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DERONDA AND THE TIGRESS: BUDDHISM, COMPASSION, AND NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN GEORGE ELIOT’S DANIEL DERONDA

By Josh Moats

Many scholars have written about George Eliot’s treatment of Judaism in Daniel Deronda (hereafter DD), but no one has yet explored why George Eliot includes Buddhism in the novel. Eliot engages with Buddhism most explicitly in chapter thirty-seven when Mirah compares Deronda to the Buddha: ‘Mr Hans said yesterday that you thought so much of others you hardly wanted anything for yourself. He told us a wonderful story of Bouddha giving himself to the famished tigress to save her and her little ones from starving. And he said you were like Bouddha. That is what we all imagine of you’ (DD 399). Eliot probably draws her inspiration for this passage from a Buddhist legend in Eugene Burnouf’s 1844 text Introduction to Indian Buddhism:

A young Brahman who has retired into the depths of a forest to give himself over, in the interest of living beings … gives his body as food to a starving tigress that just gave birth to cubs. At the moment of committing this heroic sacrifice, he exclaims: ‘How true it is that I do not abandon life for kingship, or for the enjoyments of pleasure, or for the rank of Sakra, or for that of sovereign monarch, but rather to reach the supreme state of a perfectly accomplished buddha. (Burnouf 185-186)

The Brahman’s driving desire is not the political aspirations of an exclusive culture but rather the enactment of a universal compassion for all living things – a perfectly accomplished Buddha. Mirah attributes these qualities of renunciation and compassion to Deronda, but Deronda rejects the analogy. He contends that the Buddhist legend underestimates personal desire and that the myth ‘is like a passionate word … the exaggeration is a flash of fervour. It is an extreme image of what is happening every day – the transmutation of self’ (DD 400). Deronda dismisses the Buddhist legend, but he admits that the story captures a truth of everyday life: transmutation of the self. Eliot never elaborates on this cryptic exchange between Deronda and Mirah about Buddhism in DD, but she does reflect on Buddhism and compassion numerous times in her notes for the novel.

Between 1872 and 1874 George Eliot recorded notes about Buddhism for her upcoming novel Daniel Deronda in what are now called the Pforzheimer Notebooks (Notebooks 224). These notebooks reveal Eliot’s interest in Buddhism as an ethical system centered on compassion and inclusivism with multiple worldviews. It is important to remember that by all current biographical accounts, Eliot never interacted with Buddhists in an anthropological sense nor did she read primary Buddhist texts in Pali or Sanskrit. Eliot derived her knowledge about Buddhism from French and German linguists such as Eugene Burnouf and Max Mueller. Thus, Eliot’s Pforzheimer Notebooks often portray Buddhism in abstract, humanistic terms familiar to Eliot rather than parsing complex Buddhist theological questions, such as the nature of suffering and the Karmic cycle. Eliot focuses mostly on the Buddha as an exemplar of human virtue and not his celestial status.

Eliot in the Pforzheimer notebooks describes a ‘Bouddha’ as wise and awakened, and she asserts that the title derives from ‘boudh’, which means to know (Notebooks 403). Eliot does not reserve the status of Buddhahood for a particular historical figure but rather imagines Buddhahood to be an attainable quality for anyone with proper training. Eliot makes the
inclusivism of Buddhism explicit when she describes the Buddha as 'he who walks in the paths of his predecessors, the former Bouddhas' (Notebooks 403). The plurality of this description (paths, predecessors, Bouddhas) suggests that Buddhism is compatible with multiple cultures. The Buddha for Eliot also represents the power of humanity to develop an ethical system independent of any particular conception of divinity. Eliot implies this additional quality of the Buddha when she calls him ‘Sakyamouni’. Eliot’s spelling of ‘Bouddha’ and ‘Sakyamouni’ with an ‘ou’ in her notebooks and DD itself situates her within French scholarship, and we know that Eliot read Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism by Eugene Burnouf – the premier French scholar on Buddhism in the nineteenth century (Notebooks 276). Burnouf translates ‘Sakya’ to mean the warrior caste of India, and he translates ‘mouni’ to mean recluse (Burnouf 115). Thus, the connotations of ‘recluse of the warrior class’ imply a disociation from any particular socio-political order and establish introspection as the primary method of generating wisdom and cultivating compassion. Eliot’s emphasis on the Buddha as a man who achieves supreme wisdom through his own volition distinguishes Buddhism from the Judeo-Christian traditions of Europe in which God serves as the source of wisdom. Buddhist compassion for Eliot requires no divine mediation. The Buddha is the ‘human ideal’ (Notebooks 422), and his teachings about universal compassion are compatible with many other religious frameworks, including Judaism.

