

There Comes a Time: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton and Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy

William Apel

Thomas Merton wrote to his interfaith friend Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy in January 1961, telling her that her late husband, Ananda Coomaraswamy, was a model of the spiritual unity he had been seeking. According to Merton:

...Ananda Coomaraswamy is in many ways to me a model: the model of one who has thoroughly and completely united in himself the spiritual tradition and attitudes of the Orient [East] and of the Christian West, not excluding also something of Islam, I believe.¹

Merton had discovered in Ananda Coomaraswamy's work someone who had been able to unite "all that is best and most true in the various great spiritual traditions."² He was, in Merton's estimation, among those who were "signs of peace" for his generation.³ Merton, in his friendship with Ananda's widow, Dona Luisa, had discovered the same type of person. The Coomaraswamys were individuals who, like Merton, were working for a new kind of interfaith future. The "new seeds of thought" which they were planting would hopefully lead to a better tomorrow—a future more just and without war. This new day was to be characterized by greater inter-religious cooperation and spiritual understanding.

Merton, however, had no illusions about the difficulty of realizing such a world. "Our task," he wrote to Dona Luisa, "is one of very remote preparation, a kind of arduous and unthankful pioneering."⁴ Nonetheless, Merton identified Ananda Coomaraswamy in this initial letter to Dona Luisa as a prime model "of one who has so thoroughly and completely united in himself" the values and outlook for a new community of the spirit. In a very real sense, the life of Ananda Coomaraswamy, as well as that of Dona Luisa, brought together the major themes common to what Christine Bochen has called Merton's "vocation to unity."⁵ The spiritual unity envisioned here was not a facile type of uniformity or conformity. The letters of Merton and Dona Luisa speak of another type of unity—a unity achieved not by looking for a lowest common denominator, but rather a unity resulting from an honest recognition of the "other"—differences as well as commonalities. The time had come—in fact was long overdue—for genuine encounter at the deepest levels of shared experiences within the world's religions.

Who was Ananda Coomaraswamy?

Before examining the Thomas Merton-Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy letters, we

need to understand something of the life and work of Ananda Coomaraswamy. Merton's desire to write about Ananda Coomaraswamy prompted his correspondence with Dona Luisa. This was the motivation, which initially fueled the interfaith relationship between the monk of Gethsemani and the widow of this world scholar of India.

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy was born in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1877 to a Hindu legislator and his English wife. Educated in England, he earned the degree of doctor of geology from London University before returning to his homeland in 1902. While practicing his profession as a geologist, Coomaraswamy became interested in the indigenous, pre-colonial culture of his island home. In 1908 he published *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, a groundbreaking work which explored the existence of a traditional (and inherently religious) art in the history and culture of Ceylon.⁶

Roger Lipsey, editor of a three-volume collection of Coomaraswamy's works, notes that it was not long before this professional geologist realized his true life's vocation as an interpreter of East Indian art and culture to the western world. While still a young man, Coomaraswamy left Ceylon for the larger world of India where he became a good friend of the poet Rabindramath Tagore. Like Tagore, he was an advocate of "home rule" for the Indian subcontinent. More publications followed on India art and culture, as well as several on philosophy and religion.

In 1913, Coomaraswamy began to publish in the areas of Hinduism and Buddhism. His book *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (1916) represents a pioneering publication on Buddhism

geared to the general reading public in both the East and the West. During this decade, Coomaraswamy maintained a home in England and traveled frequently between Europe and Asia. In 1918, his first American publication, *The Dance of Shiva* appeared. Reprinted in 1957, it was to find an enthusiastic reader in Thomas Merton.

Coomaraswamy's perspective on modernity in *The Dance of Shiva* was very compatible with Merton's concern about the quantification and compartmentalization of knowledge found within modern western thought. Coomaraswamy observes:

Where the Indian mind differs most from the average mind of modern Europe is in its view of the value of philosophy. In Europe and America the study of philosophy is regarded as an end in itself, and as such it seems of but little importance to the ordinary man. In India, on the contrary, philosophy is not regarded primarily as mental gymnastics, but rather, with deep religious conviction, as our salvation (moksha) from the ignorance (avidya) which forever hides from our eyes the vision of reality.⁷

