Thomas Merton and Inter-Faith Dialogue: Exploring a Way Forward

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Introduction

Religious truths are a source of both passion and of conflict. Because of this, religious people need to find ways of understanding one another and of living in tolerance with one another, in order to ensure some sort of harmony in multi-faith societies, such as our own, as well as on the religiously plural global landscape. Religious tensions in Britain, Israel, the Balkans and elsewhere alert us to the need for action as well as words. Hans Küng has warned us that there will be 'no peace in the world until there is peace between the religions.'[1] In a more pointed argument, Samuel Huntington[2] has spoken of the danger of a clash between civilizations. The two main potential enemies of the West, in Huntington's view, are Islam and Confucianism. However, if his appeal lies in the realm of security and the protection of interests from a perceived enemy, Thomas Merton's lies in the realm of reconciliation and the value of learning from a perceived friend. Merton believed that if the Western world continued to neglect 'the spiritual heritage of the East,' it could 'hasten the tragedy that threatens man and his civilizations.'[3] This paper is about Thomas Merton's dialogue with Eastern religions and the lessons we can learn from him.

Preliminary Reflections on Inter-Faith Dialogue

There are well-established principles for the conduct of inter-faith dialogue as well as key theological categories which have tended to guide scholarly debates. The principles were outlined in 1979 when the World Council of Churches produced 'Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies.' In 1983, the British Council Of Churches distilled the wisdom of the W.C.C.

document in a publication entitled 'Relations With People Of Other Faiths: Guidelines For Dialogue In Britain.' This has been widely accepted by Christians and people of other faiths throughout the world. The principles are as follows:

1) Dialogue begins when people meet each other.
2) Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust.
3) Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community.
4) Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.

The main theological categories which have been set out are exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. These have been elaborated in detail elsewhere[4] and within a very short space of time they have been widely accepted as key definitions around which debates are centred.

Nevertheless, although the principles and theological approaches are helpful, there is a growing feeling that these are all, in some way, inadequate. In short, there is considerable uncertainty about the best way to approach inter-religious encounters. To find a way through this current impasse, I want to suggest that we look more closely at the inspiring figure of Thomas Merton. In his religious quest for truth, for enlightenment and for God, he was willing to listen to, to learn from and to love those of faiths and traditions other than his own. He moved beyond perceptions and dogmas and touched something of the heart of other religions and of the devotees of those religions. In order to do this he himself had to undergo the most thoroughgoing transformation. Merton's pilgrimage took him from secular-minded and disinterested Protestantism, through an initially pious Catholic monasticism, to a man at home in the metaphysics and mysticism of Zen and other religious schools of thought and practice. Thomas Merton did not suggest that all religions were the same. Indeed, he was keen to admit and to value differences. He was very aware that the mystical path was one in which much common ground could be discovered, but was aware that no faith, even his own, had a complete monopoly on truth or on God. He believed himself to be on a journey, rather than having arrived. By examining Merton's fascinating journey, I believe that we can find a model for inter-faith dialogue which will prove to be invaluable in our age of religious conflict and misunderstanding.

His sense that truth is provisional has now gained a much firmer foundation, in science as well as in religious studies, in the light of present day knowledge. But, given his great interest in poetry, it is perhaps more fitting to use a poem to illustrate something of the direction of his life. The poem 'Truth', by Ann Lewin, aptly summarizes Merton's approach to the religious quest.

For some, Truth is a fortress, square and strong,
In which, once entered, safety lies.
Only like-minded people dwell there, none disturb
The calm and certain sureties of belief
Outside, the world pursues its way, its noise and
Clamour offering small attraction to those
Whose knowledge keeps them safe beyond the
Drawbridge of conviction. If any try to breach the
Bastions of tradition, they are repelled with
Boiling scorn. Truth is impregnable.
For others, Truth is both journey and
Discovery, a Way which leads and
Urges without rest.
No castle for retreat, but
Camps, where fellow pilgrims join
To take refreshment in each other's
Company. Assorted in experience, they
Enrich, enlighten, challenge and
Go on further exploration.
Travelling light. Knowing that in this life
All is provisional; seeking fulfilment,
The end and explanation of the quest. [5]

