

Original Article

Gesù Abbandonato as a Hermeneutical Framework for Christian–Buddhist Dialogue in Thailand

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Abstract

Interreligious dialogue has become increasingly important in contemporary pluralistic societies, particularly in contexts where religious communities seek pathways toward mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. Despite growing scholarship on Chiara Lubich's spirituality and Christian–Buddhist dialogue, little research has examined Gesù Abbandonato (Jesus Forsaken) as a hermeneutical framework for interreligious encounter within the Thai context. This study investigated the theological significance of Gesù Abbandonato and explored its potential as a hermeneutical framework for dialogue between the Focolare Movement and Theravāda Buddhists in Thailand. Employing a systematic-theological and comparative methodology, the study analyzed Chiara Lubich's writings alongside key Theravāda Buddhist concepts, particularly *dukkha* (suffering), *anattā* (non-self), and *suññatā* (emptiness). The research examined points of convergence and divergence between Christian kenosis and Buddhist self-transcendence. The findings indicated that Gesù Abbandonato offers a theological lens through which Christians may engage Buddhists in a spirit of humility, vulnerability, and compassionate presence. While significant doctrinal differences remain, important ethical resonances emerge concerning suffering, compassion, self-emptying, and relational openness. Gesù Abbandonato provides a credible hermeneutical framework for transformative interfaith dialogue in Thailand. Fostering compassionate encounters without compromising theological identity, it contributes to contemporary

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discussions in comparative theology, interreligious dialogue, and peacebuilding.

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1. Introduction

The twenty-first century is marked by unprecedented religious pluralism, global interconnectedness, and increasing interaction among diverse religious traditions. While globalization has facilitated encounters among people of different faiths, it has also highlighted the need for theological frameworks that foster authentic dialogue without compromising religious identity. Consequently, contemporary theologians increasingly seek models of interreligious engagement that move beyond mere tolerance toward genuine mutual understanding, collaborative action, and transformative encounter (Cornille, 2022).

Within the Catholic tradition, the Second Vatican Council initiated a significant renewal of the Church's relationship with other religions. *Nostra Aetate* (1965) encouraged Christians to recognize and appreciate elements of truth and holiness present in other religious traditions, while subsequent ecclesial documents emphasized dialogue as an essential dimension of the Church's mission (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 1991). Pope Francis (2020) further developed this vision by advocating a culture of encounter grounded in fraternity, mutual respect, and social friendship. Nevertheless, significant theological questions remain regarding the foundations that make authentic interreligious dialogue possible. How can Christians engage religious others while maintaining fidelity to their own faith commitments? What spiritual disposition enables meaningful encounters across religious boundaries?

Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of developing dialogical frameworks that address religious diversity without reducing theological distinctiveness. Cornille (2022) argues that comparative theology advances through engagement with religious difference rather than through the pursuit of doctrinal uniformity. Likewise, Catalano (2021) highlights the role of interreligious dialogue in fostering fraternity, mutual understanding, and ecclesial openness in an increasingly pluralistic world. Similarly, Colombo (2025) describes dialogue as a communicative process rooted in relational openness and mutual understanding. These perspectives underscore the importance of theological models that facilitate encounter while respecting the integrity of distinct religious traditions.

The Thai context provides a particularly significant setting for such exploration. Thailand is a predominantly Theravāda Buddhist nation in which Christianity constitutes a small minority. Despite differences in religious worldview, Buddhist and Christian communities have coexisted for centuries and increasingly participate in educational, social, and humanitarian initiatives together. Moreover, Thai society is

shaped by cultural values such as *kreng jai* (consideration for others), *nam jai* (generosity and kindness), and a strong emphasis on social harmony. Beyond theoretical considerations, the present study emerges from the lived context of Christian–Buddhist encounter in Thailand. The Focolare Movement has engaged in various forms of dialogue with Theravāda Buddhist monks, scholars, students, and lay practitioners through educational initiatives, interreligious gatherings, shared reflections on suffering and compassion, and collaborative social activities. These experiences demonstrate that dialogue in Thailand often develops through relationships, shared practice, and mutual presence rather than formal theological debate. Such encounters provide an important practical context for exploring Gesù Abbandonato as a framework for interreligious dialogue and respectful relationships.

These values encourage attitudes of mutual respect, non-confrontation, and communal coexistence, creating a favorable context for interreligious encounter and dialogue. In this setting, approaches that emphasize humility, compassion, and relational engagement often resonate more deeply than those centered on doctrinal debate or persuasion. Contemporary research on Buddhist-background believers in Northeast Thailand suggests that religious conversion is often influenced by personal crises, attraction to the character and lifestyle of Christians, and perceived spiritual experiences, underscoring the importance of relational encounter and authentic witness in contexts of religious diversity (Puipim & Hilderbrand, 2024). Consequently, Thailand offers fertile ground for examining theological frameworks capable of sustaining meaningful interreligious dialogue.