Eliot’s tigress metaphor and meditations about the Buddha in her Pforzheimer Notebooks imply that Buddhism probably contributed to the ethical paradigm of Daniel Deronda. Eliot never declared herself a Buddhist nor did she provide a rigorous apology for Buddhism, but if we situate her references to Buddhism in the context of a nineteenth century European fascination with Buddhism, we will find that Buddhism offers an ethical system that complements Eliot’s agnostic humanism and addresses her concerns about universal compassion in the context of an increasing fervour for nationalism in England. This essay will argue that Buddhism alleviates the tension between universal compassion and cultural solidarity in Eliot’s ethics by introducing renunciation as a technique to dissolve exclusivism while still cherishing cultural heritage. Furthermore, Buddhism provides a metaphysical paradigm in which true knowledge derives from introspection rather than an external deity – a paradigm that addresses Eliot’s critique of ‘private consolation’ in Judeo-Christian religions and focuses instead on religion as a vehicle for compassion. I will examine Eliot’s letters, ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ and chapters forty-two and fifty-nine of Daniel Deronda in light of these considerations about Buddhism and contend that Eliot’s apocalyptic vision in chapter fifty-nine of DD implies that although Eliot endorses Judaism as a national consciousness, she does not condone the exclusiveness inherent in the proto-Zionism of Mordecai and Deronda. Eliot applauds Jewish cultural heritage, but Deronda’s decision to abandon Gwendolen reflects for Eliot the dangers of a religious outlook that promotes cultural solidarity rather than universal compassion.

Buddhism has been recognized as an important cultural phenomenon for centuries by European thinkers as diverse as Marco Polo, Pierre Bayle, and Hegel, but until the mid-nineteenth century, Europeans predominantly categorized Buddhism as an Oriental superstition synonymous with Taoism and Confucianism (Clarke 74). The advent of British imperialism, however, forced Europeans to interact with Buddhists in a more substantial capacity, and the linguistic study of Sinhalese and Tibetan languages revealed that Buddhism was not an amorphous superstition but rather a distinct engagement with an intricate religious system.
This allure of exotic new languages and Buddhist culture drew Hungarian linguist Alexander Csoma to Tibet in 1823 (Lussier 101). Upon his arrival, Csoma befriended a venerated Buddhist monk named Sangye Puntsog and became the first European to access the entire Tibetan canon of Buddhist writings (Lussier 101). Csoma studied the Buddhist canon for a decade under the direction of Puntsog, and he began publishing in 1832 the first Tibetan-English dictionary as well as numerous translations of Tibetan works in the *Journal of the Asiatick Society of Bengal* (Lussier 103). The English imperial officer Brian Hodgson also published substantial translations of Buddhist texts in 1837 (Clarke 74). Eugene Burnouf then studied the writings of Csoma and Hodgson and wrote in 1844 *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* – a landmark work of scholarship that captivated many European intellectuals, including Schopenhauer and Wagner (Franklin 12). Schopenhauer then appended an extensive encomium for Buddhism in the supplement to the second edition of *The World as Will and Representation* in 1844 (Clarke 76), and Wagner, inspired by Schopenhauer and Burnouf, described himself as a Buddhist for an extended period of time and composed *Parsifal* – his final opera based on the Buddhist theme of renunciation that he explored in an unpublished opera (*The Victor*), which celebrated the life of the Buddha (Clarke 77). Thus, under the leadership of Burnouf and several titans of the European intelligentsia, Buddhism became a popular sensation by the end of the 1850s.

