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Hybridity of Kuanyin and Mary, Maternal Sacrifice and Salvation: A Comparative Theological Study, **By Jea Sophia Oh**

Abstract

What kind of life or living could be the key of salvation? This paper deconstructs the traditional understanding of sacrifice as the code of salvation, as many Christians have traditionally believed that Jesus's Crucifixion brought salvation "once and for all." Not only in Christianity, but also in many other religions, sacrifice has been recognized as a crucial key to bring salvation.

Kuanyin is the bodhisattva of compassion, one who chose not to be Buddha but chose to stay with us for sharing our sufferings. Similarly, Mary is a Christian counterpart and mother figure who complied with God's call to be a virgin mother of Jesus and witnessed the death of her own child with a great deal of suffering and compassion and yet was excluded from the divine trinity. Given these examples, can it be said that sacrifice is the key to salvation? I would say, "No! The cross is a result of living and not the climax of living. The key lies in compassionate living."

Maternal sacrifice is that of a self-giving life and love. Mary's life and her maternal sacrifice have been ignored by traditional soteriology, which emphasizes death and suffering. The code of salvation for these two mother figures is actually their compassion and love, therefore, "Life." Likewise, Kuanyin's sacrifice is a part of her self-giving love in the process of salvation, not the purpose or the condition of salvation.

This paper turns our soteriological focus from death to Life, the compassionate living as an alternative soteriology. With love, Kuanyin sacrificed her body. With love, she stays on earth to save all Life.

1. Absence of Mothers in Soteriology

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible: And in on Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all words, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us...

This is the first and essential part of the early Credo as the symbol of the Apostles, based on the Nicene Creed of 325. Whoever is speaking in this text recognizes the trinity, Jesus's true divinity and true humanity, his virgin conception, and his sacrifice for salvation as the doctrinal truths. The Credo has become the foundation of Christian doctrine of the trinity and Christology as well as of the atonement.

The phallogocentric Christian image of God excludes women from the tri-union angle of Father-Son-Holy Spirit. The Christian religious symbolic is resultantly configured as masculine. Christianity is usually complicit with matricide and the occlusion of the feminine in as much as the Father God of monotheism and the homosexual trinity serves to affect the exclusive emergence of the male into semiotic representation and cultural production. I would say that the traditional Christian trinity is lacking femininity, the matricidal trinity.

Law, religion, science, and civilization are structured through the masculine symbolic order, as well. The feminine is figured as an absence within the real as well as the imaginary and symbolic orders. Thus, women have been excluded from symbolic order. The female is entirely excluded from rational discourse. The interpellation of individuals as subjects presupposes the existence of a central other Subject. Thus, without this transcendental Subject, female subjects cannot establish their identity. Luce Irigaray argues as long as woman lacks a divine made in her

image, she cannot establish her subjectivity. It is only in relationship to female sexual signs and representations that women can reconstruct themselves and struggle toward real subjectivity, not equal to men but different from them.¹

What about the virgin mother, *theotokos*, the mother of God? For Mary's virgin birth of Jesus, there was no earthly male's insemination but spiritual conception. Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginité* narrates that "She has not a husband but she has a Bridegroom; she weds the word of God as her eternal spouse."² Elsewhere, the virgin is partnered with the Father. Human and divine are wedded in Mary's virgin conception of Jesus. Is Mary God's wife or mother? Virginia Burrus interprets that Christ makes of Mary simultaneously a daughter, a mother, and a wife. Mary makes of Christ a father, a son, and a husband by coupling with the divine man, miraculously giving birth to the triune God.³ Nonetheless, the virgin's relations with the male trinitarian union of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is still unclear, and her alliance with the trinity is given little consideration. "The virgin's relations with the Father always remain in the shadow."⁴ Absence of mother in the trinity was criticized by Ludwig Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity*; according to Feuerbach, the Holy Spirit is too vague and poetic a personification to serve as the third complementary being in the trinity. On the contrary, the Virgin Mary fits in perfectly with the relations of the Trinity, since she conceives without man the Son whom the Father begets without woman.⁵

"To the Son the Mother is indispensable; the heart of the Son is the heart of the Mother....Where faith in the Mother of God sinks, there also sinks faith in the Son of God, and in God as the Father."⁶ Protestantism has set aside the Mother God. However, as Feuerbach points out, "The Father is a truth only where the Mother is a truth. Love is in and by itself essentially feminine in its nature. The belief in the love of God is the belief in the feminine principle of divine."⁷ This principle is itself intertwined with motherhood and personal sacrifice.