One of the most original contributions to contemporary Catholic spirituality emerges from the life and thought of Chiara Lubich (1920–2008), founder of the Focolare Movement. During the devastation of World War II, Lubich developed a spirituality centered upon Jesus’ cry from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46). For Lubich, this moment of abandonment reveals the deepest expression of divine love and becomes the key to understanding Christian life, unity, and mission (Lubich, 2001, 2007).

The theology of Gesù Abbandonato occupies a central place in Lubich’s spiritual vision. Rather than interpreting Christ’s abandonment merely as an episode within the passion narrative, Lubich understood it as the culmination of divine self-emptying love (*kenosis*). In *Jesus Forsaken*, God enters fully into human suffering, alienation, and separation to transform them from within (Lubich, 2016). Consequently, Gesù Abbandonato functions not only as a Christological mystery but also as a spiritual and hermeneutical principle capable of illuminating diverse dimensions of theology and human experience.

Recent studies have begun to explore the broader implications of Lubich’s spirituality for intercultural and interreligious engagement. Kozubek (2022) demonstrates the educational significance of Lubich’s vision in contexts marked by conflict and cultural diversity, while Tobler (2022) highlights the mystical foundations of interreligious openness within Lubich’s *Paradise ’49* experience. These studies reveal the continuing relevance of Lubich’s thought for contemporary dialogue.

However, they stop short of systematically examining Gesù Abbandonato as a hermeneutical framework for the Christian–Buddhist encounter.

At the same time, Christian–Buddhist dialogue has generated a rich body of comparative theological scholarship. Scholars such as Fredericks (2021) and Habito (2023) have highlighted important avenues for dialogue and mutual learning between Christian and Buddhist traditions through comparative theological engagement and openness to religious difference. Within the broader Asian context, Chia (2021) argues that Asian theology is fundamentally shaped by engagement with the many cultures, many religions, and many poor of Asia, making interreligious dialogue an essential dimension of contextual theological reflection. Yet despite these advances, relatively little scholarship has placed Chiara Lubich's theology into sustained dialogue with Theravāda Buddhist perspectives.

This article addresses that gap by proposing Gesù Abbandonato as a hermeneutical framework for dialogue between the Focolare Movement and Theravāda Buddhists in Thailand. Rather than seeking doctrinal synthesis, the study explores how Lubich's theology of abandonment creates a dialogical space characterized by humility, vulnerability, compassion, and openness to the other. Particular attention is given to the relationship between Christian kenosis and Buddhist *suññatā* (emptiness), understood not as equivalent concepts but as distinct spiritual pathways that reveal important ethical and existential resonances.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative systematic-theological and comparative methodology to investigate the theological significance of Gesù Abbandonato (Jesus Forsaken) as a hermeneutical framework for interreligious dialogue between the Focolare Movement and Theravāda Buddhists in Thailand. The research is primarily text-based and relies on critical analysis of theological, philosophical, and interreligious sources.

The primary sources included selected writings of Chiara Lubich, particularly *The Cry of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken* (2001), *Essential Writings* (2007), and *Jesus Forsaken* (2016). These texts provide the theological foundation for understanding Lubich's interpretation of Jesus Forsaken as the fullest expression of divine love, self-emptying, and unity. The selection of textual materials was guided by their direct relevance to the study's central themes of suffering, self-emptying love, relationality, compassion, and dialogue. In Lubich's writings, passages were chosen when they explicitly addressed Gesù Abbandonato, kenosis, unity, or the encounter with the other. In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, texts and interpretations were selected for their discussion of *dukkha*, *anattā*, *suññatā*, compassion, and the transformation of suffering. Secondary sources consist of scholarly works on comparative theology, interreligious dialogue, Christian–Buddhist encounter, and the spirituality of the Focolare Movement. The selected texts were analyzed through close theological reading and thematic analysis. Particular attention was given to recurring themes

related to suffering, self-emptying, compassion, relationality, unity, and openness to the other. These themes were first examined within their respective religious contexts and then compared to identify points of convergence and divergence relevant to interreligious dialogue.

The comparative analysis does not seek to establish doctrinal equivalence between Christian and Buddhist concepts. Rather, it employs a comparative theological approach that examines points of convergence and divergence according to three criteria: (1) their understanding of suffering and the human condition, (2) their implications for self-transcendence and ethical transformation, and (3) their capacity to foster compassionate engagement with others. Accordingly, Christian kenosis and Buddhist *suññatā* are compared not as identical doctrines but as distinct religious responses to suffering, self-transcendence, and openness to the other.