With Coomaraswamy's move to the United States in 1917, *The Dance of Shiva* quickly established his reputation as a scholar of Indian art and culture, as well as a popular writer on Hinduism and Buddhism. From 1917 to 1931, Coomaraswamy served as a curator of Indian and Muslim art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. At this time, a profound transformation in Coomaraswamy's thinking occurred. By 1932, ac-

cording to Lipsey, Coomaraswamy had turned his attention from cultural history to the life of the spirit. As Lipsey notes in something of an understatement, "The art historian ceded some ground to the religious thinker and philosopher."⁸

Two works from this period of Coomaraswamy's life became quite familiar to Merton. The first was *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934) followed by *Am I My Brother's Keeper?* (1947). These books convinced Merton that Ananda Coomaraswamy was indeed the kind of model for spiritual unity he

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had been seeking. In these works, Coomaraswamy asserted his commitment to what others have called "the perennial philosophy." He promoted a universal point of view. He argued that each great religious tradition, in its own way, pointed to Ultimate Reality. This included Christianity. The only problem Coomaraswamy had with many Christians were their exclusive claims to truth. He laments, "The one outstanding, and perhaps the only, real heresy of modern Christianity in the eyes of other believers is its claim to exclusive truth..." However, for Coomaraswamy, Christianity, at its roots, was far more inclusive than most second millennium Christians realized.

He reminds his readers of St. Ambrose's famous gloss on Corinthians 12.3 "All that is true, by whomsoever it has been said, is from the Holy Ghost."⁹

Coomaraswamy believed much of ancient Christianity was compatible with his own inclusive philosophy. In "Paths that Lead to the Same Summit," an important chapter in *Am I My Brother's Keeper?*, Coomaraswamy wrote:

We have the word of Christ himself that he came to save, not the just, but sinners (Matthew 9.13). What can we make of that, but that, as St. Justin said, "God is the Word of whom the whole human race are partakers, and those who lived according to Reason are Christians even though accounted atheists... Socrates and Heraclitus, and the barbarians, Abraham and many others."¹⁰

In sum, Coomaraswamy concluded that all the great spiritual traditions ultimately speak of the same ultimate Truth. He used the metaphor of a mountain's summit to speak of this one Reality. He reasoned:

There are many paths that lead to the summit of one and the same mountain; their differences will be the more apparent the lower down we are, but they vanish at the peak; each will naturally take the one that starts from the point at which he finds himself; he who goes round about the mountain looking for another is not climbing.¹¹

Since we ascend the mountain from various directions and routes, it makes little

sense for Coomaraswamy to tell others how exactly to climb the mountain. He believed we need to encourage one another, but we ought not to insist that everyone do it the same way. According to this particular “climber” from Ceylon:

Never let us approach another believer to ask him to become “one of us”, but approach him with respect as one who is already “one of His,” who is, and from whose invariable beauty all contingent being depends.¹²

Merton’s own oft-quoted observation that “we are already one”¹³ resonates with this most basic of Coomaraswamy’s assertions.

Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy

Born in 1905 to Jewish parents in Argentina, Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy came to the United States at the age of sixteen. She worked as a Boston society photographer and married Ananda Coomaraswamy in 1930. At her husband’s suggestion, Dona Luisa studied Sanskrit and popular folklore in India for several years. After this, she joined in her husband’s work as his academic and literary secretary. After Ananda’s death, Dona Luisa began gathering and editing his papers. Dona Luisa died in 1970 before she could complete this tribute to her husband’s work.¹⁴

The Correspondence

Merton genuinely sought the privilege of a living contact with Ananda Coomaraswamy through Dona Luisa. As in his other interfaith contacts, interaction on the personal level was far more important to Merton than any formal dialogue or purely academic pursuit. What Merton

truly desired was direct spiritual engagement. He wrote to Dona Luisa, “I cannot help but feel that his ‘world of thought’ [Ananda Coomaraswamy] is also mine, and that in any other realm today I am purely and simply an exile.” Merton deeply desired to enter the spiritual territory of Ananda Coomaraswamy. His request of Dona Luisa was simple and heart-felt, “...all I really ask is an opportunity to feel myself a citizen of my true country.” Merton knew, with a conviction amounting to a certainty, that he and Ananda Coomaraswamy were fellow citizens of a land that few had yet explored or even discovered. This “true country” that Merton wished to chart with Ananda and Dona Luisa was a land of spiritual unity free from religious bigotry and psychological manipulation. Ananda Coomaraswamy in his efforts to interpret Indian culture to the West had emphasized this kind of spiritual freedom. He wrote:

