Sharing Our Faith Journey: For Merton there is no Stranger

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Introduction

THOMAS MERTON WAS RECENTLY DESCRIBED AS 'arguably the most significant writer of the western Christian tradition in the second half of the 20th century', and for spiritual writings to become real for us we need to know something about the personal spiritual journey of the writer. Indeed, spiritual writings receive their authority and credibility when linked with a personal testimony. I want to suggest that the reason for Thomas Merton's popularity is that his own personal spiritual life and struggle passed through various stages of development which reflect in some degree the various stages within our own spiritual lives. In other words, we can all relate to Merton because he recorded his own spiritual journey in great detail and with such honesty and integrity that we feel that we have been there – or we are at that stage – or if we are not, that we can see, if somewhat dimly, and maybe even resistantly, the likely way ahead.

In exploring the various stages of faith development in Merton's life, I want to draw on some of the insights of the psychology of religion and in particular the writings of James Fowler, who himself drew on some of the insights of Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg's account of moral development. Whilst critical questions can be raised about the methodology, interpretation and subjectivity of these psychologists and educationalists, if there are indeed discernible stages in faith development, then this may help us to understand Merton and ourselves and also have a bearing on spiritual direction.

James Fowler and Faith Development

James Fowler was a professor of theology and human development who interviewed 359 people ranging in age from 4 to 84, of whom 45% were Protestants, 36.5% Roman Catholics, 11.2% Jewish and 7.2% who are described as 'others'. The respondents were equally divided by gender but were overwhelmingly white (97.8%). On the basis of the interviews which were recorded and transcribed, Fowler and his colleagues identified six stages of faith development.

But what is the value of all this?

In a critique of faith development, Dr Sharon Parks writes

> The metaphor of *development*, dominant in Western culture and connoting movement, growth and ongoing transformation, has the power to resonate with both a deep source of traditional conviction and the sense of contemporary reality within the American (immigrant) soul. At the same time, the understanding of faith in which this theory rests, faith as a broad human phenomenon not exclusively bound by cultic religious control, both opens up the religious imagination and serves as a solvent of the secular resistance to religion. In short, faith development theory offers a dynamic language for an understanding of faith and religion that provides one way of addressing the reality of change and pluralism in a secular world. Yet its concern for the quality of mature faith counters the conventional dogma of relativism to which an ideology of pluralism is all too vulnerable, and thus it has the power to appeal to the religious-theological mind seeking integrity within pluralism.[2]

Three of Fowler's stages of faith development take us from childhood to adulthood. As far as Merton is concerned, we have his autobiographical account of his unusual childhood and struggle to adulthood as well as his mother Ruth's diary of her son, Tom.

Intuitive-Projective Faith

Fowler's first stage of faith development he calls Intuitive-Projective Faith. It is the faith that a child develops as he or she brings together the teachings and examples of significant adults on the one hand, and his or her own cognitive egocentricity and imaginative capacity on the other. This is the stage where imagination and fantasy are unrestrained by logic, so an ageless Father Christmas (Santa Claus)

can carry out an impossible mission every Christmas Eve. But there is also the danger of developing overwhelmingly terrifying or destructive images and the temptation of parents to exploit such images to encourage or compel moral or doctrinal conformity. Ruth Merton herself had read books on child psychology and noted her son's development and how he was more interested in books than toys and would pretend that he could read, and she noted he observed the natural world about him and the colour in his father's paintings. The influence of his parents and Merton's own growing imagination reflect Fowler's first stage of faith.

Mythical-Literal Faith

The second stage of faith, Fowler calls the Mythical-Literal Faith. This stage is usually reached about the age of seven when the Oedipal conflict has been resolved, and when children have the ability to think more logically and to assimilate their community's tradition. The fluid, image-centred faith of the first stage develops into new ways of finding coherence and meaning, particularly in the form of narrative and so, story, myth and drama become ways of conserving, communicating and experiencing meaning.

