During my junior year of high school, our Spanish language class journeyed by bus from Los Angeles round trip to Mexico City. Winding through back roads, passing cacti, corn fields, and sleepy villages, sometimes stopping at a small town or city, other nights sleeping on the bus, we made our way slowly to the capital through what seemed like clouds and stars over the hills. The entire trip was unforgettable, yet the most unexpected memorable moment came during a visit to the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Swept up by the sights, sounds, and fragrance of flowers, candles, and incense, together with the praying and singing of ordinary people, I found myself in a slow procession toward the image of Guadalupe on the *tilma*, toward a mystical encounter with Guadalupe herself. My experience resonated with what Latino theologian Virgil Elizondo writes:

As we gradually walked toward the luminous image she appeared to be coming toward us, as if she were descending to greet each one of us personally. Through the darkness we walked toward the light, the warmth, and the beauty of *La Virgen Morena*, “the dark virgin,” representing the dark, sun-burnt skin of indigenous peoples.2

I had joined a mystical procession that has been in movement since Guadalupe's first appearance in 1531.

Six years later on December 12, 1980, her feast day, Guadalupe seemed to visit me in my small room as I came to the decision to join the Maryknoll Sisters, a Catholic religious women’s missionary congregation. In the late 1980s, during a time of doubt and indecision about returning to Peru, she reassured me again while on a visit to my grandparents’ gravesites in southern California when I discovered that they were buried in the section of the cemetery named after her. She has both accompanied and challenged me to live a compassionate life of service. During studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley I met her spirit again in a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue course through discovering the bodhisattva way and, particularly, through Kuan Yin.

---

1 The *tilma* is made of a coarse fabric woven from the maguey, a cactus from which tequila is also made. This is the coarse fabric worn by Juan Diego on which the Virgin of Guadalupe’s image is said to have miraculously appeared. Ana Castillo, ed., *Goddess of the Americas—La Diosa de las Americas* (NY: Riverhead Books, 1996), xx.

In 2012, I journeyed to Japan to search out my Buddhist grandmother's place of rest and have the appropriate Buddhist ancestral prayers offered for her, as she had been neglected for over ninety years. My grandfather had taken her ashes back to Obayashimura on the outskirts of Hiroshima in 1920 and then returned to California. With the assistance of the Maryknoll Sisters in Kyoto and Buddhist lay leader Mr. Daidai, and no doubt my father's spirit, we were able to locate her 1,500-year-old temple in Kabe, Japan, and schedule the ancestral prayer that is usually done during the cherry blossom season. Protected in a mountainous river valley, the temple served as a makeshift hospital after the atomic bomb. The opening chant sung by the Buddhist priest Rev. Watanabe poured waters of tenderness and compassion over many generations and within my cradle-Catholic soul. I felt the presence of my ancestors, my father, and Kuan Yin—“hearer of cries”—and the resonance with Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe), who listened to the cries of the Nahuatl people.

In this essay I explore the resonances between Kuan Yin and the Virgin of Guadalupe through preliminary comparisons, and, more specifically, through the images and texts of The Lotus Sutra (25th chapter), The Shurangama Sutra (vol. 5), and The Nican Mopohua, the post-conquest Nahuatl account of the Virgin of Guadalupe's five visitations in 1531. As an initial step, I would like to clarify that I do not mean to imply that Kuan Yin and the Virgin of Guadalupe are identical but that understanding is deepened in each knowing about the other. Michael Rodrigo, in reflecting how his own Christian faith was deepened from learning about the praxis of Buddha from his involvement and commitment with the villagers in Sri Lanka, speaks of a “dialogy” that places dialogue as part of a religious quest and not simply a secondary reflection about religion. At some point of convergence, is it possible to say that they are both pointing to the same sacred truth or are at least similar paths to the truth? To answer this question is beyond the scope of this article. I simply and humbly begin on the path where both Kuan Yin and Guadalupe are present and seek to converse with both of them along the way, in the spirit of the dialogical nature of God's Trinitarian self. Bevans and Schroeder in their work Prophetic Dialogue note four kinds of interreligious/secular dialogue: dialogue of life, dialogue of social action, dialogue of theological exchange, and dialogue of religious experience. This essay touches on aspects of all four, yet it is more reflective of an internal dialogue process indicative of an interreligiosity or interspirituality. It is recognition of an affinity of orthopraxis (right practice) rather than orthodoxy (right belief.) As an Asian American with Buddhist and Catholic religious heritages, my resonance with both Kuan Yin and Guadalupe may be an opportunity for these two heritages to come together in solidarity rather than in competition. To discover resonances in each tradition is not meant to collapse one into the other or to blur the distinctiveness and unique contribution of each but to see an alliance of compassion.