Irigaray points out maternal sacrifice in terms of human conception: "the mother-mistress can and must suffer, or even die in order to honor those chromosomes of the male race, that priceless *logos spermatikos* poured into her."⁸ Mothers experience psychological and emotional transformation and loss, pain, blood, and the rendering of flesh to face with the ideal of sacrifice with which the Christian tradition has predominantly viewed the sacrifice of the cross.

Julia Kristeva calls this residue of sacrifice the "abject." In patriarchal cultures, women have been reduced to the maternal function. This misplaced abjection is one way to account for women's oppression and degradation within patriarchal cultures. The abject thus both threatens and promises a collapse of those symbolic structures. In patriarchal systems, the masculine is threatened by the purportedly asymmetrical, irrational, wily, and uncountable power of the feminine. This instability and asymmetry of the masculine symbolic system can always be anticipated by the deconstruction of the system and threatened by the unpredictable becoming. In order to obtain the hegemony, the masculine suppresses and demonizes the feminine as the other, the abjection.

Women are categorized as the human representative of the abjection: the improper, transgression, unclean, sin, evil in Western Christianity. For Kristeva, Mary represents the elevation of the feminine and maternal principle. Kristeva sees this as the projection of imaginary wholeness beyond the abjection associated with childbirth.⁹ In Mary's conception of Jesus, a human father was excluded. She was indeed a single teen mother of a child who had no earthly father. As an illegitimate child of Joseph, Jesus had no biological relationship to King David's genealogy. Thus, the divine agency of conception challenges the patriarchal lineage of Israel. "Only through Mary, Jesus belongs to the human race."¹⁰ Mary's sacrifice is not "death for life" but "life for life." Mary J. Streufert writes, "Childbirth and lactation further alter a woman's body, opening, stretching, and widening her. The prematernal body does not return *in toto*. By woman's stripes is life given."¹¹ It is time to move our soteriological focus from death to life, from Jesus to Mary, the mother.

Kuanyin (觀音), the Buddhist Goddess of Compassion, is a similar figure to that of the Virgin Mary. Kuanyin is known as the bodhisattva of compassion and healing. A bodhisattva refuses to go to Nirvana as long as there are still other beings who have not yet attained enlightenment and who therefore still suffer. Some syncretic Buddhist and Christian observers have commented on the similarity between Kuanyin and Mary. This can be attributed to the representation of Kuanyin holding a child in Chinese art and sculpture; it is believed that Kuanyin is the patron saint of mothers and grants parents filial children. When the Tzu-Chi Foundation, a Taiwanese Buddhist organization, noticed the similarity between this form of Kuanyin and the Virgin Mary, the organization commissioned a portrait of Kuanyin and a baby that resembles the typical Roman Catholic Madonna and Child painting. Some ethnic Chinese in the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic Philippines, in an act of syncretism, have identified Kuanyin with the Virgin Mary.¹²

Ancient scriptures tell the story of how Kuanyin became a bodhisattva: as she stood at the threshold to Nirvana, she heard the cries of pain and confusion emanating from the world, and she swore to remain in it until all sentient beings had been liberated from suffering. In *Universal Gateway*, the *Lotus Sutra*, Kuanyin can appear in as many as thirty-three different forms in order to save different types of people.¹³ A key factor in the successful indigenization and feminization of this Buddhist deity in China is that, through various myths and legends, the Chinese have managed to transform Avalokitesvara, the ahistorical bodhisattva who transcended temporal and spatial limitations, as depicted in the Mahayana scripture, into Kuanyin, who, known by different Chinese names, led lives in clearly definable times and locations on the soil of China.¹⁴

In China, gods were depicted as real human beings. Mostly the gods were males originally. Likewise, Kuanyin was originally a male deity. Her prototype was Avalokitesvara and became transgendered and evolved as a female deity through her sacrifice and compassion as a woman. Kuanyin had to become Miao-shan, a living woman, so that she could be worshipped as a Chinese goddess. Kuanyin's salvific powers, promised by the sutras, are manifested in story of Miao-shan, which offers a biography of the thousand-handed Kuanyin. The highlight of the story is the transformation of the eyeless and handless young girl who offered hands and eyes for saving her ill father who once abandoned her as an infant into the thousand-eyed and thousand-handed Bodhisattva.¹⁵ Her compassion was considered feminine virtue.

Unlike Kuanyin, a female deity in Asia, the God who has for centuries reigned in Western culture is often referred to as male, a God who mirrors the patriarchal culture and masculine desire. Irigaray argues that woman has no mirror in order to become woman. This is a constructive point, that spiritually oriented women felt the need to connect with a being of the same gender, one they could turn to when they needed protection from diseases and dangers. Much like the Chinese Great Mother, Kuanyin was especially worshipped by women, whose role was severely curtailed in male-dominated Confucian society.