How Merton resolved the Oedipal conflict and how this might have affected his later relationships with women can only be a matter of speculation. His mother was dying when he was six years old and he and his brother John Paul were sent to their grandparents, (that is when they were not with their father), and this period in Merton's life was marked with the loss of his mother and his roots and education. By the age of eight, he was back with his grandparents in Douglaston and was introduced to the world of story, myth and drama. He saw movies and his grandfather's firm published comic books and children's adventure stories. Here he also assimilated the community's tradition, or rather the anti-Catholic prejudice of the household. Then at the age of nine, his father took him to another community to live in France where he was to absorb his father's artistic and religious sensitivity.

If Fowler is right and the second stage of faith development happens at about seven years of age and involves more logical thought and the discovery of story and myth and assimilation of the

community's tradition then it is easy to identify this stage in Merton's childhood.

Synthetic–Conventional Faith

Around the age of twelve, Fowler sees his Stage 3 developing. He calls it Synthetic-Conventional Faith. The world of experience is becoming more complex and the youth struggles to make sense of it. The complexity makes young people look for security and adopt the opinions and authority of others. It is the conformist stage where the ability to reflect and judge and choose has not fully developed. But it is the stage when the youth develops a greater capacity for story-telling which shapes the *personal myth*, that is the youth can see new meanings in his or her past, and look to the future and see possible relationships and life developments. It is, however, a vulnerable stage in adolescent development and Fowler suggests that too much internalising at this stage, and too much pressure from others' expectations and judgements, can harm later autonomy or lead to despair.

During this time, when Fowler would expect an adolescent to reach Stage 3, Merton was first at the Lycée in France, which he hated but where his story-telling ability had clearly developed, because he managed to write two novels and another which he did not complete. If Stage 3 is the conformist stage, it would appear that Merton did not fit this stage of his development because he did not conform and that may well have led to his unhappiness. He was not French, he was not a Catholic and as an 'outsider' he was bullied; so when his father decided to move to England Merton was delighted and his school days in Surrey and at Oakham began.

Then at the age of 14, his father was very ill and Tom had to spend time with his father's friends in Scotland. The two girls in the household were besotted with horses, for which he did not share their enthusiasm; Tom again found himself not conforming and spending time reading alone. Life was not much brighter at Oakham. His father was dying and he was more intelligent and had a much wider experience of life and greater sophistication than the other boys. Again, he faced bullying but became captain of boxing and played rugby, so he was no weakling either physically or intellectually.

His father's death, his time at Oakham, Tom Bennett's guardianship and the time he spent in London, exposed him to the British way of life with the pre-war values typified by the Empire, Anglicanism, English literature and the English class system.

The loss of his father in adolescence must have had a profound and lasting effect on Merton. When you have lost both parents, when you feel you don't even have a country to which you belong, the crisis of self-identity and the need for love to give self-worth must have been great. Fowler's theory that interpersonal betrayal (which is one aspect of bereavement) may result in despair about an ultimate personal reality or exclusionary preoccupation with it, may be seen to explain Merton's later preoccupation (and sometimes despair) with the search for ultimate reality and self-identity of what it means to be human.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton reflects on his childhood and adolescence to give meaning to those things that seemed to have had no meaning and he acknowledges past feelings and hurts. Merton recalls memories from his early childhood and his unhappiness at school in France. Some of what he writes will strike chords with his readers because they too will have pre-school and school memories, but for those who had less traumatic childhoods, they are likely to be limited to general impressions and particular instances. It is when Merton describes what Fowler would identify as Stage 3 in faith development that most of his readers will be readily able to identify. The impression (or lack of it) made upon him by the French Protestant pastor at the Lycée and the Anglican chaplain at Oakham, will evoke our own early impressions of clergy. Children learn prejudice, and the French Catholic attitude towards Protestants and the American Protestant attitude towards Catholics were noted by Merton and probably lurk somewhere in our own unconscious minds. Like Merton, with the benefit of hindsight we see how our adolescent years shaped the future. We may have wished it had been different, but it is part of us, and most of us reading Merton's growing-up years will be able to relate to parts of it, even if we had it somewhat easier.

