and contemplation, Prāsaṅgika is a sharper
awareness that cuts through superimpositions. Also, at the time of ascertaining by experience [the supreme
knowledge] that arises in meditation, the view of the Middle Way taught in the last wheel itself is profound and
much better because: (1) the naturally pure expanse, the ultimate truth that is the self-existing wisdom, is itself
the primordial mode of reality of all phenomena, and (2) it is also in accord with the practice of the view that is
accepted in the profound tantras of Secret Mantra." Lochen Dharmaśrī, *Cluster of Supreme Intentions*:
Commentary on 'Ascertaining the Three Vows' (*sdom pa gsum rnam par nges pa'i 'grel pa legs bshad ngo
mtshar dpag bsam gyi snye ma*), (Bylakuppe: Ngagyur Nyingma Institute, n.d.), 377.4-378.4.

Nonsectarian Alternatives

One of the ways that a philosophical view could be said to be better than another is that it is a more accurate representation of reality. We might assume that views at the higher end of a spectrum of philosophical views are those that more accurately represent ultimate reality while those at the lower end are those that misrepresent it. Alternatively, it could be that traditions with the most effective emancipatory power are those that are said to be higher. Either of these criteria may not be problematic strictly within a Buddhist context (although arguably, a problem emerges when competing Buddhist views are considered on their own terms), yet when other traditions are brought into the conversation (e.g., Hindu, Christian) a problem comes into a more clear focus.

We encounter a problem when we cannot empirically reconcile conflicting claims about ultimate truth—whereas Buddhists assert no-self, Vedāntins claim a self, while some claim an impersonal ground of reality, others assert a personal or pantheistic deity at the ground of all, or the emptiness of all things…We can see this problem clearly when we consider the following thought experiment[7]: consider a Theravāda Buddhist monk who comes from his meditation retreat and reports an experience of having seen the eternal, independent Self, or, suppose he had another vision—an intimate experience with a personal and loving God upon penetrating the depths of the soul. After conveying either of these experiences to his teacher, he would most certainly be told to go back to his meditation cushion until he saw things "as they really are": impermanent, suffering, and without a self. Yet we can expect that the result would be just the opposite if the teacher were a follower of Advaita Vedānta (in the former case) or Christian mysticism (in the latter).

If we take the claims of religious experience seriously—and not brush them aside as mere illusions or projections—the lessons to be drawn from this example are clear: given that the diversity of claims has yet to be resolved by such "experiential evidence," nor by a clean philosophical or religious debate (and a dirty bomb has yet to settle these differences either), it may be time to look for another way around this problem—unless we remain content with tried alternatives: isolationism (in the ivory tower, a cave, or on the iphone), relativism (which suffers from indifferent isolationism too, as well as being self-defeating), exclusivism (which claims the universal validity of one's own culturally-contingent view), or perennialism (which, while ignoring critical differences among traditions, is guilty of the problems of exclusivism, too). Jorge Ferrer, however, points out that there may be another way to resolve the problem of religious diversity. Ferrer claims that many of the competing claims of religions present a problem only with an objectivist view, one that sees such conflicting truths as more or less accurate *representations* of ultimate reality. He states:

> The diversity of spiritual claims is a problem *only* when we have previously presupposed that they are referring to a single ready-made reality…if they intend to represent or convey the nature of a single referent with determined features. But if we see such a spiritual referent as malleable, undetermined, and creatively open to a multiplicity of disclosures largely contingent on human religious endeavors, then the reasons for conflict vanish like a mirage.[8]

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[7] I have taken this thought experiment from Jorge Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, 63.
[8] Ferrer, 'Spiritual Knowing as Participatory Enaction, 149.

Ferrer argues that this kind of religious diversity is only problematic when we assume that there is a determinate ultimate reality that can be exclusively depicted by a single representation. If ultimate reality is undetermined, there could be multiple ways it would manifest, and thus the "problem" of diversity would dissolve, echoing Wittgenstein's words in the *Tractatus* that "The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem."[9] Thus, rather than seeing religious diversity as a problem, Ferrer celebrates pluralism's irreducibility.

