

Prompt for final discussion, RLST321 Spring 2020. Students could choose a different prompt.

CHOICE #1:

Write a final discussion post that addresses our current global pandemic and the experience of social distancing. Specifically, how do you think some of the women or concepts in Christianity/Buddhism could help us approach this. What might be the role of women and/or religion in addressing the global crisis OR your own individual experience with social distancing. Please write freely and incorporate thoughtful points from ANY of our course readings this semester. You should use 6-8 short quotes from at least 3 of our different sources.

Anonymous

During a unique, chaotic and uncertain time in our society, I believe that concepts presented in Christianity/Buddhism can help us learn, adapt and appreciate an overarching lesson that the current COVID-19 global pandemic and the experience of social distancing have presented; that everyone is interconnected.

When the pandemic was first introduced in the United States and started spreading rapidly, I had severe anxiety because of the unknown. My way of life, and everyone's way of life, was drastically changing; I was not able to attend classes, go to the gym, see my friends or even go to the grocery store. I realized that these were all activities that I had taken for granted, as I often complained about classes, I usually didn't want to workout, and I viewed going to the grocery as a complete inconvenience. Now, I long to do these simple activities. I miss(ed) having simple interactions with others. I miss(ed) my normal life. However, now, after about a month into the pandemic and social distancing, I have reflected upon our readings to recognize some powerful, positive lessons; these lessons will be discussed below. Specifically, some concepts from the readings of Illuminations of Hildegard, the chapter titled "Sustainability and Spiritual Discipline" from the book Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet, and First Buddhist Women will be analyzed and discussed to place emphasis on how women and Christianity/Buddhism can help us through this global scare.

To begin, the ideologies of Hildegard of Bingen can help us approach the struggles of social distancing AND climate change. Firstly, the hardships of social distancing will be discussed. In my opinion, the term "social distancing" implies that people will feel alone and should almost feel disconnected from the world; in other words, stay the hell away from other people. However, Hildegard's "Human Microcosm of the Macrocosm" mandala that introduces the idea of interconnectedness warrants asking an extremely important question; are we really alone? Hildegard would argue that we are NOT alone, as a strong takeaway of this mandala, and all her "Illuminations," really, is that everyone and everything are interconnected—we are all part of the universe and are in the same universe. The quote "the human body is in the cosmos and the cosmos is in the human body" truly encompasses the idea that everyone and everything in the universe is connected (Illuminations of Hildegard, pg. unknown). If Hildegard were still alive, I believe she would argue that social distancing is bringing people and the universe closer together, as we are staying apart because we feel a sense of responsibility to EACH OTHER to not spread COVID-19. Even though I am a healthy 21-year-old who would most likely not die from contracting the

virus, I could carry it to someone more susceptible, such as someone else's grandparents. I feel the responsibility to keep others safe and that is why I am choosing to properly socially distance. This makes me feel more connected to all people, as I am confident that they are social distancing for the same reason. This feeling of interconnectedness and responsibility towards other humans is exactly why Hildegard would argue that social distancing is actually bringing us closer together during these uncertain times. Secondly, the improving of the polluted skies in China (climate change) can be explained by understanding and analyzing Hildegard's mandala of Viriditas, or "the Greening." I believe I accurately articulated this idea in my post titled "discussion #7," so I will simply quote it. "Despite the global health crisis, the polluted skies in China, for example, have dissipated as each citizen was trying to minimize their own and others' risk to COVID-19. I believe this observation can easily be connected with this mandala; everyone and everything in the universe is connected. She describes Viriditas as God's overall 'freshness' towards forms of life, both physically and spiritually (pg. 44). This, again, clearly articulates the claims made above, as the dependence of everything in the universe is crucial to bring greenness/ability to bear 'fruit' if this is well-understood—the interconnectedness of the people in China staying home had brought their environment 'greenness,' while keeping others' health and best interest in mind." Isn't this a beautiful thing?