Psychologists recognise that the way in which we respond to a crisis will be significant in our faith development and how we respond to a crisis will vary as to which stage we have reached. Fowler, for example, points out that a crisis in intimacy will be

experienced differently by someone in Stage 2 who has not yet developed the capacity for mutual perspective taking, in comparison to people in Stages 3 or 4.[3]

Merton's moving words of an incident in Italy point to a moment of growth in faith development

> I was in my room. It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the mystery and corruption of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realise something of the condition I was in, and I was filled with horror at what I saw, and my whole being rose up in revolt against what was within me and my soul desired escape and liberation and freedom from all this with an intensity and urgency unlike anything I had ever known before. And now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray...praying out of the very roots of my life and of my being, and praying to the God I had never known, to reach down towards me out of His darkness... There were a lot of tears connected with this and they did me good.[4]

This experience and his time in Cambridge indicates that Merton had moved beyond Stage 3 in which many adults appear to remain, to what Fowler described as Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective Faith.

Individuative-Reflective Faith

This is the stage faced by many undergraduates when study compels them to reflect on the origins and relativity of their beliefs and values. I can remember in my own undergraduate days the trauma faced by some theological students when faced with biblical criticism. They felt their world, everything on which they had based their beliefs and values, was collapsing under them. William Perry[5] in his study of intellectual and ethical development among college students says that the full realisation of relativism represents a drastic revolution that is emancipating for many, yet deeply disturbing for others. Infrequently, when relativism proves to be intolerable, the person will retreat into an authority-orientated dualistic structure of right and wrong.

In Fowler's theory, essential aspects mark Stage 4. Firstly, people recognise the relativity of their inherited world-view and abandon reliance on external authority thus developing their *executive ego*, which enables them to make choices, judgements, priorities and commitment, which can shape their future. Secondly, this critical questioning can lead to abandoning religious or moral landmarks resulting in a sense of loss and even of guilt. Fowler says that this demythologising has a positive side, which includes the clarifying and communication of meaning. The strength of Stage 4 enables us to reflect critically on personal identity and ideology; the weakness is that we might put too much confidence in our powers of reflection and attempt to assimilate other people's perspectives and even reality itself, into our own limited world-view. Some people will spend the greater part, if not all their lives in Stage 4 but the point about faith development theory is that faith can change, develop and be transformed and still retain its integrity.

There will be some of us who have naturally inherited the religious tradition, beliefs and commitment of our parents whilst others will have had a journey which is vastly different from the rest of their family. That is not to say that we have not all been through a growth process which made us question and examine our inherited faith systems and gone through a process of demythologising which may result in appropriating our inherited faith, disowning it or choosing another to make our own.

Following Fowler's scheme, it would appear that Merton spent the next stage of his life passing through the Individuative-Reflective Faith Stage during which he kicked over the traces at Cambridge, settled at Columbia University, faced the death of his grandparents and an emotional collapse and, to quote Monica Furlong, 'Unconsciously or half-consciously, he was seeking a solution for the dizzying emptiness of life.'[6] It was at Columbia that Merton read *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* by Etienne Gilson, which challenged his Protestant understanding of Catholicism. He was captured by the idea of *aseitas* and wrote

> In this one word, which can be applied to God alone, and which expresses His most characteristic attribute, I discovered an entirely new concept of God—a concept which showed me at once that the belief of Catholics was by no means the vague and rather superstitious hangover from an unscientific age that I had believed it to be.[7]

At Columbia, fellow students and both Jews, Robert Lax and Seymour Freedgood and a Hindu monk called Mahanambrata Bramachari and others encouraged Merton to explore the religious quest through the world of scholarship, art and literature which he was able to do in part through his Master's dissertation looking at St Thomas Aquinas and William Blake. There was an inner conflict within Merton of wanting the spiritual life but living a life of free morality with women, alcohol, heavy smoking and an undisciplined life style. His own private world was in chaos and the world about him was also in chaos, and facing war. That was when he made the decision to become a Catholic. At last Merton felt he belonged somewhere.

It would be possible to see Merton as one of the students to which William Perry refers as finding relativism intolerable and retreating into an authority orientated dualistic structure of right and wrong, for certainly the Catholic church in 1938 knew herself to be the one true church outside of which there was no salvation. Whilst Perry's observation might contain some element of truth in Merton's case, it would be to ignore the grace at work in Merton's spiritual quest and his intellectual integrity and independence of mind, which he was to demonstrate later.

