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# SALVATION

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*Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls through a Buddhist lens*



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## Contents

1. Introduction
2. Buddhist salvation
3. Traditional Christian Doctrine Regarding the Soul and Salvation
4. Etymology of Nobility
5. Anthropology of the Soul
  - 5.1 Porete's noble Soul
  - 5.2 The Soul-less Buddha
  - 5.3 Convergences
  - 5.4 Divergences
6. The After Life
  - 6.1 The Soul come to Nothing
  - 6.2 Nirvana and Sunyata
  - 6.3 Convergences
  - 6.4 Divergences
7. Routes to Enlightenment
  - 7.1 Seven States to Annihilation
  - 7.2 The Eight Jhanas of Absorption
  - 7.3 Convergences
  - 7.4 Divergences
8. Other worldly Assistance and Mediation
  - 8.1 Transference of Merit
  - 8.2 The role of the Trinity and Christ
  - 8.3 Convergences
  - 8.4 Divergences
9. Citations
10. Plagiarism Declaration

## 1. Introduction

The doctrine of salvation is an important theme present in most religions. This theme guides many people in their daily actions, value systems and existential worldview. This mini-thesis is soteriological and sets about to provide an appreciative critique of Marguerite Porete's doctrine of salvation (albeit annihilation in her own words) in the *Mirror of Simple Souls*, from a distinctively Buddhist perspective. In analysing Porete's work, I hope to find solid links between her mystical doctrine of annihilation and that of Buddhism. Furthermore, I hope to add to the growing academic interest in this Fourteenth Century mystic, whom with determination and fortitude gave her life for what she believed.

The importance of this endeavour is to further an international dialogue between differing faiths in the hopes of finding a common ground. At this point in history, humanity is facing many challenges on a physical and spiritual level. We live in an era of war, fear, fundamentalism, violence and prejudice. I would argue that in this climate of fear, people are more likely to look to religion for answers and comfort. Talal Asad in his inspiring works *Formations of the Secular* substantiates my claim by stating that religion is 'by no means disappearing in the modern world' (2003, 26). Parallel to this you notice an increased mistrust of those people and religions they do not understand. One example of this is evidenced by the increasing numbers of hate crimes and harassment against Muslims in America following 9/11, "The number of reported hate crimes in 2016 increased by nearly 5 percent to more than 6,100, according to a new report by the FBI" (Lopez, 2017). Mistrust, suspicion and fear are the precursors of, and inherent to intolerance and deleterious behaviour. Thus, we have a juxtaposition of the rise of religion and the rise of intolerance. Instead of moving forward to a place of mutual respect and understanding, it is apparent that the divide between certain religions is in fact growing. In her book *Liberty of Conscience*, Martha Nussbaum notes, "An organized, highly funded, and widespread political movement wants the values of a particular brand of conservative evangelical Christianity to define the United States" (2008, 9). This of course is only one example of a growing trend towards fundamentalism. As a student of religious studies, I believe fundamentalism to be dangerous in its exclusivity and divisional function, inasmuch as fundamentalism tends to divide groups of people from each other, often in a most conflictual manner.

In his essay *Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata*, Masao Abe makes an excellent case for going beyond mere interfaith dialogue, focusing rather on a "revolutionary reinterpretation "of Buddhism and Christianity (2005, 4). He says:

Both religions must fundamentally transform themselves such that their prevailing basic assumptions are drastically changed and a new paradigm or model of understanding can emerge.

(2005, 4)

My hope is that this work will add to this reinterpretation by focusing on what I believe to be a medieval Christian, mystical doctrine that has a particularly Buddhist flavour.

To aid me in this investigation, I will be paying close attention to Joanne Maguire Robinson's excellent book *Nobility and Annihilation in Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls*. Robinson provides us with the first book-length study of the *Mirror*. In her book, Robinson makes a thorough analysis of the complex, esoteric doctrine from this impressive medieval mystic. As assistant Professor of Religious studies at the University of North Carolina at

Charlotte, Robinson has brilliantly deconstructed this sometimes-confusing and contradictory manuscript, showing incredible insight into Porete's thought processes.

Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake in 1310, at the approximate age of 60 years old, having being condemned by the Spanish Inquisition as a re-lapsed heretic. Even though the Catholic Church at the time tried to destroy all copies of the *Mirror*, fortunately it survived and remained in circulation until after her death, a testament to its popularity. However, it has taken a long time for Marguerite Porete to reclaim authorship over the treatise since her name was omitted from the document after her death. Porete was finally acknowledged as the writer in 1946. We know little of who Porete was or how she spent her days; yet once having read her book, one can attest to the sophistication of her work that speaks to a high level of education. Certainly, Marguerite was a determined and brave woman illustrated by her refusal to recant her mystical exposition, even when faced with the threat of death. Certain academics claim that Porete was part of a medieval group of female mystics called the Beguines. The Beguines were a lay religious order scattered mostly around the Low Countries, Germany and France, remaining unaffiliated to any established religious order. I continue unconvinced of the truth of this claim, as in her book Porete states that even the Beguines may not understand her ideology since "The Beguines say that I am all astray" (Porete 1999, 392). Regardless it does not affect the intention of this investigation.

To summarise for the sake of an introduction we could say, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, typical of a medieval text in its allegorical nature, proposes the notion, contrary to what the Roman Catholic Church propagated, that only a select few 'noble souls' are capable of accessing their hidden 'spiritual nobility', which allows final union with God. Moreover, Porete contrasts these spiritually superior souls with that of 'base' or 'lost' souls. The *Mirror* takes the form of a conversation predominantly between Love, Soul and Reason. Love plays a didactic role in expressing Porete's doctrine of annihilation to Soul and Reason. Throughout the text, Love convinces Soul of her innate nobility and propensity for Union with God. In contrast, Reason (representative of the Little, or earthly, Church) aids in the deconstruction of Porete's message by presenting "traditional doctrine in advocating works of charity, self-abnegation, and *imitatio Christi* as the steps toward a proper Christian life" (Robinson 2001, 36). Moreover, Reason exasperates Love and the Soul by posing questions and theological problems that allow for further in depth conversation. It becomes clear that Reason is one of the lost souls destined not to reach annihilation. Throughout the book, we learn that the key to union with God is for the soul must become 'annihilated'. Annihilation in the context of the *Mirror* relates to the complete abnegation of will. The noble soul is completely emptied of all will to the extent where the only will that remains is that of God. The annihilated soul *is* the simple soul, free from all duplicity, which mirrors the pure Love of God.

The *Mirror* is a controversial text, even by today's standards. The main tenets advise a distinct separation from church mediation in terms of salvation as well as those of good works. In essence, Porete proposes a distinction between two types of souls. The first type of soul are the lost ones that will live their life consumed with the will to imitate Christ in his goodness by following the virtues to the best of their ability. These lost souls may be saved by God's Grace and enter paradise; however this is the penultimate "goal". The second type of soul is that of the sad, noble soul. For Porete, it is this noble soul who is destined to journey beyond salvation to a far greater existence, that of union with God. This union depends entirely on the complete annihilation of all will. Even more controversially, Porete places the Holy Spirit in equal

standing to the Father and the Son, as well as surpassing the need of the incarnated son as a mediator to Love.

Despite the fact that Marguerite Porete was identified as a heretic by the inquisitorial board, she remained steadfast in her intent on disseminating her elitist belief system. In addition, Marguerite provides us with what she calls ‘seven states of being’, which are the indicators of what the simple soul undergoes on its path to union with God. Porete is both “profound and prosaic” (Robinson 2001, 53) in her re-working or reinterpretation of official church doctrine, we shall see this in later chapters.

The commonalities between Porete’s work and the Buddhist tradition are for me quite startling. Already we notice semantical links as the concept of annihilation reminds us of the important Buddhist notion of enlightenment. Porete’s consistent use of the word ‘will’, the feature that is to be annihilated to attain a state of utter union with God, prompts me to consider its similarity to the integral notion of desire and suffering in Buddhism. We are also able to contrast the Buddhist meditative states of jhana to that of Porete’s ‘Seven States’ as well as Porete’s ideal of union with God to that of Buddhist Nirvana. Porete’s idea of a noble soul forms the bases of the Mirrors paradigm and therefore shall be contrasted to the Buddhist teachings of the soul and the plight of humanity. Additionally, the concept of samsara will be equated to that of Porete’s lost souls, whom in suffering are destined to live a life ruled by their will to live in the image of Christ. Furthermore, is there a link to be found between Porete’s idea of God and that of Sunyata? Finally I shall assess the role of ‘other worldly’ intervention and mediation in both of these traditions.

## 2. Buddhist Salvation

To begin this exploration let us first remind ourselves of the chief principles of Buddhism as they relate to salvation.