To continue on the idea that we are all interconnected, concepts from "Sustainability and Spiritual Discipline" will be discussed. On page 209, the author writes "thus, somewhat paradoxically, I am advocating that each individual--in the common-sense meaning of individual as a discreet personality who makes choices--assimilate and internalize a more accurate understanding of the place of individuals in the context of the interdependent matrix of life," suggesting that each human should feel undeniably connected and gravitated towards each other and other forms of life (Gross, pg. 209). If this were the case and was universally understood and FELT, ALL people would be social distancing; I have noticed that many people are ignoring these rules because I believe they do not feel a responsibility or connected to people they do not know. For example, many people around my age are socializing with big groups of friends and not participating in social distancing likely because they know that they are unlikely to die from contracting COVID-19, but they do not consider that they can be carriers of the virus and spread it to more vulnerable populations. Gross' lesson/idea of independence would hopefully penetrate the minds of the unresponsive, irresponsible people and cause them to choose to stay home, ultimately teaching them a simple lesson to think about how their actions affect the world and vice versa. I can continue to describe this, or you, the reader, can read the more elegant words of Gross; "No, interdependence is not just about celebrating kinship with all life; it is about recognizing how implicated we are in the web of environmental destruction and doing whatever we can to lessen our negative impact on that web" (Gross, pg. 213).

Thirdly, I would like to touch on the idea that most of the national authoritative figures handling COVID-19 in the media are men. I have recently been watching the news more than I ever have, and it is quite bothersome that I overwhelmingly listen to white men on the major news networks. When President Trump or Tony Fauci spoke, for example, I began feeling uncertain and anxious about the unknowns of this pandemic. However, when listening to Deborah Birx speak, I felt/feel comforted. I believe this is because of the inherent calmness of maternalism. Bhadda Kundalakesa was discussed in the chapter "Wanderers & Disciples" of *First Buddhist Women*. A quote within this story was profound to me; "Wisdom is not always confined to men; A woman, too, is wise, and shows it now and then" (Murcott, pg. 59). I believe that if more women were present in the media, there would be less mass hysteria.

Hysteria is not necessary during this time, as we can all do our part by social distancing and this situation will pass. I observe my parents watching the news and it simply brings them more anxiety. There are plenty of women who are more than capable of making decisions, presenting news, and provide a calming effect to the masses. Maternalism was also addressed in Hildegard, specifically in the “Blue Man” mandala. The imagery of God, who is all encompassing and embraces all, has a strong maternal connotation; God is not a person but rather a power, a compassionate power (Illuminations of Hildegard). Maternal compassion is strong and integral; easily recognizable. The presentation of the news with maternalistic delivery during this scary, uncertain time would help provide peace and calmness to the masses.

Together, concepts from the three texts discussed above would provide we, the people, a sense of interconnectedness to cope with social distancing and uncertainty, while giving us the framework to evaluate climate change. These texts also show that maternal compassion should be valued; it would be extremely valuable during a time like this with uneasy information being presented on the news.

I have thoroughly enjoyed this class and reading everyone’s discussion posts. I wish you all happiness and good health during these uncertain times.

Shayne Goulet

Gender, religion, and Covid 19: Women’s roles have changed throughout the pandemic and the Buddhist teaching of interconnectivity is more applicable than ever.

As we know, men and women’s gender roles have changed drastically over the last decade. Women are working outside of the home and providing financial stability for their families now more than ever. One of the major concerns surrounding the pandemic is the economic effects, specifically job loss and unemployment. It occurred to me that as people lose their jobs, many family structures are being affected. It is possible that more men are now at home with their kids who are no longer in school, while their wives are the partner that continues to work.

I think that the introduction of God’s Daughters articulates the fluidity of gender roles well, especially during times like this. We are reminded that “[...] gender relations solely in terms of male ‘patriarchy’ and female ‘oppression’ [...] are far more muddled, that women have always carved out space for themselves within the social, historical, cultural, and religious structures that constrain them and have resisted those struggles in subtle and unexpected ways” (14). It may be freeing, rather than oppressive, for women to be relieved of some of the housework and childcare duties as more men lose jobs and are at home to help. At the same time, I worry that the subversion of these roles may be oppressive for women who are in abusive relationships and domestic violence situations at home, and that the extra time in the presence of their abuser, who may feel that they are failing to uphold the male gender role as breadwinner, will lead to more women being hurt.

In *When Women Were Priests*, we learned that “in the ancient world, both men and women were patrons and householders. The social authority, economic power, and political influence associated with these roles were not restricted by gender” (13). I think that it will be interesting if we see a shift in families after all of this is over. Maybe more men will stay at home with their kids even as the pandemic subsides and we can revert to these more equal power structures.

