

The “Righteous Vaccinated” and the “Unrighteous Unvaccinated”? How Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and the Gospel of John might help us understand the ongoing pandemic

Greg Mileski

Boston College, Theology Department,
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, USA

Correspondence

Greg Mileski, Boston College, Newton,
Massachusetts, USA
Email: gregmileski@gmail.com

Abstract

As the COVID-19 pandemic turns two how should those who feel like we have been responsible neighbors (kept our distance, worn our masks, availed ourselves to the vaccine) respond to those we feel have not been—and specifically toward those who have refused the vaccine as a sign of political loyalty? How might those of us tempted to react from anger cultivate an alternative response? This paper explores the texts of two religions traditions—Mahāyāna Buddhism’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and Christianity’s Gospel of John—searching for resources for a response other than anger and blame.

KEYWORDS

anger, Christianity, Gospel of John, Mahāyāna Buddhism, pandemic, René Girard, Santideva

1 | INTRODUCTION: THE PANDEMIC GOES ON

As¹ the pandemic turns two and an initial wave has become “delta,” “omicron,” and whatever other waves lie ahead, many of us—myself included—have been reflecting on the mixed emotions these years have brought. There was the initial confusion and worry, as many watched a wave of sickness move from East to West and wondered what one’s own experiences would be. There was the gratitude shown to healthcare workers and other frontline laborers, coupled with an awareness of the inequities that allowed some to “stay home” and asked others to work. And in my own house in particular, we have been recalling the stress of waking up in the middle of the night to navigate confusing apps and interfaces while trying to book appointments that disappeared too quickly, the kindness of “vaccine angels” who had perfected CVS’s systems, and the exuberance of receiving those initial doses. Scheduling booster shots and bringing our children to receive their initial doses, how-

ever, was an experience still joyful but marred by a sense of frustration—and even anger—as a delta and now omicron wave have prolonged this pandemic further, spreading primarily among unvaccinated individuals.

There is a temptation to effect a division, a cleaving of the vaccinated righteous from the unvaccinated unrighteous, to create an oppositional relationship between the two that would justify feelings of anger and blame at those who are guilty in a way that others are not. But for those of us inclined toward a different approach, who find such distinctions problematic and unproductive, an alternative may be available. This paper explores some resources present in the Buddhist and Christian traditions for processing and resisting the temptation of anger toward, or a dismissal which would result in exclusion of, the unvaccinated, focusing on Jesus’s healing of “the man blind from birth” and verses from the sixth chapter of Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. These texts may help temper my—and others’—anger, resist the temptation to create an “other” to view opposite oneself, to be “cast out,” and provide the

resources for the alternative response evinced by the traditions' exemplars. This paper is offered as both an academic exploration of these texts and their applicability to the current moment of history, but also as a sharing of resources from one admirer of these traditions to any readers who share that admiration in whole or in part and might benefit as I have from their wisdom in these days. I write from the perspective of a twice-vaccinated and now-boosted American and, with the occasional use of plural first-person pronouns, assume the reader can largely identify with that identity.

As David French has observed, the first pandemic wave was akin to a natural disaster—and who can be angry at tsunami victims, he asks—but this second wave has been different: “First by the dozens, now by the hundreds,” he writes, “we are burying neighbors who would almost certainly be alive today if they’d done one, simple thing—taken the vaccine.”² Indeed, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, “over 90,000 COVID-19 deaths since June 2021 likely would have been prevented with vaccinations.”³ Many of those deaths were suffered by the unvaccinated but not all, meaning that the choice to remain unvaccinated likely led to the deaths of those who chose to be vaccinated for themselves and others; this is not to suggest that anybody deserved what was surely an agonizing end, but to observe that the choice to remain unvaccinated is not only about one’s own personal risk tolerance but can itself potentially be a harm-causing action—and so perhaps make one a tempting object of another’s anger. What one might judge an act of wrongdoing has resulted in physical afflictions for many.

1.1 | Sin and suffering and sickness

If a connection between religious and physical wellbeing seems unlikely in the modern age, it was not always so. The Christian scriptures draw a causal relationship between them easily enough. In Deuteronomy 28, the Israelites may reap a compendium of rewards for keeping the preceding commandments, including prosperity in their labors, success in future conflicts, and esteem among the nearby nations. Failure to keep these commandments, however, results in a host of negative outcomes, outlined first curses antonymic to the previously promised blessings, but extending further to include negative physical outcomes as well. Here, failure to keep the commandments leads to “pestilence... consumption, fever, inflammation... boils... ulcers, scurvy, and itch, of which you cannot be healed,” as well as “madness, blindness, and confusion of the mind,” and, with an image evocative of Job’s suffering, “grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your

head.”⁴ Notice that all manner of bodied conditions are included, without the distinctions between illness, mental health, or physical ableness we would make today. Blindness, madness, and fever are of a kind. This cause-and-effect dynamic is later echoed by Jesus in his healing miracles. After healing a man “who had been ill for thirty-eight years,” for instance, Jesus warns, “Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you,” in addition to coupling various healings acts with the forgiveness of sins.⁵ When they encounter “the man blind from birth,” then, Jesus’s disciples are not unfounded in their assumption that it was either his or his parents’ sin that resulted in his blindness. Might we then also be justified in dismissing the anguish of the unvaccinated as the result of their own wrongdoing and permitted, or even compelled, toward anger that it has also resulted in the suffering of others?