Victorians met the popularization of Buddhism with ambivalence. Many prominent scholars, such as Max Mueller, praised Buddhism for promoting universal compassion, but others, such as Marx, accused Buddhism of encouraging nihilism (Clarke 73). Despite the reservations of some critics, however, Buddhism found an attentive audience with the Victorians for several reasons. First, Buddhism appealed to many Victorians because the Buddhist split from Hinduism paralleled the Protestant split from the Catholic Church (Franklin 20). Both Protestants and Buddhists sought greater freedoms for impoverished social classes; both valued intent over doctrine; and both maintained less rigorous precepts for the laity and emphasized greater compatibility with different cultures. Many Victorians may have scoffed at the metaphysics of Buddhism, but they empathized with the religious politics of the Buddha. Similarly, the moral outlook of the historical Buddha enamoured Victorians (Franklin 20). The Buddha emphasized the renunciation of individual desire and the cultivation of universal compassion. The Buddha’s call for greater awareness of the social good, rather than private gain, would have appealed to many Victorians, as evidenced by the passage of numerous social reform acts in the mid-nineteenth century. Even outspoken critics of Buddhism, such as Jules Saint-Hilaire, who at one point denounces Buddhism as a nihilistic anathema (Saint-Hilaire 17), extolled the historical Buddha as an exemplar of virtue surpassed only by Jesus (Saint-Hilaire 14).

The final and perhaps most important quality of Buddhism that captivated Victorians was the secular foundation of its ethical system (Franklin 21). Victorians in the mid-nineteenth century emphasized the Buddha as a mortal man who discovered ideal morality through introspection rather than divine decree. Buddhism became for many Victorians a major world religion that practiced a respectable ethical system without necessitating a god as a source for those ethics. Asian Buddhists did often incorporate god(s) into their religious expression, but many Victorians purged the Asian gods from Buddhism and essentialized Buddhism into familiar European philosophies, such as humanism (Franklin 21). Thus, Buddhism became another secular alternative to the Judeo-Christian worldview.
Buddhism intrigued many Victorians with Protestant politics, universal compassion, and secular ethics, but many Europeans still considered Buddhism largely irrelevant to the modern intellectual landscape. A growing contingent of European intellectuals, however, began utilizing the new methods of Higher Criticism during the 1860s to speculate that Buddhism may have influenced the historical development of Christianity. For example, Louis Jacolliot claimed in *La Bible dans l’Inde* (1868) that Jesus studied Buddhism in India during his unaccounted years and that the Cult of Christ mirrors the Indian Cult of Krishna (Clarke 81). Similarly, Emile Burnouf claimed in his *The Science of Religion* (1872) that the ‘Spirit of Christ’ pre-dates Judaism (68) and that the concept of Christ may in fact originate from early Buddhist rituals regarding the god of the hearth, Agni (153). Some anti-Semitic intellectuals, such as Wagner and Friedrich Schlegel, used this possibility of Buddhism influencing Christianity to marginalize the impact of Judaism on the cultural history of Europe (Clarke 78). They reasoned that if Buddhism inspired Jesus to break from Jewish Law in the same way that the Buddha renounced Hinduism, then the Jews were an impediment to the ethical progress of humanity. Other proponents of Higher Criticism, such as Max Mueller, claimed that ‘religion’ is a mental faculty innate in all humans and that comparing religious expressions should help scholars understand connections in the human condition (‘Science of Religion’ 17). Mueller summarizes his call for inclusivism as ‘any one who knows one religion knows none’ (‘Science of Religion’ 16). Mueller would claim that discovering parallels between Christianity and Buddhism does not obviate the relationship between Judaism and Christianity but rather increases our knowledge of all three religions. Thus, Buddhism in England was transformed during the 1860s from an irrelevant philosophy into a possible progenitor for Christianity and the cultural history of Europe.