Buddhist religious tradition is similar to Christianity in that it has splintered into many schools of thought with sub-sects occurring. For Buddhism two major traditions have formed. Both schools follow the main tenets of the Buddha’s teaching with subtle variances, the main difference between them being their view as to the practice that leads to Nirvana. The two foremost schools of Buddhism are Mahayana and Theravada. Mahayana, translated as the “Great Vehicle”, is a branch of Buddhism that is geared toward the majority of humanity in the sense that here, enlightenment is more easily attainable than in the contrasting sect of Theravada Buddhism. Mahayana includes sects such as Pure Land and Tibetan Buddhism. For the followers of the Mahayana school, Nirvana is obtainable by the common person, in this lifetime, sometimes with the help of a Bodhisattva who has delayed their own ‘salvation’ for the sake of helping others. Alternatively, as in Pure Land, Nirvana is achieved through certain practices such as chanting and visualisation as well as faith and vows. Theravada has a more traditional approach to gaining enlightenment than its sister sect in that it is inclined not to stray too far from the early words of the Buddha. Members who follow Theravada tend to live monastic lives and focus on intense meditation and self-mortification.

In this research, I will be focusing on the most prevalent and core teachings of early Buddhism, however, I will pull information from specific sects inasmuch as they correlate or oppose to the mystical teaching of Marguerite Porete. Pure land Buddhism is one such sect that I will be analysing in contrast to the teachings of the *Mirror of Simple Souls*.

The event or process of salvation includes two distinct elements: God and Soul. Within the Abrahamic religions, for salvation to occur there must be an immortal soul and a transcendent Being, whom in his grace will save the individual from sin. However, if we are to grasp this from a Buddhist perspective, then first we must establish what exactly *is to be saved and who is doing the saving*. For the sake of clarity, let us remember early on in this paper that Buddhism does not speak of salvation in the conventional sense; instead the focus is a self-driven path that will lead to enlightenment, which in turn brings liberation from suffering and bliss.

To be saved implies there is ‘someone’ or ‘something’ that is *doing* the saving. Christians believe this being is God. However, most Buddhist teachings do not attach themselves to any Gods and ultimately deny the existence of a personal God who, with his grace, will save us from sin and suffering. The Buddha actively avoided answering questions regarding the presence of a divine being. I would argue that the Buddha wanted his disciples to focus on their own journey to enlightenment instead of attaching this responsibility to a God. Of course, this is pure conjecture. Thus, early Buddhism includes no deity worship or acknowledgment of a God, nevertheless, with the split into the two schisms of Buddhism there came with it new ideology.

We can categorise two types of ‘paths’ to Nirvana. There is the path based on self-power and the path where one is assisted by an ‘other power’. Most Buddhist traditions, particularly Theravada, tend towards the individual taking responsibility for their own journey, with no mention of transcendental intervention yet, there are exceptions. The Pure Land sect of Mahayana Buddhism includes both systems. In Pure Land, the intention is to assist the common person in attaining Nirvana in one lifetime. Whilst the Pure Land devotee must perform certain practices such as chanting of the Buddha’s name, they also rely on the sacred vows of Amitabha Buddha to assist them in their journey to the Pure Land. Through vehement and focused belief, the laity should progress faster to their goal to reach the Pure Land. However, Buddha Amitabha is never thought of as a God, instead, he was a skilled bodhisattva whom delayed his own Nirvana for the sake of all humanity. Thus, even for this school Buddhism, Amitabha is not a God in the popular sense of the word.

Conversely, there is a sect of Buddhism, who praise a pantheon of Gods and deity’s. Tibetan Buddhists are unique within the Buddhist community in this regard. Tibetan Buddhists practice “include[s] the incantation of mystic, magical formulas, the exorcism and destruction of demons, divination, auguries, oracles, and symbolic sacrifice and ransom -- aspects associated with Shamanism” (Lieberman and Lieberman, 2018). Even so, these monks do not rely on these deity’s for salvation, as their belief system is paradoxical in the sense that they still adhere to the concept of one’s personal quest for enlightenment.

Hence, we have established the Buddhist perspective on God albeit a very brief explanation. Let us now consider the other essential ingredient of salvation, the soul. Buddhist ideology on the soul will be discussed in depth later on in this paper, however to put it plainly, the Buddhist’s do not believe a personal soul to exist. With the overriding paradigm of the constant flux and change of all there is, for a Buddhist it would be senseless to believe in a fixed soul. The ‘law of change’ declares that nothing remains the same and that the only constant is change itself. Further to this, Buddhist doctrine perceives reality as utterly mutually interdependent. Where there is complete interdependency and mutual causality there can be no individualistic soul.

### 3. Traditional Christian Doctrine Regarding the Soul and Salvation

What is the nature of the soul? Is it noble or immoral, sinful or pure? Is the soul capable of salvation and if so, how does it go about achieving this? Medieval theological thought centred predominantly around Genesis in answer to these questions. Joanne Robinson notes that for great theologians such as St Augustine, humanity is forever unable to morally choose the right road because of the inherited effects of original sin. According to Augustine, it is only by divine grace that we are able to make good choices. Furthermore, it also only by the divine grace that God chooses to grant those who love him, that we are able to struggle against the inherited effects of Adams sin. In his loving goodness, God gifted the true believer and lover of himself, his Grace, as well as Christ his son, who due to his great sacrifice has a mediatory function in humanity attaining salvation. (2001, 58). Notions of the *image and likeness* of Jesus were important concepts at this time and had direct implications for the human soul. Joanne Robinson explains the repercussions most clearly when she says “Simply put, image is an ontological status; likeness is a moral status” (2001, 57). The moral likeness of the divine that humanity possessed was ruined due to Adams poor choice. However, not all is lost, since humanity also possesses the image of Christ within their soul. A hidden part of the soul retains this divine potentiality (the image of Christ), the key to return to God. In addition to its salvational function, the image of Christ within us, or our God-like nature, allows us to have some knowledge of the supreme. Another important aspect to consider are the sacraments. There are seven sacraments that Christians perform, and during Porete’s time, these rituals were considered as vital elements in the life of the believer. Not only do the sacraments aid in deepening faith, they are also believed to be endowed with Christ’s grace. To summarise simply then, medieval Christians generally believed that each person’s soul bears the ill effects of Adams original sin. Yet in contrast, our souls also retain the image of Christ within, the spark of the divine and the ultimate key to salvation.

Reasoning of the Church dictated that Christians must endeavour to imitate the goodness of Christ who remains the “ultimate moral blueprint for Christians” (Robinson 2001, 58). This imitation, along with the sacraments and genuine and wholehearted love for God, will lead the believer to paradise in the Kingdom of Heaven once they have left the earthly realm. Of course, there are some cases where a devotee needs further purification and so may enter a state of purgatory until the spiritual cleansing is complete and they are ready to enter Heaven.

### 4. Etymology of Nobility

In *Nobility and Annihilation*, Robinson devotes an entire section to the linguistic anthropology of what *to be noble meant* in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Since the concept is so integral to Porete’s doctrine, it is vital to consider her direct intention with the use of the term. Nevertheless, Robinson makes it clear in her book that to find a consensus on the actual meaning of the word at this time in history is all but impossible,

The huge historical corpus of interpretation of the medieval nobility attests to two enduring truths: a noble lack of consensus on some of the most basic lines of inquiry coupled with a great silence on the issue from the perspective of historical theology”  
(2001,4)

The abstruseness of the notion we are exploring involves arguments such as; nobility as a term used in ecclesiastical circles, nobility based on merit or nobility based on genealogical factors. Although Porete lived in a socio-political context of Feudalism, Robinson believes that Porete

did not use the word nobility to describe elements of this structure, although “it assumes a degree of correlation between the literary and theological use of these motifs and its basis in social fact” (2001, 3).

One proposal Robinson presents, comes from Dante Alighieri, a contemporary of Porete, who argues that nobility is “the perfection of the nature proper to each thing” (Robinson in Convivo 2001, 7). Dante further argues that since humanity originated from one ancestor, Adam whose possible paradoxical nature, of nobility and baseness in turn, ‘cancels out’ this condition for humanity. Thus, the only way to distinguish the noble from the base must be centered on the person’s commitment to virtue or submission to vice, regardless of social standing. From a theological perspective, the church insisted that the sin of Adam infected all of humanity and the only way to achieve nobility of the soul is through “works and virtues, aided by Divine Grace” (Robinson 2001, 7). This ideal of nobility does not hold water in the sense that Porete intended, for Porete abjured good works as a way to God, more on this later.

In contrast to the esoteric explanation of nobility, at this time there was also a practical interpretation. Members of the nobility came from an unbroken line of noble lineage and inheritance. Nobles in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century were descended from a genealogy of wealth and ownership of property. Here the identity of the family was of more importance than the individual. Geographical stability was a key factor in the building of a noble family ‘name’. However, Robinson is sure to point out that wealth and inheritance were not the only characteristics of nobility. In addition to being borne of noble lineage, nobles were expected to demonstrate virtuous behaviour. They were more educated than the common person and were expected to exhibit qualities such as “prowess, courage, loyalty and largesse, and thus to distinguish themselves physically and morally from commoners” (Robinson 2001, 8).