The Buddhist tradition likewise links physical and religious fitness, though with less direct causality. While the Buddha does connect karma with physical pain and suffering in subsequent rebirths, any temptation to draw direct cause-and-effect linkages is resisted and said to be known only to the Buddha himself.⁶ Nevertheless, since the earliest scriptural strands, the tradition has been concerned with alleviating the physical suffering of sickness. In the canonical texts delineating the conduct of the Buddhist monastic communities, the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the Buddha himself is shown caring for a monk sick with dysentery, instructing the man’s fellows to care for him and one another as they see him caring for the man.⁷ Similarly, the same text offers the monastic community a variety of cures for various ailments, ranging from skin irritations and body odor to afflictions resulting from sorcery.⁸ Though not miraculous, the early tradition did not exclude matters of physical well-being from its purview.

More often, illness appears metaphorically, casting the Buddha as the ultimate medic dispensing the healing medicine of the Dharma. Perhaps the most well-known connection between physical affliction (though not illness exactly) and the Buddhist tradition comes in the form of an allegory for all manner of human suffering. In the *Cūlamālunkya Sutta*, the monk Mālunkyāputta becomes frustrated that the Buddha has not provided answers to a set of questions he feels are fundamental, such as “Is the world eternal or not?” and “Does a Buddha exist after death or not?” The Buddha answers that Mālunkyāputta is like a man shot with a poisoned arrow, refusing treatment for his wounds until he knows whether his assailant was a tall man or a short man, of dark or light skin, lived in village or a town or a city, and the like.⁹ The parallel is clear: the Buddha is as the medic seeking to remove the poisoned arrow of others’ suffering. Such metaphoric connections continue into later Buddhist scriptures, as well. In the sixteenth chapter of the Lotus Sūtra, for instance, the

Buddha is likened to a skilled physician who devises skillful means to lovingly administer the correct remedies to his children.¹⁰ Likewise, in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, the Buddha is praised as the “[s]upreme doctor... [who] put[s] an end to birth, decay, sickness, and death.”¹¹ It is later in this work where the line between metaphoric and direct causality is blurred, as the titular figure appears to the Buddha’s most prominent followers as a man suffering from a sickness caused by the ignorance-cum-suffering of all other beings: “[M]y sickness comes from ignorance and the thirst for existence and it will last as long as do the sicknesses of all living beings,” Vimalakīrti says, continuing, “[w]ere all living beings to be free from sickness, I also would not be sick.”¹² Here sickness becomes a metaphor for all human suffering caused by ignorance, including sickness itself, which the Buddhas and bodhisattvas work to eliminate.

Beyond a causal link between the physical and religious fitness, the more foundational teachings of the Buddhist tradition can be instructive here. A key aspect of the Buddha’s enlightenment experience, and subsequent teaching throughout the tradition, is the realization of the lack of a substantial self. Whereas the Indian religious milieu of the Buddha’s day taught the existence of a personal *ātman*, an unchanging and eternal essence at a person’s core, the Buddha’s enlightenment disclosed that there was no such phenomenon; a person, and indeed all else, is *anātman*, without such a permanence. What we encounter, then, are not phenomena constant in their identity but momentary constellations of a host of causes knowable and unknowable. Never has the Buddhist tradition held that this evacuates anything of meaning or value or importance, but it does qualify what is meant by those ideas; they are never ultimate or permanent or unchanging in their scope.

The Buddha’s realization, however, is not the ordinary way people then—or now—come to think of themselves or the world. On the contrary, the Buddhist tradition holds that each of us habitually misses this impermanence, mistakenly assuming a permanence in phenomena that constantly eludes us, leading to all manner of harm and suffering—the sickness that led Vimalakīrti to take to bed. Rather than seeing reality as it is, as an ever-changing flux of experience, we are in a consistent pattern of misimagining ourselves and others as fixed points to which fixed identities can be assigned. This tendency leads us to too easily reduce one another, missing the complexity of all the interacting phenomena that make up a person for the too-simplistic identity. In any single moment of thought, the other is narrowed to our conception of them, a “stranger,” a “jerk,” an “elite,” or a “fundamentalist.” These reductions serve also to reduce and define our own identities as well, covering over the impermanence that characterizes ourselves. If the other is a stranger, I am known. If the other is a jerk, I am not. If the other is an

elite, I am an average Joe. If the other is a fundamentalist, it is because I am reasonable. In any one moment, these reductive identities—whether positive, negative, or neutral in their connotations—occlude the more complex identity that any of us possesses, including ourselves.¹³

1.2 | Learning from Śāntideva’s “Bile and the Like”

