

**The Middle Way of Christ:
Remarks in Dialogue with His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama**

© 2007 James S. Cutsinger

San Francisco, 15 April 2006

Your Holiness, if I understand your tradition correctly, the phrase “Middle Way” points in the first place to the enlightening discovery of the Lord Buddha Himself that the Path to *Nirvâna* passes between the extremes of ascetical severity and self-indulgence. But it is also linked with the name of the Buddhist sage Nagarjuna, who posed a *Tetralemma*, a paradoxical formula deliberately designed to intensify by a factor of two the fruitful tensions of a standard dilemma. According to Nagarjuna, we should not say that things *are*, nor that they *are not*, nor that they *neither are nor are not*, nor again that they *both are and are not*. Wherever one turns, toward any of these Four Extremes, one realizes the Truth is elsewhere.

Those of us in the Christian tradition are taught precisely the same—though of course we use different words! We are taught that Jesus Christ is the Truth (John 14:6), and we say that this Truth is not *That* alone, for He is not merely God; nor is It *this* alone, for He is not just a man; nor is It *neither That nor this*, for He is not an angel; nor again is It *both That and this*, for He is not merely a mixture, as a griffin is a mixture of an eagle and lion. No, Christ is truly and entirely God and truly and entirely man at a point where the two interpenetrate without conflation or compromise. This is the Christian *Tetralemma*.

Furthermore—and now I come to the practical import of what may seem to some people a very rarified doctrine—we Christians are told that by following Christ’s lead and obeying His precepts, we can “grow up in every way into Him” (Eph. 4:15), who “though in the form of God emptied Himself, taking the form of man” (Phil. 2:6-7). But if Christ is not *That* and not *this* and not *neither That nor this* and not *both That and this*, and if I am somehow to grow to be what He is, then I too must avoid the Four Extremes and must become who I am by following a tetralemmic trajectory, abiding in an

Emptiness that exists between opposites and remaining detached—intensely and alertly detached—from any movement of soul that might lead me astray from the Center.



As for the opposites that most concern us at this conference today, I must on the one hand “offer no resistance to evil” and “turn the other cheek” (Matt. 5:39), just as Christ commanded me, a command whose wisdom will at once be obvious to everyone here. But I must not stop with this precept. I am obliged by the Middle Way of my faith to remember that this same Jesus Christ came, in His own words, “not to bring peace but a sword” (Matt. 10:34), that He spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven being taken by “violence” (Luke 22:38), and that while commanding me to “love” those who “hate” me (Matt. 5:44), He nonetheless tells me to “hate” my “father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even myself” if I am to be His “disciple” (Luke 14:26).

These puzzling, and perhaps even frightening, words of my Scriptures serve as a bracing reminder that the Middle Way, being tetralemmic in nature, passes between *all* extremes. Those of us who seek peace have come here today to show our solidarity against every form of religious extremism, but we need to be vigilant, mercifully *hating* our egos out of lucid *love* for the Self, lest we ourselves fall into another kind of extremism. For a flaccid peace of mere comfort, complacency, or self-satisfaction is just as much a departure from Truth as a raging severity untempered by compassion.

The world, it seems, is so made that when we fail to strike the proper balance between complementary opposites, contradictions rush in to fill their place. And so we must each ask ourselves in all seriousness whether it is we who are responsible for the spread of violence today, living as many of us habitually do at the extreme of self-indulgence. To put the question in terms familiar to our Muslim friends, has our lazy refusal to engage in the greater *jihad*, the inward battle with our own grasping tendencies, led in some way, or on some level of cosmic compensation, to the violence of the lesser jihadism we all so lament?