

The Mysticism of World Faiths in Merton's Inner Experience

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THOMAS MERTON WAS FASCINATED WITH RELIGIONS, and enthusiastically explored the catholicity of the ancient Asian, Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist traditions, as well as Islam, Judaism and Hinduism, so that he could be a better Christian monk. Merton came to approach interfaith dialogue primarily from an experiential perspective, focusing on the inner experience of God beyond the doctrines that characterize the various faith traditions. He acknowledged these fundamental doctrinal differences while affirming the deeper truths that bound them together. Merton's artistic spirit, his intellect, his insatiable curiosity, and his wisdom profoundly influenced his own intimate relationship with the infinite God dwelling within him. Ironically, perhaps, it was only as he became more and more immersed in his own spiritual and monastic heritage that he found himself encountering others from widely differing traditions—encounters in what he came to call 'the hidden ground of love.'

For most of his adult life, he engaged in sustained correspondence with people committed to other religious traditions, eager to glean understanding of the truth of these traditions so as to deepen his own faith. Among his many contacts Merton corresponded with renowned Zen scholar and practitioner, Dr Daisetz T. Suzuki from 1959 until Suzuki's death in 1966; he corresponded with John C. H. Wu, the Christian Asian Studies expert who taught at Seton Hall University in New Jersey; he met and conversed with the Dalai Lama three times during his visit to Asia in 1968, and corresponded with Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk from Vietnam, as well as other Eastern monks and religious; he explored Islam and Sufism through correspondence with Abdul Aziz who lived in Karachi, Pakistan; he expressed a long-held admiration for Mahatma Gandhi in his essay, 'Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant'; and he worked towards rapprochement between Christians and Jews with Rabbi Abraham Heschel in the 1960s.¹

Contributing to his enormous understanding of other faith traditions, and his ability to converse intelligently and openly with others about their faith, was his extensive, methodical and in-depth study of world religions. Merton's engagement in inter-religious dialogue was startling for his time, and something to emulate today if we are to have peace and healing in our world. How rare that a Catholic monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani – someone devoted to God in a traditional Christian monastic setting – would be receptive to exploring the faith of other traditions while remaining firmly rooted in his own! Even more startling perhaps is how this openness to other faith traditions marks such a huge leap from the newly converted and narrow-minded Thomas Merton who entered Gethsemani in 1941, whose Christian exclusivist ideas are reflected in *The Seven Storey Mountain* where he dismissed Oriental mysticism as no more than techniques for relaxation.

Merton's attraction to Asia developed gradually. The first concrete evidence of it dates back to November 1937, when he was influenced by the writings of Aldous Huxley. Since the 1930s, Huxley had been attracted to mysticism and investigated Christian as well as Hindu and Buddhist mysticism. His newly acquired mystical views found expression in *Ends and Means*, which Merton read at the suggestion of Robert Lax, a fellow student at Columbia University.

Huxley not only aroused in Merton an interest in mysticism but also drew his attention to similarities in the experiences of Eastern and Western mystics. In particular, Huxley pointed out similarities in the view of the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and of Meister Eckhart with those of the Buddha and India's foremost philosopher, Sankara. Merton was drawn to the mystical emphasis of Asian religions, the importance placed upon contemplation and withdrawal from the world. He was deeply impressed by Huxley's contention that the practice of mystical technique could bring about peace, toleration and charity, ideals that he consistently cherished.

However, it was the Hindu monk, M. B. Brahmachari, whom Merton met during his student days at Columbia University, who encouraged him to read the classics of Catholic spirituality for answers to ultimate questions. Writing in retrospect in 1964, in tribute to Brahmachari's sixtieth birthday, Merton commented that his encounter with Brahmachari had occurred at a crucial point in his life and had contributed to his

eventual decision to become a monk.² He had taught him respect and a true love for persons of other cultures:

To love one's fellow man consists not in depriving him of his own proper truth in order to give him yours, but rather to enable him to understand his own truth better in the light of yours.³

Around the time of his meeting with Bramachari, Merton became acquainted with the writings of another Hindu, Ananda Coomaraswamy, whose ideas greatly affected Merton's intellectual development, in particular his outlook on art and civilization. Merton came to regard Coomaraswamy as a role model, combining in himself the best of East and West.⁴ Direct references to Coomaraswamy's ideas are found in Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, in *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, and in his M.A. thesis, 'Nature and Art in William Blake.'

