THOMAS MERTON: LIFE, WORK & THOUGHTS ON ZEN

Ecclesia de Lange

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Name, Surname:	Ecclesia, de Lange		
Postal address: (to which result can be posted)	P O Box 833 MAITLAND 7404		
Telephone No's:	554 1709	762 2787	083 611 2124
Email address:	ecclesia@mailbox.co.za		
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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to illustrate how Thomas Merton's life, spiritual journey, work and understanding of Zen is still relevant to contemporary religious challenges

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, had a unique spiritual journey with the ability to be open to new experiences and to embrace the good in other religions. Today in our global village we live and work among people who practise religion differently to what we might think and do. Christians generally do not tolerate other denominations, not even to speak of other religions.

We can either ignore the reality that people practise religion differently from what we might think and do, or we can respond to it. There is growing concern in the church about the increasingly absent age gap between twenty-five and forty- five.

We need to think seriously about our response to other religious beliefs. To some Christians the thought that God can use any person from any religion is frightening.
With the world becoming smaller, it is crucial for the churches' survival that we engage with other religions through interfaith dialogue, and perhaps even beyond dialogue.

Chapter One gives a general overview of how contemporary Christians view other denominations and religions as well as the emergence of Christians finding interest in other religions, Chapter Two introduces the reader to Thomas Merton and gives a thorough biographical sketch of his life. It illustrates how his context as well as his

relationships with his family and acquaintances shaped his thinking and attitude towards humanity and specifically religion. For Merton religion had to be experienced in a practical way. Chapter Three gives an overview of Merton's work which includes his thoughts on Solitude, Contemplation, Non-violence, Ecumenical Relations and thoughts on Asian Religion. Chapter Four focuses on his thoughts on Zen, particularly from a Christian perspective. The last Chapter contains closing remarks as to what Thomas Merton can mean to us today.

CONTENTS

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation seeks to introduce readers to Thomas Merton, his life, his works and his thoughts on Zen Buddhism. Merton, possibly one of the most influential American Trappist monks and religious authors of the twentieth century, was by no means a "narrow minded" man but viewed the world through a wide lens. His works reveal that he was a versatile writer showing interest in many areas of human concern. He wrote over sixty books and hundreds of poems and articles on topics ranging from monastic spirituality to non-violence to interfaith dialogue and more.

I have chosen Merton not only because of his profound contribution to religion but also because of his interest in other religions. Our societies are made up of a variety of religions, including the various Christian denominations. Ursula King notes that the World Religious Statistics showed an account of 20 870 distinct independent Christian denominations across the planet (1991).

It is clear to me that although Martin Luther's intention was never to start a "new denomination" but to reform the Catholic Church from within the consequences of the Reformation led to what we have to deal with today...many different denominations within one world. Interestingly, I have found that Christians generally want to believe that there is only one church that teaches the truth. Such Christians often criticise and ridicule other denominations precisely because they do not place the same emphases on what they believe to be important. So when it comes to other religions, there seems to be zero tolerance on the part of Christians.

I am convinced that Christianity does not have a monopoly on God and that other religions are here to stay. I agree with the authors of *Faith Religion & Theology*: "the dream of Christians that some day all the peoples of the world would be converted to Christianity, which would then be the only religion in the world, does not appear to be an entirely realistic hope.[1]

We live in a multi-faith society, which means that there are people who practise religion differently from what we might think and do. The constitution of our land guarantees freedom of religion for all our citizens. It is comforting to know that we Christians, are legally protected in our Christian belief and practice but it also means that South Africa no longer enshrines the Christian understanding of God as the legitimate faith for the country. As Christians, we need to think seriously about our response to other religious beliefs. I think other religions have beauty and value, and that it would be for each of us to discourse with people of other faiths, without renouncing our Christianity. We need to keep in mind that Christianity brings a specific tradition to the table of religion. How to know God as a parent through the Son, Jesus Christ; to know God through the human face of Jesus – to have the gift of friendship with God; to have a unique and intimate relationship with God; to be called a child of God.

People can have an understanding of God without an encounter with God. The theologian Raimundo Pannikkar makes a powerful observation when he writes, "Before I can answer the question 'Who am I? I must ask and try to answer the question 'Who are

[1] Hill: 93

you?" If I only know my God, myself, my religion: then my knowledge is inadequate – they, who know only one, know none.[2]

It is evident that God can choose whom God wants to use, whether they be Muslim, Buddhist or Christian. We can accept or reject the reality, living as we do in a multicultural and religiously pluralistic world/society. Wherever we turn, we bump into someone who practises a different kind of religion. Many people find this a experience scary. How do we understand this and how do we deal with it?

I am convinced that no religion has exclusive rights on God (Ultimate). Similarly, nor on the truth. With the world becoming smaller, it is crucial for their survival that churches' engage with other religions through interfaith dialogue, and perhaps even beyond dialogue.

There is growing concern in the church about the increasingly absent age gap between twenty-five and forty- five. One assumption for the increase seems to be that this group is more amenable to other religious experiences - especially Eastern Religions. Why?
Not long ago, I was privileged to attend a ministers' seminar addressed on this issue by Graeme Codrington, co-author of "Mind the Gap". Some of his remarks illuminated ideas which have been helpful in understanding religious peoples' (even my own) desire to explore other religious experiences. According to Codrington, who uses generation theory, there are currently five generations (1900-2005) of human beings living in one world, with generally five different worldviews, hence, five different means of relating to

[2] Ibid.: 196

God. The different worldviews have been formed not only by the cultures and norms of a society, but also by the context in which people have grown up.

Generations, a natural corollary of the reproductive cycle of limited-lifespan people, have existed since humanity's start. The differences between each successive generation, because of the slow pace of life, were initially not as dramatic and as overt as they are now. The advent of the Industrial era both accelerated the pace of life and introduced continued change. The only constant these days seems to be change. Rapid advances in technology and communications, combined with changing social mores have given each generation in the last century its own, unique set of experiences and values. Therefore, with time and events accelerating, the concept of generational identity became more appropriate and important for describing each new generation.

Codrington explains this as why many people who of similar age and exposed to the same historical and cultural pressure, generally view the world in the same way. They are called the GI (hero) generation (born 1901-1920), the Silent generation (1921-1940), the Boomer generation (1941-196o), Xer generation (1961-1980) and the Millennial generation (1981-2000). [3] One of this seminar's conclusions was that, in order to create or facilitate space where people can experience God a person needs to "mind the gap" between the different generations.

To illustrate the gap between two generations I refer to the SABC 3 radio advertisement pleading with viewers "to do the right thing" by paying their TV license fees. Now the

[3] Codrington: 12-14

silent generation will rush off to "do the right thing" (they always do the right thing) by paying their TV licenses. The Xer generation will question -"to do the right thing"- by waiting to see whether SABC 3 will really be so silly as to spend more money on a lawyer's letter than the cost of a TV license. Xer generation is not afraid to question and to explore new things, and can endure chaos. They make up the biggest portion of our workforce and have an increasing desire to escape the rush and noise of everyday life, even if that means attending a Buddhist retreat.

Therefore, in this thesis I wish to find some understanding of why people engage Eastern religions. Perhaps Merton can be of help.

Merton was a person in turmoil, caught in his own personal misery; he hated war and the general crisis of the world. It steered him to accept with his whole heart the revelation of the need for a spiritual life, an interior life, which included some kind of self-denial. Merton of the fifties and sixties questioned the inherited wisdom-of-the-church that supported the war in Vietnam. Students of the sixties questioned whether supporting the war, was the right thing to do. The result was that the "God is dead movement" had to declare that the God we inherited, was dead in order to rediscover new avenues of relating to the Ultimate.