---


Kuan Yin

Scholars of Chinese religion have called Kuan Yin “the Buddhist Madonna.” In Japan, Maria Kannon icons have been discovered from the Edo period of persecution of Christians, linking the two figures of popular piety in the Buddhist and Christian traditions. In Vietnam, the devotion to the merciful Quan Âm Thi Kính is naturally extended to Mary, the Mother of Mercy, who embodies divine compassion. In Korea, she is known as Guanyin. Kuan Yin or Guanyin is a shortened form of Guan-shi-yin which is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit Avalokiteśvara. It can be translated as “the one who listens to the cries of the world” or “one who sees the sounds of the world.” Avalokiteśvara, bodhisattva of compassion, was originally a male figure brought from India to China in the fifth century CE. By the late eighth century, she was perceived as female with her name translated into the Chinese Guan-shi-yin.

Avalokiteśvara reached enlightenment through meditation on sound where both “subject (hearer or hearing) and object (sound) are merged in the Void and awareness of voidness becomes all-embracing. When awareness of both existence and non-existence vanishes, Nirvana supervenes.”

Avalokiteśvara (Kuan Yin) as secondary embodiment of compassion, an emanation from the primary liberating energy of compassion, the Amitabha Buddha, thus acquires two “unsurpassed merits”: the profound compassion that proceeds from the Bodhi (Enlightenment) and the plea for compassion of all sentient beings below. As a bodhisattva, “one who is on the way to the attainment of perfect knowledge, a future Buddha” yet who postpones its fulfillment for the sake of others, Kuan Yin thus remains available for all suffering sentient beings as the Hearer-of-Cries. This divine merit or virtue karunā is compassion that responds with skillful means on behalf of those suffering. From this gesture on her part as one who sits next to you, we are able to draw near to her in a more accessible way than when we are awestruck by a Buddha.

The Shurangama Sutra enumerates the thirty-two response bodies in which Kuan Yin manifests in an appropriate way to draw near to those who need this bodhisattva of compassion:

---

7 Peter C. Phan, In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 105. “Mary’s alleged apparitions at La Vang and Tra Kieu both occurred in the context of persecution . . . as a protective mother, full of love and mercy for her suffering children . . . out of gratuitous and merciful love she liberated them and promised to listen favorably to those who would pray to her.”
8 Also, Indonesia—Kwan Im; Thai—Kuan Im; Khmer—Preah Mae Kun Ci lem; Tibetan—Chenrezig.
10 Sandy Boucher, Discovering Kwan Yim, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 5.
13 Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 104. Phan notes that three of the four divine virtues or merits (bramavihās) to achieve enlightenment correspond with mercy and compassion: mettā—selfless, universal, all-expansive love; muditā—altruistic joy in the success or welfare of others; karunā—compassion for all living beings in their suffering, with no sense of superiority over them, not a mere feeling of pity or a helpless vicarious suffering for others but a compassion that leads to positive action on behalf of one’s fellow sufferers.
Because I gained a power of compassion identical with that of all Buddhas, the Thus come Ones, I became accomplished in thirty-two response-bodies and entered all lands.\textsuperscript{14}

If there are women who would like to leave the home-life and hold the pure precepts, I will appear before them in the body of a Bhikshuni and speak Dharma for them, enabling them to accomplish their wish.\textsuperscript{15}

If there are women who govern internal affairs of household or country, I will appear before them in the body of a queen, first lady, or noblewoman and speak Dharma for them, enabling them to accomplish their wish.\textsuperscript{16}