Obviously, one of the main teachings of Buddhism is the interconnectivity of all beings. This point is illustrated most through our reading of *Buddhism Through American Women's Eyes*. "We are always one, though, in the world of form, we are also different. Problems arise when this truth is not lived" (26). Even though it is well known that this is a core teaching in Buddhism, Hildegard, a Christian, also spoke this truth. In her illustration of her first illumination, the golden rope that we see "tells us of the interconnectivity of all being" (33). I think that regardless of which religion someone practices, beliefs such as interconnectivity run throughout them all. Most religions point individuals towards being kind to others and realizing that we all have an influence on one another. I think that the current pandemic has only made this fact more obvious. Not only are we missing connection with others as we are quarantined, but we see how much we depend on one another, whether it is simply for love and connection, or for something as serious as medical care. We NEED one another. Personally, I see this each time I go to the grocery store. When just a few months ago people would not have talked to each other in the checkout line, now they are desperate to talk to someone, no matter how banal the conversation may be. In my opinion, it has been refreshing. To note some of the positives of this seemingly terrible time, I have seen more families playing outside together, people going on walks and bike rides, and calling and FaceTiming rather than just texting than I have in years! I think that Covid 19 has taught us just as much about being connected to one another as our study of Christianity and Buddhism has this semester.

I would like to end with one more word from Hildegard. "Christ brings lush greenness to shrivelled and wilted people and institutions" (43). I do not quote this to endorse Christianity over any other religion. Rather, I think that 'Christ' can be replaced with the figurehead of any other religion or belief system if you choose. The message is the important bit. Faith of any kind, whether by organized religion or not, can bring back the greenness which Hildegard so deeply believed in, and that can only help humanity as it is now.

Libby Hill

An Uncertain World

Travel restrictions, closures, and shelter-in place measures have left travel destinations, public squares, and roads across the globe deserted. It seems as if humans have disappeared. We haven't, a virus has just put the world on hold. We+ are living in a world of panic and fear, full of challenges. For most of us that challenge is simply staying inside but for millions who have lost their jobs, it's more complex. In a world full of uncertainty, thousands have turned to their religions for courage and hope. They use prayer and scripture to guide them through this global pandemic. Believer or not, certain religious concepts would be useful to all of us during this time. The concepts in Christianity and Buddhism could help to approach social distancing and CDC regulations in a positive way. There are three central teachings that would be most beneficial to our world: the idea of unity from Anglo women, kind hearts by Heidi Singh, and an illumination of Hildgard. These concepts have the power to change a situation, strengthen a community, and win the battle of returning to normalcy.

During this time, it is easy to feel lonely or disconnected from society. These types of feelings can be dangerous, leading to depression or anxiety. Luckily we live in a world run by technology. We have thousands of ways to stay connected, but staying connected isn't always easy. While reading God's

Daughters, I noticed that one of the big themes was unity; women loving and supporting women. They would connect over sexual abuse, loss, and hardships. Religion provided them a safe space to mourn and claim their experiences. Most importantly though, it gave them a support system and a community. During this time of social distancing it is important that each of us continue to stay connected. "I looked around this place and thought, 'Wow! I'm not alone! I'm not alone!'" Much like the Anglow women's group, together we can join to feel more empowered, share coping strategies, and gain a sense of community. Another aspect of connection that Anglow women utilize is prayer. There are many different Anglow narratives, but what they all have in common is a sense of the healing power and potential of prayer. No matter how alone someone may feel, praying gives them the ability to connect with a higher power. Food and medical supplies are a necessity to defeat the novel coronavirus, but connection and unity are just as vital.

Being stuck with the same people for weeks straight can be frustrating and exhausting. We all have felt some form of frustration lately, whether that be with our families, work, or even the government. As humans, often our immediate reaction to frustrating events is anger. Heidi Singh shares a central teaching of Buddhism that resonates well with the situation we are facing. In her chapter, "Forging a Kind Heart in an Age of Alienation", she discusses the principles of reconciliation. Singh shares her story and path of reconciliation with her dying father. Through her journey she practices meditation, recitation, study and the observance of precepts. These components of her practice taught her to become honest with her father and build better relations. Singh's approach to hatred and frustration could help ease tensions, hurt, and pain while we face this pandemic. There is anxiety concerning our future and that has caused mistrust in people, panic, and anger towards global leaders. "The teachings of Buddhism are very clear about compassion as an antidote to alienation and anger, whether on a personal, civic, or global level." We are all weathering a storm at the moment and it is important to approach it with a kind heart because although we face the same danger, we are all in different boats.