All of this comes to bear on Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, a text in which he seeks to lead himself and his readers through a process breaking out of previous forms of conditioned habits and cultivating new approaches in emulation of the Buddha—indeed, of all buddhas and bodhisattvas.¹⁴ Its sixth chapter is dedicated to developing the perfect patience of an enlightened being (*kṣāntipāramitā*), a patience which would not only allow one to avoid reacting out of anger or hatred (*dveṣa*) toward those who provoke or even harm oneself but also serve as an antidote to those reactions when they do arise.¹⁵ Key to his persuasion here, as throughout his work, is a two-pronged approach including self-interest and altruism.¹⁶ On the one hand, avoiding angry reactions is good for other beings in the short term, since one is less likely to react harmfully toward them out of anger, and the long-term, since one is now edging ever-closer to a state of Buddhahood and becoming supremely beneficial toward others. On the other hand, though, avoiding angry reactions is better for the practitioner as well, since anger harms oneself at least if not more so than the other. Śāntideva opens the chapter with the stunning words that all the benefits of practice the path over “thousands of aeons” are destroyed in a single moment of anger.¹⁷ Hatred, he goes on, is greatest evil, equaled only by the goodness of its opposite, patience.¹⁸ But it is not only that anger and hatred harm oneself in an abstract sense, hindering one’s development of the sought-after enlightened qualities and leading to less desirable rebirths, but also in the more concrete and immediate sense. Anger repels one’s friends, mars one’s generosity, disturbs one’s own peace of mind and sleep, and dampens the experiences of all other pleasures (vss. 3, 5). While it may be easier to think of anger and hatred as something we direct at another, Śāntideva reminds us that any harm inflicted on others begins with harm done to ourselves.

Among other arguments and tactics, Śāntideva draws a lesson from that which causes illness: “I feel no anger towards bile and the like, even though they cause intense suffering. Why am I angry with the sentient? They too have reasons for their anger.”¹⁹ “Bile and the like”—germs, we might say—regularly cause harm in the form of sickness but do not inspire anger from one suffering their effects;

they lack the requisite agency. In the same way, Śāntideva reasons, the actions of harm-causing persons—those who beat him with sticks, say—are the result of various causes: their ignorance, greed, and hatred born of past karma, not to mention the anger and hatred they have endured and learned from others which they now reflect (vss. 23–26, 68). “It is better than I hate that hatred,” Śāntideva sees, assigning blame at that which impels the person and not the person themselves.²⁰ Here, Śāntideva draws on the Buddhist teaching of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), a universal principle of cause and effect: there is no effect that arises without cause, and indeed multiple causes, beyond itself.²¹ The suffering of illnesses has its root in “bile and the like” which do not warrant an angry response, so too does the suffering inflicted by others have similar roots beyond his assailants. “Therefore, even if one sees a friend or an enemy behaving badly,” Śāntideva concludes, “one can reflect that there are specific conditioning factors that determine this, and thereby remain happy.”²² Śāntideva transfers the lack of blame he assigns to germs that cause harm to people that cause harm, reasoning that both are the result of various conditioning causes and so do not warrant his anger.

In addition to nuancing the causes of others’ harmful actions, Śāntideva also refuses to delineate himself from those persons. In addition to the workings of karma mutually implicating him in the harmful event, Śāntideva admits that he wrongly reacts angrily toward the people harming him rather than the cause of their actions, their hatred (vss. 41, 43–44, 47). Further, as he too is prone to angry reactions toward others, he realizes that he also has caused others harm, in this life and in previous lives (vs. 42). Śāntideva undercuts the basis for drawing a distinction between himself and his assailants meaningful enough to justify anger at the latter. Note, that in seeking to understand his assailants’ actions and so deprive himself of any cause for anger, Śāntideva does not absolve them of consequences for their harm; they will still suffer “the long-drawn agonies of hell” due to this and presumably other instances of anger-inspired harm that are generating karma for them—and this too becomes a reason for pity rather than anger.²³ Thus, Śāntideva recognizes that his assailants’ harmful actions have causes that arise elsewhere and drive their actions, rendering the anger he is tempted toward as sensible as angry reactions toward germs, and also that he too shares in tendencies of his assailants. Harmful consequences for their harmful actions remain, though these complicating factors allow Śāntideva an alternative approach to harm-causing agents, one not rooted in seeing himself in opposition to them or in nourishing an angry response toward them. What they are caught up in, so too is he.