Although Eliot agreed that Buddhism inspired some cultural developments in Europe, she did not endorse the anti-Semitic conclusions drawn by some proponents of Higher Criticism. Eliot makes this sentiment most clear in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe on 29 October 1876:

> Towards the Hebrews we Western people ... have a peculiar debt. Can there be anything more disgusting than to hear people called ‘educated’ ... showing themselves empty of any real knowledge as to the relation of their own social and religious life to the history of [Judaism]? They hardly know Christ was a Jew. And I find men educated at Rugby supposing that Christ spoke Greek. (*Letters* VI: 302)

Eliot’s scoffing at the possible influence of Greek culture on Jesus challenges the claim by the aforementioned proponents of Higher Criticism that Jesus was merely a religious archetype inherited by the Greeks from the Aryan Buddhists. Judaism remains for Eliot the foundation of Christianity. In fact, Eliot claims in the same letter to Stowe that her primary inspiration for *Daniel Deronda* derives from a desire ‘to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to’ (*Letters* VI: 301).

Eliot’s remarks about the pre-eminence of Judaism in the development of Christianity seem to diminish the impact of Buddhism upon European culture. After all, Buddhism loses much of its cross-cultural significance if Jesus derived his ethics strictly from Judaism. Eliot, however, follows her sympathy for Judaism in the same letter to Stowe with one of her most important commentaries on compassion and multiple cultures:

> Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we
English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should care more to do ... than rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs. (Letters VI: 301)

Eliot prizes Judaism as an underappreciated foundation for European culture, but she also demonstrates a disdain for any exclusivism that precludes fellowship with other cultures. She makes explicit her condemnation of exclusivism in religion at the end of her letter to Stowe: ‘This inability to find interest in any form of life that is not clad in the same coat-tails and flounces as our own lies very close to the worst kind of irreligion.’ Thus, Eliot’s letter implies that true religion must exhibit a universal compassion that is compatible with multiple cultures. Therefore, Eliot reaffirms the pre-eminence of Judaism in the cultural history of Europe, but she also remains supportive of the cross-cultural conversation between Buddhism and Christianity.

Eliot’s denunciation of exclusivism in her October 1876 letter to Stowe suggests that she would despise nationalism, but her essay ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’ in Impressions of Theophrastus Such seems to celebrate nationalism, particularly Jewish nationalism. Eliot appears to endorse Jewish nationalism through the proxy of Theophrastus with passages such as: ‘I share the spirit of the Zealots. I take the spectacle of the Jewish people ... preferring death by starvation or sword ... as a sublime type of steadfastness’ (‘Hep!’ 150) and ‘Every Jew should be conscious that he is one of a multitude ... strong enough ... to constitute a new beneficent individuality among the nations, and, by confuting the traditions of scorn [non-Jewish religions], nobly avenge the wrongs done to their Fathers’ (‘Hep!’ 164). In fact, Theophrastus establishes nationalism as the core of all ethics when he claims that ‘The consciousness of having a native country ... that sense of special belonging ... is the root of human virtues, both public and private’ (‘Hep!’ 156). Thus, human virtue for Theophrastus seems to require a nationalism that excludes other cultures. Theophrastus attests to this necessity of separateness when he compares cosmopolitanism to cynicism: ‘If they [Jews] drop that separateness which is made their reproach, they may be in danger of lapsing into a cosmopolitan indifference equivalent to cynicism, and of missing that inward identification with nationality ... which might make some amends for their inherited privation’ (‘Hep!’ 155). Cosmopolitanism for Theophrastus therefore nullifies the solidarity necessary for an ethical society and instead teaches a superstition that disregards the cultural history crucial for human identity (‘Hep!’ 165).