Chapter Two introduces the reader to Thomas Merton and gives a thorough biographical sketch of his life. It illustrates how his context as well as his relationships with his family and acquaintances shaped his thinking and attitude towards humanity and specifically

religion. Chapter Three gives an overview of Merton's work. Chapter Four focuses on his thoughts on Zen and the last Chapter contains closing remarks as to what Thomas Merton can mean to us today.

Chapter Two

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Thomas Merton was born on the last day of January 1915, in the heart of the French mountains in Prades. Both parents were artists, his father, Owen Merton, came from New Zealand and his mother, Ruth Jenkins, from America. They met in Paris, married in London and moved to France. It seems both parents received Christian instruction as youngsters. Ruth attended Quaker meetings but when it came to raising her own children had a rather modern approach to religious instructions. She was very sceptical of formal religion and churches, and therefore allowed her children to have a free spirit, to think and experience for themselves what they believed in rather than to be manipulated into a particular religious tradition; they had to be independent. Hence, it could only have been Owen Merton's idea to baptize his son in the Church of England.[4]

Relocating to USA

With clear signs of war in the sky, her parents, in the USA, persuaded Ruth to return to a safe place. It was there that Merton got to know his American Grandparents, Pop, an up and about person who was good at giving orders (he worked for publishers), and Bonnemama, completely the opposite of her husband. They were Protestants, but overall the general attitude around their house was the implicit assumption that all religions were more or less praiseworthy on social grounds. The Catholic Church was the only one they showed signs of animosity and bitterness towards, due to information that Pop received during meetings of the Knights Templars of which he was a member. Pop's stance

[4] Ibid.: 3-5

towards the Catholic Church took root in Thomas Merton's mind, with the result he too developed an attitude of hatred and suspicion towards the Catholic Church.

Moving on, during the First World War years, live was hard for the Merton family, paintings did not bring in much to support the family and Owen had to be satisfied as a landscape gardener.

John Paul, a new baby boy was born to the Merton family in 1918. In 1920 Thomas Merton's New Zealand Grandmother (a teacher like her husband) came to visit; she made a good impression on Thomas, and was the one who taught him the Lord's Prayer.

By 1921 Ruth developed cancer of the stomach. From the hospital she wrote a letter addressed to Merton notifying him that she was about to die. He was not sure what to make of the news as death and suffering was kept hidden from him. It was not long after that that his mother died.

The death of Thomas Merton's mother brought change to the family as a whole. Owen Merton decided the best for his family would be to put all his time and energy into painting. To that end he often located to new vicinities; this helped him to produce significant work. The consequences were: Merton and his brother John Paul separated, Merton having to go with his father and John Paul staying with his American grandparents. There were intervals where they were reunited temporarily. It was a time of continual rearrangement of their lives. There were times when Merton had to go to school and sometimes played truant. At the age of nine Merton was a boy who was becoming more and more averse to the thought of being involved with any religion.

For two years there was some sense of stability in Merton's life. His father went to Europe (to paint) and he had to stay with his grandparents. It came as a shock when his father returned (1925) only to inform him that they were to return to the country of Thomas' birth, France.[5]

Return to France

It was here in France that his father told him for the first time to pray- to ask God to help them, to help him paint, to help him have a successful exhibition and for them to find a suitable home. After a long search, they settled in a town named St. Antonin, where his father started building a house and it was here where Merton started attending the local elementary school. Merton sat with the youngest children because he could not speak French; he had to pick up the language as he went along.

Aged eleven Merton was sent to Lycee boarding school (he called it a prison), which he disliked intensely. He found it difficult to relate to the rich boys compared to the boys in St. Antonin's school they had certain a simplicity about them. However, he soon adjusted and got into a group of peaceful friends. It was at this young age that Merton discovered his desire to write.

Sunday mornings they received religious instruction, which did not have real value for Merton. For him the only valuable religious and moral instruction (at that stage of his life) came from his father, it was not systematically, but rather naturally and spontaneously in the course of everyday conversation. He also learned frrm his father not to be afraid to express his ideas about truth and morality when the occasion arose.

[5] Ibid.: 4-28

During his free time in France, he wandered around old churches and monasteries, fascinated by the relics of medieval culture.

In 1926, his father went to Murat, where he boarded with a family. Here Owen became very ill. This family, the Privats, took care of Merton's father and nurtured him back to health. The Privat family made a remarkable impression on the young Merton. They were people who lived a simple and honest life, which reflected peacefulness and kindness that could only be found living close to God. This seems to be Thomas Merton's first experience of how religious people could live out their faith and he was impressed by it.

In the spring of 1928, his father returned from a trip to England to announce that they would relocate to England. Merton saw this as his escape from Lycee ('prison') and could not wait to embrace liberty by moving to England.[6]

Escape from Lycee to England

Thomas entered Ripley Court, a small boarding school near London. Once again, he had the humiliation of descending to the lowest place, sitting with the smallest boys in the school, because he did not know Latin. He caught up quickly with his peers and passed the entrance exam for Oakham Public School. Here for the first time he was confronted with the question of what he would like to become in the future, by his aunt Maud. His answer was "to be a novelist". Ripley was also the school where he received helpful Christian instruction, good for his formative years.

[6] Ibid.: 33-60

At Oakham School, he spent four years preparing for college. During this time, his father was diagnosed with a malignant tumour on the brain and after a prolonged struggle died a few days before Thomas' sixteenth birthday. His father's death left him feeling devastated and depressed, perhaps even abandoned, unable to make sense of his father's death.

Tom Bennett, his father's doctor and wealthy friend played an important role in Merton's life after his father's death. Bennett became Merton's father figure, role model and mentor in the ways of the world. He encouraged him to become a diplomat.
Merton also came directly under the influence and guidance of the headmaster Mr. Doherty, a lover of Plato. Mr. Doherty identified potential in Merton and started to prepare him for University, for Modern Languages and Literature.

There was much uncertainty not only in Merton's life but also in the world. No wonder a rebellious Merton made his appearance at this stage. He would think what he wanted, do what he wanted and go his own way (as normal teenagers do).
Merton now became a complete twentieth century man; here there was no place for God and only living for pleasure of self.

Aged seventeen, during one of his excursion in Europe, he had a near death experience, when he fell ill. He did not much care whether he would live or die, but soon recovered. During this time, he was introduced to the writings of William Blake and Gerard M Hopkins, a Catholic priest and a Jesuit.

When Merton completed his schooling at Oakham and was accepted by Cambridge University, he felt a sense of independence and freedom. His holiday trip to Italy was the start of exploring churches rather than ruined temples and landscapes. He experienced a strange attraction to the churches not for the art but something much deeper. For the first time in his life, he began to show a true interest in the person called the Christ, by reading the gospels more earnestly.

One night he had a profound mysterious experience; Merton does not consider it as his conversion. He was in his room when he suddenly had clear insight to the corrupt state of his soul; this moved him to pray earnestly to this unknown God. The rest of his days in Italy were very happy ones. The thought of "becoming a Trappist monk even entered his mind. One can definitely not say that Merton was afraid to try new experiences. His vacation was shortened when his grandfather requested he return to New York for a visit. In Douglaston one Sunday, he went to a Quaker meeting, where every person sat patiently longing for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He liked the silence and peace that it brought with it. Unfortunately, it did not last very long, a woman got up to say a few words. Merton was not impressed with the Quakers and soon lost interest in them.[7] His interest in religion quickly faded when he returned to New York and then to England to start classes at Clare College, Cambridge, in 1933. His intention was to enter the British Diplomatic Service.