From his entry into Gethsemani in 1941 to his ordination as a priest in 1949, there is a gap in our knowledge about Merton's involvement in Asian religions. However, his friend, Ed Rice, tells us in his book *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* that 'in the fall of 1949 Merton had begun to correspond with a Hindu who had written him about Patanjali's system of yoga, and this led to numerous contacts in India, with Hindu monks and mystics on yoga.'⁵ As Merton studied yoga, he discerned similarities between Patanjali and St Gregory of Nyssa and St John of the Cross. During the 1960s he continued his studies of Patanjali, and took extensive notes on the eight steps of Patanjali's yoga leading to the stilling of the mind. The ultimate goal of the yogis appeared to Merton similar to that of the apophatic mystics of the West.

While praising the virtues of yoga, however, Merton warned about irresponsibly mixing Christianity and yoga. He believed by using Hindu techniques for breath control, bodily postures and methods of concentration one could attain a more authentic Christ-centeredness.

In his essay, 'Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant,' Merton claims:

[Gandhi] neither accepted Christianity or rejected it; he took all that he found in Christian thought that seemed relevant to him as a Hindu. The rest was, at least for the time being, of merely external interest...here was no syncretism and no indifferentism. Gandhi had the deepest respect for Christianity, for Christ and the Gospel.⁶

Merton ends his essay by affirming:

Peace cannot be built on exclusivism, absolutism, and intolerance. But neither can it be built on vague liberal slogans and pious

programs gestated in the smoke of confabulation. There can be no peace of earth without the kind of inner change that brings man back to his "right mind."⁷

From 1961 on Merton studied Asian spirituality in a more systematic manner. Asia became his major concern to the end of his life, as is apparent from some of his significant publications: *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and finally, the posthumously published *Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*.

Well in advance of Vatican II, Merton recognized the need to dialogue with representatives of Asian spirituality in the conviction that Asian wisdom could enrich his own Catholic tradition and contribute to a renewal of Christianity, especially of monasticism. It was primarily the ancient monastic and contemplative tradition of the East that attracted him.

Studying the spiritual treasures of Asia, Merton discovered striking similarities with the teachings of Christianity—teachings which modern western society had discarded. Merton became increasingly convinced of the need for a return to a life balanced between contemplation and action, a life of self-transcendence rather than egocentricity. Above all, he became a fervent advocate of co-operation between East and West. Asian wisdom undoubtedly enlarged Merton's vision and deepened his insight into life's mystery.

Among all aspects of Asian wisdom, Zen made the greatest impact on Merton. In his book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, he wrote:

I believe that Zen has much to say not only to a Christian but also to a modern man. It is non-doctrinal, concrete, direct, existential, and seeks above all to come to grips with life itself, not with ideas about life...⁸

In regard to how Merton viewed the relationship of Zen to Buddhism, he writes:

To define Zen in terms of a religious system or structure is in fact to destroy it—or rather miss it completely, for what cannot be 'constructed' cannot be destroyed either... Zen is consciousness unstructured by particular form or particular system, a trans-cultural, trans-religious, transformed consciousness.⁹

Merton looked for ways to reach transformed consciousness through Sufism as well as Zen. Abdul Aziz, a young Pakistani Muslim who was interested in Christian mysticism, wrote to Merton on November 1, 1960, beginning a correspondence that lasted until

Merton's death in 1968. They enthusiastically engaged in book talk, recommending titles and authors to each other on Christian and Islamic mysticism.