If there are living beings who like being people and want to continue to be people, I will appear in the body of a person and speak Dharma for them, enabling them to accomplish their wish.\textsuperscript{17}

This is called the wonderful purity of the thirty-two response bodies, by which one enters into all lands and accomplishes self-mastery by means of the Samadhi of becoming permeated with hearing and cultivating hearing and by means of the miraculous strength of effortlessness.\textsuperscript{18}

Kuan Yin listens to the sound of suffering, not contemplating the sounds for her own sake but rather to enable “living beings throughout the ten directions who are in suffering and distress to attain liberation by contemplating their sounds.”\textsuperscript{19} In the Lotus Sutra, thirty-three different forms are referred to and female manifestations appear:

If they need a monk, a nun, a layman believer, or a laywoman believer to be saved, immediately he becomes a monk, a nun, a layman believer, or a laywoman believer and preaches the Law for them.\ldots\linebreak[3] If they need a heavenly being, a dragon, a yaksha, a gandharva, an asura, a garuda, a kimnara, a mahoraga, a human or a nonhuman being to be saved, immediately he becomes all of these and preaches the Law for them.\textsuperscript{20}

Kuan Yin is as a universal gateway or doorway to Enlightenment for all sentient beings, manifest in the ways necessary and appropriate to their situation and need.

\textbf{The Virgin of Guadalupe}

In order to understand a similar divine–human (enlightened–sentient being) parallel in Mary, it is important to revisit the Christological controversy of the early church. In the Council of Ephesus in 431, Mary as Theotokos—Godbearer, Mother of God—emphasized Jesus Christ’s personal unity as God and human, affirming the Alexandrian interpretation. Nestorius, unable to accept Theotokos, pointed to a sharper contrast between Christ’s godhead and his humanity, representing the Antiochene approach. Both approaches shared the presupposition about the absoluteness of God but had divergent theories about the person of Jesus Christ. The Alexandrian interpretation understands God as impassable (incapable of suffering), taking on suffering through the unity of the divine and the human in Jesus, from two natures but now one. The Antiochene approach calls this fusion or confu-

sion that jeopardizes the impassibility of the Logos and makes meaningless the possibility (capability of suffering) of humanity, seeking to maintain the two natures.

The Antiochene approach weakens when the soteriology held in common is examined further. The purpose of the coming of Christ was salvation that had as its consequences immortality and impassibility, liberation from the lifelong bondage through the fear of death. Mere association or human assumed by Logos (Christokos, indwelling) in the Antiochene understanding was insufficient to explain this understanding of salvation. The union between Logos and the one born and crucified—the Savior is the Logos himself, Savior of the Cosmos—proves more sufficient an understanding. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 affirmed the difference and unity within the incarnate Christ where each nature (fully divine and fully human) is preserved “since the difference of the natures is not destroyed because of the union but, on the contrary, the character of each nature is preserved” and both concur in one person, one hypostasis—the substance, essence, or underlying reality. This is a relational unity and an attempt to strike a balance between the two approaches. Pope Leo I expressed that “to enhance humanity is not to diminish deity” and that a “drawing near in mercy is not a failure in power.”21

Mary, as well as Jesus, enables this “drawing near in mercy.” “It was the Holy Spirit who made the Virgin fertile, but the substantive reality of the body was derived from her body; so, ‘since Wisdom was building herself a house,’ [Prov. 9:11] ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ [John 1:14].”22 Within the Mexican context, as theologian Virgil Elizondo has noted, Guadalupe herself has been understood as a Christ event, a Christology. She wears the distinctive black band over her waist that indicates she is pregnant; the new source and center of the new humanity that she carries within her womb is the innermost core of her presence. That source and center is Christ as the light and life of the world.23 As she participates in both human and divine realms, has shared in the struggles, fears, and suffering of a human mother, her compassionate power of her intercession is recognized and called upon. At this point, a brief recount of the Guadalupe story is in order. The following is a brief summary of the Nican Mopohua by Elizondo.