The analytical process proceeds in three stages. First, the theological foundations of Gesù Abbandonato are examined within Scripture, Christian tradition, and Lubich's writings. Second, these theological insights are placed in dialogue with selected Theravāda Buddhist teachings. Third, the study develops a hermeneutical framework for interreligious dialogue based on the spirituality of Jesus Forsaken and evaluates its relevance for Christian–Buddhist relations in contemporary Thailand.

As a literature-based theological investigation, this study does not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or experimental procedures. Consequently, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

3. Results

3.1 Kenosis and Jesus Forsaken in Lubich's Thought

The theology of Gesù Abbandonato occupies a central place in the spirituality and thought of Chiara Lubich. Rooted in Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46), Lubich understood Jesus Forsaken as the deepest expression of divine love. In *The Cry of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken*, she describes Jesus Forsaken as "the key to unity" and the one who embraces every form of human suffering and division (Lubich, 2001). Similarly, in *Jesus Forsaken*, she presents Christ's abandonment as the moment in which divine love reaches its most radical expression by entering fully into human experiences of loneliness, suffering, and separation (Lubich, 2016). These texts reveal that, for Lubich, Jesus Forsaken is not merely a theological symbol but the interpretive center of Christian life and mission. For her, Jesus Forsaken represents the culmination of Christ's self-emptying (kenosis), whereby God enters completely into the depths of human suffering, loneliness, and alienation to redeem them from within.

The theological foundation of this interpretation can be found in the Pauline hymn of Philippians 2:5–11, where Christ "emptied himself" (*ekenōsen*) and took the form of a servant. Christian tradition has long understood this passage as expressing the humility and self-giving love of Christ. Lubich extends this understanding by

emphasizing that the deepest expression of Christ's kenosis occurs in the experience of abandonment on the cross. In *Jesus Forsaken*, she sees the point at which divine love embraces every form of human suffering and separation. This interpretation resonates with von Balthasar's (1990) reflection on the Paschal Mystery, in which Christ's abandonment reveals the radical depth of divine love and solidarity with humanity. For Balthasar, the mystery of Holy Saturday and the experience of forsakenness belong to the fullness of Christ's redemptive self-emptying. Although Lubich develops her spirituality from a distinct perspective, both emphasize that divine love is revealed most profoundly through Christ's willing embrace of suffering and abandonment.

According to Lubich, *Jesus Forsaken* reveals a God who does not remain distant from human pain but enters fully into it. The cry of abandonment becomes a sign of radical solidarity with humanity. For this reason, she regarded *Jesus Forsaken* as the key to understanding Christian life, spirituality, and mission. Rather than avoiding suffering, the believer is invited to recognize Christ's presence within experiences of loss, rejection, misunderstanding, and vulnerability. Such recognition transforms suffering from an obstacle into an opportunity for communion with God and others.

This spirituality also has a profoundly relational dimension. Lubich consistently linked *Jesus Forsaken* with the restoration of unity. She argued that every division—whether personal, social, cultural, or religious—finds its healing in the self-giving love revealed in Christ's abandonment. The willingness to embrace vulnerability, listen to others, and transcend self-interest becomes a path toward reconciliation and communion. Consequently, *Gesù Abbandonato* is not only a Christological concept but also a hermeneutical principle for interpreting human relationships and encounters with difference.

The theme of unity is particularly significant within the Focolare Movement. Inspired by Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21), Lubich understood unity as inseparable from the experience of abandonment. Genuine communion emerges when individuals move beyond self-centered concerns and embrace the perspective of the other. In this sense, *Jesus Forsaken* becomes both a spiritual model and a practical method for dialogue. Encounter with the other begins not from superiority or certainty but from humility, openness, and self-emptying love.

From this perspective, *Gesù Abbandonato* provides the Christian theological foundation for the present study. The emphasis on self-emptying love, solidarity with suffering, relational openness, and unity establishes important points of contact with other religious traditions while preserving the distinctiveness of Christian faith. These themes provide the basis for engaging Theravāda Buddhist understandings of suffering, self-transcendence, and compassion in the sections that follow.

3.2 Dukkha, Anattā, and Suññatā in Theravāda Buddhist Thought

Theravāda Buddhism begins its analysis of human existence with the recognition of *dukkha*, a term commonly translated as suffering, dissatisfaction, or

unsatisfactoriness. The First Noble Truth identifies *dukkha* as a fundamental characteristic of conditioned existence. Human beings experience suffering through physical pain, sickness, aging, death, separation from what is loved, association with what is disliked, and the frustration of desires. However, *dukkha* extends beyond particular experiences of suffering and refers more broadly to the instability and impermanence of all conditioned phenomena. According to Buddhist teaching, attachment to impermanent realities inevitably leads to dissatisfaction because nothing within conditioned existence can provide lasting fulfillment.