Thus, explanations of the etymology of what it means to be noble are presented briefly above, but how did Porete intend the term to be understood? Plainly, the noble soul does not relate to any strict social structure, since Porete considered herself a noble soul and yet, from what we know of her life, was not part of the social construct of nobility. Furthermore, a noble soul in the Porete sense cannot mean a certain morality based on merit since Porete consistently abjures good works and merit as a way to union with God. We are left then, with the notion of genealogy. The concept of descent is the key to understanding Porete’s noble soul.

## 5. Anthropology of the Soul

### 5.1 Porete’s Noble and Lost Soul

Part of what got Marguerite Porete into trouble with authorities was the elitist nature of her doctrine. In the Medieval era, the church used scripture as well as papal authority to formulate their dogma. The ‘little church’(as called by Porete) claimed that all souls can be saved through the grace of God however for this to be attained, it is of paramount importance that we live in Christ’s image, forever trying to atone for our inherited sin through good-works, the sacraments and commitment to the Virtues. Herein lies the controversy, for Porete insists that although this is a worthy existence and souls that adhere to this traditional ideology shall surely be saved, true bliss is found in union with God, and this ecstasy is reserved for noble souls alone. Further to this, the Mirror espouses two contentious claims. Firstly, that Christ is not needed as mediator between the soul and God and secondly that to attain union, the soul must give up their preoccupation with the Virtues.

Although contradictory at times, it becomes clear that Porete intended this book for those who are capable of annihilation, the noble soul. In fact, Porete seems almost arrogant in her assertion that only noble souls will have the capacity to understand her creed. Right from the start of her book, Porete makes it abundantly clear that her doctrine is not for all. She states that not everyone will understand its contents for not everyone has the inherent spiritual superiority needed for the task. Porete claims those lost souls ruled by reason are ‘donkeys’ who “seek God in creatures, in monasteries for prayer, in created paradise, in human words and in scripture” (Porete 1999, 486). Try as they may, these base souls will remain slaves to the reasoning of the Little Church.

Joanne Robinson describes Porete as “profound yet prosaic” and her unique doctrine on the soul is a perfect example of Robinson’s description. In the introduction of her book Robinson states “Porete challenges the traditional Christian conception of the radically debased nature of fallen humanity by asserting the nobility and freedom of certain individual souls” (2001, xi). For Porete, there is a cycle at work. The soul is borne from no-thing as an expression of God’s love; it comes from the perfection of a pre-existent state of union with God. Nevertheless, ignorant of the dismal repercussions the soul moves away from no-thingness, from the state of annihilation, through its own expression of will. As Adam ate of the forbidden fruit of knowledge, so he separated himself from God through his own will. I believe this is what Porete believed the sinful soul to be, merely a soul, who in ignorance separated himself from perfection. In her text Porete tends to refrain from reviling the sinful and debased nature of humanity; instead, she consistently speaks of a soul moving away from a state of perfection, of nothing-ness, through their own agency. As the cycle of existence continues, some select souls will return once again to nothing-ness. This return to God occurs only through the complete and utter abandonment of the will. Unfortunately, this gift of union is not available to all souls, for there are lost souls bound to live in suffering, consumed by their will. Ironically, their will to live in the image of Christ is the very thing keeping them from reuniting with God.

Arguably, the most significant aspect of the *Mirror* is Marguerite Porete’s clear and insistent differentiation between two *types* of souls. The ‘lost souls’ and ‘forlorn, noble souls’. For Porete, lost souls are those souls whom are bound to struggle and toil their entire life in an attempt to imitate the goodness of Jesus Christ by serving the virtues unfailingly. Love says in chapter 56 “those men become lost who remain in the service of the Virtues” (Porete, 489). This notion is starkly opposed to the popular Christian doctrine of the time, and even by today’s standards, what Porete is proposing is hugely controversial. Porete states that souls desperately trying to live life in imitation of Jesus are in fact becoming slaves to their own *will*. Their desire for personal morality perpetuates their suffering. The lost souls *will* to do good works, *will* to act morally and *will* to obey the commandments, and yet, it is exactly this will, that keeps them from ultimate union with God. Their continued desire to live in the image of Christ leaves them in a cycle of anxiety and travail with no chance of escaping.

Whoever serves a poor lord for long can expect poor reward and little payment. Now it is so, that the Virtues have realised and perceived clearly, as those that have been willing to hear have heard, that they have no understanding of the state of being of Perfect Love.

(Porete 1999, 489)

The passage above clearly shows Porete’s disassociation from dedication to the Virtues. Although for Porete lost souls are admirable in their quest, they are ultimately misled and

mistaken, for they serve a 'poor lord'. For following the goodness of the Virtues will leave them bereft. Unfortunately, there is no release from the lost soul's cycle of desire, as they are base born in a spiritual sense and therefore incapable of understanding their folly.

Porete boldly introduces the idea of a different soul, a soul endowed with a certain spiritual status, a noble soul. It is this noble soul whom is capable of digressing from the path ruled by the nescience of reason. Now we may ask whom these select noble souls are that Porete believes hold a higher purpose than the 'common' soul. Furthermore, how is it that they have come to possess such superiority? Let us at this point return to the idea of nobility and specifically, what Porete intended when she used the term with such regularity. I think it is safe to say that when she spoke of a noble soul she was not referring to those souls born into a system of inherited wealth or property. However, as touched on in the previous section, there is a link between the social construct of nobility and the noble soul, and that link is lineage. Robinson notes that Porete makes explicit as well as implicit references to lineage throughout her text and uses it to identify "the inalienable inborn characteristics of certain types of souls" (2001, 88). The direct ancestry of the noble souls is in fact the most eternal-ancestor of humankind "God as Trinitarian ground of all" (Robinson 2001, 88).

The noble soul, capable of annihilation, is graced with a certain spiritual status granted by the love and work of the Holy Spirit. Only the noble soul is capable of obliterating their will and reuniting with God, because the Holy Spirit has imprinted this soul with Love. Keeping in mind that for Porete, Love and the Holy Spirit are one thing. The Holy Spirit is the love and goodness of God. Additionally, in keeping with conventional doctrine, the Holy Spirit, as with the Son, is part of God and yet still remains separate. It is through the agency of the Holy Spirit that the noble soul has access to union with the supreme. We can note here how Porete diminishes the role of Jesus as mediator between humanity and God; rather she focuses her attention on the Holy Spirit as the direct line of access to God. The noble soul came from no-thing as an expression of God's love and although it has separated itself from God, the noble soul still contains the emblazoning of the Trinity upon its essence. It is precisely this imprint, which allows the noble soul to return to a pre-existent state of union with God. It is the stamp of love, on the quintessence of the soul, which gives it its inalienable grace. In her book, Robinson once again elucidates the on the matter skilfully. She explains that in the *Mirror*, Porete divulges two 'paths' that the soul journeys on. The higher path that is concerned with the soul's relationship to God encompasses the lower earthly path. Robinson goes onto to clarify how the majority of souls, being lost and deluded, devote themselves to good works and 'worldly cares' (2001, 60). These base souls shall "achieve salvation through the grace of Christ's sacrifice, but they will never enjoy the glorified life of annihilation" (2001, 35). Conversely, the noble souls attain the highest 'reward', for it is only noble souls whom are able to complete both spiritual paths. Once these noble souls realize their true nature and true potentiality they are able to move past devotion to earthly practices to achieve a far higher prize, that of union with God. This is only accomplished by annihilating all hints of personal will. Robinson notes how Porete emphasises God as One, and this oneness is the "simple ground of all" to which humans souls aspire by attaining simplicity (2001, 53). The noble soul may realize this simplicity by eliminating all traces of will. When a soul becomes simple, she no longer exercises her will, for she understands the consequence of this is detachment from God, which creates a state of perpetual suffering. Furthermore, she realises that the only will that shall liberate her is that of

God's. Free from all types of duplicity, the noble soul may re-unite with the nothing-ness from whence she came in pre-existence.

## 5.2 The Soul-less Buddha

Siddhartha Gautama, the Enlightened One, taught that a permanent soul does not exist. To have faith in a fixed soul would be to grossly misunderstand the nature of reality from a Buddhist perspective. Buddha, through his meditation and life's quest to end suffering, realised the fugaciousness of all things. Impermanency is the chief characteristic of all that we know. Heraclitus the Greek philosopher said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man". This law of change effects the animate and inanimate alike. Everything in our reality is transient, including ourselves. According to the law of change, all that we see, feel, touch, hear and think is in a constant state of flux and change. Nothing remains the same from one moment to the next. Sometimes this change is obvious and immediate, such as watching the transformation of a raw egg to a fried egg. In other instances, the change is imperceptible as it occurs over millennia. An example of this would be the slow weathering of a rock caressed by a stream of water for thousands of years. With this in mind, we can understand how the ideal of an eternal, individualistic, fixed soul would be incongruent with Buddhist belief. In a reality of constant change nothing is fixed, nothing is stable, except change itself. Buddha explains this notion of impermanence lucidly when he said, "All conditioned things are impermanent, when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering".