In the year 1531 on December 9, Juan Diego, a poor and dignified Indian, is passing by Tepeyac on his way to church at Tlatelolco (an ancient ceremonial center that had become a center of Spanish evangelization and spiritual domination) when he hears the birds and flowers dialoguing in beautiful singing. He was being called from the summit. “Dignified Juan Diego . . . my most abandoned son.” The Virgin of Guadalupe appears to him with her clothing like the sun. She gives the litany of Nahuatl terms for God: “I am the Ever-Virgin Holy Mary, Mother of the God of Great Truth, Teotl, of the One through Whom We Live, the Creator of Persons, the Owner of What is Near and Together, of the Lord of Heaven and Earth.” She announces her mission of compassion and desires a hermitage to be built at Tepeyac to hear their cries and to remedy their ills. “In it I will show and give to all people all my love, my compassion, my help and my protection.” She sends Juan Diego as her messenger to the bishop, who listens but then sends him away. Juan Diego returns downcast and asks the Virgin to send somebody more important. She sends him again and this time the bishop asks for a sign. When he returns home, however, he finds his uncle dying with smallpox and so decides to sidetrack the Virgin to go call a priest, but she appears to him just the same on a different road. “Let nothing trouble you or cause you sorrow . . . your uncle is healed. Go up to the hill

22 Norris, Christological Controversy, 148.
23 Elizondo, Guadalupe, 128.
As Mary has also manifested herself in different contexts—Lourdes (France), Fatima (Portugal), Copacabana (Bolivia), and others—the intricacies of her Nahuatl names indicate her manifestation in the indigenous context of the particular Nahuatl cosmovision. “Guadalupe” is itself a Spanish name imported from the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe from Extremadura, Spain, and the word itself is a corruption of Arabic, which means “river of love, river of light.” It is similar in sound to Tequatlasupe or Tequatlanopeuh, which means “She Whose Origins Were in the Rocky Summit.”25 She appeared a fifth time to Juan Diego’s ill uncle, Juan Bernardino, and in the redaction of the Nican Mopohua, it is attributed to him that “She Called Herself Tequatlasupe.”26

The Nican Mopohua, written by a Nahuatl scholar for the Nahuatl people, is rich in its visual precision, elegance, beauty, sound, and Nahuatl symbolic meaning. The four appearances of Guadalupe to Juan Diego resonate with the sacred number of the four cardinal directions and the four elements of air, fire, water, and land. The fifth appearance marks the center, making it complete. Flowers signify truth while beauty signifies authenticity and philosophy. Yet Guadalupe appears in a moment that is one of the greatest tragedies in human history. Juan Diego is walking “when it is still night.” In 1521 there was a great massacre of the Nahuatl people. Combined with the pestilence of disease, there was a drastic decrease in population. Justo Gonzalez notes:

I am convinced that the so-called ‘encounter’ between two hemispheres led to one of the greatest tragedies in human history, and one of the worst blots on Christian history. The death of millions upon millions of human beings, the disappearance of entire civilizations and peoples, and the subjugation of others for five hundred years should not be obscured nor minimized. The cries of trampled and destroyed generations still rise to heaven, and justice still remains to be done.27

Those who survived were considered less than human and, in a state of shock, were haunted by the memory of conquest and a death wish. “Allow us to die, allow us to perish, since our gods have already died.” Guadalupe, like Kuan Yin, hears these cries and desires the hermitage as a hospice for a people who had been totally displaced and left homeless by the conquest. The healing of Juan Bernardino is the beginning of the healing of a people. In the text, this hermitage evolves into a new home, a place of affectionate relationships where liberation is attained “by contemplating their sounds,” where Guadalupe takes seriously their suffering. Finally this hermitage/home becomes a temple, a place for the manifestation of the sacred where the people can know their lives as sacred in being received by the sacred. By invoking the Nahuatl terms for God, Guadalupe re-establishes the authenticity and veracity of these names for the sacred, which had been discredited as demons and false idols by the Spanish evangelizers.28

The dehumanization of a people is marked by subjugation and rape. The resulting bastard “half-breeds” are denigrated even further. By the time of her appearance, most indigenous would have been of such mixed blood. Guadalupe gazes on this mestizaje and through her compassionate relationship; the conquered poor mestizos become