The heart and essence of the Indian experience is to be found in a constant intuition of the unity of all life, and the instructive and ineradicable conviction that the recognition of this unity is the highest good and the uttermost freedom.¹⁵

This “uttermost freedom” could not to be abridged or diminished, especially by those who denied others the very freedom they would claim for themselves. According to Coomaraswamy: “All that India can offer to the world proceeds from her philosophy.” This freedom is India’s spiritual gift to the world, but its expression is not limited to India. He writes in *The Dance of Shiva*, “This philosophy is

not, indeed, unknown to others—it is equally the gospel of Jesus and of Blake, Lao Tzu and Rumi....”¹⁶ Influenced by the “perennial philosophy” she shared with her husband, Dona Luisa offered the following related thoughts with Merton in her letter of January 23, 1961:

I personally do not hold to converting...what is congenial to us may not be truly so to another, on our level of reference, I trust. I do hold with the possibility of any individual after some 18-20 years study, one Avitar may come to be more apparent (to one present-being) than another, but after 18-20 years of study... we should have come to be God’s very own in whatever channel it has pleased Him to cast us in...¹⁷

Like her husband, Dona Luisa had confidence that God would lead each individual in the way they are to walk. If people remain spiritually attentive, the path will break clear. Merton expressed agreement with Dona Luisa in a letter dated February 12, 1961. He writes quite bluntly, “Like you, I hate proselytizing.” This whole matter was distasteful and unchristian to Merton. He notes, “This awful business of making others just like oneself so that one is thereby ‘justified’ and under no obligation to change himself. What a terrible thing this can be. The source of so many sicknesses in the world.”¹⁸ Proselytizing, of course, is ever present among the zealous. In every religious tradition, there are those who seek to make others over into mirror images of themselves. Writing self-consciously as a Christian monk, Merton tells Dona Luisa:

The true Christian apostolate is nothing of this sort [the proselytizing kind], a fact which Christians themselves have largely forgotten. I think it was from Ananda that I first heard the quote of Tauler (or maybe Eckhart) who said in a sermon that even if the church were empty he would preach the sermon to the four walls because he had to. That is the true apostolic spirit, based not on the desire to make others conform, but in the desire to proclaim and announce the good tidings of God’s infinite love.¹⁹

In this sense, the proclaimer is not a “converter” for Merton. Rather, the proclaimer is “a herald, a voice (kerux), and the spirit of the Lord is left free to act as he pleases.”²⁰ For Merton much of modern religion had degenerated into “convert-makers” who use every technique of human manipulation available, and in the process, program out the Holy Spirit altogether. In a devastating indictment of the “convert-makers,” Merton writes to Dona Luisa, “Little do men [women] realize that in such a situation the Holy Spirit is silent and inactive, or perhaps active against the insolence of man [woman].”²¹ Merton, like Ananda and Dona Luisa, desired to spread the message of God’s love—freely and devoid of manipulation or control. Indeed, the theme of God’s unrestricted love was the central thread woven by Merton throughout the fabric of his interfaith friendships. People must be free to be who they truly are—children of God. In this regard, Merton tells Dona Luisa:

...[AKC] just was a voice bearing

witness to the truth, and he wanted nothing but for others to receive that truth in their own way, in agreement with their own mental and spiritual context. As if there were any other way of accepting it. But no, this awful mistake of the West, which is certainly not a "Christian" mistake at all, but the fruit of Western aggression, was the idea that one had to "convert" the East and make it change in every way into a replica of the West. This is one of the great spiritual crimes of man [woman]...²²

Merton, like the Coomaraswamys, insisted that God's love could never be the exclusive possession of any single religion or culture.