The radical shift in the Roman Catholic position in respect of non-Christian religions (as expressed by the Second Vatican Council) sat well with Merton's later thinking. One suspects that he might also have felt comfortable with recent Anglican statements[6] on inter-faith understanding. However, the modern position which I believe most closely reflects Merton's own understanding is that of Professor John Bowker. In his fascinating book, *Is God A Virus? Genes, Culture And Religion*,[7] Bowker moves beyond exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism to propose a fourth solution, a position he has called 'differentialism.' This is suggestive of a very helpful way forward in terms of both good theology and good inter-faith relations, allowing for 'differences to be carried to their ultimate conclusion.' It[8] does not attempt to force the 'approximate and corrigibly expressed accounts

of ultimacy in each religion' into the claims of any one of them, 'since more than one may be correct.' Neither, he argues, does it 'allow an indefinable category of "ultimacy"' to force all religions into 'approximate accounts of the same thing' because differences are real and 'lie deeper than semantics.' Bowker argues that this admission of legitimate diversity in differentialism allows for 'equal outcomes of value which cannot be translated into each other.'[9] According to David Bosch[10] the three main positions leave no room for 'embracing the abiding paradox' of asserting one's own ultimate religious commitment and 'genuine openness to another's...' Differentialism, on the other hand, does leave such room and it is into this 'abiding paradox' that Thomas Merton speaks very powerfully. It allows for the symbolic and provisional nature of religious language, which Merton clearly recognised.

Reflections on Eastern Spirituality and Identity

Thomas Merton's life reveals a dogged search for identity. His affinity with Eastern spirituality was a key factor in this. He read widely about the major religions of the world. But the impact of personal contact with people of non-Christian religions was, for him, probably of far greater significance. Lipski highlights the fact that his initially 'negative impressions' of Oriental mysticism 'were partially neutralized by his encounters in June 1948 [1938: Ed.] with an Indian yogi,' whose 'calmness and worshipfulness deeply impressed Merton.'[11] His spiritual experience was greatly enhanced through his contact with people of other faiths. And, as spiritual experience grew in influence, rigid adherence to doctrine became less significant. In addition, it is important to realize that his life of contemplation and dialogue was largely a search for his true self. His writings show how he realized that the discovery of one's true self was the same process as the discovery of God and 'the other.' Merton's spiritual journey led him to a surprising sense of wholeness in which he saw inter-connections between the self, God and the other. His journey eastwards was a crucial part of this voyage of discovery.

Although Merton was a committed Christian, it was because he did 'not believe anything is final or conclusive'[12] that he moved beyond the books and letters and discussions and actually went to Asia. He was, in fact, very honest about his desire to learn from Eastern spiritual traditions. He said that he sought 'to learn more

(quantatively) about religion and monastic life' and also 'to become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively).' He was looking for a 'full and transcendental liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals...'[13] Furthermore, he referred to his Asian trip in a remarkable way, by saying that 'I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body...'[14] There is little doubt that he regarded Eastern religious spirituality as central to his sense of identity, to his life of faith and to his spiritual calling as a monk. As Merton's spiritual exploration turns further towards the East, he comes to a fuller, deeper and richer understanding and experience of what his true identity is. He clearly became comfortable with the imagery of the religious thought patterns of the East and was open to all that these could teach him.

In this process of discovery, change and spiritual growth I see two aspects of Merton's complex nature which particularly inform his approach to other religions: the artistic and the apophatic. These inspired his inter-faith explorations and enabled him to inwardly grapple with and outwardly express the conflicting, contrasting and intermingling aspects of his spiritual journey. Hence, his contemplation became deeper and his dialogue wider. Furthermore, it seems to me that Merton's radical thinking about the inter-relationship between God, self, and 'the other' is suggestive of a model of dialogue which I have called 'explorational.' This is quite different to what may be called a functional approach. By functional I mean official dialogue between representatives of various religions and organisations, with definite objectives in view. By explorational I mean open-ended dialogue between spiritual people on an unofficial level, even a personal level, with only limited or even no particular objectives in view. Merton, in my opinion, personifies the latter. Before we examine the explorational model in more detail, let us first of all look at these two important aspects of Merton's evolving personality which I believe to be largely responsible for his openness to Eastern spirituality and his ability to engage in fruitful dialogue.