Does this move to embracing pluralism and an undetermined ultimate reality leave us with relativism—equalizing all assertions and disclosures? Not necessarily. Empirical claims can still be distinguished on empirical grounds,[10] while claims about ultimate reality can be distinguished, too. Yet, rather than one claim being *better* than another by more accurately referring to an objective, predetermined ultimate truth, it can be said to be better based on the potency of its emancipatory effects. With this, a representational or objectivist picture of language can be left behind, as there is no need for a conception of language that models a pregiven reality. Rather, language can be thought of here as a vehicle to elicit transformative experience, like the example of a finger that points to the moon. That is, when evaluating competing claims, a more effective or aesthetically pleasing, simpler or more elegant way *to evoke* an experience of ultimate reality could be said to be a better one, even if what is expressed is not something that could be represented. Thus, instead of seeing language about ultimate reality as *descriptive*, this is what Ferrer proposes in the *prescriptive* or performative language of mystical traditions:

> The expression "things as they really are" is misguided only if understood in the context of objectivist and essentialist epistemologies… After all, what most mystical traditions offer are not so much descriptions of a pregiven ultimate reality to be confirmed or falsified by experiential evidence but prescriptions of ways of "being-*and*-the-world" to be intentionally cultivated and lived. In the end, mystical traditions aim at transformation, not representation… It may be more accurate to talk about them not so much in terms of "things as they really are," but of "things as they really *can* be" or, perhaps more normatively, "things as they really *should* be."[11]

In contrast to a criterion of representational adequacy, another way to evaluate the claims of traditions is through their transformational potency.

Thus, the presumption that ultimate reality is undetermined does not necessarily lead to relativism, but could support a hierarchical model of truth, too. The logic of such a hierarchy could be based on what has more emancipatory power, like we see in some Tibetan Buddhist philosophical hierarchies. In such a Buddhist context, claims that are more effective in eliciting *nirvāṇa*, an end to suffering, are said to be better. This kind of inclusivism is hierarchical, too, as a tradition represents its own stance as the most accurate and complete, while those of others are seen as partial or incomplete. Yet Ferrer points out a problem with inclusivism as a picture that predetermines the way that opposing views fit into one's own framework and structures all divergent ideas into one's own, ready-made model. He states:

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[9] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.521.

[10] Empirical validity, as Ferrer points out, is not reducible to objective (third person) verification or falsification, but encompasses intersubjective verification (and falsification) as well as disciplined introspection. See Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, chapter 2.

[11] Ferrer, 'Spiritual Knowing as Participatory Enaction,' 155.

Once one believes oneself to be in possession of a picture of "things as they really are," dialogue with traditions maintaining different spiritual visions often becomes an uninteresting and sterile monologue. At its worst, the conflicting viewpoints are regarded as less evolved, incoherent, or simply false. At best, the challenges presented are assimilated within the all-encompassing perennialist scheme. In both cases, the perennialist philosopher appears not to listen to what other people are saying, because all new or conflicting information is screened, processed, or assimilated in terms of the perennialist framework. Therefore, a genuine or symmetrical encounter with the other in which opposing spiritual visions are regarded as real options is rendered unlikely.[12]

Here, Ferrer argues against a predetermined hierarchical scheme for spiritual truths, not only for the reason that he rejects exclusivism (because no tradition has exclusive priority to claims that are non-empirical), but because he rejects an objectivist model that presumes a structure that is pregiven, generalizable, and fixed for all individuals across space and time.[13] This applies not only to ultimate truths, but to hierarchies of philosophical systems, as well as structures of paths understood to lay out 'The Way' to liberation in a way that mirrors an intrinsic, objective reality that everyone must follow. He contends that not only does such a preconception preclude the possibility of genuine interreligious dialogue, but it delimits transformative possibilities to one's own preconceived notion of the result of a process of spiritual transformation. Thus, Ferrer challenges a hardwired, vertical hierarchy of religious truth, and opts for a more fluid or multi-centered structure that embraces not only a plurality of *paths*, but a plurality of ultimate(s) *goals* as well, in what could be said to be, in a Deleuzian sense, a 'rhizomatic' landscape.[14]