Theophrastus’ celebration of nationalism seems to challenge Eliot’s endorsement of Buddhism and universal compassion. If the human Good derives from a cultural history distinct to a particular people, then an ethical person must necessarily exclude the cultures of others to avoid ‘cosmopolitan indifference’. But although Theophrastus may describe nationalism as an exclusive cultural heritage shared by a particular group of people, he also asserts that the greatest Good transcends these particularities of nationality:

Affection, intelligence, duty, radiate from a centre, and nature has decided that for us English folk that centre can be neither China nor Peru. Most of us feel this way unreflectingly ... what is wanting is, that we should recognize a corresponding attachment to nationality as legitimate in every other people, and understand that its
absence is a privation of the greatest good. (‘Hep!’ 147)

In fact, nationalism for Theophrastus does not presume a political nation at all but rather describes a unified culture, which, in the case of the Jews, overcomes national boundaries: ‘A people with oriental sunlight in their blood, yet capable of being everywhere acclimatized [Jews], have a force and toughness which enables them to carry off the best prizes’ (‘Hep!’ 157). A ‘nation’ for Theophrastus is not a geographical location but rather a national consciousness among a group of people despite cultural differences. Thus, political cosmopolitanism is the tragic loss of identity with this national consciousness, but universal compassion is the ability for compassion to transcend one’s own culture and ‘rouse imagination for those whose customs differ most from our own’. The Jews for Theophrastus are capable of balancing national consciousness and universal compassion by acclimatizing with other cultures while still maintaining their own ‘oriental sunlight’. But the ethical consequences of national consciousness and universal compassion extend beyond the Jews. Eliot’s choice of the phrasing ‘oriental sunlight’ rather than ‘Jewish sunlight’ also implies that other Asian belief systems, such as Buddhism, may share the same affinity for universal compassion.

George Eliot further explores this tension between national consciousness and universal compassion during chapter forty-two of Daniel Deronda. During this scene, Mordecai, Pash, and Gideon (all Jews) debate the merits of Jewish nationalism. Gideon begins the discussion by suggesting that Jews should revere their heritage while assimilating into the political communities of their neighbours:

I’m a rational Jew myself. I stand by my people as a sort of family relations, and I am for keeping up our worship in a rational way ... But I am for getting rid of all our superstitions and exclusiveness. There’s no reason now why we shouldn’t melt gradually into the populations we live among. That’s the order of the day in point of progress ... And I’m for the old maxim, ‘A man’s country is where he’s well off’. (DD 449-450)

Gideon’s love for his Jewish heritage and denunciation of Jewish exclusivism matches the balance of compassion and national consciousness that Eliot endorses in ‘The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!’.

Mordecai, however, dismisses Gideon’s rationality as ‘a charter of selfish ambition and rivalry in low greed’ and describes Gideon as ‘an alien in spirit, whatever he may be in form; he sucks the blood of mankind, he is not a man’ (DD 450). Mordecai claims that Gideon’s notion of change does not necessitate development and that assimilation is dishonourable to cultural heritage (DD 451). Gideon retorts that Judaism maintains too much emphasis on ‘superstitions’ such as the literal fulfilment of prophesies, and he asserts that if Jews ‘Prune [Judaism] of a few useless rites and literal interpretations ... our religion is the simplest of all religions, and makes no barrier, but a union, between us and the rest of the world’ (DD 455). Pash interjects at this point to compare an assimilated Judaism to a decoration or piece of rubbish (DD 456). He also adds: ‘I don’t see why our rubbish is to be held sacred any more than the rubbish of Brahmanism or Bouddhism’ (DD 456). Even though Eliot presents Pash’s words as ironic from the outset (DD 455), we should not underestimate Eliot’s decision to compare Judaism to Buddhism, given the aforementioned tigress legend and Eliot’s meditations about the Buddha in the Pforzheimer Notebooks. Eliot could have chosen during Pash’s dialogue to juxtapose Judaism with Christianity – the most familiar religion to her
readership – but her decision to have Pash equate Judaism with Buddhism implies that Judaism and Buddhism share some essential qualities, namely, the ability to unite the world with universal compassion. Thus, Eliot probably sympathizes with Gideon and Pash more than a cursory reading would suggest.