Finding God, Self and 'The Other' in Art

Thomas Merton had a sense of pride in the fact that both of his parents were artists. He even acknowledged that he had inherited something of his father's vision of the world.[15] Their artistic awareness had been transmitted to Merton and as his spiritual journey developed he became conscious of the link between art and spirituality. Ross Labrie makes a convincing argument for Merton's artistic orientation and comments that his mind 'was intuitive and tentative.'[16] He points out that, for Merton, mystics such as William Blake and St. John of the Cross had woven together threads of both the artistic and the contemplative life. In Labrie's view, Thomas Merton's writing 'was intimately connected with his sense of identity,'[17] a sentiment echoed by others as well as by Merton himself Although he, at times, doubted his monastic call, he knew that he could not doubt his call to be a writer. 'I was born one and will most probably die as one,' he once remarked.[18] This was, I believe, the creative urge of the artist within him. It was because of his artistic leanings that he was often frustrated about being over busy. Furlong records his comment that, 'It is not much fun to live the spiritual life with the spiritual equipment of an artist.'[19] His appreciation that different forms of artistic communication were akin to religious experiences was a common thread through his later writings. He believed that 'Poetry is not ordinary speech, nor is poetic experience ordinary experience. It is closer to religious experience.'[20]

Moreover, Merton's thinking on the interrelationship between art and spirituality was crystallized during his visit to Polonnaruwa in 1968, which was 'such an experience' that he 'could not write hastily of it.' Indeed, it was such a profound and defining experience for Merton that he felt inadequate to speak of it at all. He describes a fellow visitor, the vicar general, sitting under a tree reading, 'shying away from "paganism,"' whilst he approaches the enormous Buddhas 'barefoot and undisturbed.' His linguistic collage which portrays this momentous event evokes images of Moses at the burning bush:

> Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace...that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything – without refutation – without establishing some other argument. For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence can be frightening. I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the obvious clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape, figure, rock and tree... Looking at

> these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious... All problems are resolved and everything is clear...everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination... I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise... It says everything; it needs nothing.[21]

Merton was approaching the figures at Polonnaruwa positively, not as a misguided form of paganism. The result was overpowering. Hugo Meynell says that, 'The appreciation of art in general tends to counteract the rigidity of our habits of perception and understanding.'[22] We certainly see here Merton's fascination with aesthetics and with the spiritual power of art forms to break down his own false perceptions, misunderstandings or barriers to enlightenment of any kind. I tend to agree with Monica Furlong's assessment that it was at Polonnaruwa that Merton underwent his most transforming spiritual experience and found something he'd been seeking all his life. In the introduction to his biography, she makes the interesting observation that 'these great holy figures' somehow released 'joy and love in his heart' and gave him the feeling that 'he had come home, and the home was God.'[23]

Finding God, Self and 'The Other' in Darkness and Emptiness

Thomas Merton spoke about a 'transformation of consciousness' which is required in order to leave the 'false self' and discover the 'true self.' The notion of transformed consciousness which evolved in his mind was enriched by both his artistic orientation and by Christian mystics of the apophatic (from the Greek *apophasis*: denial, negation) tradition, such as St. John of the Cross, St. Gregory of Nyssa and Meister Eckhart as well as by Taoism, Sufism, Judaism, Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism, but especially by Zen. John Teahan has rightly highlighted the 'appropriation of the apophatic tradition in Christian mysticism' as a 'dominant concern' of Merton's.[24] Much that he discovered in Taoism and Zen resonated with treasures he'd unearthed from the apophatic tradition in Christian mysticism. Teahan helpfully identifies and clarifies 'Merton's apophaticism,' particularly with reference to the symbols of darkness and emptiness. These, he

believes, are highly significant symbols in apophatic literature as well as being constantly recurring themes in Merton's writings. This important strand in Merton has, as Teahan argues, direct 'relevance to the meeting of East and West.'[25] Teahan explains that '"negative theology" refuses to assign attributes to God' and that the 'apophatic mystics further claim that it is impossible to reach God through reason alone.' Apophatic mysticism attempts to 'approach God by transcending ideas, images and sense impressions.'[26]

Merton claimed 'that contemplation transcends the theological enterprise'[27] and 'reveals a God beyond concepts, a God known by unknowing.' John Wu, Jr. believes that Merton intuitively realized that 'wisdom and the search for the inmost self did not lie in the gaining of knowledge' but rather 'in the losing of it.'[28] Furthermore, Teahan argues that Merton had an 'aversion to technical theology, even of the apophatic variety,' and this 'increased in the last fifteen years of his life.'[29] He asserts that Merton was 'more at home with the metaphorical language of darkness and emptiness than with complex reasoning.' Teahan draws attention to the fact that, for Merton, 'The essence of God is beyond human knowledge,'[30] but this was in his understanding a very positive discovery.