Closely related to *dukkha* is the doctrine of *anattā* (non-self), one of the central teachings of the Buddha. Theravāda Buddhism rejects the notion of a permanent, independent, and unchanging self. Instead, what is commonly regarded as the self is understood as a temporary aggregation of physical and mental processes. Attachment to the illusion of a fixed self generates craving, fear, and suffering. Liberation, therefore, requires a transformation of perception in which one recognizes the conditioned and interdependent nature of existence. The doctrine of *anattā* does not deny personal experience but challenges the tendency to absolutize individual identity and ego-centered concerns.

The concept of *suññatā* (emptiness) further develops this insight. In the Theravāda tradition, *suññatā* refers to the absence of an enduring self within phenomena and the recognition that all things exist in dependence upon causes and conditions.

The Thai Buddhist scholar Phra Payutto provides a particularly influential interpretation of these themes within contemporary Thai Buddhism. According to Payutto (2024), Buddhist practice seeks to overcome suffering by cultivating wisdom that recognizes the conditioned and interdependent nature of reality. Rather than emphasizing metaphysical speculation, Payutto presents *Buddhadhamma* as a practical path of transformation grounded in an understanding of causality, impermanence, and non-self. His interpretation highlights the ethical consequences of Buddhist insight, particularly the cultivation of compassion, responsibility, and harmonious relationships with others. Because Payutto's writings have significantly shaped contemporary Thai Buddhist thought, they provide an important contextual framework for understanding how concepts such as *dukkha*, *anattā*, and *suññatā* are interpreted within the Thai religious landscape.

Emptiness is not understood as nihilism or the denial of reality; rather, it points to freedom from attachment and distorted perception. Through insight into emptiness, practitioners learn to transcend self-centered grasping and cultivate wisdom, compassion, and inner freedom. As Payutto (2024) explains, Buddhist practice aims to overcome ignorance and attachment by understanding reality according to its true nature.

These teachings possess important ethical implications. An important ethical consequence of these teachings is the cultivation of *karuṇā* (compassion). In the Theravāda tradition, compassion is not merely an emotional response to suffering but a disciplined disposition rooted in wisdom and awareness of the interconnectedness of

all beings. Because suffering is recognized as a universal human reality, practitioners are called to respond with concern, kindness, and a commitment to the well-being of others. Karuṇā therefore serves as one of the principal ethical expressions of Buddhist spiritual practice and provides an important point of dialogue with Christian understandings of self-giving love and compassionate solidarity. Because attachment to self is regarded as a primary source of suffering, the cultivation of loving-kindness (mettā), generosity, and concern for the well-being of others becomes an essential dimension of Buddhist practice. Ethical transformation arises not from obedience to an external command but from insight into the interconnectedness of all beings. Recognition of interdependence encourages attitudes of humility, non-violence, and concern for the well-being of others.

Within the context of this study, dukkha, anattā, and suññatā are significant because they provide conceptual resources for engaging Christian theological reflections on suffering, self-emptying, and relational openness. While these Buddhist concepts emerge from a different religious and philosophical framework than Christian theology, they address many of the same existential questions concerning suffering, attachment, transformation, and compassionate engagement with others. Consequently, they provide an important foundation for the comparative dialogue developed in the following section.

3.3 Bringing Christian Kenosis and Buddhist Suññatā into Dialogue

A comparison of Lubich's understanding of Jesus Forsaken and Payutto's interpretation of Buddhaddhamma reveals both convergence and divergence. The analysis shows that both authors interpret suffering as a catalyst for transformation, yet they locate that transformation within fundamentally different theological horizons: Lubich within communion with God through Christ and Payutto within liberation from attachment through wisdom. Lubich views self-emptying as participation in divine love and communion with God, whereas Payutto understands liberation as freedom from attachment through wisdom and insight. Despite these differences, both perspectives challenge ego-centered existence and encourage compassionate engagement with others. The comparison, therefore, demonstrates not doctrinal equivalence but ethical resonance grounded in self-transcendence and concern for human suffering.

Having examined the theological foundations of Gesù Abbandonato and the Theravāda Buddhist concepts of dukkha, anattā, and suññatā, it is now possible to place the two traditions into constructive dialogue. The purpose of this comparison is not to establish doctrinal equivalence or to blur the distinctive identities of Christianity and Buddhism. Rather, the comparison seeks to identify areas of ethical and existential resonance that may foster deeper understanding and meaningful interreligious encounter.