This kind of model still permits a (soft) hierarchy within traditions in terms of their efficacy in different contexts for varied individuals, and a fluid or soft hierarchy can also be laid out here with regards to claims about the ultimate as well. That is, there can be times when the monistic singularity of reality may serve as a 'better' description (or prescription or performative 'path') for someone and other times when the pluralistic diversity of reality may be better and yet another time when a denial of both singularity and plurality may be preferable. Likewise, it may be better to emphasize the continuity of reality in some contexts while in others, rupture and disjunction may be better, depending on the desired outcome for the particular community or individual in the situation at hand. In other words, whether or not these expressions may be said to be 'better' does not depend on how well they hook up to a universal structure or objective referent in the world, but to the efficacy for a desired outcome in a given context.

It is in this last criterion of efficacy, the pragmatic or transformative effectiveness of a tradition and its claims, where we find what pertains to the ethical rather than simply the metaphysical. It is in this domain where we find what does the work that determines the criteria for evaluating traditions according to Ferrer, as he states:

Although my work does not privilege any tradition or type of spirituality over others on objectivist or ontological grounds (i.e., saying that theism, monism, or

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[12] Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, 94.

[13] Ferrer, 'Participation, Metaphysics, and Enlightenment: Reflections on Ken Wilber's Recent Work,' 8; see also Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, 164–5.

[14] For Deleuze (and Guattari) on the rhizome, see, for instance, their *A Thousand Plateaus*: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brain Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21.

nondualism corresponds to the nature of ultimate reality and/or is intrinsically superior), it does offer criteria for making qualitative distinctions among spiritual systems *on pragmatic and transformational grounds*.[15]

Rather than just a metaphysical criterion, Ferrer incorporates ethical standards for evaluating mystical traditions, too, and solicits two main criteria to evaluate them: the *egocentricism test* and the *dissociation test*. The egocentricism test evaluates 'to what extent… a spiritual tradition, path, or practice free(s) its practitioners from gross and subtle forms of narcissism and self-centeredness?'[16] And the dissociation test evaluates 'to what extent… a spiritual tradition, path, or practice foster(s) the integrated blossoming of all dimensions of the person?'[17] The 'integrated dimensions of a person' refers to criteria that incorporate both cognitive and embodied aspects of an individual.[18] Ferrer further adds a third criterion (that could be considered a subset of the second) that he calls the *eco–social–political test*, which he says, 'assesses the extent to which spiritual systems foster ecological balance, social and economic justice, religious and political freedom, class and gender equality, and other fundamental human rights.'[19]

The importance of these evaluative criteria is that they are nonsectarian or, rather, are not tradition-specific, but attempt to provide a means to make qualitative distinctions across different religious traditions without taking on a privileged perspective from any one tradition's view. Arguably, this allows one to sidestep absolutist claims because no single tradition is held to presume an exclusive monopoly on truth, and furthermore, standards are not measured with reference to a predetermined, objective reality. Rather, the evaluative measures are based on pragmatic markers that are applicable across traditions. These criteria arguably avoid relativism, too, because, despite a real diversity of empirically irreconcilable truth claims amongst different traditions, their varying qualities of truth can be differentiated qualitatively on the grounds of their enacted results—on (integrative and dissociative) psychological, sociological, and ecological grounds—rather than based on which one most accurately depicts *the right* metaphysical picture of reality.