Emptiness was another important motif for Merton. According to Teahan, Merton described emptiness in 'two major ways: as realization of spiritual destitution and finitude and as liberation from attachment to selfish obsession.'[31] D.T. Suzuki sought to correct what he believed to be Merton's misunderstanding of emptiness, at one stage, and maintained that Zen emptiness is 'not the emptiness of nothingness', but the 'emptiness of fullness', in which 'zero = infinity.'[32] Commenting on the correspondence between Suzuki and Merton, Teahan says that, for Merton, emptiness came to indicate 'a potential for fullness, though the contemplative may not always recognize it.'[33] Just as I argued that Merton's artistic orientation accelerated his openness to Eastern spirituality and ability to dialogue, so I want to also argue that his way of darkness and emptiness furthered this endeavour. Teahan puts it this way:

> The theme of openness to all modes of dynamic spirituality permeated the final decade of Merton's life and writings. To be empty of egocentricity is to be open to others, to the possibilities that arise only when defensiveness and discrimination are replaced by compassion and communion.[34]

Explorational Dialogue - A Model for the Future

Merton came to believe in the need to enter upon a way which meant he had to 'leave all ways and in some sense get lost,' an insight he gleaned from studying Chuang Tzu.[35] Yet, for Merton acceptance of 'the other' never meant rejection of his own tradition. He believed that:

> genuine ecumenism requires the communication and sharing, not only of information about doctrines which are totally and irrevocably divergent, but also of religious institutions and truths which may turn out to have something in common, beneath the 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 religious traditions and beliefs. It seeks a deeper level, on which religious traditions have always claimed to bear witness to a higher and more personal knowledge of God than that which is contained simply in exterior worship and formulated doctrine. [36]

Merton speaks of a 'universally recognizable' spirituality, which has a 'very real quality of existential likeness.'[37] He perceived 'the growth of a truly universal consciousness in the modern world,' 'a consciousness of transcendent freedom and vision.'[38] However, whilst readily admitting that God may well 'impart His light to other men,'[39] he is alert to the dangers of syncretism and is keen to distance his own approach from that particular option. Merton strongly rejected the tendency of those who 'identify all religions and all religious experiences with one another.' He believed that this would guarantee that the interfaith dialogue would end in confusion.'[40] The extent of Merton's exploration is, perhaps, best revealed by his obvious affinity with people of other faiths. He found it astonishing that he had 'much more in common' with a Japanese Zen Buddhist than with fellow Christians, 'who are little concerned with religion, or interested only in its external practice.'[41] This affinity with 'the other' and the superficiality of many within his own tradition obviously concerned Merton, for he wanted fellow Christians to share the joy of his discoveries. 'Our task now,' he said:

> is to learn that if we can voyage to the ends of the earth and there find ourselves in the aborigine who most differs from ourselves, we will have made a fruitful pilgrimage. That is why pilgrimage is necessary, in some shape or other. Mere sitting at home and meditating on the divine presence is not enough for our time. We have to come to the end of a long journey and see that the stranger we meet there is no other than ourselves – which is the same as saying that we find Christ in him.[42]

In this section, then, I want to draw attention to those aspects of Thomas Merton's explorational approach which are distinctively characteristic of him and from which we can learn vitally important lessons.

Valuing Pure Exploration

Merton saw a profound innocence in the artistic enterprise of contemplation and dialogue. Recognising the link between art, poetry and spirituality, he said that the art of the poet 'depends on an ingrained innocence which he would lose in business, in politics, or in too organized a form of academic life.'[43] This is why I prefer to think of him as an artist rather than an academic, even though his intellectual capabilities were immense. When Merton was asked directly about art and freedom, his answers were very revealing. He was profoundly aware that the artist 'is responsible first of all for the excellence of his work' and should not need to justify itself in any functional frame of reference. 'The artist,' he believed 'must serenely defend his right to be completely useless.'[44] He argued that it is 'better to produce absolutely no work of art at all than to do what can be cynically "used."'[45]

Humility

Merton's spiritual journey is one of remarkable humility. He was readily willing to change his mind and to admit the fact. William Johnston comments that, 'When questioned about one of his early works, Thomas Merton remarked: "The man who wrote that book is dead."'[46] He adds that Merton 'died and rose many times.' It seems to me that an important part of this process for Merton was the willingness to enter the dark night of the soul. I also see something of the inspired artist in this humble process of change. Labrie notes that:

> The artist, Merton believed, went out to the object before him – a rose or a grain of sand – with complete humility, not subjecting the object to the classifying habit of the mind, but so identifying with it as to look out of it as though the artist fulfilled the role of consciousness not only for himself but for the object as well. [47]