The next period in Merton's life was focused on testing his vocation. Rejection by the Franciscans was later followed by acceptance by the Cistercians and monastic formation and studies for the priesthood. Cistercian life at Gethsemani was austere but Merton embraced it and wrote about it partly in his autobiography and also in his book *The Silent Life* with its apophatic, life-denying emphasis. Merton's happiness in his life of penance and his triumphalistic account of his ordination to the priesthood combined with the outstanding and unexpected success of *The Seven Storey Mountain* gave the impression of someone who had found himself, arrived and was at peace in the pre-Vatican II monastic life. Reflecting on his autobiography twenty years later, he wrote

> Perhaps if I were to attempt this book today, it would be written differently. Who knows? But it was written when I was still young and that is the way it remains. The story no longer belongs to me, and I have no right to tell it in a different way, or to imagine that it should have been seen through wiser eyes. In its present form, which will remain its only form, it belongs to many people. The author no longer has an exclusive claim upon his story. [8]

Merton had moved on in his faith journey and indeed it would seem that his divine discontent was there even before his solemn profession. He wrote

> By the time I made my vows, I decided that I was no longer sure what a contemplative was, or what the contemplative vocation was or what my vocation was, and what our Cistercian vocation was. In fact I could not be sure I knew or understood much of anything except that I believed that You wanted me to take those particular vows in this particular house on that particular day for reasons best known to Yourself, and that what I was expected to do after that was follow along with the rest and do what I was told and things would begin to come clear. [9]

Things were indeed to become clearer as Merton's questioning and prayer led him to that stage of faith development which Fowler describes as Stage 5—Conjunctive Faith.

Conjunctive Faith

The move to Stage 5 comes about with the realisation that life is not adequately comprehended by the clarifications and abstractions which have previously supported the life of faith. There is an awakening of a sense of the deeper possibilities within oneself and the symbols and paradoxes of our religious tradition insistently challenge the neatness of our Stage 4 faith. It is called conjunctive faith because it recognises that people can face the paradoxes and contradiction in themselves and in their experiences but also attain some measure of integration.

Stage 5 is reached with the realisation that we live in a relativistic world and those who reach this stage of faith are genuinely open to the truths of other communities and traditions and with humility recognise that ultimate truth extends far beyond the reach of every tradition, including his or her own. As Fowler put it, conjunctive faith, 'combines loyalty to one's primary communities of value and belief with loyalty to the reality of a community of communities.' [10]

Christians are divided in their approach to relativism. If relativism is defined as a theory that absolute truth, certainty or standards of judgement cannot be reached, then fundamentalist Christians will violently disagree, saying that the absolute truth is revealed in the Bible. Conservative Catholics might also argue that absolute truth is

found in the teachings of the Church. Others will claim that Jesus is himself the truth but that from this side of the grave we can only 'see through a glass darkly', wrestle with the truth as found in scripture and tradition and see Jesus as the ultimate and fullest revelation of God. That, however, is not to say that God's truth is not found elsewhere in other cultures and faith communities and expressed in ways that may be new and refreshing.

One of the lessons that Merton learned when he entered Gethsemani was that whilst he was surrounded by Cistercian faith and liturgical and other practices and caught up in its high ideals, he was still the same person and still had a need to express himself in writing. 'Conversion of manners' was to be a life work and not an instant transformation, but he nevertheless became aware of the deeper possibilities within himself. In his writings we see a questioning of the Cistercian monastic life and what it means to be a contemplative, and this led to his request to explore his vocation with the Carthusians or Camaldolese. We also see in Merton a growth from being world-denying and despising all the pleasures outside the monastery to a life-embracing approach. Whilst he always recognised the false values of society, he began to experience a deep love for people. His experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets is often seen as Merton's moment of disclosure.

> In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers...Then it was as though I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are.[11]

Paradoxically, Merton's deeply felt love for people was expressed in his desire to be apart from them because he recognised that so often in spiritual terms, to be on the edge is in reality to be at the centre. Gilbert Shaw, an Anglican priest expressed it in these terms.