1.3 | The sight to see the sin of exclusion

In the ninth chapter of John, Jesus and his disciples encounter “a man blind from birth.”²⁴ The disciples initiate the scene, asking whose sin, his or his parents, is responsible, knowingly or unknowingly echoing the above scriptures (vs. 2). That is, initially in their eyes, the man’s blindness is not a location for their compassionate response but an impetus toward assigning blame for his affliction and delineating themselves as the sighted righteous. That they may have witnessed Jesus draw his own connection between sin and sickness in his miraculous healings makes their response all the more understandable but also makes Jesus’s rejection of their assumption even more noteworthy.²⁵ Jesus answers that neither’s sin is the cause of his affliction; rather, “he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him,” and so recasts the man, from one whose affliction reveals somebody’s blameworthy sin to one who becomes a location of God’s miraculous healing. The chapter unfolds with a healing miracle and an interrogation of the man by the religious authorities, followed by a discussion rife with symbolism about what it means to be “blind” or not.²⁶ The dynamics of the scene—the initial exclusion of the man as an unrighteous blind beggar, righted by the miracle which allows him to be included, followed by his subsequent exclusion by those who assume the position of righteous outcasters and finally his inclusion among those who recognize Jesus’s divinity—call out for a Girardian analysis.

Developed out of a study of comparative literature and then mythology during the mid-twentieth century, the work of René Girard holds that human culture arose out of a need to regulate and control a consistent sense of interpersonal rivalry lurking beneath the surface of our awareness. Girard’s thinking was launched by the realization that, beyond biological necessities like food and shelter, our desires are not our own but are rather learned from those around us. One desires not according to oneself but according to the various models one is constantly observing.²⁷ The always-at-hand example is the child who has no interest in a particular toy until seeing another child choose it; now there is no other toy the first child wants as much. The same dynamic, Girard observes, repeats itself throughout human cultures, leading to competing desires for material and symbolic goods alike. When such goods abound, well and good, but when desires converge on something limited, rivalry and hierarchy—eventually leading to violence—emerges. Because we learn our desires from one another, we are necessarily seeking what those around us seek and have, and so have developed our capacity for relationships with this latent rivalry always lurking beneath the surface, always

threatening to erupt in violence. It has been amid this tendency toward conflict that human culture has developed.

Girard surmised, however, that human beings could have never organized into the cooperative groups necessary to survive, evolve, and develop into the cultures and societies that mark our species without devising some way to regulate the resulting rivalistic violence. With a group of people—or hominid near-ancestors—accumulating an increasing number of rivalistic relations, the potential for mass chaos would increase until it threatened to tear the nascent community apart. At some point in our distant pre-historic past, Girard speculated, human beings learned to transfer their collective rivalry onto a scapegoat, a victim declared to be guilty of some foul sin but in actuality no more or less guilty than any other group member.²⁸ Through the expulsion of this victim, these group tensions were released and harmony temporarily restored. After discovering this dynamic accidentally, and perhaps repeatedly over millennia, early human beings eventually learned to regulate and develop this process into the various sacrificial systems that proliferated in the ancient world and whose patterns of thought echo longer after regulated sacrifice is abandoned.²⁹ Regardless of whether one lives amid an active sacrificial system or not, these dynamics of group formation at the expense of an expelled victim remain fundamental to human group formation, as communal coherence is achieved at the expense of some marginalized outsider, occurring on the playground and from the demagogue's dais alike.

James Alison, a theologian who has worked to translate Girard's philosophy into Christian theology, observes these dynamics at play in the healing of "the man blind from birth" in John 9, finding new insights from this incident when it is seen through a Girardian lens.³⁰ The story begins with the man's exclusion:³¹ "His blindness was considered part of a moral defect that meant he was ipso facto impure," Alison notes, citing Leviticus 21:18. As noted above, his disciples have no hesitation assigning this moral blame to somebody, only unsure whether it is this man or his parents who are at fault, a dynamic here rejected by Jesus (vss. 2-3). Jesus heals him, on a Sabbath day, allowing him to participate fully in the life of the community, rectifying his initial exclusion. Owing to the unbelievable nature of the miracle, the man's friends and neighbors take him to the religious authorities who become skeptical, since such a miraculous act could have only been committed by someone "from God," who forbade such acts on the Sabbath.³² The man who now sees can attribute the healer's powers to no other but God (he does not yet know that it was Jesus who healed him, since he did not receive his sight until having gone and washed in the pool at Siloam), and the Pharisees become increasingly frustrated with the man's intransigence, particularly when he suggests that they may

want to become his followers. "Then they reviled him," John tells the reader, "saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.' . . . And they drove him out."³³ Their coherent identity as "disciples of Moses" is affirmed in the expulsion of the man due to the guilt falsely imputed onto him: "You are his disciple," they claim, despite his yet not knowing Jesus's identity, "We are disciples of Moses."³⁴ Jesus then seeks him out, revealing to him his identity as "the Son of Man," an identity to which the man assents with his worship (vss 35-38), a final inclusion among those who recognize his divinity. Jesus then declares enigmatically, that he has come into the world "so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."³⁵ When some nearby Pharisees overhear him and ask if it is them to whom Jesus refers, he affirms that it is: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."³⁶