Finally, by the ninth century C.E., practically all images of Kuanyin became female. Some transitional images even show Kuanyin in feminine robes but sporting a fine moustache as an androgynous figure. This probably indicates that the Chinese collective consciousness had strongly absorbed the bodhisattva in female form.¹⁶ I found that Kuanyin's transgender body followed its personality, which I perceive to be more feminine than masculine. Kuanyin gradually evolved from a male to a female. Kuanyin and human mothers mirror each other in becoming divine through maternal sacrifice and compassion. She is the most beloved and revered of the Chinese deities. Kuanyin is the Divine Mother we all long for: merciful, tender, compassionate, loving, protecting, caring, healing, and wise.

2. Compassion, not Sacrifice

Among many legends of Kuanyin, Miao-shan's sacrifice of her body to save her father is similar to Jesus's salvation story. Miao-shan might have been a favorite religious name for

women long before the birth of the legend. This is similar to the popularity of the names Maria or Mary among Christian women in honor of the Virgin Mary. Miao-shan donated her arms and eyes to heal her father and had become the embodiment of the purest unconditional compassion.¹⁷ It sounds as horrifying as Jesus's crucifixion. The body was scattered into many pieces and prepared into medicine. Both Jesus's passion and Miao-shan's sacrifice are too violent to romanticize as love. Miao-shan became Kuanyin with a thousand arms and a thousand eyes to see (hear) cries (sufferings) of the world and to embrace the world. As the co-sufferer and healer, she stays in the mundane world. She is the heart of the world who feels directly our suffering and happiness until the whole world is saved.

What does sacrifice do for salvation? Is salvation the result of sacrifice, or did sacrifice come out of the process of salvation as an act of compassion? The latter is what I believe as a feminist theologian. First of all, if we consider salvation as conditional on sacrifice, now we are saying that without sacrifice there can be no love and salvation. Secondly, in order to be saved, sacrifice can be romanticized and enforced. In the name of love for family, many women are forced to sacrifice. Thirdly, through this process of dramatization of sacrifice, violence can be justified. Finally, the horrific drama has become inevitable for fulfilling the atonement as the perfect crime with no charge.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states, "If Jesus lived the *basileia* of God by festive table and egalitarian healing, then Jesus's sacrifice of life has more to do with the kingdom of God and less to do with the redemption of sin."¹⁸ By the same token, Rosemary Ruether eschews the idea of redemptive suffering. Ruether argues that Jesus's death is the result of his commitment to a model of new leadership of service to others. Jesus's life redeems us, and his suffering is a by-product, not the cause, of redemption. The cross is a result of living, not the climax of living.

Being reminded that "Jesus's life is redemptive" is critical in the effort to redirect our focus from a single vision of atonement to a multifaceted view of it.¹⁹ Jesus's compassionate living is viewed by feminists as maternal and feminine. Elizabeth Johnson argues that the crucified Jesus embodies the exact opposite of the patriarchal ideal of the powerful man. Thus, Jesus's maleness is prophecy announcing the end of patriarchy. Johnson claims that Jesus's passion and compassion resemble women's shedding blood for life in menstruation and giving birth. Jesus is the savior, not because of his physical maleness but because of his love.²⁰ However, Jesus is undeniably a male savior and the protagonist of the Christian atonement. Similarly, Kuanyin is the Bodhisattva of compassion, one who chose not to be Buddha but instead to stay with us to share in and heal our sufferings. Her compassionate living is the key to salvation. Kuanyin's sacrifice is likewise a by-product of her self-giving love, not the purpose or the condition of salvation. For Kuanyin, suffering invokes compassion, and compassion saves (heals) the sufferer.

3. Compassion is listening

Both Kuanyin and Mary are called "Lady of Compassion." Kuanyin in Chinese roughly translates as "the One who sees the cries of the world." Similarly, Mary listens to our prayers and prays with us to communicate with God. Here, listening is the crucial point of compassion. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, a Greek prayer that has been in use for 1,750 years begins with Mary's compassion: "Under your compassion we take refuge, *Theotokos*; do not overlook our prayers in the midst of tribulation, but deliver us from danger, O only pure, only blessed one."²¹ The same verb "deliver" (*libera*, to redeem) is found in the *Lord's Prayer*: "deliver us from evil" (*libera nos a malo*). Mary is a savior figure, who delivers us from danger and protects us as the listener to our suffering.