> Withdrawal does not deprive the solitary of his humanity and all that that implies in terms of his relationship, for his coinherence in mankind is by his natural birth... For him, withdrawal emphasises the fact of his relationship with man, because through the deepening of

his prayer in solitude he comes to a deeper realisation of his coinherence with mankind.[12]

But for Merton, withdrawal was not only to achieve a greater unity with people in prayer but also to be a powerful symbol of humanity's true values. He wrote in *Contemplation in a World of Action*:

> Whereas in the fourth century monks were determined to prove their solitude characteristic by showing it to be beyond the human, the situation today is quite the reverse... The hermit exists today to realise and experience in himself the ordinary values of a life lived with the minimum of artificiality. Such a life will, from the beginning, seem itself artificial because it is so completely unlike the lives of other people.[13]

Conjunctive faith, according to Fowler, is when paradoxes and contradictions can be faced whilst still attaining a degree of integration, so for Merton there appears to be no conflict between embracing the world and choosing the hermit life. Again, Merton demonstrates his ability to face paradox and contradiction in his ecumenical outreach. During his life understanding of what it means to be a Catholic – of belonging to a Church with its buildings, priesthood, the Mass, monastic life and hierarchy – had broadened and when he wrote of his conversion to Catholicism, as a son of St Benedict, he preferred to speak of his conversion to Christ. Merton's understanding of Catholicism and the Church was of the world in the process of redemption. He wrote

> For me, Catholicism is not confined to one culture, one nation, one age, and one race. My faith is not a mixture of the Irish Catholicism of the United States and the splendid and vital Catholicism reborn during the last war, of my native France... My Catholicism is all the world and in all ages. It dates from the beginning of the world.[14]

Merton went on to speak of the Church of the future with an appropriate message for us today:

> For many in our New World, the Church is merely a respectable institution closely linked to a past society. This is a grave mistake and a disastrous error—an error that we clergy and religious must try to dissipate, not only with our teaching but also with our lives. We love our old traditions but we are men of the future. Our responsibility is to the future, not the past. The past does not depend on us, the future does.[15]

Brother Patrick Hart describes Merton's spirit of ecumenism as a natural consequence of his monastic and contemplative experience

and that in its renewal the monastic life must preserve or acquire an ecumenical relevance in the form of an openness to discuss our differences.

> Merton saw clearly the unique dimension that the monastic life could contribute to ecumenical experience by deepening the unity that comes about not only by dialogue with our separated brethren, but above all by being silent with them, and sharing our solitude with them. A contemplative monastery should provide this kind of atmosphere or climate for mutual fraternal exchange and prayer.[16]

Merton was in the forefront of encouraging ecumenical encounter at Gethsemani even before Vatican II. In the fifties, groups of Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist and Disciples of Christ seminarians or exchange students came to experience life at the Abbey and to engage with Merton and some of his fellow monks in ecumenical dialogue. Throughout the fifties and sixties his correspondence and journals reveal an ecumenical approach which goes well beyond welcoming home the separated brethren or resolving theological disagreements. It displays a post-critical attitude of discovering unity in oneself which is characteristic of Fowler's description of Conjunctive faith.

> If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russian with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division upon the other or absorbing one division into the other. But if we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political, and doomed to further conflict. We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.[17]

Fowler says that conjunctive faith combines loyalty to one's own primary communities of value and belief with loyalty to the reality of a 'community of communities' and this Merton clearly did in his commitment to solitude and the world and his commitment to the Roman Catholic Church and other Christians, but Fowler goes on to warn that the emergent strength of the Conjunctive Faith stage is the *ironic imagination*, the capacity to become powerfully engaged by symbolic expressions, even while recognising their relativity and ultimate inadequacy for representing transcendent reality. The danger here is becoming paralysed by the irresolvable paradoxes and

polarities, a state of disunity that can lead to a sense of 'cosmic homelessness and loneliness'.

I suppose it is legitimate to ask if Merton experienced that state of cosmic homelessness and loneliness. His ecumenical involvement seemed to naturally open up the question of interfaith relations and a deeper and wider search for an understanding of truth and contemplation. Did he still belong in the confines of a Cistercian Abbey or had his spiritual horizons made him equally at home in the Himalayas? Although surrounded by friends, admirers and spiritual children, was Merton a lonely man who perhaps felt more at home with his Zen Buddhist monk friends than with some of his own Cistercian brethren?