Within this narrative, Alison notes a twofold subversion, first of judgement and then of sin. Concerning the first, the once-blind man becomes the one who can accurately discern righteousness, naming Jesus first as "a prophet" before recognizing his divinity: "The judgment that excluded the former blind man is revealed as the judgment (also discernment) that the expellers are really blind."³⁷ But there is also a second subversion in the story. Sin is not only dismissed as the cause of the man's affliction, but is redefined altogether. While at the narrative's outset, sin is "the moral defect" the disciples assume has resulted in the man's blindness, by its end it has been redefined: "*Sin ceases to be a defect which excludes and comes to be participation in the mechanism of exclusion,*" Alison notes with emphasis.³⁸ Sin is now no longer moral culpability which justifies the exclusion of the sinner, but is rather the act of excluding one named as a "sinner" or "unrighteous" by those who assume the place of righteousness in opposition.³⁹

The moral force of the story comes, on the one hand, with the reader's recognition that "blindness" has ceased to refer to the man and come to refer to those who act as excluders. "Don't be like them, those who exclude others out of sense of their distinct righteousness; they're the real sinners!" the story's subversions lead the reader to conclude.⁴⁰ And indeed, Alison concurs: "Such people not only take part in mechanisms of exclusion, but justify them as good and from God. Their guilt remains."⁴¹ However, he notes that the story doesn't allow the reader to stop there, for, on the other hand, the story's fullness is found in the reader's own resistance to the mechanism of exclusion. That is, if as readers we simply side with the expelled man against his expellers, we have missed the full force of the story. This comes to the fore first from the reevaluation the narrative effects regarding the man. He who was at the story's outset justifiably afflicted is revealed to be a

location of God's holy revelation of miraculous healing and then a full-fledged follower of Christ; he who was blameworthy according to the disciples becomes one of them. The story invites an empathy for the man in the reader, especially in the ways that the reader has likewise felt the sting of exclusion. But in the subversion of who is "blind" and who isn't that is made known to the reader, the narrative inaugurates the reader among those who see; that is, having seen that it is the mechanism of the exclusion of the "unrighteous" by the "righteous" the story condemns, the reader is also cast among those who see through the hollowness of such distinctions, particular as the reader realizes that they too have been among the excluders of others. The Pharisees' guilt is of a kind with the reader's own; they are not acting out of anything but their learned behaviors of who is righteous and not, the behaviors that the reader is now called to see through and abandon. In this way, the reader identifies also with the Pharisees themselves. "I don't think that there's anybody," Alison notes, "who isn't partially excluded and partially an excluder, in whom the two poles of this story don't cohabit."⁴² If we simply imitate the expelling mob and cast *ourselves now* as the "righteous just," we'll have only repeated the action the story calls us to condemn, and assumed our own sense of blindness.⁴³ Instead, we are invited to see, to step out of the cycle altogether and decline to name ourselves righteous in opposition to the unrighteous expellers.⁴⁴

In the sixth chapter of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and in the ninth chapter of John, the reader is invited to reevaluate their anger toward those who cause harm both by considering the extenuating causes of the actions of those who cause harm and the ways in which the reader too shares in those causes. The justification for casting oneself as finally distinct from the other, of reducing the other to "harm-causer" despite the myriad of causes motivating them, or of reacting in anger toward them is undercut and an avenue toward empathy opened. In both, the ability to discern what actions are good and moral and preferable remains. Śāntideva still recognizes the negative repercussions his assailants will face in the form of negative rebirths in hell realms, and even retains the possession of his hatred, aiming it now at hatred itself. Likewise, John 9 does eliminate "blindness," but recasts it as the mechanism of exclusion in the name of righteousness, which the reader is invited to discern and abandon. Discernment remains in both, but in neither does it translate into a justification for the exclusion of the other.

1.4 | Responding well to the "Politically Unvaccinated"

Both of these stories offer insights for guiding our responses toward the unvaccinated whom we might be

tempted to blame as the "unrighteous," guilty—not only responsible, but *guilty*—of prolonging the pandemic. In each, the reader is invited to consider mitigating causes of the actions of those who cause harm and to recall the forces that capture and shape the actions of all of us, from which we are only ever partially to escape. Might these insights help to guide our response to our fellows who choose to remain unvaccinated?

First, it will not do to simply lump all "unvaccinated people" into a single category. While some have chosen to remain unvaccinated as an expression of political tribalism (and more on them anon), Zeynep Tufekci has catalogued a number of other reasons why the unvaccinated have remained so, including ongoing skepticism concerning vaccine safety, concerns regarding the safety of the vaccine for those pregnant, a history of mistreatment of racial and ethnic minorities—especially African American—at the hands of medical institutions resulting in lower levels of trust in these communities, and even a fear of needles rising to the level of the phobic.⁴⁵ Further, Tufekci notes, a considerable number of people have no primary care provider of which to ask questions concerning efficacy and safety, a number no doubt exacerbated by incomplete insurance coverage in the United States and less access to medical care in rural communities. In other words, for many at whom we may first be tempted to aim our anger, there may be causes of their actions that undercut our logic and inspire empathy instead.