[7] Ibid.: 63-118

University Days

Merton's period at Cambridge was short lived. Instead of attending classes, he chose to live his life irresponsibly. Therefore, it comes as little surprise to learn that during this time, he fathered a child, and evidently, a paternity suit was filed against him. Fortunately for Merton, with Bennett's help, Thomas could accept responsibility for the child and work out some arrangement. Virtually nothing is known of the woman and child; however, Merton left a part of his possessions to them when he entered Gethsemani.[8]

By this time, Tom Bennett had lost patience with Merton's irresponsible lifestyle and sexual exploits. Merton spent the summer in New York when a letter came from Bennet suggesting it would be better for Thomas to give up the idea of becoming a British Diplomat and that Cambridge was a waste of money and time. He suggested that it would be very sensible for Merton to stay in America. Merton knew he was guilty of unbecoming conduct. Shortly after returning to England, he was removed from Cambridge and returned by ship to his grandparents in New York. It was a stormy crossing during which Thomas Merton had much to reflect upon. He realized that he had become a product of his time, society and class – selfish, irresponsible and extremely materialistic. Merton's personal convictions not only indicated that he should strive for moral reform but that he must devote himself to the good of society and apply his mind to some extent to the problems of his time. [9]

At Columbia University Merton became actively involved in Communism, attending communist meetings and participating in protests. He thought that Communists were

[8] Simsic: 18
[9] Merton: 1975: 126-136

calm, strong, and courageous people who knew the solutions to the world's problems. According to Merton, they were indeed calm and strong and had peace of mind stemming from definite convictions, but the trouble with their convictions, for him, was that they were mostly strange, stubborn, prejudices, brainwashed by their incantation of statistics and without solid intellectual foundations. They excluded God, having decided that that God was an invention of the ruling classes trying to establish a new moral system by abolishing all morality. After only three months Merton turned his back on Communism.[10]

Merton came under the influence of bright and concerned friends, including Mark Van Doren who taught English literature. The others were Bob Lax, Ed Rice and Sy Freedgood. Merton became the editor of the 1937 Yearbook and art editor of the Columbia Jester.[11] In amid all this he still endeavoured to fill the frightening abyss he felt at the core of his being.

His readings directed him more and more to the Catholic faith. One day Thomas bought a book called *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* by Gibson, not knowing it was a Catholic book. Although tempted to through it away because he had always been afraid of the Catholic Church, he opened it and started to read. Merton discovered an entirely new concept of God, a concept that revealed to him that Catholicism was by no means as vague and rather superstitious as he had believed it to be. Instead there was a notion of God as being deep, precise, simple, accurate and yet mysterious. Part of the insight he

[10] Ibid.: 139-146
[11] Ibid.:139, 155

gained from Gibson's book was the discovery that many people who are or who call themselves "atheists", do so simply because they are repelled and offended by statements about God made in imaginary and metaphorical terms which they are not able to interpret and comprehend. They refuse these concepts of God not because they despise God, but perhaps because they demand a notion of God more perfect that they generally find and because ordinary, figurative concepts of God could not satisfy them. It was a relief to Merton that no idea of ours let alone any image could ever adequately represent God, but also that we should not allow ourselves to be satisfied with any such knowledge.[12] Reading this book seemed to impact profoundly upon Thomas. At once, he had acquired an immense respect for the Catholic philosophy and for the Catholic faith, which was evident in his life. For the first time ever he genuinely desired to attend church.

Another book, which his friend Lax recommended – Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*- introduced to Merton the need to practise prayer and asceticism. The thought of denying himself in order to practice certain discipline was a revelation to Merton. The author quoted some of the Christian mystics like St. John of the Cross, St Teresa of Avila and writers like Meister Eckhart, as well as Oriental mysticism. Nevertheless, the important effect it had on Merton was that he started thoroughly searching the university library for books on Eastern mysticism.[13]

The author William Blake seemed to have influenced Merton's through his own struggle in which he tried to adjust himself to a society that understood neither him nor his kind of faith and love. Blake's work made Thomas more conscious of the necessity of a vital

[12] Ibid.:171-174
[13] Ibid.: 184-187

faith and aware that the only way to live was to do so in a world charged with the presence and reality of God. [14]

Interestingly, it was his Hindu (monk) friend, Bramachari, who advised Merton to read Christian Mystical books especially St. Augustine's *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ.*[15]

As time went buy Thomas gradually realized that all the authors he had encountered, his friendship circle, and his life and religious experiences, worked together to expanded his image of God and that his whole being was now being pulled towards God.[16]

This force moved him to attend Mass regularly, until one day after reading the life story of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit poet, he realized he wanted and needed to make a commitment. After finding courage, Thomas went to speak to the priest and told him that he wanted to become a catholic. He enrolled for baptism classes. During this time, another thought entered his mind – an obscure desire to become a priest, but it was too much for him to grapple with at this stage: baptism was his focus and on 16 November 1938 several friends witnessed Thomas Merton's baptism. After several years of seeking, he made a decision to allow Christ to offer him peace and a new reality.[17] .

A Trappist Monk

After receiving his master's degree in literature in 1939, Merton made plans to commence with his doctorate. He continued to spend time with his friends, wrote poems and experimental novels and enjoyed his newfound religious belief, which gave him new

[14] Ibid.: 190-191
[15] Ibid.: 198
[16] Ibid.: 177
[17] Ibid.: 212-215, 218, 221

vision and happiness in life. However, in the midst of all of this another crisis aproached. The thought of becoming a priest haunted him. According to Merton, he did not have the right credentials (he was no saint) to become a priest. But his friend Lax encouraged him by saying that all that is necessary to be a priest, is to desire to be one; God will make you what God created you to be.

Thomas investigated his options by seeking Dan Walsh's advice. Dan spoke to him about a Trappist Monastery in Kentucky - the Order of Cistercians, but put off not only by the name but also by their strict observance, he turned to the Franciscans. He preferred the Franciscan Order because their life was very simple, informal and the atmosphere of St. Bonaventure's was pleasant, happy and peaceful. He was attracted most by the sense of freedom from spiritual constraints, from systems and routine. At first, nothing stopped Thomas from applying to become a Franciscan, which he did, followed by a visit to the Franciscans. During his visit, overcome with a sense of unworthiness and plagued by the sins of his past, Thomas was in agony and sought counsel from the priest. He counselled Thomas to withdraw his application. Thomas was devastated, as well as convinced that he did not belong in the monastery, still less in the priesthood.[18]

Merton got back into the normal swing of life and took a teaching position in the English department at Saint Bonaventure College. He had a rigorous schedule of prayer, spiritual reading and solitary walks. Life was good. His longing for God intensified. In his first year of teaching, he spent Holy Week at the Abbey of Our Lady Gethsemani in

[18] Ibid.: 261, 263.

Kentucky. At this retreat, he wondered whether God was calling him to be a Trappist monk after all.[19]

Once back at Saint Bonaventure's, Thomas came across an opportunity to enter a new world of poverty and dehumanisation when he heard the Baroness Catherine de Hueck speak about her work with poor people in Harlem. Working with poor people seemed to be a good alternative to the monastic life. One day he ran into her and asked whether she would consider his part-time help. She accepted. It was not long before she asked Thomas when he would join them for good.[20]

Confronted with reality Thomas now had to choose between Gethsemani and Harlem. As he prayed about his predicament it soon became clear to him that he wanted to be a Trappist monk. He sought advice from Father Philotheus, who counselled him to write to the Abbott of Gethsemani, which he did, asking permission to make a Christmas retreat and hinting that he desired to enter the postulancy.