Towards the end of his life, two particular areas of concern link with Fowler's Stage 6, which he calls Universalising Faith—that is Merton's passion for peace and justice issues and for interfaith relations.

Universalising Faith

This sixth stage of faith development has been the one most questioned by Fowler's critics. I should also add that Fowler doesn't suggest that people suddenly move from one stage of development to another but that there is a gradual growth and progression. Indeed, in his own research, when trying to place people at different stages of faith development, he uses eleven stages because he places many people as being between two stages.

In recognising the discomfort of Stage 5 with its irresolvable paradoxes and polarities, a state of disunity which can lead to a sense of 'cosmic homelessness and loneliness', Fowler sees certain rare individuals as being called into a new, transformed relation to the ultimate environment which he calls universalising faith. This leads to a *decentration of faith*, in which they embrace the knowing and valuing of the world as experienced by others which then leads to the *emptying of self* through detachment. Controversially, Fowler cites Gandhi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Martin Luther King Jr as examples of people who have reached this stage. Fowler is not, however, saying that they have achieved perfection but rather, that although still limited and blinded in certain respects, these

exceptional people, through their struggles with various difficulties, have become selfless proponents of a redeemed world.

The sign of having reached Stage 6 is the ability for people to embrace the world as their community and demonstrate an all-consuming commitment to peace and justice. The monastic life has traditionally taught the need for humility and self-emptying in imitation of the kenosis of Christ who emptied himself at the incarnation. Merton also understood the importance of this:

> But if the Truth is to make me free, I must let go my hold upon myself, and not retain the semblance of a self which is an object or a 'thing'. I too must be no-thing. And when I am no-thing, I am in the All, and Christ lives in me. But He who lives in me is in all those around me. He who lives in the chaotic world of men is hidden in the midst of them, unknowable and unrecognisable because he is no-thing. Thus in the cataclysms of our world, with its crimes, its lies and its fantastic violence, He who suffers in all is the All who still cannot suffer. Yet in us, it is He who suffers, that we may live in Him.[18]

By the 1960s Merton's outlook moved from the apophatic life-denying and world hating monk of his autobiography to the kataphatic life-embracing monk who "chose the world" and could write

> To choose the world is to choose to do the work I am capable of doing, in collaboration with my brothers, to make the world better, more free, more just, more liveable, more human. Rejection of the world and 'contempt for the world' is in fact not a choice but the evasion of choice.[19]

Merton, the "guilty bystander" saw the need to speak out for the voiceless and oppressed and challenge those who colluded with racism or war. He was among the first Catholics to condemn any use of nuclear weapons, although his superiors tried to silence him at first. Merton believed that war was outside the kingdom of God and not a fit activity for Christians. Drawing on the scriptures, the writings of the Fathers and his own critique of St Augustine and the Just War theory, Merton engaged with others in expressing his opposition to war and the use of weapons of mass destruction. He was unequivocal in his condemnation of the Vietnam War and like Gandhi was a proponent of non-violent resistance.

His opponents, of course, pointed out that nuclear weapons could not be un-invented and that whilst contemplation may help to provide depth and perspective to life, it did not solve the problem

faced by world leaders. Merton was not suggesting that it did but he provided a prophetic voice which showed the danger of power, the futility of the Vietnam war, the move away from Christian moral principles, the need to form a conscience and for peace-building.