But what of those whose motivations seem less empathy-inspiring? Certainly, there are our fellow citizens who have chosen to remain unvaccinated and seek alternative treatments when falling ill as an expression of political identity. A poll just prior to the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election revealed that, among those fully or partially vaccinated the Democratic candidate led by fourteen points while among those who were unvaccinated the Republican candidate led by a staggering seventy-seven points before going on to victory.⁴⁶ Indeed, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, political affiliation has become the most reliable indicator of vaccination status.⁴⁷ Surely anger is warranted here. Perhaps, but a factor which might temper our anger is the changes that rural communities have undergone in the past decade or two (acknowledging that "rural" is an imprecise term).

Describing what he has termed "the density divide" in a paper for the Niskanen Center, Will Wilkinson observes that "[t]he filtering/sorting dynamic of urbanization has produced a lower-density, mainly white population that is increasingly uniform in socially conservative personality, aversion to diversity, relative disinclination to migrate and seek higher education, and Republican party loyalty."⁴⁸ As those inclined to move to cities have done so in recent decades, those who remain have undergone a uniforming of identity, adopting a number of mutually reinforcing

traits. This has left rural America, as he has observed elsewhere, “placeless,” as unique cultural markers and local authorities have faded in importance.⁴⁹ Wilkinson has also noted the reverse trend; that is, as rural Americans living in lower-density areas have more uniformly identified with the emerging brand of Republican Party politics, so have many who already identified as Republicans come to relate to and adopt the cultural identifiers of rural Americans.⁵⁰ That is to say, there are large, cultural pressures driving a segment of the American population, both rural and exurban, to increasingly identify with a certain strand of ethnocentric politics which may have also left them more likely to see vaccine resistance as a component of this identity; the homogenization he observes allows such a view to take hold and spread along a conformity bias. Indeed, one place this uniforming can be observed is in misinformation regarding the pandemic. According to polling done by the Kaiser Family Foundation, “[a] full 94% of Republicans think one or more false statements about COVID-19 and vaccines might be true, and 46% believe four or more statements might be true.”⁵¹ The most commonly believed of these was the claim that the number of pandemic-related deaths has been exaggerated by the government and news media, leading those susceptible to this misinformation to downplay the danger. With Śāntideva, then, we are able to recognize that harm-causing actions themselves have causes outside any one person, causes which may lead us toward empathy instead of anger.

Likewise, just as Śāntideva recognizes that his assailants’ actions inculcate negative repercussions for them as well as himself, we too might consider that the subsequent pandemic waves have been primarily borne by those in rural communities. According to a September news report from NBC, rural counties have suffered pandemic-related mortality rates twice that of urban ones.⁵² An analysis by *National Public Radio* likewise concluded that those “living in counties that went 60% or higher for Trump in November 2020 had 2.73 times the death rates of those that went for Biden,” and among “the reddest tenth of the country” mortality rates rose to “six times higher than the bluest tenth.”⁵³ The burden borne by these communities has also doubtless been exacerbated by the depletion of medical facilities in rural communities. According to the Sheps Center at the University of North Carolina, rural communities have experienced an increasing rate of hospital closures.⁵⁴ Additionally, the nationwide nursing shortage has been felt more acutely in rural areas that often offer lower salaries and then further exacerbated by burnout during the pandemic’s first wave, a situation which may become a source of further hospital closures in the future. Reflecting on these challenges in light of the pandemic’s

ongoing waves in rural communities, head of the National Rural Health Association Alan Morgan has remarked, “We’ve turned many rural communities into kill boxes.”⁵⁵

Śāntideva’s sixth chapter of his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and the ninth chapter of John’s Gospel, lead readers of these texts to consider first the causes of the actions of those who cause harm, recognizing that others are never acting without conditioning and habituation. Just as Śāntideva’s assailants acted out of their own ignorance, greed, and hatred born of past karma, and just as those who cast out the now-sighted man do so out of a “blindness” resulting from a learned sense of righteousness, so too do those who refuse to be vaccinated do so as the result of causes beyond themselves. Misinformation finds a home among a uniforming of views born of decades of urbanization. And just as Śāntideva and John ask their readers to pause before casting themselves in the role of righteous against those named unrighteous, considering their own participation in the same forces as those they seek to expel, so too might others tempted toward this distinction recall the ways that they too have been susceptible to misinformation and misplaced loyalties, as well as an unwilling participant in the large forces of urbanization and rural decline that have confounded the suffering of many—vaccinated and unvaccinated, medical staff and caretakers, and those now mourning the loss of loved ones. Lastly, it is worth noting again that neither text calls for the abandoning of discernment about which actions are good and desirable. It is not the case the choice to be vaccinated or not is simply neutral, a choice between two equally competing options. But just as both texts call their readers to reconsider their responses to those who act in harmful ways, so too might an alternative response present itself to those of us tempted toward anger and blame at those who choose what is not good and desirable.