There Comes a Time

In relation to her husband's universal philosophy of life, Dona Luisa was to raise a most intriguing question in her correspondence with Merton. She wondered if Christianity might not benefit by borrowing from Islam its mystical tradition and establish something like a Sufi religious order. Writing to Merton on January 23, 1961, she declared, "there comes a time" in which "only the top-values survive" for any way of life. Might this not be such a time for Christianity? Historically, the Sufis had enlivened a stagnant Islam, and Dona Luisa wondered whether a similar sort of thing could not happen in Christianity.²³ Merton responded favorably, but with an important word of caution. He wrote about his qualified "yes" to Dona Luisa on February 21, 1961:

You are right about the Sufis and

about the need for Christian equivalents of the Sufis. This kind of need is not something that man [woman] thinks up and then takes care of. It is a question of God's honor and glory and of His will. Men [women] do not choose to be Sufis; least of all Christian Sufis so to speak: they are chosen and plunged into the crucible like iron into the fire.²⁴

Merton knew first-hand what it was like to be "chosen and plunged into the crucible like iron into the fire." He also understood that a prophetic response to God's presence could not be initiated from the human side of things. It was just the opposite. He knew that he and his interfaith friends must live under "the sign of contradiction."²⁵ Like Jonah, they frequently were called upon to act in ways that were

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not even clear to themselves. They were exploring new ground: A Christian Sufi order? Perhaps, but any such new reality could only be God-inspired. It could not simply be the result of human efforts, no matter how well intended.

In Dona Luisa and Ananda Coomaraswamy, Merton had truly discovered kindred spirits. By the mysterious actions of

God rather than the political and religious machinations of humanity, they believed with all their hearts that Truth would be served. Merton wrote Dona Luisa, "Would that I might so live gently, non-violently, firmly, in all humility and meekness, but not betraying the truth."²⁶ God was always the focus for these interfaith pioneers, always the source of Truth. Dona Luisa put it this way to Merton:

There are no exclusions—where man is God IS—and this applied to the so-called 'barbarians' in the remotest parts of the world...There is no monopoly on MONOtheism, never was—can you imagine God objecting, in any way whatever, to what Names He is called! Or what forms one worships Him in. Let us not attribute to Him our shortcomings.²⁷

In the end, this is the great lesson to be learned from the Merton - Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy correspondence. God may indeed have a thousand names, but God remains One. It is humanity's task to cooperate with God placing no limits upon divine possibilities. There is only one God. For Dona Luisa, "The way [of God] is multiple, 'He is multiple, as he is in us, at the same time, He is Unity so He is in Himself. Many are called, few are ready, and even of these, fewer are chosen."²⁸ Those prepared to respond to God's Oneness, in an interfaith sense, may be few in number. But for Thomas Merton and Ananda and Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy "There comes a time" when all the differences created by our human limitations must be set aside. It is then that God can become "all in all." This is the grand vision which Merton

and the Coomaraswamys shared. It is a vision not just for their time but also for our time. There does indeed come a time. And that time is now.

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24. Shannon, op. cit., p.128.

25. The "sign of contradiction" that Merton found himself living under in

The Sign of Jonas (1953) can rightfully be applied to his interfaith friends as well.

26. Shannon, op. cit., p.128.

27. Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy to Merton, January 23, 1961 (TMC).

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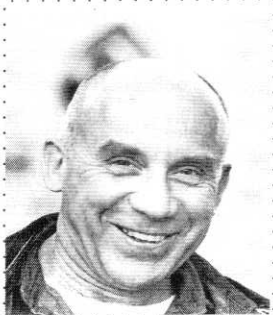
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Merton works discovered

Editor donates proofs, drafts to Bellarmine center

By Peter Smith

The Louisville Courier-Journal

Robert Giroux has collected vast numbers of documents during a career editing many of the 20th century's greatest writers, including 15 winners of Nobel or Pulitzer prizes.

But when a friend was helping him sort them last year in his New Jersey retirement apartment, Giroux had no idea what discovery awaited him - more than 3,000 pages of documents by the late Kentucky author-monk Thomas Merton.

The friend, the Rev. Patrick Samway, opened a cabinet and saw several book-length manuscripts by Merton.

"I said, 'Bob, take a look! I can't even lift this stuff!' " said Samway, who teaches literature at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

Giroux donated the documents, appraised at nearly \$1 million, to the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. The center houses the monk's archives.

"I just knew that's Merton's stuff and forgot what it was," said Giroux, a college friend of Merton who later edited many of the monk's books, including his breakthrough work, "The Seven Storey Mountain."

Merton lived at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Nelson County from 1941 until his death in 1968 at age 53. His dozens of books -- many still in print -- cover such topics as prayer, social justice and interfaith relations.

The donated documents include drafts or proofs of five Merton books. It also includes an unpublished book manuscript, various essays, letters between Merton and Giroux and a 1940 rejection slip for an early novel.