It was 1941, America was at war and things were moving fast. While waiting for the abbot's reply Merton received a letter from the army advising him to report for induction. Nevertheless, Gethsemani was his destiny. He decided to go hoping the monastery would accept him. Merton experienced an immense sense of freedom when he entered the monastery on December 19, 1941. [21]

[19] Ibid.: 304, 310
[20] Ibid.: 340-341, 344, 358
[21] Ibid.: 366, 370-371

Gethsemani - the Trappist Monastery

The Trappist order originated in France in the 17th Century as a reform movement within the Cistercians, resulting in the establishment of two separate observances, the "common" and the "strict" observances. The Strict Observance Order is called the Trappists. They eat, sleep, and work in absolute silence; they abstain from eating meat, fish, and eggs; and follow the Benedictine rule.[22] The Trappist communities are dedicated to silence and contemplation.

At first Thomas stayed in the monastery guesthouse, until word came of his acceptance by the order. He could now enter the community. With great enthusiasm, he renounced his name and took on the religious name of Frater Louis. Within days he was out of his secular clothes; adopting dress and religious practices of medieval origin. He responded with enthusiasm as he engaged with simplicity, routine, silence, confinement, hard work, contemplation and prayer in a community of over a hundred monks. For the first time in his life, he felt at home.[23] However, his new-found life – filled with beauty, silence and solitude- did not still his active mind.

John Paul, his brother, sprang a surprise visit on Thomas before going overseas to join the Royal Canadian Air Force's war effort. During his visit, John Paul was baptised.

[22] Trappists: "Microsoft ® *Encarta* ® *Encarta*® *99 Encyclopedia*© 1993-1998 Microsoft Corp.
[23] Ibid.: 384-388

The following year Merton received tragic news. John Paul's plane had been shot down in the North Sea.[24]

The instinct of a writer was still alive in Thomas. It caused him much tension over the appropriateness of writing, in his new life as a contemplative monk. He sought advice from his superiors. They encouraged him to write.[25]

> In fact I went in to see him and started in at once trying to introduce the subject of avoiding too much activity and remaining in solitude and being a contemplative and, before I could get fairly started, he began blocking me...Reverend Father is set on my writing books.[26]

Merton the monk commenced writing poems and short books on Trappists life. In 1946, he was encouraged to start writing his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain.*

As the years progressed Merton desired more solitude, the modern farm equipment increased the noise level. He even enquired whether any monks of their Order had managed to get permission to be hermits in the then current era. To his surprise, Reverend Father said yes, there was still one living at Oka. Abbott James Fox, aware of Merton's need first allowed him to spend a part of each Sunday in the forest, later he offered Merton a vault and eventually a tool shed in the woods in which to write.

[24] Ibid.: 394-403
[25] Ibid.: 389,413
[26] Montaldo: 47

Although it seemed to be the solution, the thought of greater solitude never left him. He called the shed Saint Anne's Hermitage. [27]

1948 brought changes not only to Merton but also to Gethsemani. The publication of The Seven Storey Mountain was a huge success. Reflecting the theological outlook of the 1940's Catholicism and Merton's youthful idealism, the book became a national best seller. It brought international attention to the Trappist monastery secluded in rural Kentucky. Suddenly, people besieged Gethsemani desiring to become Trappist monks; Merton's story inspired people of all ages. This enormous popularity heightened the tension between his writing and his contemplative living. Nevertheless, Merton started accepting himself as a Trappist monk who was also a writer.[28]

Shortly before his ordination, doubt returned. [29] He made a journal entry a day before his ordination, stating that with his life a mess he was in despair and being driven to throw himself blindly into the arms of God's mercy.[30] He struggled through the darkness of doubt to discover a renewed peace and assurance of his vocation. He became Father Louis on May 26, 1949.

Despite periods of illness and exhaustion and time spent in the infirmary the following years were very fruitful for Merton.[31] He finished three books for meditation: *New Seeds of Contemplation; No Man Is an Island;* and *Thoughts in Solitude*. [32]

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[27] Ibid.: 128, 315
[28] Simsic: 23
[29] Merton: 1975: 420-421
[30] Merton: 1956: 190-191
[31] Montaldo: 424, 436, 444
[32] Cunningham: 76, 144.

In 1951, Merton was appointed master of scholastics –training young monks in preparation for final vows. He entered his tutoring duties wholeheartedly; even though this new responsibility limited his time he continued to write. The realization that the contemplative path had to include responsibility and compassion for other people, deepened within him.[33]

Civil Rights Movement

Merton read widely and deeply as his interest in the civil rights movement grew. He followed activities such as those of Martin Luther King, Jr and immersed himself in the writings of Gandhi. Merton had an epiphany early in 1958, on his way to the dentist, while standing on a street corner. He seemed to have realized the following: that he loved people and was part of them; a contemplative life had to touch, and allow to be touching by, the lives of other human beings; and that holiness did not always require silence, isolation and renunciation of the world.[34]

Merton described himself as a "guilty bystander" in a turbulent, desperate, cynical and violent world. Still involved in the monastery he could not let go of the responsibility he felt and therefore continued to minister to the world through writing letters and publishing articles on matters of justice and peace. Merton had such passion for these issues that he produced a book-sized collection of "Cold War Letters", which were never published: the abbot had asked Merton to cease writing because of the Catholic's support of government policy towards the Cold War. Restricted as to marching and writing on peace, he continued to minister through his influence on activists and others

[33] Montaldo: 459-464
[34] Cunningham: 156, 181-182

who wrote to or visited him. Merton was convinced that the solution would have to have a contemplative dimension to it.

The tide turned in his favour. After USA President J F Kennedy's assassination, restrictions on Merton's publications were lifted. He issued *Seeds of Destruction* and worked on a small book, *Gandhi on Non-violence*. Merton opposed the Vietnam War and nurtured an acute awareness of social problems. As a young man, he escaped the world to find union with God; now, twenty years later he realized that the intense struggle for his union with God called him to engage with the world to work for unity, peace and equality among all people.[35]

Hermitage Years

Although Merton acknowledged that most monks found the traditional monastic silence adequate he desired solitude. Therefore, in 1965, Merton received permission from Abbot Don James to live, as full-time hermit in a cinder block cottage not a mile from the abbey. This to him was the crown of the monastic vocation. The cottage had originally been constructed for meetings with ecumenical groups.[36]

After his fiftieth birthday, Merton realising he was at a crucial stage of his spiritual journey, took stock of his life, especially as a hermit. As he reflected he realized that solitude tears off masks and tolerates no lies – one is naked before God.

A normal day in the life of Merton the Hermit consisted of the following: praying, meditating, sweeping, cleaning, cutting wood and writing. He received his meals at the

[35] Simsic: 25-26
[36] Hart: 1978: 179

hermitage but celebrated Mass at the monastery. Merton cherished the time to walk in the woods and the hours in uninterrupted prayer. A wide variety of people - scholars, peace activists, writers, theologians and friends- came to visit him.