These last months have been a trying time for many of us, and anger at those we might perceive as exacerbating or prolonging the challenge is understandably tempting and it is worth acknowledging the difficulty in resisting anger toward those we may feel have hurt us. For Christians, a divide must necessarily remain between the character of Christ and our own, as we can only imitate his love imperfectly. For Buddhists, Śāntideva’s project is aimed at those actively seeking to relinquish their anger and especially those who have chosen to undertake the arduous bodhisattva path, a course expected to take multiple lifetimes. Nonetheless, for those of us who seek to emulate the Christ or the Buddha in responding to harm-causing persons with something other than reciprocity, perhaps these reflections can open a door toward doing so. By recognizing the way illness and other physical afflictions in others often brings forth a natural empathy, and recognizing the way we resist blame despite undergoing suffering when sick

ourselves, an alternative response to harm-causing agents is revealed, one which for some of us may represent a faint echo of the divine work of God and for others an expression of the Buddha's own perfect patience and compassion.

ENDNOTES

- ¹A version of this paper was first presented to my colleagues in the Comparative Theology area of the Boston College Theology Department before being delivered at the annual meeting of American Academy of Religion as part of the *Disease in Comparison Roundtable*, in San Antonio, TX, 20 November 2021; I am grateful to all who offered feedback on those earlier drafts, especially my area colleagues at Boston College.
- ²David French, "The American Crisis of Selective Empathy." *The Dispatch*, September 12, 2021.
- ³Jared Ortaliza, Kendal Orgera, and Krutika Amin, "COVID-19 continues to be a leading cause of death in the U.S. in September 2021," *Kaiser Family Foundation*, October 13, 2021.
- ⁴Deuteronomy 28:15ff, especially 21-22, 27-28, 35; Job 2:7; for a related passage, see Leviticus 26:14-29; this and all other biblical references are taken from the NRSV.
- ⁵John 5:14; see for instance Mark 2:5; I am indebted to my colleague David Mayaan for this observation regarding these verses on those previously mentioned.
- ⁶AN 4:232, ii 230-232 (*The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya*, tr. Bhikku Bodhi [Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012]); on this resistance, see, for instance, Kunzang Pelden: (*Nectar of Manjushri's Speech*, tr. Padmakara Translation Group [New Delhi: Shechen Publications, 2008]: The workings of karma, in all its different forms, are indeed beyond the conception of ordinary minds. . . . Only the Omniscient can know the causes and effects of actions in all their subtle details; they are beyond the grasp of anyone else (145-146); see also Rupert Getthin (*The Foundations of Buddhism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998] on the nuancing of direct causation in Buddhist thought generally (153).
- ⁷*Mahavagga* 8.26.1-8. *Vinaya Piṭaka*, tr. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access To Insight: Readings in Theravada Buddhism*. <https://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/vin/mv/index.html>.
- ⁸*Mahavagga* 6.
- ⁹MN63, i428-430 (*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, tr. Bhikku Nāṇamoli, ed. and rev. Bhikkhu Bodhi [Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001 (1995)]).
- ¹⁰*The Threefold Lotus Sutra: A Modern Translation for Contemporary Readers*, tr. Michio Shinozaki, Brook A. Ziporyn, and David C. Earhart (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 2019), 279-281.
- ¹¹*The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture*, tr. Robert A.F. Thurman (State Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 14.
- ¹²*The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, 14, 43.
- ¹³See John Makransky, *Awakening through Love* (Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2007), 36-40, which much of the above reflects, for a fuller discussion of this phenomenon, as well as 103-105 on the reflexive nature of this way of thinking of others.
- ¹⁴Śāntideva's text was likely composed in Sanskrit in eighth-century India, possibly at the monastic university Nālandā in the present-day state of Bihar. The title is variously translated as "A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life" (Wallace and Wallace [1997]), "The Way of the Bodhisattva" (Padmakara Translation Group [1997, 2006]), and "Guide to Bodhisattva Practice" (Gold and Duckworth [2019]). See also Schmidt-Leukel (*Buddha Mind—Christ Mind* [Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2019]), 3-12, for a thorough discussion of the text and its author, especially 8 for a discussion of its title and possible translations, as well as the introduction to the translation by Crosby and Skilton by Paul Williams (vii-xxvi).
- ¹⁵Crosby and Skilton, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 45; further references to this text utilize this edition.
- ¹⁶Schmidt-Leukel tracks this throughout his commentary, but see 256 and 259-260, in particular for this methodology in chapter six.
- ¹⁷See Kunzang Pelden 197-199, for a discussion of how literal Śāntideva is to be taken here, and the following pages for his commentary on the verses discussed here.
- ¹⁸*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 6.1-2; the Sanskrit term Śāntideva employs, *kṣānti*, is here translated "patience," though "'endurance,' 'tolerance,' 'composure' and 'forbearance,'" the term preferred by Crosby and Skilton, are also connoted (Schmidt-Leukel 258).
- ¹⁹*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 6.22.
- ²⁰*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 6.41.
- ²¹The teaching of dependent arising is found throughout the tradition, perhaps most notably articulated by the Buddha in the *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta* (MN 28.28, i 190-191), though interpreted with somewhat different emphases in various expressions; here Śāntideva employs it the broad observation of a pervasive cause-and-effect found everywhere, common to his Mahāyāna Buddhism; see also Getthin 151-153 for general comments on causality.
- ²²*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 6.33.
- ²³*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 6:48.
- ²⁴John 9:1.
- ²⁵As noted above, see for instance Mark 2:5.
- ²⁶John 9:3ff.
- ²⁷See for instance the first chapter of Girard's initial book *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, tr. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), "'Triangular' Desire," 1-52, especially 9ff, and 83-85; as well as his *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory, (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 145-148 and his *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, tr. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987 [1978]), 212.
- ²⁸On why one figure might be so selected, see chapter 2 of Girard's *The Scapegoat*, tr. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), "Stereotypes of Persecution," for a discussion concerning common characteristics of this figure throughout mythology, the stories, Girard speculated, that record over and over again the echoes of this process.
- ²⁹See Part I of *Things Hidden*, "Fundamental Anthropology," especially chapters 1-3, but 26-27 for a concise summary of this process.
- ³⁰While Girard always eschewed the title of theologian, his work came to center Christianity and in particular the passion narrative of the gospels as the ultimate scapegoating narrative which, in the resurrection, reveals the entire mechanism. He described his first work, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, as one of literary analysis and his second, *Violence and the Sacred* as one of "archaic culture"; it was his *Things Hidden* that attuned more completely to his views on Christianity, though attentive readers may see these views developing in his previous work (see *Evolution and Conversion* [London: Continuum International Publishing, 2007], 34-41