During difficult times it is easy to focus on the negative. In the last month, news networks and papers have been pumping negativity into society with news of food shortages, unemployment, death, and potential war. These things are a reality, but we don't have to approach all of the pandemic with negativity. In Illumination Plate 6 of Hildegard, she brings in her interpretation of interconnectedness. For her the human body is in the cosmos and the cosmos in the human body. This means that God created humans and the universe to work and create together. Hildegard goes into more depth about how everything is interconnected and uses the wind as an example. "The wind affects human beings...Sometimes the alteration may weaken individuals, and at other times it strengthens them". What we can take away from Hildegard is this idea of interconnectedness; that we humans are linked to every aspect of the universe. We can choose to become weakened by stocking up on canned goods, buying out the toilet paper, protesting Trump, and creating an 'all for one' mentality; or we could choose to let it strengthen us. To strengthen us, we need to work together and maintain a positive outlook. Some of us are on the frontlines, while others are staying home; either way we are fighting together. The virus has the potential to create a sense of unity within the world along with having positive impacts on nature and air quality. This central teaching shows us that our interconnectedness within the world can break us or rise us up.

We all want life to return to normal, but unfortunately we still have a pandemic to deal with. We can not make the virus and the damage it has done disappear; therefore, we are left to decide how we each individually want to approach the situation. These three concepts: the Anglow women, Heidi Singh, and

Hildegard, could help to approach social distancing and CDC regulations positively. The Anglow women teach that connection and unity are an essential part of surviving and keeping hope, Singh has taught that even in times of alienation it is important to approach with a kind heart and lastly Hildegard has taught that we are all interconnected, which can either strengthen us or weaken us. These concepts have the power to change our situation, create a strong community, and fight the virus.

Meghan Hill

It's crazy to see how things change in one year, nobody would have ever thought that our world would look like this. We are unable to see friends and loved ones, celebrate birthdays, graduations, weddings and so much more. We do not get to enjoy the noise of restaurants or bars and having zoom happy hours in the new normal. Our everyday lives are changing but what can we learn from this? Things are changing but the world is not shutting down, just learning new ways to function and this is true for the realm of religion. Religious meetings are still happening but just online and self isolation might just give reflection time. Christianity and Buddhism can help every person approach this pandemic and give hope to all.

During the first couple of weeks, we read the article Sustainability and Spiritual Discipline, it talks about global warming and the center for all of this is human greed, however, this is still applicable to the current pandemic. On the first page, it opens up with a call to action that we need to slow down and enjoy all the things around us we take for granted and once we slow down and be grateful, we will be happier. "Since desire is insatiable, we will never be able to satisfy all of them, thereby constantly thwarting ourselves. We need to learn, instead, to enjoy the simple, tenuous life we have. In fact, only if we learn that getting the next thing -- whatever that next thing might be -- will not make us happy, can we ever be truly happy, paradoxical as that may sound"(Gross, 207). During this time it is uncertain when the world will "open back up" again and so looking forward to that can be hopeless and daunting but by being present in the moment, it can bring happiness. The same week we read another article but talking about Christianity, Rosemary Ruether writes about how in Genesis, in the bible, God granted domain to the humans over the land and every living thing. This means animals and the Earth but also means other humans as well. During COVID-19 we are asked to stay inside to "flatten the curve". I am a healthy 21 year old but in order to do my part in all of this, I must stay home to not spread the disease more If I was to contract it. It is not about me but taking care of those around me and this is what Ruether is saying in her article, "Humans are caretakers of a land that ultimately comes from and belongs to God. They are accountable for the well-being of all those who live together--fellow humans, animals, and the soil itself"(Ruether, 198).

Since this time is so uncertain, well being and mental health is important to people. Buddhism looks a lot at the self and what is inside and how to obtain and maintain happiness. When I watched the talk by Robina Coutin it really opened my eyes that Buddha was not telling people this is how you find peace, here are five easy steps, good luck. She explained how everyone's walk is different and all that matters is if it is authentic to you. Going off that idea, she also explains how Buddha finds happiness and that is just a jumping off point for us to follow and that finding happiness is much easier than we make it out to be. Through all this though, she assures us, it is not through materialistic things, "What we think it is