Mordecai, however, rejects the passive equality that Gideon and Pash endorse and insists that justice can only arise from the aggressive re-establishment of Israel as a political state:

The effect of [Jewish] separateness will not be completed and have its highest transformation unless our race takes on again the character of a nationality ... [Jewish] skirts [are] spread afar. They are torn and soiled ... but there is a jewelled breastplate ... We will lift up a standard, we will unite in a labor hard but glorious like that of Moses and Ezra ... There is store of wisdom among us to found a new Jewish polity ... And the world will gain as Israel gains'. (DD 456)

This proto-Zionism by Mordecai contradicts Eliot’s notion of cultural imagination in her aforementioned letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe. Mordecai is not interested in reflecting on a vision of other cultures that are most different from his own. He cares only for upgrading the political standing of his ethnic group. Nationalism does not represent for Mordecai the cerebral solidarity that Theophrastus endorses but rather the fervour for a political nationalism that will alienate the Jews from other cultures (‘Hep!’ 157). Mordecai claims that Israel will foster a community ‘in the van of the East which carries the culture and sympathies of every great nation in its bosom’ (DD 456), but Mordecai ignores the reality that his usurpation of foreign lands will encroach on the national consciousnesses of other cultures, which is a privation of the greatest good (‘Hep!’ 147). Eliot grants Mordecai narrative power in chapter forty-three of DD by giving him an abundance of speeches with powerful rhetorical effects, but Eliot’s subtle warnings about the dangers of political nationalism through Gideon, Theophrastus, and her letter to Stowe foreshadow the apocalypse that Eliot envisions when Deronda forsakes Gwendolen to pursue the re-establishment of Israel.

The repercussions of Mordecai’s proto-Zionism become most explicit in chapter sixty-nine when Deronda forsakes Gwendolen. In this section, Deronda tells Gwendolen, ‘the idea that I am possessed with is that of restoring a political existence to my people, making them a nation again ... That is a task which presents itself to me as a duty ... I may awaken a movement in other minds, such as has been awakened in my own’ (DD 688). Deronda’s claims seem to echo the egalitarian community that Mordecai envisions, but Deronda loses sight of his neighbour figuratively and literally when he decides to abandon Gwendolen. Eliot makes this abandonment clear in the next passage: ‘The world seemed getting larger around poor Gwendolen, and she the more solitary and helpless in the midst. The thought that [Deronda] might come back after going to the East sank before the bewildering vision of these wide-stretching purposes in which she felt herself reduced to a mere speck’ (DD 389). But Gwendolen’s alienation is not unique. Eliot in the same section paints an apocalyptic vision of the consequences of any religious outlook that abandons universal compassion and instead pursues exclusivist politics:

There comes a terrible moment to many souls when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind, which have lain aloof in newspapers and other neglected reading, enter like an earthquake into their own lives – when the slow urgency of growing
generations turns into the tread of an invading army or the dire clash of civil war, and grey fathers know nothing to seek for but the corpses of their blooming sons, and girls forget all vanity to make lint and bandages which may serve for the shattered limbs of their betrothed husbands. Then it is as if the Invisible Power that has been the object of lip-worship and lip-resignation became visible, according to the imagery of the Hebrew poet, making the flames his chariot and riding on the wings of the wind, till the mountains smoke and the plains shudder under the rolling, fiery visitation. Often the good cause seems to lie prostrate under the thunder of unrelenting force, the martyrs live reviled, they die, and no angel is seen holding forth the crown and the palm branch. Then it is that the submission of the soul to the Highest is tested, and even in the eyes of frivolity life looks out from the scene of human struggle with the awful face of duty, and a religion shows itself which is something else than a private consolation. (DD 689)