Merton had also experienced a radical change in outlook when it came to interfaith interests and in particular with his growing interest in eastern religions. In 1948, he wrote

> Ultimately, I suppose all Oriental mysticism can be reduced to techniques that do the same thing (i.e. achieve relaxation), but in a far more subtle and advanced fashion: and if that is true, it is not mysticism at all. It remains purely in the natural order. That does not make it evil *per se*, according to Christian standards: but it does not make it good, in relation to the supernatural. It is simply more or less useless, except when it is mixed up with elements that are strictly diabolical: and then of course these dreams and annihilations are designed to wipe out all vital moral activity, while leaving the personality in control of some nefarious principle, either of his own, or from outside himself.[20]

Ten years after dismissing Oriental mysticism as little more than a relaxation technique, we see Merton sharing his manuscript, The Wisdom of the Desert with Dr Suzuki, a teacher of Zen. From 1961, Merton spent much time in the systematic study of Asian religions and philosophies helped by his Chinese friend Professor Wu who was a convert to Catholicism, but who had brought his own understanding of Zen, Taoism and Confucianism into Christianity. Merton was convinced that Asian wisdom could enrich Western Christianity. He agreed with the 16th century Jesuits that Confucianism should be viewed as a 'sacred philosophy' similar to Christianity and that both had an answer for the problem of alienation. But it was Taoism in which Merton found a greater similarity with Christianity and in particular the works of a recluse called Chuang Tzu, and when he wrote his The Way of Chuang Tzu in 1965 he indicated that he had enjoyed writing this book "more than any other I can remember".[21] Merton was particularly attracted to Taoism's teaching about the complementarity of opposites with which he could identify in his own life and which Fowler associates with Conjunctive faith.

It was, however, Zen Buddhism that most attracted Merton because he saw it having the potential for world peace, finding

meaning in ordinary life, bringing together heart and mind and finding self-knowledge and transcendence. He wrote in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*

> 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, and existential and seeks above all to come to grips with life itself, not with ideas about life.[22]

Nevertheless, Merton saw the similarities between Christianity and Buddhism with meditation as a way to approach suffering and achieving peace and harmony but he also recognised the differences. Realising that discussions about doctrine were fruitless, Merton engaged with his Eastern friends on the basis of religious experience and ultimate goals.

Merton had also encountered Hinduism through Dr Brahmachari in his Columbia student days and in later studies of yoga, but he nevertheless found it too speculative. He also found that some of the battle accounts in the *Bhagavad Gita* clashed with his pacifism. On the other hand, he was able to identify with the fusion of action, worship and contemplation of Hinduism and acknowledge

> Since it is perfectly obvious that a Sadhu might well know God better and love Him better than a lukewarm Christian, I see no problem whatsoever about declaring that such a one is closer to Him and is even, by that fact, closer to Christ. [23]

Merton's love for Asia – its philosophy, mysticism and religion – made him long to visit the continent. His abbot, Dom James Fox, thwarted one opportunity, but in 1968 his dream came true. There was a new abbot and he agreed that Merton could be a speaker at a Benedictine conference in Bangkok. He was able to combine his visit with visits to Christian and Buddhist monasteries in various countries and Merton kept a journal of his visit, a visit from which only his body was to return—in the hold of a US plane, ironically also carrying the bodies of soldiers who had died in Vietnam.

During his Asian visit, he stayed at Dharamsala, the home of the Dalai Lama. There he had a dream that he was back in Gethsemani in the habit of a Buddhist monk. Perhaps that expresses something of his identification with the East or his concern as to how he would take his Asian experience back with him to Gethsemani.

Fowler believed that those who attain Stage 6 embrace the world as their community and demonstrate an all-consuming commitment

to justice and love. Merton would certainly seem to fit his definition.

Conclusion

What James Fowler has done is to suggest that there are indeed stages of faith which are common to us all. Psychology of religion is not an exact science and others have criticised Fowler's approach or produced theories of their own including Meissner, a Jesuit psychoanalyst whose own scheme identifies five modes of religious experience; but even Meissner himself wrote, 'Fowler's work represents a fundamental contribution to our understanding of the human experience of faith'.[24] Fowler, I believe, enables us to take a fresh look at how faith develops within us and to discern Merton's own faith development. This in turn enables us to see our own journey more clearly and to journey with others through their stages of faith.

I began by suggesting that Merton's story is our story because his faith journey will in some way parallel our own faith journey. Although Merton's life is likely to have been very different from our own, yet he is not a stranger to us nor did he find others strangers to him. Whether standing on the corner of Fourth and Walnut Avenues, or in a Hindu Ashram or Buddhist monastery, he was not among strangers but with fellow pilgrims like us, who are also at some stage on our personal faith journey.

Notes and References

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