

'Already One': Mystical Union and Religious Pluralism

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Hans Küng has said that there will be no peace in the world until there is peace among the religions and that there will be no peace among the religions until there is dialogue among the religions.¹ These words would have found ready support from Thomas Merton. On January 13, 1961 he wrote to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy, widow of Ananda Coomaraswamy, telling her of his admiration for her husband as a scholar who had united in himself the spiritual traditions of both the East and the West. He is a model of the kind of people needed to bring peace to the world, namely, men and women who are "able to unite in themselves and experience in their own lives all that is best and most true in the various great spiritual traditions."²

There is the much quoted statement in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, wherein he says: "If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians."³ Later in the same work, he speaks of his conviction that his "job is to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me, and in which I live: the tradition of wisdom and spirit that is found not only in Western Christendom, but in Orthodoxy and also, at least analogously, in Asia and Islam."⁴

These texts (and so many more that could be quoted) serve to place Merton into the company of those engaged in (1) ecumenical dialogue, i.e., dialogue among Christians and (2) interreligious dialogue, conversations with religious traditions outside the pale of Christianity. (For convenience sake, from now on in this paper I shall use the term "religious dialogue" to include both.) My intent in this paper is to present two distinctive elements in Merton's approach to religious dialogue that distinguish him from others.

I. A Different Starting Point

Those who engage in religious dialogue want to end where Merton wants to begin. They would start from *the empirical fact of divisions* among religious traditions. Thus, they would reflect this way: we are divided from one another. Let us, in prayer and conversation, consider our differences in the hope that we shall be able to move closer toward deeper mutual understanding, even religious unity. Merton's starting point, on the other hand, is the realization of *the mystical reality in which we experience that we are already one*. Our task is to become aware of this oneness and all the implications it embodies. In a talk given at Calcutta in October 1968 Merton spoke of this union that is beyond word. "[T]he deepest level of communication is not communication,

but communion. It is wordless, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are."⁵

This was not a new thought for Merton. By the time he was in Calcutta it had been an essential part of his thinking for at least ten years. It was given its earliest expression in a text that has become very familiar to most Merton readers. It might be called the "theophany of Louisville". On March 18, 1958 Merton was in Louisville to speak with a local printer about a new postulants' guide book that was in process. Standing at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, he saw women and men walking about in a shopping area. All of a sudden he was overwhelmed with the realization that he loved these people (even though they were strangers), that he belonged to them, and they to him. Something new and exciting was happening to him. It was an experience that shattered the notion of a separate holy existence lived in a monastery. "The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream... To think for sixteen or seventeen years⁶ I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking."⁷ He reflects on the wondrous beauty of seeing for the first time what was always there. What a glorious destiny it is to be a member of the human race! In spite of the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition, the realization of who we are is a tremendous insight and a wondrous source of immense joy. "If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained.

There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."⁸

A similar experience that also led to a realization of the oneness that is always there came as a result of Merton's correspondence with the Hindu scholar, Amiya Chakravarty. In 1967 Chakravarty was teaching at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. On March 14, 1967 he moderated a session on Merton's writings that was attended by students and faculty. On March 29 he sent Merton an enthusiastic report. It was a great evening, he said. "We were immersed in the silence and eloquence of your thoughts and writings. The young scholars here realize that the absolute rootedness of your faith makes you free to understand other faiths."⁹ On April 13 Merton wrote to express his appreciation. "I do really feel that you have all understood and shared quite perfectly. That you have seen something that I see to be most precious – and most available too. The reality that is present to us and in us: call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pneuma...or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations."¹⁰

2. A Different Emphasis

The many papers that have emerged from religious dialogue indicate a strong desire on the part of the participants to deal with various beliefs, teachings and doctrines in such a way that new formula-

tions may bring the participants closer to one another. Merton saw the value of this—and he certainly knew the rules that should govern religious dialogue.¹¹ He was more comfortable, however, with dialogue that sprang from religious experience. That is why he was somewhat wary of dealing almost exclusively with doctrinal formulations which, however precise they may be, can never adequately express the transcendent reality of the religious experience.

Merton carried on a lengthy correspondence with Abdul Aziz, a Sufi scholar in Karachi, Pakistan. On June 2, 1963 he replies to Aziz's statement that Islam has no doctrine of salvation. Merton agrees and then goes on to say: "Personally, in matters where dogmatic beliefs differ, I think that controversy is of little value because it takes us away from the spiritual realities into the realm of words and ideas. In the realm of realities, we may have a great deal in common, whereas in words there are apt to be infinite complexities and subtleties which are beyond resolution. It is, however important, I think to try to understand the beliefs of other religions. But much more important is the sharing of the divine light...It is here that the area of fruitful dialogue exists between Christianity and Islam."¹² Earlier (May 13, 1961) He had invited Aziz: "...We must be brothers in prayer and worship, no matter what may be the doctrinal differences that separate our minds."¹³

Boris Pasternak, Russian author and translator, an international symbol of moral courage in face of Soviet oppression, wrote his much lauded novel, *Dr. Zhivago* in 1957. It was not allowed to be published in Russia. In 1958 he was

awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He was prevented from accepting it. It was that very year that Merton began writing to him. He expressed his admiration for Pasternak and his desire to share correspondence with him. Thus he wrote: "It may surprise you when I say, in all sincerity, that I feel much more kinship with you, in your writing, than I do with most of the great modern writers in the West... With other writers I can share ideas, but you seem to communicate something deeper. It is as if we met on a deeper level of life on which individuals are not separate beings. In the language familiar to me as a Catholic monk, it is as if we were known to one another in God."¹⁴