Holding Together The Contradictory

In this study I have suggested that Thomas Merton was a religious artist. I regard his pilgrimage as a form of wrestling with God, just as Jacob wrestled with the angel in the book of Genesis. The poem 'Art,' by Herman Melville[48] uses this imagery and speaks of how 'unlike things must meet and mate' to produce art. In Merton's own spirituality, the 'unlike things' certainly did 'meet and mate' and form a very powerful picture of spiritual reality. Amos Oz says that the ability to hold together, with 'integrity,' those things which appear contradictory is the sign of the writer. It is, if you like, the artistic gift. This skill is simply a different form of art and it may be described as the ability to see the unity in diversity, to find the wholeness in that which is different.[49]

One of the remarkable things about Merton was this ability to hold together a range of apparently conflicting ideas in his own person, his own identity. Here is a classic example of how he expressed something of his multi-dimensional being in his own words:

> the more I am able to affirm others, to say "yes" to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says yes to everyone. I will be a better Catholic, not if I can refute every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further. So, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc. This does not mean syncretism, indifferentism, the vapid and careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing. There is much that one cannot "affirm" and "accept," but first one must say "yes" where one really can. If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the spirit with which to affirm it.[50]

Openness

In the Preface to the *Asian Journal*, the consulting editor, Amiya Chakravarty said that:

> Readers of Thomas Merton will know that his openness to man's spiritual horizons came from a rootedness of faith; and inner security led him to explore, experience, and interpret the affinities and differences between religions in the light of his own religion.[51]

In other words, for Merton, his own faith was not a barrier to openness but rather a springboard for it. Thomas Merton was a remarkably open person, who learned to approach people of other faiths with a reverence and willingness to learn. He said that, 'To give priority to the person means respecting the unique and inalienable value of the other person...'[52] Furthermore, he clearly believed that insights shared with others were more likely to result in 'certainties' than the imagined certainty of isolation, which Lewin's poem[5] speaks of as the 'fortress' of truth.

Insider Perspective

Merton's aim was not to stand back and observe other religions and judge, but rather to look at that particular faith from the inside. This is clear from his preface to *Mystics And Zen Masters*. He says:

> The author has attempted not merely to look at these other traditions coldly and objectively from the outside, but, in some measure at least, to try to share in the values and experience which they embody. In other words he is not content to write about them without making them, as far as possible, "his own."[53]

Jim Forest refers to Merton's 'insider perspective' with reference to his correspondence with the Muslim, Abdul Aziz. For Forest, Merton's letters to him were 'a perfect example of this gift Merton had of writing to people from almost within their own skin.'[54] It seems to me that he possessed an absolutely remarkable intuitive perception of and insight into them. This fact is borne out by scholars and respected followers of those religions who praised his appreciation of their particular faith. These include such respected figures as D.T. Suzuki[55] Chatral Rinpoche[56] and the Dalai Lama.[57] Although it is never possible to gain a perfect 'insider' perspective as an 'outsider,' the response of prominent members of other faiths to Merton's understanding of their faith bears ample evidence to suggest no small measure of mastery on his part.

Recognition Of Interdependence

Merton wrote that, 'Every other man is a piece of myself, for I am a part and a member of mankind.' He added: 'Nothing at all makes sense, unless we admit with John Donne, that: "No man is an island..."'[58] Merton became aware of the interdependence between man, God, and all things in the universe. Reflecting on the wisdom

of the Vietnamese Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh, he recognized the unity of humankind:

> To set up party, race, nation or even official religion as absolutes is to erect barriers of illusion that stand between man and himself...[59]

Then, in *Zen And The Birds Of Appetite*, speaking of Zen and art, Merton points to a unity between existence and being, a broader interdependence between all things. He calls man 'a soul in the form of art,' and 'a solitary being full of meaning and close to the essence of things.'[60] He was concerned that we should be 'Piercing the illusions in ourselves which divide us from others' through 'unity and solidarity' and 'openness and compassion.' Such love, he says, 'can transform the world.' This wider transformation is, for Merton, a direct result of an inner transformation. He argued that, 'In order to see rightly, one must recognize the essential interdependence, impermanence, and inconsistency of phenomena.'[61]

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me simply list current initiatives with which I believe Merton would have felt a kindred spirit. Space forbids me from doing more than simply naming them:

- The Kagyu Samye Ling Tibetan Centre's Inter-Faith Symposia and Holy Island Inter-Faith Project.
- The World Congress Of Faiths, with its emphasis on world peace.
- The Christian Meditation Centre, with its John Main Seminars — notably the 1994 one, at which the Dalai Lama gave his reflections on the Gospels.
- The Thomas Merton Society, of which I need say no more.

Notes and References

This paper is a summary of Cohn Albin's M.A. Thesis, entitled '*Dialogue With Asian Religions: Exploring "A Way" With Thomas Merton*' – available at Lancaster University.

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