for his recounting of this, as well as Cynthia Haven's biography, *Evolution of Desire*, 109-120, for a description of his eventual personal embrace of Christianity).

³¹ *The Joy of Being Wrong* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 120; Alison also treats this narrative in "The Man Blind from Birth and the Subversion of Sin," (*Contagion* 4 [1997]): 26-46.

³² John 9:16.

³³ John 9:28, 34.

³⁴ See Alison's observation regarding this "grammatical game," in "The Man Blind from Birth," 30.

³⁵ John 9:39.

³⁶ John 9:41.

³⁷ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 121.

³⁸ James Alison, "The Man Blind from Birth," 38.

³⁹ While the Pharisees here, as elsewhere, are cast as foils in the narrative, Girard is clear that this is no opening toward anti-Semitism as they are evincing universally human patterns of thought, evinced elsewhere by the disciples themselves; see, *Things Hidden* 137-138, and 158ff in particular on "the Curses against the Scribes and Pharisees."

⁴⁰ See *The Joy of Being Wrong*, where Alison seems to prefer this conclusion, assigning particular guilt to the Pharisees at the chapter's conclusion: "Such people not only take part in mechanisms of exclusion, but justify them as good and from God. Their guilt remains."

⁴¹ *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 122.

⁴² James Alison, "The Man Blind from Birth," 40.

⁴³ James Alison, "The Man Blind from Birth," 40.

⁴⁴ See also Alison's insight comment: "If this story is the word of God, then the word of God acts in our midst as an element which is continuously subversive of our notions of order, of goodness, of clear moral understanding, and so on" ("The Man Blind from Birth," 39).

⁴⁵ Zeynap Tufekci, "The Unvaccinated May Not Be Who You Think," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2021.

⁴⁶ Dan Balz, "A fractured Virginia electorate prepares to pick a governor," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2021.

⁴⁷ Ashley Kirzinger, et al. "KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: The Increasing Importance of Partisanship in Predicting COVID-19 Vaccination Status." *Kaiser Family Foundation*, November 16, 2021.

⁴⁸ Will Wilkinson, "The Density Divine: Urbanization, Polarization, and Populist Backlash." *Niskanen Center*. June 2019.

⁴⁹ Will Wilkinson, "The Density Divide and the Southernification of Rural America." *Model Citizen*, August 30, 2021.

⁵⁰ Will Wilkinson, "The Density Divide and the Southernification of Rural America."

⁵¹ "Pro-Trump counties now have far higher COVID death rates. Misinformation is to blame," "Morning Edition." *National Public Radio*, December 5, 2021; see also Liz Hamel, et al., "KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: Media and Misinformation."

⁵² Lauren Weber, "Covid is killing rural Americans at twice the rate of people in urban areas," NBC News, September 30, 2021.

⁵³ "Pro-Trump counties now have far higher COVID death rates."

⁵⁴ "181 Rural Hospital Closures since January 2005," UNC's Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research.

⁵⁵ Lauren Weber, "Covid is killing rural Americans at twice the rate of people in urban areas."

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Greg Mileski is a doctoral candidate in the Boston College Theology Department where he studies issues within the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. His dissertation will focus on how the Buddhist bodhisattva path can inform the development of the pacific mimesis of Christ as understood by René Girard. His work has previously appeared in *Glossolalia* and the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*. He is ordained in the Lutheran tradition (ELCA) and is privileged to serve as a chaplain to the Boston College Theology Department. He is also a managing editor for *Religion and the Arts*.

How to cite this article: Mileski, G. (2022). The "Righteous Vaccinated" and the "Unrighteous Unvaccinated"? How Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and the Gospel of John might help us understand the ongoing pandemic. *Dialog*, 1–9.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12724>