The Buddha went so far as to say, that there is no true self either. If we perceive the world through Buddhist lenses then we understand the manner in which the world, nature, our body and mind are in a never-ending process of transformation. Pertaining to the physical world, we can see our bodies grow old through the years. So are we our bodies? If my body is in constant flux, am I still able to define myself through it? If I lose a limb, am I still me? If I lose the ability to communicate, see or hear, am I still me? It becomes obvious then that defining our identity, or self, through our physical body, means we are on shaky ground to say the least. We would not recognise a child when we meet her years later, since she has gone through extensive change, moving from a girl into a woman. Science confirms our bodies grow anew every seven years; this means on a cellular level the true nature of our body is change. Thus, if we cannot base our identity, our self, on our physical body then we may assume we are defined by our mind, our thoughts, and our personality. However, this too is an ethereal foundation of understanding. Science has correlated ancient Buddhist thought in confirming the unsubstantiality of the mind and thoughts. Our minds are not situated in our heads, who we are, is not easily placed. William Hamilton coined the term 'stream of consciousness', a stream of consciousness, one thought giving rise to more, with no clear demarcation between them. Each thought, a drop of water within the constant flux and flow of the river. If we are to agree with this, then we cannot accept the concept of a fixed self or soul, for that would make little sense when we understand that there is nothing 'fixed' or static about us.

Even though there is no soul by Buddhist standards, let us consider how this tradition perceives the experience of the unenlightened practitioner and that of the enlightened Buddha to be, this will allow for easier comparison later on in this section. At the heart of Buddhist doctrine lie the Four Noble Truths. These truths were realised by the Buddha as he contemplated the

suffering of all humankind. The Buddha realised that once one strips away all ‘causes’ or influences of suffering, we get to the kernel of the issue, desire. The Buddha explained that life is suffering and that this suffering is created by desire and the only way to end this suffering is to eliminate the root cause, desire. In his wisdom, the Buddha offered to his disciples the eightfold path, which he claimed to be the way to end this desire. Thus, the basic experience of all humanity is suffering caused from desire. For desire is attachment, whether that attachment be to material objects, emotional attention or even the most fundamental of desires-to exist. Once again, we can look to the law of impermanency of all of existence as the reasoning as to why desire is unfavourable. Humanity is fighting a battle they cannot possibly win by consistently forming attachments; therefore, the most fundamental experience of our being is pain and suffering. Buddhist doctrine is complex, including many universal laws, which, true to Buddhist ideology are in many ways interconnected. One such law is that of Karma. Karma is the law of cause and effect that states that every action and thought creates a subsequent effect. Karma is impersonal and does not discern between wholesome and unwholesome thoughts, good or bad deeds, it merely projects back to us what we project into the universe. We must not think of Karma as judge who punishes or rewards as this implies some sort of personal identity. When in fact, Karma is completely objective. Unwholesome thoughts and actions have a consequent and corresponding effect individually and as a whole in terms of humanity. In their journal entry Yin and Len describe this phenomenon as such; “karma is a doctrine to the effect that the worldly order has a moral order by which all affairs are conducted ethically, i.e. encouraging a fair distribution of punishments and rewards”(On the naturalization of karma and rebirth. *International Journal of Dharma Studies*, 2015). In a similar fashion, wholesome thoughts and actions create a corresponding positive effect. Karma acts as the chain that pulls us back to re-birth once we pass, over and over again until we are able to alleviate all karmic debt. This constant cycle of death and re-birth is samsara. The only way to escape samsara finally is to become enlightened to true reality. So if karma causes re-birth and enlightenment is the way out then what is enlightenment? We desire because we form attachments to things, be they material, cognitive, spiritual or emotional. According to Buddhists, this attachment comes from ignorance, for why would we willingly form attachments in a reality that is in constant flux. Thus, we are ignorant to the nature of reality and through Buddhist practices; we may become enlightened to this truth. Enlightenment means understanding the negative effects of desire. Enlightenment means knowing that will creates suffering and most importantly, enlightenment means the practitioner has abandoned her desire. Once we stop desiring we stop suffering, we eliminate karmic effects. In summary, we may say that from a Buddhist perspective humanity suffers through each lifetime because of our desire and consequent karmic footprint.

In contrast, there is the practitioner who becomes enlightened and experiences something substantially different. Buddha described the experience as such,

When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, & attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental fermentations. I discerned, as it was actually present, that ‘This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress... These are fermentations... This is the origination of fermentations... This is the cessation of fermentations... This is the way leading to the cessation of fermentations.’ My heart,

thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the fermentation of sensuality, released from the fermentation of becoming, released from the fermentation of ignorance. With release, there was the knowledge, 'Released.' I discerned that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done...

(Domyo, 2018)

Therefore the quintessence of the Buddha becomes pure, liberated, released from all attachments and suffering. The Buddha becomes knowledgeable to the impermanence of reality, which in turn allows him to experience bliss. The Buddha has ended the cycle of suffering and has returned to a pre-karmic state.

### 5.3 Convergences

Noble souls, lost souls and no souls, surely there can be no common ground between Buddha and our medieval mystic. Yet once familiar with these two systems of thought we cannot but sense there is a commonality to be explored in the *experience* of the lost soul, noble soul and humanity. Let us first look to Porete's lost soul. The lost souls live their lives stuck in a cycle of suffering as they continue to will to live in the image of Christ. Is this 'will' not the *desire* that the Buddha insisted was the root of all suffering? To be enlightened means awakening to the truth of the injurious effects of desire. For the Buddhist, desire is the foundation upon which all suffering is experienced. This is precisely Marguerite Porete's doctrine of annihilation. To end the suffering of the lost souls, in essence attaining union with God, they must release themselves from the shackles of desire through annihilation. Noble souls are also subject to this suffering, they too agonize in a cycle of desiring to unite with God, yet remain deluded to the correct path in attaining this. Fortunately, Porete wrote this text with the express intention of enlightening noble souls.

Marguerite Porete's lost souls are plainly also subject to this condition. It makes no difference that these souls desire to do good works; *all* desire causes pain, *all* willing causes anguish. Specifically, in both traditions, will/desire becomes a limitation to peace. This desire/will, sweeps them up in the cycle of samsara. For Porete the lost souls are not merely restricted by their adherence to virtuous behaviour and avoidance of the vices, it is *the cause* of their inability to re-unite with God. Similarly, desire and attachment creates suffering in the Buddhist sense. The restriction and pain is created and perpetuated by their will, for according to Porete, the only will that allows for the unadulterated bliss of union, is that of Gods. Similarly, Buddhism speaks of going beyond morality. In his published lecture on the details pertaining to Nirvana, Kyabgon Traleg Rinpoche says, "if one has attained wisdom through self-cultivation, through the practice of meditation, that particular individual does not have to try to have wholesome thoughts. They do not have to try to develop positive attitudes or generate loving, compassionate emotions; these things will be their natural attributes" (*What is Nirvana: An Overview of the Various Views of nirvana in the Buddhist Tradition*, 2018). Therefore both Porete and Buddha perceive humanities will, humanities desire, to be an obstacle to liberation from suffering.

Yet for Porete, there are those noble souls who are able to realize something far greater than salvation. Porete is in line with traditional Christian doctrine in that she does not dismiss the role of Christ in salvation; however, this is retained for the lost souls alone. Porete controversially plays down the role of Christ in the quest for annihilation of the noble soul. As with Buddhism, the noble soul is not saved. Instead, through the 'seven states of being' she

comes to realise her true potentiality and the true nature of reality, meaning that through wisdom the soul understands that 'will' creates a barrier between herself and God. This is directly comparable to the Jhanas, the meditative practices that Buddhist go through in order to find liberation from samsara. Just as a Buddha is enlightened, so too is the noble soul. Thus for both doctrines, the experience of awakening for the Buddha and the noble soul is characterised by peace, wisdom, purity and freedom from suffering.

One further correlation between these two belief systems is the true nature of humanity. I agree with Robinson's interpretation of Porete's thoughts regarding this matter. In *Nobility and Annihilation* Robinson explains,

The will of the Trinity, in the person of the Holy Spirit, enables the procession of creation from the godhead as well as the return of creatures to pre-existence. Humanity is granted free will, free to turn to good or evil. Yet it is most free, truly free when it has no will and is thus returned to God. Only then does the Trinity work within it. For Porete, the soul's true nature is as noble heir to god; as such it derives its identity from the Trinity itself, not from Adam's willful sin.

(Robinson, 2001)

Therefore, according to Robinson, Porete denies the inherent evilness of humankind. Instead, the soul is considered ignorant of its true nobility rather than sinful. Adam exercised his free will thus extracting himself from the no-thingness that is pre-existence. Adam was not sinful in his desire/will, rather like the noble soul, he was misled. In chapter 94 Porete says,

The truly innocent are never right, but wrong is never done to them. They are wholly naked, they have nothing to hide. All others therefore still hide themselves because of Adam's sin, except for those who are brought to nothing, and they have no reason to hide.