---

24 Elizondo, Guadalupe, 5-22.
25 Castillo, Goddess of the Americas, xv.
26 Elizondo, Guadalupe, 5
27 As cited in Elizondo, Guadalupe, 29-30.
28 Elizondo, Guadalupe, 8.
a New Humanity as they are recognized as persons. This resonates with “living beings [who] want to continue to be people” of the thirty-two response bodies of Kuan Yin. The Lotus Sutra describes the “pure gaze.” [Kuan Yin] of the true gaze, the pure gaze, the gaze of great and encompassing wisdom, the gaze of pity, the gaze of compassion—constantly we implore [her], constantly look up in reverence. [Her] pure light, free of blemish, is a sun of wisdom dispelling all darknesses. [She] can quell the wind and fire of misfortune and everywhere bring light to the world.

Guadalupe’s compassion frees the spiritual and physical imprisonment of a people that has left their will to struggle to live defeated. This echoes with the Lotus Sutra:

Suppose you are pursued by evil [ones] who wish to throw you down from a diamond mountain.
Think on the power of that Perceiver of Sounds and they cannot harm a hair of you!

Think on the power of the Perceiver of Sounds and at once all will be swayed by compassion!

Suppose you are imprisoned in cangue and lock, hands and feet bound by fetters and chains. Think on the power of the Perceiver of Sounds and they will fall off, leaving you free.

It is important to consider the affinities with the hieroglyphics of the image on the tilma, which scientifically should no longer exist due to the potential disintegration over 450 years of time. The color luminosity is “as fresh and crisp as the day it was formed.” She stands in front of the sun rays and stands upon the moon. She is greater than these but does not extinguish them. The blue green of her mantle is the color of divinity and she brings the contradictory forces in the universe together in a harmonious way. The pale red of her dress symbolizes the blood sacrifice and suffering of humanity while the stars on her mantle are a sign of a new era, a new civilization. She wears no mask like the typical indigenous goddess and her beautiful eyes attract us to her gaze.

Elizondo believes that Guadalupe is the “woman, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” that Revelations 12:1 writes about. It resonates also with the Shurangama Sutra:

In this three-thousand-great-thousand world system with its billions of suns and moons, as many Dharma princes as there are grains of sand in sixty-two Ganges Rivers appear in the world and cultivate the Dharma. They act as models in order to teach and transform living beings. They comply with living beings by means of expedients and wisdom, in different ways for each.

Like the White-Robed Kuan Yin whose white-bleached hemp clothes of the commoners indicated that she does not set herself apart from the commoners of the world, Guadalupe is dressed in the typical dress of a pregnant indigenous woman. Both bring together the divine and the human at an ordinary level in an extraordinary way.

Kuan Yin and Guadalupe as both the Hearer-of-Cries reveal the sounding that is in the heart of each suffering person and people. The convergence of Kuan Yin and Guadalupe is not that they are identical or manifestations of each other but that they are manifestations of the same compassionate energy. “[Kuan Yin] corresponds to an actual energy permanently latent in the mind; though it may be that the forms in which she is envisaged are de-

29 The Lotus Sutra, 305. I’ve modified the pronouns to reflect the female figure of Kuan Yin.
30 The Lotus Sutra, 304.
31 The image remains intact in the new Basilica of Mexico City. My first encounter with Guadalupe in 1973 occurred at the old basilica.
32 Elizondo, Guadalupe, 78.
34 Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua, The Shurangama Sutra, 174.
35 Tzu Chi magazine (Fall 1997), 84.
liberate human creations.”36 Kuan Yin is our own selfless and compassionate true nature. “You are Kuan Yin” is an understanding in Mahayana Buddhism and is expressed in the poetry and sutras. Meditation in stillness unclouds our mind of the egoistic self that prevents us from seeing our true self.37 In a similar manner, virginity means “the state of the person who is free of all false images and is therefore able to bear God in himself or herself,” according to Meister Eckhardt.38 Thus the virginity of Mary can be understood as a relational reality more so than a biological reality. She is a “liberated human being, who—not being subject to any other human being—is free to serve God.” She matures to wholeness as a complete person and is open for others.39

In some ways, my personal encounter with Guadalupe back in high school was the beginning of my own coming to wholeness. I was able to receive her gaze on my own dual cultural heritage that has not always been a harmonious existence. As an Asian American, East and West have often struggled with each other due to some stark differences whose competition was fostered in an environment that often labeled me “the other.” Guadalupe’s gaze gave me hints of the possibility of a new synthesis as well as being surrounded by those whom she had compassionately heard into being.