Although Merton sent him copies of his own books, he refused to send *Seeds of Contemplation*. Merton said, 'The book was written when I was much younger and contains many foolish statements, but one of the most foolish reflects an altogether stupid ignorance of Sufism.' In the letter, Merton does not say what the foolish statement is, but William H. Shannon, the general editor of Merton's published letters, notes that in *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton had spoken of 'the sensual dreams of the Sufis as poor substitute for the true contemplation that is found only in the Church.'¹⁰ *Seeds of Contemplation* was written in 1949. More than a decade later, in the same letter dated November 17th, 1960, Merton wrote to Abdul Aziz:

As one spiritual man to another (if I may so speak in all humility), I speak to you from my heart of our obligation to study the truth in deep prayer and meditation, and bear witness to the light that comes from the All-Holy God into the world of darkness where He is not known and not remembered. May your work on the Sufi mystics make his name known and remembered, and open the eyes of men to the light of His truth.¹¹

In his essay, 'As One Spiritual Man to Another—The Merton-Abdul Aziz Correspondence,' Sidney Griffith points out:

These letters are rare in that they contain a correspondence between a notable Christian and practicing Muslim in religious dialogue in modern times. Of course, Merton had long been writing letters to other scholars of Islam, some of them Muslims. But the letters to Abdul Aziz are uniquely personal and religious. Indeed one has the impression that Abdul Aziz pushed Merton, sometimes quite persistently, to express himself on themes that he would not otherwise willingly have addressed. The result is that Merton was compelled to state his position on matters of inter-religious dialogue, and other topics, in ways that other Catholic writers and scholars have adopted in print only in recent years.¹²

A similar kind of correspondence began in 1960 between Rabbi Abraham Heschel, a gifted writer and professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, and Merton in which they explored Jewish and Christian relations. (This correspondence is also published in the first volume of Merton's letters—*The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*.) Heschel sent Merton a

mimeographed statement about the declaration at the Vatican Council on Jewish-Christian relations on September 3rd, 1964, pointing out that the declaration had been rewritten in a way that made it ineffective and even offensive to Jews. In response, Merton wrote:

This much I will say: my latent ambitions to be a true Jew under my Catholic skin will surely be realized if I continue to go through experiences like this, being spiritually slapped in the face by these blind and complacent people of whom I am nevertheless a "collaborator." If I were not "working with" the Catholic movement for ecumenical understanding, it would surely not be such a shock to take the three steps backward after each timid step forward.¹³

In the recently published *Merton: Essential Writings*, Christine M. Bochen has gathered quotations by Merton from his journals and letters, some previously unpublished, that are thematic to the last chapter's title—*A Call to Unity*. These quotations demonstrate Merton's ability to articulate principles of genuine ecumenism – and inter-religious dialogue – with simplicity and clarity. Here are just three such examples:

One must cling to one tradition and to its orthodoxy, at the risk of not understanding any tradition. One cannot supplement his own tradition with little borrowings here and there from other traditions. On the other hand, if one is genuinely living his own tradition, he is capable of seeing where other traditions say and attain the same thing, and where they are different. The differences must be respected, not brushed aside, even and especially where they are irreconcilable with one's own views. Letter to Marco Pallis, Easter 1965, HGL, p.469¹⁴

Here Merton expresses the importance of being rooted in one's own tradition whilst respecting the integrity of other traditions. As Ed Rice affirms, he is not interested in 'baptizing' Buddhism for example, or taking bits and pieces of other religions and adapting them for Christianity. Rice continues, 'Buddhism had its own very valid and true existence, and he was trying to shed the restriction of the Western mind in reaching out for it.'¹⁵ There is a paradox here, and not a little tension—shedding restrictions of the Western mind whilst clinging to one's own tradition and its orthodoxy. This tension is perhaps transcended, if not resolved, by seeking to communicate and share at a deeper level:

Genuine ecumenism requires the communication and sharing, not only of information about doctrines which are totally and irrevocably divergent, but also of religious intuitions and truths which may turn out to have something in common, beneath surface differences. Ecumenism seeks the inner and ultimate spiritual "ground" which underlies all articulated differences. A genuinely fruitful dialogue cannot be content with a polite diplomatic interest in other religions and their beliefs. It seeks a deeper level, on which religious traditions have always claimed to bear witness to a higher and personal knowledge of God than that which is contained simply in exterior worship and formulated doctrine.

'Contemplation and Dialogue' in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, p.204¹⁶

More controversial and illustrating Merton's profound understanding of 'Christ' and his incarnation in humanity—he had come to embrace a transforming cosmic vision of Christ paradigmatic of Christ everywhere, a vision that transcended boundaries and bridged cultures:

It was certainly right that Christian Europe should bring Christ to the Indians of Mexico and the Andes, as well as to the Hindus and the Chinese: but where they failed was in their inability to encounter Christ already potentially present in the Indians, the Hindus and the Chinese. . .