One important point of convergence concerns the challenge to ego-centered existence. In Christian theology, kenosis refers to Christ's self-emptying love, most

fully revealed in Jesus forsaken on the cross. Through this act of self-giving, Christ transcends self-interest and opens a path toward communion with God and others. In Theravāda Buddhism, *suññatā* points to the absence of a permanent self and invites the practitioner to overcome attachment and self-centered grasping. Although these concepts arise from different theological and philosophical frameworks, both encourage a movement beyond ego-centered existence toward a more relational and compassionate way of life. Christian kenosis may also be understood as a movement of self-transcendence grounded in God's self-communication to humanity (Rahner, 1978).

A second area of dialogue concerns the interpretation of suffering. In Lubich's theology, Jesus Forsaken reveals God's solidarity with humanity in the midst of suffering and abandonment. Suffering is not sought for its own sake but can become a place of encounter with divine love and a source of transformation. In Theravāda Buddhism, *dukkha* is recognized as a universal characteristic of conditioned existence and serves as the starting point for spiritual awakening. While Christianity understands suffering within the context of divine redemption and Buddhism approaches it through the path of liberation from attachment, both traditions take suffering seriously and seek a transformative response rather than avoidance or denial.

A third point of resonance emerges in the area of compassion and relational openness. Lubich's spirituality emphasizes loving the other, embracing difference, and building unity through self-giving love. Similarly, Buddhist practice cultivates compassion (*karuṇā*) and loving-kindness (*mettā*) toward all beings. In both traditions, spiritual growth is inseparable from concern for others. Compassion is not merely an individual virtue but a way of engaging the world and responding to human suffering. Despite these convergences, important doctrinal differences remain between the two traditions. Christian kenosis is rooted in the belief that God freely enters human history through the incarnation of Jesus Christ and reveals divine love through self-emptying sacrifice. The movement of kenosis is therefore relational and theocentric, directed toward communion with God and neighbor. By contrast, Buddhist *suññatā* arises from insight into the impermanent and conditioned nature of reality and does not presuppose the existence of a creator God. Rather than emphasizing a relationship with a divine being, it seeks liberation through wisdom and freedom from attachment.

Differences also emerge in their understanding of selfhood. Christianity affirms the enduring dignity and uniqueness of the human person, even while calling believers to self-giving love and self-transcendence. Theravāda Buddhism, through the doctrine of *anattā*, challenges the notion of a permanent and independent self, emphasizing the conditioned and impermanent nature of personal identity. Although both traditions critique ego-centered existence, they do so from distinct anthropological foundations.

Furthermore, Christian and Buddhist perspectives differ in their ultimate soteriological goals. Christian salvation is understood as participation in the life of God through Christ, culminating in communion with God and the fulfillment of creation. In Theravāda Buddhism, liberation (*nibbāna*) is understood as freedom from suffering and the cessation of craving through awakening and insight. Consequently,

similarities between kenosis and *suññatā* should not be interpreted as doctrinal equivalence. Rather, the comparison is valuable because it reveals ethical and existential resonances concerning suffering, compassion, self-transcendence, and openness to others while preserving the distinctive theological identities of both traditions.

Nevertheless, the comparison demonstrates that meaningful dialogue does not require doctrinal agreement. Instead, dialogue may proceed through shared human experiences of suffering, vulnerability, compassion, and the search for transformation. Within the Thai context, where Buddhist and Christian communities live alongside one another and frequently collaborate in educational, social, and humanitarian initiatives, these ethical resonances provide a valuable basis for mutual understanding and cooperation.

From this perspective, *Gesù Abbandonato* may be understood as a hermeneutical framework that enables Christians to engage Buddhists with humility, openness, and respect. Rather than approaching dialogue from a position of superiority, the spirituality of Jesus Forsaken invites Christians to enter into the experiences of others, listen attentively, and seek points of encounter amid difference. In this way, the theology of Jesus Forsaken offers a constructive foundation for Christian–Buddhist dialogue while preserving the distinctive identities of both traditions.

3.4 Summary of Findings

The theological and comparative analysis yielded several significant findings. First, the study found that Chiara Lubich's theology of *Gesù Abbandonato* is rooted in the biblical narrative of Christ's abandonment on the cross and develops this event into a spirituality of self-emptying love, unity, and relational openness. The analysis further demonstrated that Jesus Forsaken occupies a central place within Lubich's theological vision as the fullest revelation of divine love expressed through kenosis and solidarity with human suffering.