(1999, 338)

Is it possible that Porete means that the base souls, bound by their pledge to follow in Christ's image, are sinful by nature? Is it further possible that Porete does not mean sinful in the conventional manner, but rather that 'original sin' was merely Adam expressing his own will, moving away from the Godhead? Thus, we can postulate that for Porete, sin is not evil, a radically debased nature, sin is ignorance in action. The same may be said for the Buddhist belief of the nature of humanity. The Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda Maha Thera states,

Buddhists do not regard man as sinful by nature of 'in rebellion against god'. Every human being is a person of great worth who has within himself a vast store of good as well as evil habits. The good in a person is always waiting for a suitable opportunity to flower and to ripen. Remember the saying, there is so much that is good in the worst of us and so much that is bad in the best of us.

(Dhammananda Maha Thera, 2018)

Thus, Porete and Buddhism understand humanity to be inherently good, albeit deluded at times. For Porete humanity is deluded to the way in which union with God is attained and their inherent goodness. For Buddhist, humanity is deluded to the nature of reality and their inherent wholesomeness.

#### 5.4 Divergences

Yet, we cannot ignore a substantial difference between Marguerite Porete's doctrine and Buddhism. If we look at Pure Land Buddhism, one of the few teachings of the Buddha that was not a direct response to a specific question, we understand that for this doctrine *anyone can reach enlightenment*. Any person committed to self-cultivation of the essential ingredient of wisdom, may achieve an end to suffering, an end to desire or an end to will. Technically, these people will enter the Pure Land where from Nirvana is readily accessible. Although in some traditions, such as Theravada, it is considered very difficult to become a fully-fledged Buddha, the Buddha maintained this state is achievable by all; unlike Porete, he was in no way elitist in his propositions of enlightenment. However in the Pure Land sect, enlightenment is made all that more accessible through certain practices. In his book *In One Life Time: Pure Land Buddhism* Shi Wuling states, "For countless people, Pure Land practice is the most suitable for several reasons. First, it is relatively easy to practice in almost any environment: alone, with other practitioners, or even amid the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Second, there are no difficult entry-level criteria. Even if one's abilities and knowledge are modest, with belief, vows, and practice, we will be reborn in the Pure Land" (2006, 3).

In contrast to Buddhist thought, for Porete, the soul who lacks the direct lineage from the Trinity, may never achieve this ultimate bliss, these souls will never reach annihilation. Regardless of how they may try, these lost souls are destined to live a life of servitude to the virtues; they cannot escape this bondage as they naturally fall short of the requirements. Thus within the practice of Buddhism any committed and skilful practitioner can be liberated from suffering. Whereas Marguerite Porete dismisses what I can only assume to be a large portion of humanity, as destined to suffer in anxiety without any hope of release.

#### 6. The afterlife

A novice to the teachings of Buddhism may understand Nirvana from a Western, Christian perspective, conceiving of it as a blissful paradise where one goes once they have reached an enlightened state. Such a conclusion is erroneous, for Nirvana is not a place, rather it may be thought of as a state of being enlightened to the truth of reality. Concepts of heaven in the Christian sense have changed over time, depending on who is doing the consideration. Yet during Porete's time Heaven was most probably in most sects of society, thought of as a place of paradise. However, this started to change when Thomas Aquinas "argued that heaven was not an earthly paradise but rather an abstract communion with God filled with light and knowledge" (Hays: 2018). This is precisely what Marguerite Porete declares is in her book, although of course she claims this is reserved for noble souls alone. Porete does not describe the afterlife as such. Rather she employs the description of the characteristics of the annihilated soul, to hint at what this union may feel like.

##### 6.1 The soul who has come to nothing

Porete claims that Paradise- in essence heaven- is primarily to be one with God. Due to this, when discussing the afterlife she tends to focus on what the experience is of the annihilated soul is or the characteristics of the soul in poverty. Of course, her descriptions are apophatic since the noble soul becomes 'nothing' and so cannot be described in terms of 'something'.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the *Mirror* is drastically paradoxical, and this duality shines through particularly in the way in which Porete describes the annihilated soul, "Now such a

Soul is nothing, for through her abundance of divine knowledge she sees her nothingness, which makes her nothing and reduces her to noth-ingness” (Porete 1999, 164). In chapter 11, we are provided with nine descriptions of the annihilated soul through the character of Love in her conversation with Reason. Firstly, the soul come to nothing cannot be found. This is not meant in the literal sense rather that the annihilated soul is aware of all her terrible sins, yet these sins are “less than nothing; and so, interpreted in this way, this Soul, in as much as she is, is less than nothing, and so we can conclude that one cannot find this Soul” (Porete 1999, 174). Loves states that this soul is saved without works, the significance of this is that the soul has faith, which is deemed by Porete as being far more important than good works. The annihilated soul “is no longer capable of works, and undoubtedly she is well excused and discharged” (Porete 1999, 174). This links in with the *Mirrors* overall paradigm that the annihilated soul has no will at all. Without will, the soul can no longer perform works; instead, these works are carried out by Gods will *through the soul*. Another characteristic of the annihilated soul is her lack of attachment to any “creature made by God”. Porete describes this soul as a “solitary phoenix”, as she remains alienated from all but Love (1999, 175). Furthermore, Love explains to Reason that the obliterated soul does nothing for God as well as doing everything for God. This soul understands that her actions are of no concern to God and she remains only concerned with the will of God, and so God works his will through her empty vessel. Because the annihilated soul wants for nothing, no one is able to take anything from her, give her anything or teach her anything. God encompasses her fully and completely in union and this provides her with everything she needs, even though of course she wants for nothing. The annihilated soul has true poverty of will “and if they wished for anything, they would separate them- selves from Love” (Porete 1999, 175). Ultimately, this soul remains in the love of the Trinity where she is protected from all forms of suffering and anguish.

## 6.2 Nirvana and Sunyata

Nirvana means, “blowing out” and specifically refers to the blowing out of ones ego. For as humans, we are naturally egotistical. I do not mean this in the negative sense, rather in the sense that we tend to believe we have a self, which of course is denied by Buddhist thought. The belief in a ‘self’ becomes a negative force in our lives since we form a strong attachment to this abstract concept; this in turn perpetuates our state of suffering as we struggle against reality. Therefore, in fact, Nirvana is the effect of the realisation of self-lessness. Furthermore, Nirvana is the state of bliss that arises from the realisation of the insubstantiality of a reality that is in constant flux. When the Buddha becomes enlightened, he understands that there is no permanence and so there is no need for any sort of attachment. This lack of attachment is the extinction of all expressions of desire.

Traleg Rinpoche the resident and Spiritual Director of Kagyu E-Vam Buddhist Institute in Melbourne and E-Vam Institute in the Upstate New York, explains Nirvana in his 2015 e-book. Although there are various subtleties as to how the idea of Nirvana is understood by different Buddhist schools, we can make some sweeping conclusions. Rinpoche states “all ‘types’ of Nirvana may either be Nirvana with Remainder or Nirvana without Remainder” (2015, 5). This means that when the Buddha becomes enlightened under the Bodhi tree, he has reached Nirvana; however, he retains his physical form. Our physical bodies, as our minds, are also subject to Karma and hold the residual effect of our past actions and thoughts. Therefore, the Buddha still in the physical plane is in a state of Nirvana with Remainder. Once the Buddha

passes, he leaves his physical body with its karmic attachments and reaches Nirvana without Remainder.

Nirvana is a *state*, free from the suffering of desire and free from the endless cycle of re-birth. Nirvana is what follows once we realise the true nature of reality and ourselves, through having followed the eightfold path. This path laid down by Buddha is the process we must commit ourselves to, if we wish to end our pervasive pain. Nirvana is impersonal with no talk of what *happens there*, for nothing can happen there, as it is not a place. Nirvana is merely the absence of suffering, release from the karmic driven cycle of constant rebirth. Rinpoche also speaks of Nirvana as extinction. For the practicing Buddhist it is important to be a moral person; however, this morality (once enlightened) comes from a place of wisdom, not desire. The enlightened soul does not desire to do good works; rather she acts morally without effort as she has the wisdom to understand that her actions and thoughts have a ripple effect that touches all of creation. With wisdom comes the realisation of the interdependent nature of the reality in which we are entwined. The beautiful tenets of Hua-Yen Buddhism express this idea effectively in the imagery of the jewel net of Indra:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net, which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities. The artificer has hung a single glittering Jewel in each "eye" of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the Jewels are infinite in number. There hang the Jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these Jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that its polished surface there are reflected *all* the other Jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the Jewels reflected in this one Jewel is also reflecting all the other Jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring. The Hua-yen school has been fond of this Image, mentioned many times in its literature, because it symbolizes a cosmos in which there is an infinitely repeated interrelationship among all the members of the cosmos. This relationship is said to be one of simultaneous *mutual identity* and *mutual intercausality*.

(Cook 1977, 8)

When a Buddha is in a state of Nirvana with Remainder she no longer needs to *try* to act morally, morality now is effortless since she has the wisdom to know that what she does for someone else, she actually does for herself. She knows this because through wisdom she understands the mutual identity and mutual intercausality of reality. Thus, Nirvana is the extinction of unwholesome desire as well as wholesome desire to remain virtuous.