It is my belief that we should not be too sure of having found Christ in ourselves until we have found him also in the part of humanity that is most remote from our own.

Christ is found not in loud and pompous declarations but in humble and fraternal dialogue. He is found less in a truth that is imposed than in a truth that is shared.

'A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants', *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp.380-388¹⁷

Commenting on this in a letter to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy (Ananda's widow), Merton says that the missionaries thereby both did and did not preach the Gospel and were and were not true to Christ and that this 'awful ambiguity has been the tragedy of Christianity since the Middle Ages.'¹⁸

In the introduction to *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, Lawrence Cunningham reminds us that when Merton made his fateful trip to the Far East in 1968, 'he had behind him nearly two decades of intense study of Buddhism, the Sufi tradition of Islam, and, to a lesser degree, Hinduism.'¹⁹ Merton was reaching for a deeper communion

of mysticism that made him radically open to the presence of the Spirit in the world. This was Merton's approach to inter-religious dialogue—to engage in conversation and enquiry that would allow an experience of the deepest level of communication that is communion.²⁰ Neither Christian exclusivism nor Christian inclusivism was acceptable to the mature Merton; neither were relativism and syncretism. Rather a genuinely appreciative and respectful desire to understand other faith traditions underscored Merton's approach to inter-religious dialogue, while staying deeply committed to Christian monasticism.

In one of his last recorded conferences at Gethsemani, Merton encouraged his brothers to be less concerned about finding the correct 'keys' to unlock their hearts to God and more concerned with 'breaking' the lock. After all, he insisted, 'We made a vow to open our hearts to love, not to be "correct."' ²¹ In so saying, Merton expresses his embrace of a universalist and pluralist Christianity, rejects a purely Western one, and acknowledges that our pilgrimage is inward, beyond geography, even beyond rational thought. In his practice of this highly integrative approach to interfaith dialogue, Thomas Merton remains for us an icon of our own religious future, the union of all in 'the hidden ground of love.'

Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (ed. William H. Shannon). New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985 (HGL). For correspondence with Suzuki see pp.560-571; Wu, pp.611-635; Hanh, pp.381-382; Aziz, 43-67; Heschel, pp. 430-436. Merton's essay 'Gandhi and the One Eyed Giant,' published originally in the January 1965 issue of *Jubilee*, became the introduction to Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence: A Selection from the Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*. New York, New Directions, 1965
2. Thomas Merton, 'Dr. M. B. Bramachari: A Personal tribute.' *Collected Essays*. Volume 9, pages 27-29. Unpublished Manuscript on file at The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Ky.
3. *Ibid.* p.29
4. HGL, p.126
5. Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree (The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton): An Entertainment*. New York, Doubleday, 1970, p.76 (Paperback, 1972, p.101)
6. Thomas Merton (ed. & intro), *Gandhi on Non-Violence*. New York, New Directions, 1965. p4
7. *Ibid.* p.20
8. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. New York, New Directions, 1968, p.32
9. *ibid.* pp.3, 4

10. HGL, p.44
11. HGL, p.45
12. see Bob Baker and Gray Henry (eds), *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story (A Complete Compendium)*. Louisville, Kentucky, Fons Vitae, 1999, p.103
13. HGL, pp.434-435
14. Cited in Christine M. Bochen, *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*. Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2000, p.167
15. Ed Rice, *op.cit.* p.92 (paperback, p. 131)
16. Cited in Christine M. Bochen, *op.cit.* pp.167-168; see also, Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York, The Noonday Press, 1961) p.204
17. Cited in Christine M. Bochen, *op.cit.* p.153; see also *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York, New Directions, 1980) pp.381, 382-383
18. Letter of September 24th, 1961, HGL, p.132
19. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master (The Essential Writings)*. New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1992, p.46
20. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. New York, New Directions, 1968, p.308
21. Thomas Merton, 'Solitude: Breaking the Heart,' (Cassette Recording, Merton Tape No.A2165). Kansas City, MO, Credence Communications