[happiness], is what you get when you get what you want and that drives us”(Coutin, youtube). Finding happiness with yourself during this time is not only necessary but in a way inevitable if you spend time self reflecting instead of filling yourself with objects. During this time when we are sheltering in place, there is nobody else to see your journey to happiness and you cannot compare your journey to anyone else’s. I think also so much of Buddhism is the idea of self reflection and finding out what emotions you have. Coutin talks about how reflection is necessary because feelings of depression and sadness are not normal emotions even though the western world tells us they are, “Our mind is ours and we create it”(Coutin, youtube). She encourages us to look into our emotions so we can deal with them because we create ourselves. Christianity also does this but with a twist to it, last week I looked into women’s Christian organizations and the website, Women of Faith, also explained how everyone’s journey is different but that does not make you any less worthy in the eyes of God and that God creates you rather than you creating yourself. They make sure to reiterate this Christian principle by saying, “We think equipping women with the right tools will help build God’s kingdom and help women strengthen their relationship with God”(Women of Faith). This website is not necessarily giving you a road map saying “do this and you will be happy” just like the Buddhist teaching, but rather here are tools to aid you in your relationship with God and you will find joy in that relationship. During the corona virus pandemic, there are tools online and I think now that everything is remote, organizations like Women of Faith will have resources to connect you with other women and have community and talk about being isolated.

Through this whole class, we have seen power and how this can split gender very easily. Woodhead explains power dynamics in the Christian church very well and where the power lies. Women are more relationship and community based in the church. They are given tasks like volunteer work, children’s ministry and community. Every since the pandemic, community based work is brought to the spotlight instead of the pastor preaching the weekly meeting. On page , Woodhead says, “Once power is highlighted it is easy to see how religion and gender interact”. Outside of this class, the concept of who is necessary and who is not, right now is everywhere. Lower class working citizens are seen as essential and people who make six plus figures are not. I think these two tie together very well, hopefully through all of this people will see that women’s positions are important and even though it might be behind the scenes they are doing necessary work.

This class has given many insights on Buddhism, Christianity, power, and gender and how they all flow together. I think this course has also prepared us better to understand why this pandemic might have happened in the eyes of a Buddhist or Christian. It has also given me a way to self reflect and challenge what I believe or predisposed thoughts about either religion. It has also given me tools on how to deal with this strange time we are in.

Emily Prater

One of the first women that come to mind when I think about how women could be connected to the pandemic is Robina Coutin. In her talk, she said we “have to distinguish between the neurotic and positive voices in our head.” I know many people have had issues as this pandemic continues to worsen. At first, health care officials said that face masks did not affect the spread of the virus, but then other officials came out later saying to wear masks. Who do we believe? R. Marie Griffith is another woman author I believe really relates to our situation. She said that “Countless signs indicate the enduring popularity of prayer in America...” (Griffith, 1). And “Even many medical professionals attest to the

usefulness of prayer for human healing,” (Griffith, 1). As this continues, we must rely on each other and our spiritual support systems.

One recent event I have witnessed in the news really concerned me. Obviously as the nation (and world) continue to be almost completely shut down, our economy continues to tank. There have been recent protests fighting for our country to reopen. Many signs protestors hold up say, “My body, my choice” which absolutely makes my blood boil. Overnight all these conservative republicans have turned into body positive activists, which relates to “...male honor and female shame...” (Torjesen, 189). It is alright for these men (and women) to wish to kill off other people by reopening the public too early, but rape victims are not allowed rights to an abortion. Torjesen also said, “Akuron signifies the lack of legitimate power or authority. That the male rules over the female is a statement of social arrangements. The notion that the male should rule over the female rests on the philosophical argument that although woman possesses the rational faculty, she does not possess it with authority,” (Torjesen, 198). I believe that religion can help save our world in this crisis but we need to give up our need for unnecessary material possessions, like Coutin said in her talk. However, there has been big environmental improvements because of this. For example, the air in Wuhan, China has finally been clear for the first time in decades. “All nature is at the disposal of humankind. We are to work with it. Without it we cannot survive,” (Fox, 21).

I think that a lot of the parents now put in roles as caregivers and homeschool teachers have been placed on moms. I know several moms who have attempted to educate their children, at an age appropriate level, the seriousness of this virus, and that we must stay home. Because many people have not taken this quarantine seriously, there is now a second strain of the virus, which is much more deadly. As an “essential” worker, people are not taking this seriously. I work in a restaurant, and we regularly make more money than we did last year daily. People will come through with masks, but take them off to talk. I am not lying to you when I say I say I have seen people take their mask off, pick their nose, hand their money to us, and THEN put their mask back on. Before all this, that would have been gross and honestly still unsanitary, but I cannot believe some of the things I see. We have several elderly people come through and cough with their mouth uncovered. Sometimes it feels as though this is all one big joke to everyone. I am not sure how we are supposed to continue on like this. If something does not change, “this” will not continue for a lot of people, because they will not be around to see our new normal.