Second, the comparative investigation identified important points of resonance between Christian and Theravāda Buddhist traditions. While Christian kenosis and Buddhist *suññatā* emerge from distinct theological and philosophical foundations, both challenge self-centeredness and encourage openness to others. Likewise, Christian reflections on redemptive suffering and Buddhist understandings of *dukkha* reveal shared concerns regarding the transformative response to suffering, although they differ in their ultimate soteriological interpretations. The comparison of Christian self-giving love and Buddhist *anattā* further highlighted convergences in self-transcendence while preserving significant doctrinal differences.

Third, the findings indicate that *Gesù Abbandonato* offers a theological lens through which Christians may engage Buddhists in a spirit of humility, vulnerability, and compassionate presence. While significant doctrinal differences remain, important ethical resonances emerge concerning suffering, compassion, self-emptying, and relational openness. These findings suggest that the spirituality of Jesus Forsaken can

function as a constructive hermeneutical framework for interreligious dialogue without requiring doctrinal synthesis or the reduction of religious distinctiveness.

Collectively, these findings indicate that the spirituality of Jesus Forsaken possesses significant potential as a theological resource for Christian–Buddhist encounter, particularly in contexts characterized by religious plurality and the shared search for peace and human flourishing.

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpreting Gesù Abbandonato as a Hermeneutical Framework for Dialogue

This study sought to answer the following research question: How can Gesù Abbandonato function as a hermeneutical framework for dialogue between the Focolare Movement and Theravāda Buddhists in Thailand? The findings suggest that Gesù Abbandonato provides a credible theological framework for interreligious encounter by fostering a spirituality of humility, vulnerability, compassionate presence, and openness to the religious other. Rather than encouraging doctrinal synthesis, the framework enables constructive engagement while preserving the theological integrity of both Christian and Buddhist traditions. The relevance of this framework within Thailand is further supported by the work of the influential Thai Buddhist scholar Phra Payutto (2024), who emphasizes ethical transformation, compassion, wisdom, and harmonious social relationships as essential dimensions of religious practice.

The practical relevance of this framework is evident in ongoing experiences of Christian–Buddhist encounter within the Thai context. The Focolare Movement in Thailand has engaged in dialogue with Theravāda Buddhist monks, scholars, students, and lay practitioners through educational initiatives, interreligious gatherings, shared reflections on suffering and compassion, and collaborative social activities. These encounters are typically characterized by mutual listening, friendship, hospitality, and shared ethical concerns rather than doctrinal debate. The experience of dialogue with Buddhist communities demonstrates that meaningful interreligious engagement in Thailand frequently develops through relationships of trust, compassionate presence, and openness to the other. In such contexts, the spirituality of Gesù Abbandonato provides a theological disposition that encourages Christians to approach Buddhists with humility, receptivity, and a willingness to learn while remaining faithful to their own religious identity. Although emerging from different theological foundations, these concerns resonate with Lubich's emphasis on self-emptying love, unity, and relational openness. Such ethical convergences provide fertile ground for Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Thailand while preserving important doctrinal distinctions between the two traditions.

The results demonstrate that Chiara Lubich's theology of Jesus Forsaken extends beyond Christological reflection and possesses significant implications for interreligious dialogue. The theological analysis revealed that Christ's abandonment

represents the culmination of divine kenosis and the fullest expression of self-giving love. The comparative analysis further identified important ethical and existential resonances between Christian kenosis and Theravāda Buddhist concepts such as dukkha, anattā, and suññatā. Although these concepts arise from different theological and philosophical foundations, both traditions challenge ego-centered existence and encourage compassion, self-transcendence, and relational openness.

These findings support the study's central argument that Gesù Abbandonato can serve as a hermeneutical lens through which Christians engage with Buddhists in a spirit of encounter rather than competition. The findings therefore support the study's original proposition that the spirituality of Jesus Forsaken offers a meaningful theological basis for Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Thailand (see Figure 1).

The proposed hermeneutical framework is summarized in Figure 1. The model places Christian themes of kenosis, crucified unity, and ecclesial communion in reciprocal dialogue with the Theravāda Buddhist concepts of suññatā (emptiness), anattā (non-self), and karuṇā (compassion). Each component of the framework was selected because it emerged from the comparative theological analysis conducted in this study. On the Christian side, kenosis represents the self-emptying love revealed in Jesus Forsaken; crucified unity reflects Lubich's conviction that unity is born through the embrace of suffering and division; and ecclesial communion expresses the relational and communal dimensions of the spirituality of unity. On the Theravāda Buddhist side, suññatā was selected because of its emphasis on freedom from self-centered attachment, anattā because it challenges fixed notions of selfhood and encourages self-transcendence, and karuṇā because it represents the ethical expression of Buddhist compassion toward all beings. These concepts were chosen not because they are doctrinally equivalent but because they represent significant points of encounter concerning suffering, self-transcendence, relational openness, and compassionate engagement. The framework, therefore, illustrates how distinct theological and philosophical traditions may enter into constructive dialogue while maintaining their respective identities. The bidirectional relationships indicate mutual engagement, learning, and reflection while preserving the distinct theological identities of both traditions. At the center of the framework stands Gesù Abbandonato (Jesus Forsaken), which functions as the hermeneutical lens through which these points of encounter are interpreted. Through this dialogical process, the framework fosters humility, compassion, self-transcendence, and openness to the religious other, ultimately contributing to Christian–Buddhist dialogue and shared interfaith praxis.