Here is a Buddhist prayer to Kuanyin: "She *redeems* the multitude; She has great compassion; Thus she rules over the T'ai Mountain, and lives at the South Sea. She *saves* the poor, searching for their voices."²² Kuanyin is the messianic figure who saves the world from suffering, dwells in mountains and rivers, listens the cries of suffering. The Process

Ecotheologian, Jay McDaniel calls God the Deep Listening. Deep Listening is not an act of knowing about; rather, it is an act of knowing with. In genuine listening, the dichotomy between subject and object is eliminated, because at a certain level of the listener's psyche, we become the other, the person listened to. "In the beginning is the listening, and this listening is with God and is God."²³

If so, then I wonder why the lady of compassion, Kuanyin (觀音, seeing the cries) is not Chungyin (聽音, hearing sounds). The Chinese letter "Kuan (觀)" means not just "seeing (見)" but "seeing through," therefore, penetrating, immanence in the midst of sufferings of the world, "being with"; not just a cry for but a "cry with"; not just a prayer for but "prayer with." If the pain is so horrible, one cannot even make a sound. This was so for Jesus on the Cross, the silent cries of the oppressed, natural destruction, animals' sufferings, deforestation, and more – all of which are barely audible but visible. Yet they require our careful and responsive observation. Kuanyin refrains from entering Nirvana in order to come to the aid of others. She was so moved by the pain of the world's beings that her heart began to shake, and she knew that she could not yet leave the world behind with the vow of bodhisattva: "I will not reach final liberation until all other beings have been liberated."²⁴

If compassion is defined as a virtue, it relates to the emotional capacities of empathy and sympathy for the suffering of others. The Latin word *cum* means "with" and *passion* means "suffering." Compassion means being with the suffering heart of the one who suffers. Compassion means being with the event, sharing the event, feeling the event, and actually becoming the event – as Mary, the suffering mother at the Cross, was witness to the Resurrection.

It would behoove us to shift our focus from Jesus to Mary in the Crucifixion. Traditionally, Christian theologies have focused on Jesus's suffering on the Cross. Christians traditionally believe that Jesus's Crucifixion brought salvation "once and for all." I believe we should instead refer to John 19:25-27 about the Crucifixion of Jesus and Mary's maternal sacrifice:

25 Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, [a] here is your son," 27 and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Among four Gospels, John's description of the Crucifixion of Jesus reveals Mary's presence as a detailed picture even though it is still Jesus-centered. Three other Gospels do not even mention Jesus's name. I would argue that one should not read the Gospel of John under the *a priori* assumption that it is only Jesus's story, in which Mary just enhances Jesus's soteriological climax. Rather, it would benefit us to reread this story as "Mary's story." The alternative soteriology is to be saved in the presence of God by way of compassion. This is a soteriological model of restoration that is not simply maternal but transcendent. Compassion is what restores our awareness of God's presence. By transferring our soteriological focus from death to life, such as the life given and cared for by the mother, the way to life is no longer exclusively focused on an obedient death but on compassionate living, Life.

Compassion means being with the sufferer and becoming the other. The key to salvation is not sacrifice or suffering itself. Rather, suffering calls for compassion. Compassion heals and saves the sufferers. Compassion occurs when there is *passion* (suffering) and healing from it. It is as though a synergy when Mary prays with us, being with and becoming the other. The practice of synergy evokes compassion and the support of "community of communities" as "becoming together." Compassion is the Heart of God, and *God is the Heart*. The Heart of Compassion saves the world not once and for all, but continually and immanently, every day

within us. Compassion bridges *samsara* and *nirvana*, suffering and salvation. With compassion, *samsara* is transformed into *nirvana*. *Nirvana* has been postponed but can be attained now when we invite the compassionate heart in the midst of *samsara*.

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Notes

- ¹ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, tr. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 63.
- ² Virginia Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 145.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 144.
- ⁴ *Sexes and Genealogies*, 62.
- ⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The essence of Christianity*, tr. George Eliot (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), 74.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, tr. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 170.
- ⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Stabat Mater, The Kristeva Reader*, tr. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 49-79.
- ¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatic I, 2*, 219.
- ¹¹ Mary J. Streufert, "Maternal Sacrifice as a Hermeneutics of the Cross," *Cross Examinations*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 71.
- ¹² Daniela Schenker, *Kuan Yin: Accessing the Power of the Divine Feminine* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2007), 26.
- ¹³ Chun-Fang Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 294.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 299.
- ¹⁶ *Kuan Yin: Accessing the Power of the Divine Feminine*, 16.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ¹⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 95.
- ¹⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 27.
- ²⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 161.
- ²¹ Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Lost Gospel of Mary: The Mother of Jesus in Three Ancient Texts* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2007), 86.

²² David R. Kinsley, *The Goddess Mirror: Visions of the Divine from East and West* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 25-26.

²³ Jay McDaniel, *Gandhi's Hope: Learning from Other Religions as a Path to Peace* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 8.

²⁴ *Kuan Yin: Accessing the Power of the Divine Feminine*, 2.