As in the spirit of a good Cistercian Merton retained his interest in monastic renewal, he reflected on questions such as "What does it mean to be a monk?" and "How does a monk live in the twentieth century?" He was convinced that the monastery was not an escape from the world. He even questioned a monastic obedience that emphasised institutional control rather than life ordered toward God. [37]

Travelling East

Merton's interest in Eastern religions never died. In his later years, he was convinced that sharing religious experiences nurtured not only world unity and peace but expanded our knowledge about our mysterious Creator. He grasped the idea that God does not belong exclusively to Christians. He was in regular contact with Jews, Muslims and Buddhists. Eastern religions intrigued Merton. His interest was revived by the visit of the Zen scholar, Daisetsu T. Suzuki in 1964. He found that some of the Taoist poems accurately mirrored his own spiritual concerns.

Merton enjoyed inter-religious dialogue, but realised that his knowledge and experience were limited and therefore restrained himself from any judgement. Upon receiving an invitation to take part in a conference on monastic experience and East-West dialogue, he sought and obtained the permission of his abbot to go. He saw himself as a humble pilgrim open to revelation. Merton was ready to enter deeper into the mystery of the

[37] Simsic: 27

unknown. It seems Merton sensed that a major revelation was about to unfold in his life.[38]

Last Pilgrimage

Thomas Merton's preoccupation with Eastern things can be traced back to his college days at Cambridge and Columbia. He began to study the Zen Masters seriously in his late fifties through the stimulus of renowned scholars such as Dr John C. H. Wu.

Dr Paul K. T. Sih of the Institute of Asian Studies at St. John's University in Jamaica provided him with the Legge translation of the Chinese Classics, which he pondered deeply. Merton absorbed as much Asian literature as he could get his hands on. He seemed to have received the most encouragement in his Eastern studies from the eminent Zen authority, the late Dr. Daisetsu T. Suzuki, with whom he corresponded over the years and with whom he had several conversations during Suzuki's final visit to USA. Suzuki was convinced that Merton was one of few Westerners who really understood what Zen was all about.[39]

Merton's "The Asian Journal" tells the story of his final pilgrimage to the East. The purpose of his pilgrimage to Asia is evident from the prepared remarks for the interfaith meeting held in Calcutta in mid November.

> I speak as a Western monk who is pre-eminently concerned with his own monastic calling and dedication. I have left my monastery to come here not just as a research scholar or even as an author...I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just facts about other monastic

[38] Ibid.: 28
[39] Burton: xxvi-xxvii

> vision and experience. I seek to learn more (quantitatively) about religion and monastic life, but to become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively) myself.[40]

Merton was to give of himself as well as to receive from their rich monastic tradition. It was part of an effort to deepen his own religious and monastic commitment.

Merton met with a number of sages in New Delhi, Calcutta and Darjeeling. Amongst them were the Dalai Lama and Chatral Rimpoche, both of whom were impressed by Merton's temperament and understanding of Zen. Rimpoche called Merton a "natural Buddha". [41] It seemed people, whether monks or nuns or cab drivers, immediately responded to his intellect, charm and his spirituality.

Merton had another significant experience while visiting the colossal Buddha figures carved out of rock. He wrote:

> Looking at these bodies 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, simply because that which matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya...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.[42]

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[40] Ibid.: xxiii, 295,296
[41] Ibid.: 143,145
[42] Ibid.: 233-235

This incredible moment of aesthetic-mystical experience seems to have clarified Merton's vision: it allowed him to pierce through the surface, beyond the illusion that surrounded reality.

On December 10, 1968 Merton gave his final talk, on "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives" at a Bangkok conference. In his paper, he suggests that both Marxism and monasticism should urge change in the world: Marxism a revolution of economic structure, and monasticism a transformation of consciousness. Merton's thesis 'Inner Transformation' is at the heart of the monastic vow.[43]

During the recess, after Merton's talk, a priest went to check on him. He found Merton dead, apparently electrocuted by a defective fan. His body was flown back to the USA in the company of Americans killed in the Vietnam War, the very war he had protested. The body arrived early in the afternoon of December 17th at the Abbey. The funeral service in the church started almost immediately. Thomas Merton or rather Father Louis, was laid to rest in the monastic cemetery beneath a solitary tree.[44]

[43] Simsic: 29
[44] Burton: 158-259

Chapter Three

AN OVERVIEW OF MERTON'S WORK

It is nearly impossible to summarise Merton's work (and spirituality) because he does not present a systematic treatment of any given subject. Much of his vision and passion are encapsulated in his notes, journals, autobiographical reflections and private correspondence. His Language, typical of a mystic, is filled with metaphor, symbol and image. The period between 1960 and 1968 covers a variety of topics. Merton writes of Hinduism and Zen, visits Buddhists and rabbis and corresponds with atheists and revolutionaries. His books deal with war and technology, with racism and peace, with the immorality of the Vietnam War and the cruelty of nuclear weapons, and with capitalism and Communism. Through this, he becomes a global figure defining himself not as a Catholic monk but as a companion on a journey, which includes all people.[45] There seems to be a definite move reflected in Merton's work (and life), from self and monastery to Church and Catholicism and then to the world and humanity, which is reflected in his work.

Much of his spirituality was shaped in a variety of events, tensions and paradoxes in his life. Merton lived in a time when the world felt unsafe. His life was disturbed by a bewildering succession of wars. In his 53 years there were four major wars, namely World Wars I & II, Korea and Vietnam.

[45] Padovano: 45

Wayne Simsic suggests that the essence of Merton's spirituality is captured in the following statement: *"All life tends to grow like this, in mystery imbued with paradox and contradiction, yet centered, in its very heart, on the divine-mercy".*[46]

Thoughts on Solitude

One of the primary motifs in Merton's work was his mystical quest for God, which led him to the solitude of a contemplative monastery. The ongoing quest led him further into solitude. Merton craved throughout his adult life for solitude. He writes in *The Sign of Jonas*, "Everything in me cries out for solitude and for God alone". Merton remained restless until permitted to live as a hermit within his Order near the monastery. He came to interpret in terms of solitude, much of what he experienced and thought about. The tradition of the Desert and of the Monastic Fathers of the Church convinced him that solitude and contemplation are central to the monastic life. As he studied the Eastern religions, he found the same tradition of solitude and contemplation.

Merton viewed solitude as the domain of a person's spiritual life, the inner space in which the quest for God takes place, the inner space where one meets God. It includes the purifying process of the interior, which strips all false ideas and illusions, and is where delusions are burned away in order that one might discover the true self, one's true identity as a creation of God. [47]

Solitude is parallel to silence. There can be no solitude without silence. Solitude for Merton seemed to have found its common meaning representing a place, which is lonely,

[46] Simsic: 30
[47] Cashen: 2

remote – a place apart. He calls this physical solitude; it was this solitude that he sought when he parted from ordinary society to the relative solitude of the monastery. However, Merton also speaks of solitude in another form, interior solitude, which is more important. He argued that while physical solitude helps foster interior solitude, it is not interior solitude, which gives physical solitude its validity. Merton warned that without interior solitude, physical solitude might be used as an escape from reality and responsibility.[48]

Merton used interior solitude as a vehicle for presenting his understanding of humanity. He remarked that to be aware of solitude in oneself is a reality, the solitude experienced by all human beings. To discover this inner solitude was to discover that one really is a person. Respect for other people is therefore respecting others solitude. In turn, society gives individuals a chance to transcend themselves in the service of others and through this to become closer to God. The process of self-transcendence is the doorway to finding compassion with and compassion for fellow human beings as well as an opportunity to enter into the mystery of God.[49]

Merton was adamant that all people are held solitary, isolated by the inevitable limitations of their own aloneness. Each person is distinct, unique, separate and alone. Nothing brings this home to a person more than the realisation that we must die, and when we do, we die alone. Merton calls this the 'mystery of living in solitude' – the fact that in a certain each person must also live alone.