While the present framework emerges from Christian theological reflection, its dialogical significance lies not in doctrinal convergence but in its capacity to foster mutual understanding and ethical collaboration across religious boundaries.

4.2 Relationship to Previous Scholarship

The findings of this study resonate with Panikkar's (1999) understanding of dialogue as a transformative encounter through which engagement with the religious

other deepens one's own religious identity. Cornille (2008) likewise observes that authentic interreligious dialogue requires both openness to the religious other and commitment to one's own religious tradition. This balance between dialogue and identity is reflected in the present study's proposal of Gesù Abbandonato as a framework for Christian–Buddhist encounter. Recent scholarship has highlighted the broader significance of Lubich's thought for intercultural and interreligious engagement. Kozubek (2022) emphasizes the educational and intercultural relevance of Lubich's spirituality in contexts marked by diversity and conflict, while Tobler (2022) identifies the mystical foundations of her openness to religious others. These studies suggest that the spirituality of Jesus Forsaken possesses resources that extend beyond intra-Christian concerns and may contribute meaningfully to contemporary interreligious dialogue.

The findings are consistent with recent developments in comparative theology and interreligious studies. Cornille (2022) argues that authentic comparative theology requires engagement with religious difference rather than the pursuit of doctrinal uniformity. The present study supports this position by demonstrating that meaningful dialogue can emerge without theological relativism or the reduction of religious distinctiveness. Likewise, Fredericks (2021) highlights the significance of Buddhist–Christian dialogue in the post–Nostra Aetate period and the importance of engaging religious difference in contemporary interreligious relations. The present study extends this insight by proposing Gesù Abbandonato as a theological framework for Christian–Buddhist encounter in Thailand.

The findings also reinforce the work of Habito (2023), who argues that comparative theology should be understood as a central task of Christian theology in an increasingly multifaith world. Rather than seeking to resolve religious differences through exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist frameworks alone, Habito proposes that engagement with religious others can deepen Christian theological understanding while fostering humility and openness. Furthermore, by situating this dialogue within the lived context of Christian–Buddhist relations in Thailand, the study demonstrates the importance of contextual sensitivity and concrete interreligious encounter in comparative theological reflection.

Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on education, spirituality, or mystical experience, the present study advances the discussion by systematically developing Gesù Abbandonato as a hermeneutical framework for Christian–Buddhist dialogue within the Thai context.

4.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theologically, this study contributes to contemporary discussions in comparative theology by demonstrating that interreligious dialogue may be grounded in a specifically Christological framework without becoming exclusivist. Gesù Abbandonato provides a model of engagement rooted in Christian identity while remaining genuinely open to learning from religious others. The study therefore

contributes to ongoing debates concerning the relationship between confessional commitment and interreligious openness.

Practically, the findings have implications for interfaith relations, peacebuilding, education, and pastoral ministry in Thailand. The spirituality of Jesus Forsaken encourages Christians to approach Buddhists through relationship, listening, and compassionate presence rather than confrontation. Such an approach aligns with Thai cultural values, emphasizing harmony, respect, and social cohesion. The framework may therefore serve as a resource for Catholic schools, ecclesial movements, parish ministries, and interreligious organizations seeking to strengthen Christian–Buddhist relations.

More specifically, the proposed framework may be applied in several contexts within Thailand.

First, the framework may contribute to educational initiatives that bring together Christians and Buddhists for shared learning and dialogue. Schools, universities, and formation programs may employ themes such as suffering, compassion, self-transcendence, and relational openness as common points of reflection, enabling participants to engage one another respectfully while remaining rooted in their respective traditions.

Second, the framework has implications for pastoral and spiritual formation within Christian communities. By emphasizing humility, listening, and compassionate presence, the spirituality of Gesù Abbandonato can help prepare Christians for constructive engagement with Buddhist neighbors. Rather than approaching dialogue primarily through apologetics or doctrinal debate, Christians are encouraged to cultivate attitudes of openness, friendship, and mutual respect.