Then, there is his correspondence with Etta Gullick, a teacher at an Anglican College that trained young men for priestly ministry. She became one of Merton's favorite correspondents. He enjoyed her letters because much of what she wrote reminded him of the England he had known as a child and a young man. Etta, in turn, looked to him as a kind of spiritual director. In one of her letters she wrote of her anguish over the fact that there appeared to be little prospect in the foreseeable future of any kind of union between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism that would allow for intercommunion and recognition of one another's institutional structures. In a letter of November 26, 1966 Merton replied that he wasn't so "terribly anguished." Admitting that he was not able to get involved in the institutional side of any efforts now in process, he expresses a principle that is at the heart of his involvement in religious dialogue: "To me it is enough to be united with people in

love and in the Holy Spirit, as I am sure I am and they are, in spite of the sometimes momentous institutional and doctrinal differences. But where there is a sincere desire for truth and real good will and genuine love, there God Himself will take care of the differences far better than human or political ingenuity can."¹⁵

On an earlier occasion Etta asked Merton if, as a Roman Catholic, he was obliged to think of her as a heretic. His answer sounds a bit odd coming for Merton in 1963. It perhaps indicates that he had not completely let go of the pre-Vatican II vocabulary that had prevailed when he first became a Catholic. He indicates that he probably was supposed to think of her as a heretic. "[B]ut personally I have long since given up attaching importance to that sort of thing, because I have no idea of what you may be in the eyes of God and that is what counts. I do think, though, that you and I are one in Christ, and hence the presence of some material heresy (according to my side of the fence) does not make that much difference. Certainly truth is important, but there are all sorts of circumstances one must consider, and as far as I am concerned you are what you should be, and what you can be, and thank God for it" (March 24, 1963).¹⁶

In a letter of November 12, 1962 to John Whitman Sears, he expresses what he considers important in religious dialogue: a living exchange whose aim is to share, not to proselytize. Religious dialogue must never degenerate into a debate, in which one tries to prove that the dialogue partner is wrong. "I have come to see that perhaps the most fruitful things we can do today are in the realm not of 'proving' this or that, or of 'convincing'

anyone, but simply of communicating more or less validly with someone else on a level of genuine interest and in a matter of importance."¹⁷

Merton was strongly convinced that religious dialogue should never be thought of as a way of making converts. To Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy he wrote on February 12, 1961: "Like you I hate proselytizing. This awful business of making others like oneself so that one is thereby 'justified' and under no obligation to change himself. What a terrible thing this could be."¹⁸ Eckhart, Merton says, displayed the true apostolic spirit when he said in a sermon that if no one came for the service, he would still preach it to the four walls. For his intent as a preacher was not to be a "converter" but a herald, a voice, proclaiming and announcing the good tidings of God's infinite love.¹⁹

By the 1960s Thomas Merton was moving beyond the narrow Catholicism he had embraced in 1938 toward what I believe might be called a *world Catholicism* that was ready to learn from the religious insights and spiritual experiences of various religious traditions of both the East and the West. In no sense does this mean that he was abandoning his Catholic faith that looked to the local church of Rome as its center. Nor did this mean that he was putting all religious traditions on a par with one another. What was happening to him is that he came to see that a church that claims to be catholic can be so in fact only if it is prepared to recognize all that God is doing outside the parameters of its own institutional structures. "To be truly catholic is to believe that what God is doing in cultures that have never experienced Christian faith cannot contradict what God is doing

in a western culture that for many centuries accepted Christian faith. To be truly Catholic means to refuse to hold God captive in a single religious tradition; it is rather to recognize that God is above all religions as Saviour and Judge of all... God is, if one may say so, a Catholic God, that is a God of all peoples who acts in all and leaves traces of his/her presence in all that is authentic in religious traditions, rituals, and stories in whatever part of the world they may be found."²⁰

Notes

1. Hans Küng, *World Religions, Universal Peace, Global Ethic*, Tübingen, The Global Foundation, p.3. See also Hans Küng, *Tracing the Way: Spiritual Dimensions of the World Religions*, Continuum, (UK and USA), 2002.
2. *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed., William H. Shannon, New York, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1985, p.126. (Hereafter referred to as *HGL*).
3. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1966, p.21.
4. *Ibid.* p.194.
5. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Stone, Patrick Hart, James Laughlin, NY, New Directions, p.308.
6. Though he is often a bit careless in dating events, in this instance "Seventeen years" is exactly correct, since this was written in 1958 and Merton entered Gethsemani in 1941.
7. *Conjectures*, p.157.
8. *Conjectures*, p.157.
9. *HGL*, p.115.
10. *HGL*, p.115.

11. In *The Asian Journal* (pp.316-317) Merton gives five principles that should govern religious dialogue.
12. *HGL*, p.54.
13. *HGL*, p.49.
14. *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen, NY, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1993, pp.87-88.
15. *HGL*, p.378.
16. *HGL*, p.358.
17. *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon, NY, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1994, p.304.
18. *HGL*, p.128.
19. Merton would surely have agreed with Dr. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury who, when commenting on Tony Blair's moving from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, said: "A great Catholic writer of the last century said that the only reason for moving from one Christian family to another was to deepen one's relationship with God."
20. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, NY, Crossroad, 1993, p.285.

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