Buddhism goes further by describing the true nature of reality as sunyata. Sunyata, emptiness, is an important Buddhist concept that I draw upon in an attempt to describe the nature of the indescribable. Sunyata is notoriously difficult to define since the very thing you are trying to describe is empty and therefore indescribable. Sunyata as described by Masao Abe is not "Being or God, but also not emptiness as distinguished from somethingness or fullness" (Abe in Cobbs & Ives 2005, 27). It is emptiness, voidness, no-thingness. In its emptiness or no-thingness, sunyata has the characteristics of suchness. It is boundlessly open and inclusive of all things. The idea of sunyata and enlightenment are closely linked for to be enlightened is to *realise* Sunyata. Finally, we may say that Nirvana is a state of bliss that is the result of this realisation.

### 6.3 Convergences

It is significant to appreciate that Porete insists the noble soul returns to the no-thingness, from whence it came before it separated itself from this through will. Further to this, it is important to note the way in which Porete writes no-thingness. She does not say ‘nothing’ but rather no-thingness or no-thing. In chapter 11 the soul says, “There is no ‘less’, there is nothing but ‘all’: this I can well say, and I say the truth” (Porete 1999, 177). Is this terminology not similar to the central teaching of Sunyata in Buddhism? Sunyata could be considered an apophatic explanation for the nature of reality. Sunyata cannot be reduced to a single principle such as God, and even though Porete refers to a “union with God”, she also speaks of the soul coming from no-thingness and returning to no-thingness, furthermore, as with the concept of sunyata, Porete consistently speaks of God in an apophatic manner. Is it feasible to say then that she meant *not one thing but everything*? Just as Sunyata is *everything and not one thing*. By using the word ‘no-thing’, it appears that Porete in a manner de-personalises the nature of God, and in doing so aligns herself with Buddhist thinking. Porete denies the efficacy of the sacraments, rituals designed to honour Christ. The sacraments just like the virtues are an invalid route to God. If Porete truly believed in a God whom is pleased by certain actions and displeased by others, surely then she would be convinced of the need to praise him ritually. Yet, nowhere in her text does Porete allude to the requirement of any type of action as a path to God. Her entire creed serves as a foil to the very idea of these practices.

Furthermore, we notice a strong correlation between Margarite Porete’s thoughts on annihilation and Nirvana. Porete believes that, in a similar fashion to Nirvana with Remainder, the noble soul can become annihilated and reach union with God whilst still in physical form. In chapter 114 labelled *Whether any human creature can remain alive and be at the same time without herself*, Truth says,

Truth for her part says “Yes,” and Love explains clearly, who says that the Soul brought to Nothing is without herself when she has no feeling or work from nature, nor any from within, nor shame nor honor, nor any fear of anything which may happen, nor any affection for the divine goodness; and when she no longer knows where her will is housed, but is rather constantly without will. Then it is that she is brought to nothing, without herself, whatever it be that God endures from her. Then she does all things without herself. This is no wonder: she is no longer for herself, for she lives by the divine substance.

As with Buddhism, the practitioner may become enlightened and yet still walk the earthly plane.

### 6.4 Divergences

To argue that Marguerite Porete leans away from a paradigm of a personal God, could be considered a gross assumption since surely we cannot know this with certainty. Especially during a time of such strict adherence to traditional doctrine, it may seem unlikely that Porete went against these basic beliefs.

## 7. Routes to Enlightenment

### 7.1 Seven stages to Annihilation

In the *Mirror of Simple souls*, Margarite Porete offers to us an analysis of what she believes to be the seven states or steps toward ultimate union with God. Porete calls these seven states “states of being”. Although she also refers to them as steps, one should not confuse them for a method to attain ultimate annihilation of the soul. Instead, the seven states present to us what happens to the noble soul on its journey to obliteration. The Soul explains this to us in chapter 118 opening dialogue “the seven states which we call states of being, after Love has come and taken hold; and states of being they are. And they are the steps by which one climbs from the valley to the summit of the mountain, which is so isolated that one sees nothing there but God; and at each step is found the corresponding state of being” (1999, 375). Porete presents the seven states to the reader through the allegorical character of ‘The Soul’, with occasional explanatory interjections coming from ‘The Free Soul’. Throughout her book Porete describes the characteristics of the Soul that have divested themselves of will, however it is only in chapter 118 that she breaks down the mechanics of the process for us. Of course, according to Porete, only noble souls are capable of treading this path. In *Nobility and Annihilation*, Robinson reminds us that at the beginning of the *Mirror* Porete explains that the soul at the first step in the seven stages is touched by Gods’ grace, which allows them to continue on the path, guided by the divine grace of the Holy Spirit. Eventually the annihilated soul reaches stages five and six where the soul has achieved bliss in Love. The seventh and final stage remains reserved for the annihilated soul after death. Robinson explains that “the stages of perfection are purificatory and developmental, aimed at divesting the human being of worldly loves and willing” (2001, 38).

Overall, Robinson notes that all souls whether lost or noble, must “endure three deaths: to sin, nature and to the spirit” (2001, 38). It is in the first state that the soul dies to sin by committing their lives to the commandments, vowing to live their lives loving God and neighbours. Due to this commitment, God graces them. This stage is the foundation for all the stages to follow, a starting point that is lofty in its expectations. To be saved in the conventional manner, the soul must die this death to sin. Of course, a vow to adhere to the commandments takes a degree of will and so souls in this stage are ‘lost souls’, bound to suffer in this state. To this point, the Souls says:

And so this Soul considers and ponders with great fear that God has commanded her to love him with all her heart, and her neighbour also as herself. This seems to this Soul to be labor enough for her and for all that she is capable of doing; and it seems to her that if she were to live a thousand years, that it would take her all her might to keep and observe the commandments.

(1999, 376)

In the second state the soul dies the second death, that of nature. Here the soul must toil against their natural inclinations towards vices such as greed, pride and sloth. In this state the soul must “act beyond the counsels of men in mortifying nature, in despising riches, delights and honors, to achieve the perfection of the evangelical counsels of which Jesus Christ is the exemplar” (Porete 1999, 377). These souls have the arduous task of aiming for evangelical perfection, constantly endeavouring to live in imitation of Christ. Porete deems this path as misled and futile as nothing the soul does at this stage, will compensate for the sacrifice that Christ made.

At this stage particularly, we see again Porete's disdain for those lost souls bound to good works, the sacraments and the virtues. Of course it is not that Porete despises the virtues, for she considers them commendable and worthy of 'normal' salvation. However, it is essential that the soul is not a slave to the virtues; instead, the virtues must serve the soul. This is only possible with the noble soul who will ascend the ladder of the seven states. Souls that become annihilated have God working through them, without them. There is a strong sense of passivity here, for here the annihilated soul understands that the will must be given over to the grace of God. Robinson draws our attention to Porete's illustration of this through the story of the labourer "the wise labourer has plowed and hoed the earth and placed the wheat in it, all his power cannot do any more...and this you can see through the sense of nature" (Robinson citing Porete 2001, 40). The significance of this is, as a person there is only so much we can do to make something grow, in the end, it is in God's hands. The annihilated soul realises this and is able in the later states to abandon their will in favour of Gods.

The third stage is the state where the noble soul is released from the anxiety caused by the will to do good works of the previous states. Porete notes how the soul "loves nothing except works of goodness" (1999, 377), but because she loves her God so much "and [so] she does not know what to give to Love, unless she sacrifices this to him" (1999, 377). Porete tells us that this stage may be the most testing "for it is harder to conquer the works which the spirit wills than it is to conquer the body's will and to do the will of the spirit" (1999, 378). By releasing themselves from bondage to the Virtues, the soul makes space for Love. She now no longer lives a life of servitude and is able to enter what Robinson describes as the "treacherous fourth stage" (2001, 41). This state can be described as perfidious since it is easy for the soul to think they have now reached final bliss. The overwhelming love experienced by the soul in this state, deludes them. They become "inebriated" (1999, 379), intoxicated with Gods love. However, they are yet to achieve Porete's obliteration of will and so have not reached ultimate union. Robinson states that the soul "must die to the spirit, as she has already died to self (to sin and nature), in order to move beyond this deceptive fourth stage to the true life of the fifth and six stages" (2001, 41).

The fifth state is one where the soul realises the need to return the free will she has been blessed with by God, to Himself. The catalyst for this realisation and consequent release is what Porete describes as a "rapturous outpouring in the movement of Divine Light" (1999, 379). Let us remind ourselves here that the noble soul is the soul marked with the Love of the Trinity. Thus, the Divine Light finds the mark of itself within the noble soul and spreads within, as to show the noble soul that her will must "be returned to where it is not, whence it came, and where it must be" (Porete 1999, 379). Now the soul understands that to progress she must submit her will to God, this must be done if the soul is to finally reunite with her creator. Porete describes this handing over as a gift that allows her to enter a state of perfection. The soul no longer lives a life of discord and conflict, they become emptied of all will "And so she is no longer concerned about the strife of nature, for her will has been completely restored to the place from where it was taken and where, by right, it must be" (Porete 1999, 380). This soul is now returned to the nothingness from whence she came, to her pre-existent state.