Deronda’s mission to re-establish Israel is the awful face of duty, and the consequences of his exclusivist ambitions are catastrophic. There is no glory in the vision that Eliot presents. Israel does not become a nexus for global peace and prosperity. The ‘Invisible Power’ that Deronda worships with ‘lip service’ becomes manifest as the slaughtering of generations, and no angel anoints a King or arrests the suffering. Religion is transformed from a private consolation into an engine of destruction, and the good cause – the beautiful cultural heritage of Judaism – becomes trampled by exclusivist ambitions. In the midst of this chaos, Eliot proclaims that submission of the soul to the Highest is most tested, but God only replies with the ‘awful face of duty’; and religion becomes ‘something else’ than a private consolation.

A charitable reading of the apocalyptic passage could claim that ‘something else’ refers to religion becoming a unifying force for a people in times of secular turmoil. Given this reading, Deronda’s re-establishment of Israel would promote the Good by granting greater solidarity among his people in times of turmoil. But Eliot describes Deronda’s duty as ‘awful’ rather than heroic, and the Invisible Power becomes manifest as a destructive chariot fashioned by a Hebrew poet. This Invisible Power is not a saviour but rather a catalyst for the destruction. The chariot fans the flames of war and does not rescue pious followers. Given this dire imagery from Eliot, it seems that this violent version of Judaism does not resonate with compassion.

In a letter to Mrs Henry Ponsonby on 10 December 10 1874, George Eliot maintains that the true source of morality in her novels is not God but rather a goodness that emanates from mankind:

My books, which have for their main bearing ... a conclusion without which I could not have cared to write any representation of human life – namely, that the fellowship between man and man ... is not dependent on conceptions of what is not man: and that the ideal God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human (i.e. exaltation of the human). (Letters VI: 98)

Eliot follows this passage in the same letter with an assertion that compassion toward our neighbours should be the greatest motivation for our actions:

I suppose that there is not a single man, or woman, who has not more or less need of that stoical resignation which is often a hidden heroism, or who, in considering his or her past history, is not aware that it has been cruelly affected by the ignorant or selfish action of some fellow-being in a more or less close relation of life. And to my mind, there can be no stronger motive [for compassion] ... to an energetic effort that the lives nearest to us
shall not suffer in a like manner from us. (Letters VI: 99)

For Eliot, the greatest good comes from exalting our neighbours over our personal ambitions and allowing a stoical resignation to guide our compassion. This idea of stoical resignation echoes the themes of renunciation and universal compassion in the Buddhist tigress legend.

As Mirah says in chapter thirty-seven of Daniel Deronda, nearly all the characters in the novel consider Deronda to be an exemplar of compassion, but as Deronda himself recognizes, he cannot renounce his own desires to match the compassion of the Buddha in the tigress legend (DD 399). Deronda insists on abandoning Gwendolen and re-establishing Israel. Gideon's vision of Judaism as a celebration of Jewish cultural heritage does not satisfy him. Eliot condemns intransigent beliefs like Deronda's that exalt the religious ambitions over compassion for neighbours who suffer. For Eliot, the only way to renounce these selfish ambitions is to prioritize human compassion over divine purpose. Eliot's Buddhist tigress metaphor offers an optimal blueprint for how renunciation may help overcome the paradox of cultural solidarity and universal compassion. The Brahmin in the legend celebrates his Buddhist cultural heritage by reflecting that he hopes someday to become a buddha, but he renounces his immediate desires in an act of compassion for those not even in his species. Eliot introduces this legend in chapter thirty-seven to preface the debate about nationalism between Gideon and Mordecai in chapter forty-two. The tigress legend reinforces Gideon's call for passive national consciousness and portends Deronda's eventual abandonment of Gwendolen and subsequent vision of apocalypse. Eliot's version of Buddhism is in a unique position to offer such mediation between Gideon and Mordecai for Judaism because it does not base its ethical foundation upon any divinity. Buddhism for Eliot extends beyond the 'clan' mentality and promotes an inclusivism that both honours cultural heritage and prioritizes universal compassion.

Works cited