[48] Ibid.: 50
[49] Ibid.: 53

Solitude is also found in suffering, for when we suffer we are most alone. Suffering often raises disturbing questions about the meaning of life. The challenge is to make sense of it all. This limitedness, helplessness about the unknown and unknowable future, heightens the feeling of being alone.[50]

Most people tend to avoid being alone, doing everything they can to avoid it and having to face themselves. They keep themselves busy with all sorts of things. Merton asks the question 'Why would people be afraid to stop, to be silent, to be alone? He reckons when people stop, they come face to face with 'self', a disturbing stranger, and the self that is both 'I' and someone else. People become aware of what they have been trying to avoid, a sense of anguish and dread, the sense of nothingness that overwhelms them as soon as they are left alone. Often it is accompanied by feelings of unworthiness and failure. Merton notes this as a crucial moment – the first difficulty of interior solitude:

> The disconcerting task of facing and accepting one's own absurdity. The anguish of realizing that underneath the apparently logical pattern of a more or less 'well organised' and rational life, there lies an abyss of irrationality, confusion, pointlessness, and indeed of apparent chaos.[51]

For many these anxieties are too much to face. They prefer to flee the loneliness; in choosing this option, they flee themselves as well as God. This flight and denial according to Merton is the core of anxiety loneliness. The other alternative, the acceptance of the solitariness and loneliness, brings pain and promise. Merton calls this a healthy pain. When people embrace the real loneliness and real anxiety, it causes them to

[50] Ibid.: 56
[51] Ibid.: 58

move beyond themselves, to take responsibility for their inner life and to become a balanced person. The pain includes freely accepting absurdity, insecurity, that pervading awareness that somehow one has not lived up to ones own inner truth. The promise is discovered in a paradox – finding meaning in the meaningless, peace and understanding in the anguish. Solitude can therefore be described as a vehicle that goes before into the emptiness to open secret windows of a persons 'innermost apartment'. However, it is only possible if one responds to the invitation of solitude.[52]

Merton suggests that solitude invites people to discover the meaning of life, for while others can assist, support, and guide, people must take responsibility for living their own lives and for finding themselves.

> If he persists in shifting this responsibility to somebody else, he fails to find the meaning of his own existence. You cannot tell me who I am, and I cannot tell you who you are. If you do not know your own identity, who is going to identify you? Others can give you a name or a number, but they can never tell you who you really are. This is something you yourself can only discover from within. [53]

People grow up in societies where they are taught how to live life. There seems to be a natural laziness in people rather to accept others' interpretation of life than to pursue the difficult task of working through their own identities. The result is the surrender of what is deepest and most essential in the 'self', to conformity to a societal image, a collective unity. This is where contemporary society becomes problematic to Merton. Because for

[52] Ibid.: 58-59
[53] Merton: 1967: xii

all its sophistication and unquestionable advantages, society did not seem to provide people with lives that are fully human and real. He remarked that totalitarianism appeals to people who have no identity of their own, who for one reason or another do not accept responsibility of being individual persons and for standing on their own feet. Merton was convinced that every pressure in society is to conform, for people not to think, judge and act for themselves, and where love is destroyed and replaced by fanaticism. Merton continues by stating that people have lost touch with their inner reality as well as with God, and therefore fall victim to forces which have lost all respect for human dignity and seek to exploit people for their own ends.[54]

Hence, people live in a constant state of alienation – alienation from themselves and from God. They are constantly dominated by someone else's values and concepts. Merton felt that many people in living in this state of alienation have little real respect for themselves; they often act out their resentment at being pushed around by resorting to hatred and violence. Thus an already alienating society breeds further alienation in its ranks. Merton called the relation of the person to society as one of the most important problems of the twentieth century.[55]

Merton's description of people living in a society runs parallel to existentialism. Merton adopts the existentialist meaning of alienation, alienation from the self:

> Note that the word 'alienation' is used by non-existentialists to support the fictions of collective life. For them the 'alienated' man is the one who is not

[54] Cashen: 60
[55] Ibid.: 62

> at peace in the general myth. He is the non-conformist: the oddball who does not agree with everybody else and who disturbs the pleasant sense of collective rightness. For the existentialist, the alienated man is the one who, though 'adjusted' to society, is alienated from himself. The inner life of the mass man, alienated and levelled in the existentialist sense, is a dull, collective routine of popular fantasies maintained in existence by the collective dream that goes on, without interruption, in the mass media.[56]

The people who accept the status quo of the society are limited by the laws and illusions of collective existence and alien to their own truth. Merton is convinced that for people to find their own truth they must accept their reality as solitary. People must accept existential loneliness and existential anxiety as the first step in cutting through the illusions of society if they are to discover their own identity. When people pause to confront the existential loneliness, they confront "nothingness", an abyss, a void. John of the Cross described this nothingness as *nada*, empty of all fictitious images, projects, and desires, which becomes the *todo*, the All, which we are accustomed to call the Love of God and which no person can ever account for or explain.[57]

Merton made three basic discoveries in solitude. The people who truly empty themselves will discover God, discover their own identity and discover communion with all people. Merton proceeds by explaining that these three are often experienced in one act, so that the people who are 'lost' in God find themselves at the same instant as being loved by God as well as being one with all who rest in that same love. In this process, Merton

[56] Ibid.: 63
[57] Ibid.: 66

insists that people must first descend to the centre of their own soul, and then pass beyond this deepest self to God. The Christian doctrine of grace is important at this point. Merton is convinced that no amount of inner discipline and no system of meditation or self-emptying can bring a person into union with God, without the free gift of God:

> If you succeed in emptying your mind of every thought and every desire, you may indeed withdraw into the center of yourself and concentrate everything within you upon the imaginary point where your life springs out of God: yet you will not really find God. No natural exercise can bring you into vital contact with Him. Unless he utters Himself in you, speaks His own name in the center of your soul, you will no more know Him than a stone knows the ground upon which it rests in its inertia.[58]

The fruit of solitude brings forth an increased sensitivity and compassion for others. There is a new freedom not only to love others, but a new attentiveness to their needs as well as a new responsiveness to their pain.

> It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them. It is pure affection and filled with reverence for the solitude of others. Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.[59]

The recovery of the self inevitably affects many areas of a person's being and life. Merton wrote in 1968 that more people were turning to solitude not in order to plan, or

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[58] Ibid.: 74
[59] Foster: 94

think in an analytic way, but simply in order to be. They want to get themselves together in silence. They want to rediscover themselves in a unity of thought, will, understanding and love.

> Not only does silence give us a chance to understand ourselves better, to get a truer and more balanced perspective of our own lives in relation to the lives of others: silence makes us whole if we let it. Silence helps draw together the scattered and dissipated energies of a fragmented existence. It helps us to concentrate on a purpose that really corresponds not only to the deepest needs of our own being but also to God's intention for us.[60]

A few questions arise when people read Merton's writings on solitude, and his frequent desire for greater solitude compared to the many people who filled the solitude of his hermitage. Could Merton really have lived a life as a hermit, despite his stated desire to do so?[61] I do not know the answer to this question. I know that he lived as a hermit for about three years, though admittedly not according to the popular image the word 'hermit' invokes in the mind. He was convinced that society was dependent on the existence of the inviolable personal solitude of its members. Only those who are aware of their inner solitude are capable of the love which holds a society together.