Since Ferrer's model is based on a pragmatic and 'participatory' account of truth rather than a metaphysical one, his approach is different than the one proposed by John Hick, who relied on a Kantian metaphysic to formulate his 'pluralistic hypothesis' of different religions experiencing 'the Real' in different ways.[20] In contrast to Hick's metaphysical 'Real,' Ferrer does not subscribe to objectivist metaphysics. He stresses that reality is indeterminate (or undetermined) and that there is no real, pregiven structure to reality. Thus, he arguably avoids unwarranted metaphysical assumptions. While Ferrer's pluralist model of alternative religious ends resembles a position articulated by Mark Heim,[21] he distinguishes his model from Heim's on precisely this point where he differs from Hick.[22]

Ferrer argues that Heim is guilty of presuming an independent, pregiven reality and perpetuating Kantian dualism,[23] while Ferrer himself claims that 'the model I

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[15] Ferrer, 'Participation, Metaphysics, and Enlightenment: Reflections on Ken Wilber's Recent Work,' 7.
[16] Ferrer, 'Spiritual Knowing as Participatory Enaction,' 153.
[17] Ferrer, 'Spiritual Knowing as Participatory Enaction,' 153.
[18] Ferrer, 'Participatory Spirituality and Transpersonal Theory: A Ten-Year Retrospective,' 3.
[19] Ferrer, 'Participatory Spirituality and Transpersonal Theory: A Ten-Year Retrospective,' 7.
[20] See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 240–46.
[21] See Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religions*.
[22] Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, 215n27.
[23] Ferrer, 'Spiritual Knowing as Participatory Enaction,' 165–66n49.

am advancing here is that *no pregiven ultimate reality exists, and that different spiritual ultimates can be enacted through intentional or spontaneous creative participation in an indeterminate spiritual power or mystery.*'[24] Of course, a lot hinges upon what is meant by this 'indeterminate spiritual power or mystery,' but Ferrer maintains that his *denial* of any pregiven reality is not the same as his *affirming* a positive theory about it. Thus, he claims to avoid the ontological presuppositions of the metaphysical systems he critiques.[25] The move Ferrer makes here to avoid self-contradiction is reminiscent of the one made by Nāgārjuna in support of his Middle Way doctrine of emptiness.[26] Indeed, there is a real affinity with Ferrer's position and the Buddhist Middle Way.

Yet the 'one vehicle' of the Middle Way tradition in Tibet affirms that all Buddhist paths lead in the end to the same goal (of becoming Buddha). This is a classic view of inclusivism, not pluralism. This view is said to be better than the 'Mind Only' tradition's assertion of three vehicles (Auditor, Solitary Realizer, and Bodhisattva) that lead to different final results (and only the last leads to becoming a Buddha). Probing this internal diversity of Buddhist tradition can be a good point of entry to query Buddhist attitudes toward other religions.[27] Here, we have a place from which to ask critical questions about contemporary Buddhist inclusivism: Why is it better to hold one final goal for all these Buddhist traditions (and for all other traditions, too, with the claim that all beings will eventually become Buddhas)? Is it because this accords with how reality is or is it better because subscribing to this is an effective means to overcome egocentrism and dissocation? The *Uttaratantra*, a classical text that supports the universality of Buddhist enlightenment, suggests the latter.[28] Yet how is the single final destination reconciled with non-Buddhist paths that claim other ends (like heaven (or hell), union with God, Brahman, etc.)? Is asserting one end for everyone better because it does not exclude people in other religions from the final fruit of one's own—for Buddhists at least? for everyone? This last question is particularly relevant for traditions in the contemporary world to address, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. A nonsectarian stance of *pluralism* rather than inclusivism—one that concedes multiple ends, like Ferrer's—is one possible alternative. This kind of pluralism offers a nonsectarian stance in a global context. As a stance that stakes a certain claim, it indeed is not neutral, relativistic, or apathetic, and certainly (and by definition) is not the only one.[29]

Conclusion

While Ferrer's notion of ultimate reality being undetermined resonates with Buddhist emptiness (as does his *egocentrism test*), his idea of an *undetermined*

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[24] Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, 151.