At first, this bicultural personality is difficult to live with, but in time it provides the basis for a new synthesis. This new synthesis is easy to talk about, but it never takes place easily. There is first a deep and profound loneliness, the loneliness of not even being able to conceptualize and verbalize the reasons for the social alienation. Attempts will be made to “unbe” in order to be. The inner self will be suppressed into an almost total silence. Finally, through struggle and suffering the new identity will begin to emerge and the self will be able to shout out with joy: I am. This new identity does not eliminate either the original culture of the parents or the culture of the new country. On the contrary, it enriches both by opening up each to the possibilities of the other.40

That I am now able to also identify Kuan Yin’s influence as she has deepened my understanding of the experience of Guadalupe reaffirms the truth of wisdom and compassion and that its energy cannot stay within one person. It is a relational energy. It must expand and be shared or else it is no longer compassion. Perhaps this is the truth of the phrase “Compassion is the origin of salvation, but without wisdom, it cannot become great compassion.”41 It makes perfect sense to me now that she reappeared at my call to join my heart with the Maryknoll Sisters and our option for the poor in service and mission around the world, and reaffirmed my call to return to accompany the Aymara, an indigenous and marginalized people of the southern Andes of Peru. That Kuan Yin enables a personal understanding of this call as rooted in both traditions of my religious heritages indeed magnifies my heart.

“It is the hard reality of social conflict, not the exchange of ideas, that creates unity or foments division.” From Kuan Yin listening and responding to the sound of suffering and Guadalupe also responding to the suffering of the Nahuatl people, I place my particular reflections within the context of an emerging worldwide community made up of the despised and rejected of the modern world. Buddhist and Christian alike, we struggle to cope with this reality.

Thus, if dialogue can gently and determinedly induce both parties, both religious groups (and in multi-religious dialogue areas), or all groups, to be prophetic at the service of the poor of God, by

---

36 Blofeld, Bodhisattva of Compassion, 23, 42.
37 Habito, Zen and the Spiritual Exercises, 200-203.
38 Reis-Habito, Bodhisattva Guanyin and Virgin Mary, 60, 68.
39 Chung Hyun Kyung, Struggle to Be the Sun Again (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 77.
40 Elizondo, The Future is Mestizo, 100.
socio-political cooperations, then religion and dialogue would have done their obvious duty. Otherwise dialogue will become only a frustrating task of aimlessly looking at each other and not transforming the world by the richness of a transforming presence.42

Inspired by Avalokiteśvara (Kuan Yin) and through dialogue with neighboring Catholic sisters in Hualien, Taiwan, Venerable Dharma Master Cheng Yen founded the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, *tzu chi* meaning “compassion and relief,” in 1966 with six Buddhist nuns and thirty housewives. At present, the nonprofit foundation has nearly 10 million volunteers and donors in 50 countries, and has provided relief in more than 85 countries.43 The Maryknoll Sisters and the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation movement would indeed converge at this point of compassionate energy, as we both receive and give the listening of our hearts and attempt to respond with “skillful means.”

In closing, I would like to dedicate this essay in remembrance of Sister Conchita Hojilla, on our Maryknoll Sisters leadership team 1996-1998 who died suddenly of a stroke while on visitation to Hong Kong in November 1998. It was there that she, too, had met Kuan Yin and was in the process of bringing her back to share with the Maryknoll Sisters.

---

42 Rodrigo, "The Hope of Liberation," 193.
43 For the history, philosophy, and practice, see www.us.tzuchi.org.