Merton seemed to have recognised the tension of his need to be in solitude as well as to be social. On his Asian trip, a Tibetan spiritual leader advised him to blend solitude and active compassion – that it would be beneficial and bring balance to his vocation.[62] I agree with Richard Cashen, who is convinced that Merton intended to continue to write

[60] Cashen: 88
[61] Ibid.: 177
[62] Burton: 103

in solitude –it seemed to be what God was asking of him- as well as to use his gifts in the service of others.[63]

I think the crux of Merton's work on solitude urges humanity (in a technological world) to search for some degree of sanity and wholeness through the exercise of silence and solitude. I cannot agree more with Kenneth Russell who states that Merton provokes us to emulate him, not that he is a perfect model, but Merton remains an excellent catalyst for reflection, self-understanding, singleness of purpose and purity of heart. If we could take his insight and infuse them into our own lives, we to would come to know that 'mysterious inner solitude in which the soul is absorbed in the immense and fruitful silence of God.'[64]

Thoughts on Contemplation

Contemplation seems to be the starting point of Merton's anthropology. It is also the key to his understanding of redemption – the return to the original unity that characterised the human condition as God intended and intended us to be, it is the overcoming of all that alienates us from God, from our own true selves as well as from fellow human beings. Therefore, for Merton the road back to original unity is the road of contemplation. Merton was convinced that contemplation was a way of life that all people were meant to practise. In his early writings, Merton links contemplation with baptism, in a Christian context; however, his growing appreciation of Eastern religions, especially Zen, opened

[63] Cashen: 178
[64] Hart: 1982: 127

his mind to the realisation that contemplation could also be found outside the Christian tradition.[65]

Merton saw the contemplative experience as an experience of oneness and transcendent unity, bringing together the scattered bits of one's person and unifying them in the intuition of the Real Self. The inner unity within oneself makes union possible with God and with all creatures.

Two theological traditions have attempted to express the contemplative experience. Knowing God through concepts (e.g. knowing that God is), the kataphatic tradition; and knowing God beyond concepts (e.g. knowing God as though God is not), the apophatic tradition. Kataphatic contemplation makes use of symbols drawn from the created order to describe the reality of God. The experiences of motherhood, of justice etc. serve as windows whereby we look out through the created world to the reality of God. Kataphatic contemplation is limited in that it can only tell us about God and what God does; it cannot penetrate the deepest essence of God's life. Apophaticism on the other hand is the contemplative tradition of darkness and denial. Apophaticism is seen as an essential step to true contemplation because there comes a point in contemplation when concepts and images will no longer suffice; in fact, they become obstacles to the deep experience of God. Hence eventually, the contemplative must renounce the mind's activity, put out the light of the intellect, and enter into the darkness, wherein there seems

[65] Shannon: 4, 6

to be an experience of the ineffable reality of what is beyond experience. The presence of God is 'known' not in clear vision but as 'unknown'. [66]

The apophatic method has a long history in the Christian mystical tradition. It is the way of Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross and many others. It is also the way of Thomas Merton.

> The Christian contemplative is aware that in the mystical tradition of both the Eastern and Western Churches there is a strong element of what has been called 'apophatic theology'. This apophatic tradition concerns itself with the most fundamental datum of all faith – and one, which is often forgotten; the God who has revealed Himself to us in His Word has revealed himself as the unknown in His ultimate essence, for He is beyond all mere human vision. 'You cannot see my face; no man shall see me and live'. (Exodus 33:20) [67]

Merton did not deny the value of the kataphatic approach but was certain that it must yield place to Apophaticism. In apophatic contemplation, God is experienced as 'a dazzling darkness'. The author of *The Cloud of the Unknowing*, who exercised the apophatic way, speaks of two clouds: the cloud of forgetfulness that one must put between oneself and creatures and the cloud of unknown that one must enter into to find God in an overwhelming experience. Therefore, God is known in darkness, by not knowing God. God is sought and is found through not finding God. In a lecture on contemplation Merton quoted Meister Eckhart, '*Seek God, as never to find God*',

[66] Ibid.: 9-10
[67] Ibid.: 10

Eckhart was making the point that once you seem to have found God, it is not God whom you have found; once you seem to grasp God, God eludes you. God is the All whom we can discover only in the experience of not discovering God. This is the paradoxical language of apophatic contemplation.[68]

Shannon believes a distinctive characteristic of Merton's apophatic approach to contemplation is his application of the way of darkness and denial to the discovery of our Real Self. For the Real Self, being our own subjectivity cannot be known, because it cannot be objective –as soon as you attempt to objectify it in images and concepts, you lose it. Therefore, the Real Self can only be comprehended in an intuitive darkness that coincides in some mysterious way with the intuition of the reality of God.[69]

Merton made a first attempt to write about contemplation in *What is Contemplation? (1948)*. In the booklet, Merton states that there is only one kind of contemplation in its strict sense, namely that infused of pure or passive contemplation. It is a gift of God and cannot achieve it by our own efforts. It involves a direct and experimental contact with God as God self, meaning emptying oneself of every created desire to be filled with God's love. To attain this means to go beyond all created images to receive the light of God. Merton also touches on a second type of prayer, to infuse contemplation, called active contemplation. Anyone can achieve this kind of contemplation. According to Merton, it includes the use of reason, imagination and the affections of the will. It draws on resources such as theology, philosophy, art and music. It may involve meditation,

[68] Ibid.: 11
[69] Ibid.: 12

vocal prayer or effective prayer that builds the desire to please God rather than to enjoy the satisfactions of God in love.

Liturgy is the highest expression of active contemplation and it may become the transition from active to passive contemplation. What makes active contemplation similar to infused contemplation is that the goal of both is union with God in love. What differentiates the two is that active contemplation is union with God in the liturgy of the Church or in the activities of one's life compared to infused contemplation which seeks union with God as in God-self. Therefore, because infused contemplation involves experiencing God as God-self, it is contemplation in the strict sense of the term, whereas active contemplation deserves the description of contemplation only by way of analogy. In the Christian context Merton identifies three types of practising Christians, first, those who obey God but do not really love God – superficial Christians; second, those who love God and are united with God in the activities of their lives – quasi-contemplatives; and third, those who love God and experience God as God is in God-self – pure contemplatives. When Merton writes about contemplation, he refers to the third group. He believed that it was easier for pure contemplatives living in silence and solitude to empty themselves of all things outside of God, so that their emptiness could be filled with God's transcendent presence.[70]

Merton stressed the purity of love, which is at the heart of true contemplation. It is pure because it desires no reward. It brings peace and strength to the contemplative individual. However, there are times when the peace it brings is buried under pain and

[70] Ibid.: 22-23, 25

darkness leaving the contemplative with feelings of helplessness and incapacity. This darkness and helplessness is the very nature of the infused contemplative experience - sooner or later brings with it a terrible revelation. The God we thought we knew is taken away and the mind is no longer able to think of God; it seems to remove everything we have known and loved, while leaving nothing in its place. This is the crucial part in the life of prayer. For we want to depend on ourselves, yet we are called to wait for God to act. We want at least to know whether we are on the right path, yet we find ourselves in darkness and denial that seems to deprive us of the certainty we once thought we had about God and about ourselves. We are bombarded with questions of How can we know...?[71]

Merton remarks that he does not have the answers to the many questions but one thing that he is sure of is that behind this cloud of unknown is a powerful, mysterious and yet simple attraction which holds the soul prisoner in this obscure darkness. Then one day there is an illumination, the soul realises that in the darkness it has truly found the living God. The paradox is this: the darkness does not cease to be darkness but it has become brighter than the brightest day. Life is transformed and one thought seems to dominate, namely, that of GOD ALONE.[72]

It is important to note that for Merton the darkness of the apophatic way must be both understood as a way of expressing it and borne in mind as never conveying the total experience. There is darkness from our side (the light of our ability is put out), but not from God's side, for it is the very intensity of God's light that causes the darkness. The

[71] Ibid.: 26-27
[72] Ibid.: 28

darkness of the apophatic approach is never total darkness, which is why Merton speaks of a ray of darkness, which is really a ray of light but so brilliant a light that it blinds us to leave room for the activity of God.[73]

Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation (1949)*, is a very different book compared to *What is Contemplation,* because he had already tasted the joys of contemplation, entered into God and allowed himself to be become as a contemplative. There are two themes I would like to pick up in this book. First, the discovery of the True God, discovery of the True Self, and the discovery of the other people. Second, contemplation as an experience of freedom.