[25] Ferrer, 'Spiritual Knowing as Participatory Enaction,' 168n63.

[26] Nāgārjuna, *Vigrahavyāvartanī* v. 29: 'If I had a thesis, I would have fault; since I have no thesis, I am only faultless,' and *Mūlamadhyāmakakārikā* XIII.8: 'The Victorious Ones have proclaimed emptiness as that which relinquishes all views; but those who hold emptiness as a view are incurable.'

[27] See Kristen Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism*: *Attitudes toward Religious Others* (England: Ashgate Publications, 2005).

[28] See *Uttaratantra* I.157. See also, Duckworth, *Mipam on Buddha-nature*, 136–7.

[29] See John Makransky (2008) for a defense of Buddhist inclusivism that sustains multiple ends for different religious traditions, but asserts a distinctive Buddhist end (for its distinct path).

ultimate precludes emptiness from being the final word on reality because, being undetermined, ultimate reality can also be disclosed as theistic in a personal God. And importantly, this God is not a "lower" reality than emptiness because, of course, being lower depends on the criteria of a given context, not an objective truth. That is, its value is based on the pragmatic results or emancipatory functions it serves for an individual or community at a specific time, in the way it functions to overcome egocentrism and dissociation. It is with this logic that Ferrer challenges the structure of predetermined paths and sectarian hierarchies within a scripted Buddhist universe, and with this he offers a challenge to the assumptions of so-called "nonsectarian" traditions of Buddhist Tibet. However, the logic that drives his argument is precisely the logic of interdependence (or context-dependence), and this again can be seen as a Buddhist position.

Moreover, Ferrer's notions of the *dissociation test* and *eco–social–political test* are also not foreign to a Buddhist worldview, but grow out of the notion of the *bodhisattva*. Indeed, he articulates his own updated version of the *bodhisattva* vow to engage the world that he calls 'the integrated bodhisattva vow.' With this, he describes a commitment to cultivate fully the integrated dimensions of heart and mind, and not neglect the horizontal 'breadth' of one's living body (e.g., the emotional, energetic, and somatic dimensions) and world (e.g., the social, political, and ecological dimensions) while vertically ascending the 'heights' (and depths) of cognitive development.[30] In this light, Ferrer can be seen as a 'Buddhist modernist,' or rather, as offering a critical and constructive version of Buddhism for Northwestern European cultural traditions of the twenty-first century.[31]

The strengths of Ferrer's contribution are that he brings traditional religious systems, and Buddhism in particular, into conversation with the concerns of the contemporary world, a world that is not bound to the singular narrative of one pre-modern ethos, but which resonates with a multiplicity of voices—feminist and historical, empirical and theoretical, hermeneutic and scientific, mystical and secular, Hindu and Muslim. Yet Ferrer can be seen to clearly be drawing from Buddhist principles: emptiness (with his notion of an undetermined ultimate), interdependence (with his emphasis on context-dependence for evaluating normative values), no-self (which he formulates in the *egocentricism test*), and the *bodhisattva* ideal (which he reformulates in the *dissociation* and *eco–social–political tests*). In this light, Ferrer is doing nothing more (and nothing less) than offering an updated version of Buddhism, a global Buddhism. Nonetheless, his most significant contribution may be in illustrating what a "nonsectarian" stance might look like in a contemporary, religiously diverse world. While doing so, he shows us what is lost, and what is gained, if we adopt such a truly "nonsectarian" or pluralist stance: what we stand to lose is our particular version of a determinate ultimate truth and a fixed referent of what the end religious goal looks like; what we stand to gain is the real possibility of a transformative dialogue with different traditions, and a new, open relation to the world, ourselves, and each other.

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[30] See Ferrer, 'Participation, Metaphysics, and Enlightenment: Reflections on Ken Wilber's Recent Work,' 16–19.

[31] A similar project to reconstruct a modern Buddhist stance toward religious others are taken up in J. Abraham Vélez de Cea, *The Buddha and Religious Diversity* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

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