Much of Porete's work in the *Mirror* is paradoxical, and the sixth state of being is an example of this duality. In the sixth state, the soul becomes so immersed in obliteration, so emptied of her will, that she no longer sees herself or any of existence. The only will present within her is that of Gods and so it is only through the will of God that she is able to see herself and creation.

In the sixth state, Porete describes the soul as ‘pure’ and ‘illuminated’. The soul cannot achieve a higher state of being than this until after death, when the soul is glorified in the seventh state. Porete offers no further information on the seventh state “of which we shall have no knowledge until our souls shall have left our bodies” (1999, 382).

## 7.2 The Eight Jhanas of Absorption

Jhana is a Pali word, derived from the verb ‘jhāyati,’ meaning to meditate. The jhanas have caused some disagreement within both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions, with each school of thought understanding the level of intensity of these meditative states slightly differently. Although all agree the jhanas are states of mental absorption, the extent to which this absorption takes hold is disagreed upon. The Visuddhimagga, the principle text for the Theravada tradition, describes the jhanas as being intense and prolonged states of mental absorption. Because of the intensity of this interpretation, the jhana states are all but inaccessible to the ordinary man. Zen Buddhism is an example of this. In fact, the word Zen is interchangeable with the word jhana. Zen Buddhists devote their lives to these states of mental immersion, removing themselves from worldly endeavours and practices with the intention of reaching enlightenment. Tibetan Buddhism goes further than the Zen in claiming that the mental absorption characteristic of the jhanas goes so far as to “withdrawal of the mind from the senses” ([The Jhanas-The Original Practice of Mindfulness and Insight 2011](#)).

For both traditions the jhanas do not include the meditative states that a novice would experience, which tend to be unstable in character with frequent interruptions from wandering thoughts and forgetfulness. Jhanas refer explicitly to a meditative state that is stable, focused and concentrated. What this means ultimately is that the Buddhist who is fully absorbed in the jhana, would most likely be a seasoned meditator.

Within the Buddhist tradition, we have four form jhanas and four formless jhanas. The formless jhanas are in fact variants on the fourth form jhana. The form jhanas are meditative states that remain connected to the material world in some sense, whilst the formless jhanas retain no such connection to the material realm. All Buddhist jhanas have four things in common. They are all wholesome in nature; they all have the presence of the jhana factors of joy (piti), unification of the mind (cittas’ ekaggata), equanimity (upekka) and happiness or pleasure (sukha). Furthermore, all the jhanas are meditative states that have a high level of absorption and unification of the mind.

Jhana one is a state characterised by a feelings of joy and happiness arising from withdrawal. In this jhana, the practitioner removes their attention from sensual pleasures and maintains focused and stable attention. This withdrawal encourages the positive emotions noted above. The meditator in this first state focuses their attention on an ‘object’. Master Culadasa explains this meditation object “is the sensation of the breath as experienced in the whole body simultaneously, arrived at through the practice of ‘Experiencing the Whole Body with the Breath’” ([The Jhanas-The Original Practice of Mindfulness and Insight 2011](#)). One can think of this Jhana as that of awareness, the meditator is aware of the joy and happiness they feel. Therefore, one could call this jhana a ‘lighter’ form of meditation. During this first jhana, the meditator will still have wandering ‘investigative’ thoughts that slowly dissipate as they move into the second jhana state.

The second Jhana is also characterised by feelings of joy and pleasure, however this time the feelings arise from concentration as opposed to withdrawal. Within the second jhana the meditator releases their sustained and directed attention as described above, however since at this stage the mind/body is still unable to abandon a “specific object of attention” there remains physical sensations. In saying this, there is, at this stage, a progression towards entering a state where unification of the mind arises. Apart from feelings of joy, the practitioner will be encompassed by inner confidence in the second jhana.

In the third Jhana, the meditator moves away from reliance on concentration and enters a state characterised by equanimity and happiness. Within this jhana, one has clear comprehension and mindfulness.

And as he remains thus mindful, ardent, and resolute, any memories and resolves related to the household life are abandoned, and with their abandoning his mind gathers, settles inwardly, grows unified and focused. This is how a monk develops mindfulness immersed in the body.

### [The Jhanas-The Original Practice of Mindfulness and Insight 2011](#)

The fourth jhana is the last ‘material’ Jhana, the last jhana with form. Within this state the meditator moves beyond feelings of pleasure and pain, furthermore she is aware of a subtle feeling of neither happiness nor unhappiness. This state has the quality of purity of mindfulness. Still within her body, she is able to abandon any thoughts relating to mundane reality. Immersed in her mindfulness, she settles in a state of unification of the mind. Overall, the four form jhanas allow the practitioner to gain insight and a certain degree of what Master Culadasa calls ‘illumination’.

As mentioned before, there are four formless Jhanas. Each of these is characterised by a direct experience of the condition that is distinctive to each state. The first state of the formless Jhana is characterised by the sense of infinite space. Here the practitioner moves beyond bodily sensations, any resistance falls away and she loses any sense of worldly diversity. The meditator no longer has the subtle feeling of neither happiness or unhappiness but gains a perception of the Infinite nature of Space. In the next formless jhana, the awareness of infinite space of the previous jhana disappears and is replaced by a deep sense of Infinite Consciousness. Similarly, in the next state, the awareness of Infinite Consciousness is replaced by the sense of No-Thingness. The meditator is permeated by a perception that there is nothing that really is. She becomes aware of No- Thingness. Lastly, we have the state of neither Perception nor Non-Perception. Unlike the previous formless jhanas, where throughout there has been perception, even if that perception is of no-thingness, now she remains conscious yet moves beyond perceiving no-thingness and remains in a state of neither perception nor non-perception. The four formless jhanas direct the meditator into a state of profound unity of mind. These jhana practices are extremely powerful and ultimately direct the expert meditator towards an enlightened state.

### 7.3 Convergences

The first commonality we find between Porete’s states of being and the jhanas is that for both, they are states of mind. Neither are steps, rather they are mental states that lead towards annihilation or enlightenment, which as discussed earlier are directly comparable. Jhana’s are considered to be absorptive states, and whilst Porete’s souls may not be in a typical meditative

state, to come to the realisations they do, as well as the spiritual path they tread, must take a degree of absorption. To sacrifice the will as well as denying their nature surely takes an intense amount of mindfulness and possibly meditative introspection. Furthermore, all jhanas are characterised by wholesome thoughts, as are Porete's states, which include a rejection of sin through commitment to God's commandments. Further to this, one could consider Porete's seven states of being as being purificatory in character. Throughout the seven states, the noble soul eliminates all desire, which corrupts and causes pain. By the end of the seven states, the noble soul is a pure, empty vessel with which God can now exercise his will. In a similar way, the jhanas also have a purificatory function. With each absorption, the Buddhist is further purified of worldly thoughts and desires. Eventually the jhana practitioner will reach a level of Neither Perception Nor Non-Perception, it must be then that this 'level' can be equated with a state of pure being. A pureness born of complete abdication of desire and attachment.

The four form jhanas can be contrasted to the first three states that Porete proposes. A summary of the first four jhanas would show a trend towards the elimination of desire, withdrawal from worldly life, unification of the mind and equanimity. Therefore, there is a move away from the meditator's natural inclination towards desire and preoccupation with the material world and this is replaced with mindfulness. Similarly, for Porete, within the first three states the soul retreats from their predisposition to sin, to the vices of nature and their preoccupation with the Virtues and sacraments. Additionally, there is a strong connection between Porete's last three states as compared to the four formless jhanas. In the *Mirror's* last three states of being, the noble soul dies the last death to spirit, finally reaching annihilation, purity and illumination. The noble soul no longer perceives reality personally; instead, she now functions completely *through* God's will. In a similar fashion, the four formless jhanas change to a more ethereal plane where the meditator moves from subtle perceptions of infinite space to infinite consciousness and after that no-thingness. Parallel to this, Porete uses the phrase no-thingness regularly in her text for the soul was born of it and it is where she will return. Therefore, for both traditions there is a final extinction of ignorance. Porete's noble soul are no longer ignorant of their true noble nature, they realise the no-thingness nature of reality and of God. They become illuminated to the deceptions of will/desire, which have trapped them in a cycle of anxiety and suffering. Working through the jhanas, the Buddhist also comes to understand the reality of infinite space, consciousness and no-thingness. Thus, the Buddhist is also released from ignorance. For both traditions, there is a succession of states that allow the person to gain insight, both lead to a state of utter unification be it with God or of the mind.

#### 7.4 Divergences

The major divergences between the jhanas and Porete's seven states is the concept of outside or 'other' intervention. Whilst the *Mirror* speaks of the soul being touched by the Grace of God in the first stage, as well as an outpouring of love from God in the fourth stage, the jhanas include no speak of intervention from any outside source; the Buddhist is thoroughly independent in this endeavour.