Third, the framework may support peacebuilding and social cohesion in religiously plural contexts. In Thailand, where Buddhists and Christians frequently cooperate in educational, charitable, and community-based initiatives, shared commitments to compassion and service provide opportunities for collaborative action. The ethical resonances identified in this study can encourage joint responses to social concerns such as poverty, environmental challenges, community development, and care for vulnerable populations.

Finally, the framework may enrich interfaith activities organized by movements and institutions committed to dialogue. Within the experience of the Focolare Movement in Thailand, Christian–Buddhist encounters often develop through friendship, shared reflection, service projects, and moments of silence and contemplation. The spirituality of Jesus Forsaken offers a theological foundation for such encounters by encouraging participants to approach one another with humility, openness, and a willingness to learn from the religious other while remaining faithful to their own traditions.

While Christianity and Buddhism interpret suffering differently, both traditions recognize its transformative potential and encourage compassionate responses to it. This shared concern offers practical opportunities for collaboration in areas such as

education, social development, healthcare, environmental stewardship, and peacebuilding.

4.4 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based exclusively on textual and theological analysis and does not include empirical research involving participants from either the Focolare Movement or Theravāda Buddhist communities. Consequently, the findings remain primarily theological and conceptual, although they are informed by the broader context of Christian–Buddhist encounter in Thailand. Further research is needed to explore how the proposed framework functions within lived interreligious experience.

Second, the study focuses specifically on Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand and therefore does not address the diversity of Buddhist traditions found elsewhere in Asia. The conclusions should not automatically be generalized to Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, or other Buddhist contexts.

Third, the comparative analysis concentrates on selected concepts—kenosis, dukkha, anattā, and suññatā—and does not attempt a comprehensive comparison of Christian and Buddhist theological systems. Additional themes such as soteriology, ethics, ritual practice, and spirituality warrant further investigation.

4.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore the practical application of Gesù Abbandonato within actual Christian–Buddhist dialogue initiatives in Thailand. Empirical studies involving members of the Focolare Movement, Buddhist monastics, educators, and lay practitioners could provide valuable insights into how this framework functions in lived interreligious encounter.

Further comparative studies may also examine how Gesù Abbandonato relates to other Buddhist traditions beyond Theravāda Buddhism. Comparative engagement with Mahāyāna concepts of compassion, bodhisattva spirituality, and emptiness could enrich the dialogue and expand the applicability of the framework.

Additional research may investigate the role of Gesù Abbandonato in interreligious peacebuilding, conflict transformation, environmental ethics, and educational practice. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of how theological reflection can inform constructive engagement within increasingly pluralistic societies.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that Gesù Abbandonato provides a distinctive and constructive theological framework for Christian–Buddhist dialogue. By grounding interreligious encounter in humility, compassion, self-giving love, and openness to the other, the spirituality of Jesus Forsaken offers a pathway toward deeper mutual understanding, peaceful coexistence, and authentic human solidarity in contemporary Thailand and beyond.

5. Conclusion

This study has argued that Gesù Abbandonato (Jesus Forsaken) may serve as a constructive hermeneutical framework for dialogue between the Focolare Movement and Theravāda Buddhists in Thailand. Through a comparative theological analysis of Chiara Lubich's spirituality and selected Theravāda Buddhist concepts, the study identified significant points of ethical and existential resonance concerning suffering, self-transcendence, compassion, and openness to the other. While important doctrinal differences remain, the findings suggest that meaningful dialogue can emerge through shared human experiences without requiring doctrinal synthesis or the loss of religious identity.

The study contributes to contemporary discussions in comparative theology and interreligious dialogue by proposing a specifically Christological framework grounded in the spirituality of Jesus Forsaken. It further highlights the relevance of this framework within the Thai context, where Christian–Buddhist relations frequently develop through friendship, education, shared service, and everyday encounters. In this setting, the spirituality of Gesù Abbandonato offers a theological basis for dialogue characterized by humility, compassionate presence, and mutual respect.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. As a literature-based theological investigation, the study remains primarily conceptual and does not include empirical research involving participants from either the Focolare Movement or Theravāda Buddhist communities. Future research should therefore examine how the proposed framework functions within actual Christian–Buddhist dialogue initiatives in Thailand. Such studies may contribute to a deeper understanding of how theological reflection can support interreligious encounter, peacebuilding, and collaborative engagement in religiously plural societies.



Figure 1. Gesù Abbandonato as a hermeneutical framework for Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Thailand.

Note. The figure illustrates the proposed hermeneutical framework developed in this study. Gesù Abbandonato functions as the interpretive center through which Christian themes of kenosis, crucified unity, and ecclesial communion enter into dialogue with Theravāda Buddhist concepts of suññatā, anattā, and karuṇā, leading toward shared praxis and interfaith engagement.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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