### 8. Other Worldly Assistance and Mediation

#### 8.1 Transference of Merit

Most schools of Buddhism consider the path to illumination as an entirely self-reliant undertaking. As discussed earlier in this paper, Buddhist do not believe in a God or saviour,

whom will aid us in our journey. However, there is a sect of Buddhism, which is one of the exceptions to the rule. In Pure Land Buddhism, humanity is no longer alone in their quest, they now have the help of an outside power, that of the Buddha Amitabha.

Pure Land practitioners are committed to helping all sentient beings achieve re-birth in the Pure Land. Once in this Pure Land, the Buddhist is guaranteed to reach Nirvana in this lifetime. Pure Landers understand that for the common person to become enlightened is a very difficult task due to the spiritually defunct nature of our lives. The constant worry and pain that humans experience makes the possibility of attaining Nirvana exceptionally challenging. However, through faith in Amitabha Buddha and the practice of chanting, even the spiritual layperson can become enlightened. The Buddha relayed the story of Bodhisattva Dharmakara whom recognised the difficulty for most people to become awakened; he therefore undertook to help humanity by endeavouring to complete forty-eight vows, which upon achievement would lead to the creation of the Pure Land. Bodhisattva Dharmakara became Buddha Amitabha once he had completed his vows and thus created the Pure Land of Bliss. One can think of the Pure Land as a springboard to Nirvana. Within this realm, the practitioner has a head start to enlightenment, as it is a place of purity and serenity. When in the Pure Land, it is far easier for even the layperson to reach Nirvana as they now are in an environment where worldly afflictions and distractions are not present. Further to this is the concept of ‘transference of merit’. Shi Wuling states that Amitabha Buddha “with his deeds, [he] creates the conditions for beings to accumulate merits” (2006, 4). It is this transference of merit, which is the source of ‘other-power’ in Pure Land Buddhism. Unlike other school of Buddhism where to reach enlightenment is an entirely independent path, Pure Landers believe that a practitioner may accumulate stocks of merit, which helps not only in their own journey, but also in that of other beings. The concept of transference of merit is illustrated in the following extract take from the book *Pure Land Zen, Zen Pure Land*.

We know, for example, that if there is a dark, heavy cloud above, the chances are that it will rain. But we also know that if a strong wind should blow, the cloud will be carried away somewhere else and we will not feel the rain. Similarly, the addition of one big factor can alter the whole course of karma...

(Lecture on Kuan Yin by Tech Eng Soon – Penang Buddhist Association, c. 1960. Pamphlet.)

It is imperative for the Pure Land practitioner to have faith in bodhisattva Dharmakara’s sacrifice. Faith, vows and practice are intrinsic to this Buddhist sect. The follower of this path must have faith in Amitabha’s vow to save all beings who recite his name. Vows means the determination to reach the Pure Land and finally practice refers to “reciting the Buddha’s name to the point where one’s Mind and that of Amitabha Buddha are in unison – i.e., to the point of singlemindedness. Samadhi and wisdom are then achieved” (Kuang, 2018)

Once we reach the Pure Land, it is up to us to finish the task as the Pure Land is merely a sphere where awakening becomes all that more accessible. Thus, Pure Land Buddhism combines the “other power” approach to enlightenment as well as “own power”.

## 8.2 The role of the Trinity and Christ

Joanne Robinson explains in her book that Porete relies on three key doctrines that guide her thoughts on the relationship between Creator and creature. Firstly, God is the entire “source

without source of the Trinity” (Robinson 2001, 52). God created all that we know, and yet remains distinct from creation. Secondly, God created creation from an overflowing of his love. Everything comes from nothing and souls with spiritual nobility shall return to this nothingness. Thirdly, Porete surpasses Christ as mediator between the soul and God. Instead, the Holy Spirit, as Gods goodness has created a direct line between the soul and re-union with God, furthermore, this link is reciprocal. Just as the Holy Spirit imprinted on the soul, so is the Holy Spirit imprinted upon. The stamp of Love on the soul acts as a bungee cord. Just as the thrill seeker jumps from the cliff, so too does the soul erroneously jump from a state of union with God. However just as the bungee, keeps the person from death, so too does the imprint of Love save the soul from everlasting isolation from God.

Yet, Porete does not completely abandon the role of Jesus as saviour. Robinson explains how for Porete, if Christ had not sacrificed himself “human beings could not even begin on the path” (2001, 67). Robinson goes on to explain

Fallen humanity derives its life form Jesus Christ, who ushered in a second “creation”; however, this life is specifically the life of the Virtues, lived by human beings on earth who will achieve salvation by Christ’s grace. That grace allows all human beings to achieve salvation despite Adam’s sin. The annihilated soul moves beyond even this grace. It recognises a different origin and thus has a different goal.

(2001, 67)

Thus, Porete’s doctrine most definitely includes the mediation of an ‘other source’, be that Jesus Christ for base souls, or the Love of the Holy Spirit that presents as a lifeline to a pre-existent state for noble souls.

### 8.3 Convergences

Thus it becomes clear that if we consider the *Mirror* from a Pure Land perspective, we see that both doctrines include some sort of ‘other power’ that ensures the soul reaches their goal. For a Pure Lander acts as their saviour, like Christ he sacrifices himself for humanity. Both Christ and Amitabha remain in suffering for the sake of others. Likewise, both traditions rely on faith. Pure landers have faith in Buddha Amitabha as a being who ‘saved’ them by completing his vows, which allowed for the creation of the Pure Land. Certainly, Porete’s misled souls have faith in Christ as their saviour, however more importantly to this study; the noble soul must have faith in their noble origin within the trinity, for if they did not, they would remain ever bound to the Virtues.

### 8.4 Divergences

The main difference between these schools of thought lies in the nature of the ‘other power’. For Porete, Christ is the incarnation of God, as is the Holy Spirit an expression of Gods goodness. Even though a Pure Lander may have faith in Buddha Amitabha, he is not revered as Godly. I remain unconvinced that Buddha truly believed that chanting Amitabha’s name would in some otherworldly Godly sense, save a human from suffering. Is it possible then that the Buddha recognised the human need for faith in a higher being, and so filled this spiritual gap with Buddha Amitabha? Thus by implementing a form of ‘higher being’ as a focal point, the layperson is able to focus their mind with more ease, than if they were ‘image-less’. Additionally, surely Buddha would have understood the through this faith the law of attraction will go to work, expediting the process. Is it further possible that the three cornerstones of Pure Land, (faith, vows and practice) is truly just a method to aid in attaining a meditative state

conducive to attaining enlightenment? Through the devoted chanting, the practitioner can achieve singlemindedness, a necessary mechanism for awakening. If we believe this to be true, then even for Pure Land Buddhism, the other worldly intervention is merely a focal point than a deity.

## 9. Conclusion

It is a privilege to have access to the mind of a female mystic of such brilliance, whom lived just over seven hundred years ago. Marguerite Porete stands out amongst her contemporaries for her unwillingness to express herself from a position of female weakness. Furthermore, she remained steadfast in her intention of disseminating her work. Even in the face of death, Marguerite Porete did not falter. She watched as her *Mirror* burned before her, a grim precursor of what was to become of her. Surely whilst watching the flames reduce her work to ashes, she would have anticipated her death, and yet she fearlessly refused to amend her 'heretical' ways. During a time where the Church held much power, Porete fearlessly rejects their doctrine, insisting that commitment to the Virtues, good works and the sacraments, as a way to God is misinformed. The continued desire to act morally 'for' God, keeps souls in a state of perpetual anxiety and suffering. Porete believes God to be the One, ground of all, and it is the goal of the simple soul, who lacks any duplicity, to re-unite with this oneness, this no-thingness. The key to this re-union is the annihilation of will. The Buddha too urged his disciples to end desire if they were to escape suffering; even the desire to act ethically is rejected, for a Buddhist must go beyond morality. Both Buddhist and the noble soul must go through some sort of meditative practice to attain their goal as well as both traditions rely on self-motivated salvation as well as employing faith and wisdom as aids to achieve liberation. Wisdom is the key to Nirvana as is it the key to God. Porete and Buddha rely on this wisdom as the vehicles that will awaken their disciples. Despite the many correlations, these traditions digress on one major point; for Porete believes that only a select group of humanity may escape suffering. In contrast, Buddhism has the characteristic of equality, where every human has equal opportunity to Nirvana.

Buddhism and Christianity seem worlds apart in ideology. From differing beliefs on the nature of humanity to the nature of God and the soul, and yet it is Marguerite Porete's book that unites these two great traditions. Porete is insightful in her understanding of Christianity, as she strides away from any sort of literal interpretation. Separated by almost two thousand years and many miles, Buddha and Porete echo many of the same sentiments. One can only imagine the conversation that would ensue if these two great thinkers could ignore the boundaries of life, death and time.

This short study touches on the main similarities and differences between Porete and Buddhism, however there is substantial research yet to be done. Buddhism is an extremely rich tradition with many intricacies and the same can be said for the content of the *Mirror*. A full length investigation and comparison is required to fully explore the depths of similarity between these two doctrines, in order to do them true justice. Regardless, it is my hope that this work will make a start in this direction.

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I Georgina Giorko declare that the work contained herewith is my own and that all relevant sources have been cited accordingly.

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