Contemplation is a discovery of our dependence on God and the implication of that dependence. Merton speaks of that intersection where God and we meet, a point where, in a mystery beyond fathoming God and we are one and we experience God. If we truly meet God at this point of what is divine and what is human, the One we will meet is the True God as God is in God's own reality. We discover our dependence on God and in a way God 'discovers' our dependence on God. Merton continues by asserting that God 'discovers' us as dependants on God the moment we begin to exist. God sees us in God-self and God-self in us. In other words, God lives in us not only as our creator, but as our other and true self. And because we are in God, we swim in an ocean of contemplation. The result according to Merton is that we are in a sense already contemplatives, because we exist in God who is pure contemplation. The problem says Merton is that we do not realise we are contemplatives (at the centre of our being) because we do not actualise our capacity. Merton gives this as the reason why after we first taste the joys of

[73] Ibid.: 33

contemplation, it strikes us as utterly new and yet strangely familiar. In contemplation, we 'return' to a place where we have never been.[74]

Contemplation is also a discovery of the True Self at the same centre. For God bears in God-self the secret of whom we are. Therefore, we find our True Self when we find God. Therefore, we discover our true identity and possess our true identity by losing ourselves in God.

Contemplation is also a discovery of others. Contemplation is an experience in solitude, but it is not an experience in isolation. The point of dependence where we meet God is also a place where we meet others. We contemplate not to escape others, but in order to find them in God.[75]

The seeds of contemplation that God plants in us can only grow in the context of freedom. If we want to actualise our capacity for contemplation then Merton reckons, we must become free people. Merton suggests that the starting point of freedom is to see things as they really are. We must be free from selfishness, that is to say, free from the desires and attachments that feed the false self. We must give up our life of accumulating pleasures and experiences and power and honours that clothe our false self. Until we have managed this escape, we will not see things as they really are.[76] Merton in this moving passage offers a picture of what perfect freedom could look like:

[74] Ibid.: 38-39
[75] Ibid.: 41, 42
[76] Ibid.: 44, 45

> I wonder if there are twenty men alive in the world now who see things as they really are. That would mean that there were twenty men who were free, who were not dominated or even influenced by any attachment to any created thing or to their own selves or to any gift of God, even the highest, the most supernaturally pure of His graces. I do not believe that three are twenty such men alive in the world. But there must be one or two. They are the ones who are holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart.[77]

I do not think Merton intended this passage to discourage us but rather to show how deep the reality of freedom is and how rare this achievement might be. It is clear that the path to perfect freedom is difficult. For Merton it leads into the desert, into the place of solitude and silence.

Merton insisted that the climate in which monastic prayer flowers is that of the desert, where the comfort of the person is absent where the secure routines of human society offers no support and where contemplation (prayer) must be sustained by God in the purity of faith. Contemplation is therefore not so much a way to find God but also a means of resting in God, a means of being transformed and enlightened by God. For Merton it was a way of life!

Thoughts on Non-violence

Merton died when the Vietnam War escalated. There seems to be irony in the fact that Merton, identified with non-violence and pacifism, should have the essence of his life

[77] Ibid.: 46

identified by war. It was a time when all the major systems of the human community seemed to fail. The economic structures collapsed and lead to economic depression. Civilization seemed to lead nowhere except to conflict and war.

Yet the essence of the world's religions rested in compassion for the earth and for others. Generally, no religion makes a virtue of hostility or rejects reconciliation. World peace appears to be a vision that all religions aim for. It is suggested that Merton's non-violent approach to life had its origins in his mother's convictions and his father's approach to life. Merton objected to World War II when it had little social support. He encountered resistance as he criticised war and weaponry on a regular basis. The problem as he saw it, was represented by the great majority of American Catholics, "who went along", as Catholics of all nations have always gone along, supporting war and preparation for war without question. Merton wrote on the importance of non-violence. Some of his comments were reserved for this sad failure of his Church to inspire its members to oppose the militaristic ethos and the arms race. [78]

His contemplation and study of early Church history watered the seeds of pacifism in his life. He even took exception to Augustine's just-war theory. Augustine justified war if it intended objectives other than the killing, and if war were the last resort. Augustine's thinking permitted the Crusades and the Inquisition. Merton argued that Augustine's position made sense in a rational order, but was untenable in the real or existential order.[79]

[78] Zahn: xv
[79] Merton:1968: 4, 244

Merton's reading on Gandhi introduced and taught him the spiritual discipline of genuine pacifism. Gandhi's non-violent struggle for India's freedom impressed Merton. Interestingly, the original teachings of Christianity were overlooked by Christians and yet adopted and implemented by Gandhi. Merton wrote:

> It is curious that in the twentieth century the one great political figure who has made a conscious and systematic use of the Gospel principles for non-violent political action was not a Christian but a Hindu. Even more curious is the fact that so many Christians thought Gandhi was some kind of eccentric and that his non-violence was an impractical and sensational fad.[80]

Non-violence must be as concerned about the rival as about self. It seeks to liberate the rival from the mentality which makes violence and oppression attractive. Renewal and transformation is radically sought, not for the oppressor and oppressed to exchange places, but for eradicating violence altogether. In other words, non-violence allows a win-win situation to take place.[81]

Merton was convinced that the early Church Fathers and Church tradition imposed on Christians the imperative of non-violence. For instance, Clement of Alexandria noted that a disciple of Christ is a soldier of peace in an army that does not shed blood, and Tertullian insisted that Jesus disarmed every Christian soldier when he told Peter to put away his sword.[82]

[80] Zahn: xxvii
[81] Ibid.: 179
[82] Padovano: 74

In a way, non-violence invites humanity to let go of the idea that there are complete solutions to all life's challenges and to totalitarian approaches to life. People become violent because they believe that they alone have the answers and truth. Alternative answers or positions on a particular issue make matters worse, leading to tension and then conflict. Merton argued that Christians become aggressive because they see the truth as smaller than they themselves are. He affirmed the truth is larger than we are and enduring even when we do not defend it. Merton was convinced that the truth is more than the church and that Christians are not the possessors of all truth but its servants. Therefore, we do not have to attack others to preserve it. When we defend a so-called truth by violence, then we are not serving the truth but ourselves.[83]

Those identified as our rivals are often not our enemies, but simply those we cannot control. Those who take options in life we do not and those who interpret the truth in a way different from our interpretations, are seen as having a blind spot. It leads to demonising that which is alien to the accepted way in a particular culture/religion. Many of those we declare wicked are not wicked, but different. Therefore, non-violence requires some sense of spiritual maturity.

The failure of non-violence is ascribed to the idea that beneath the surface of non-violence there is a hidden agenda called aggression, a desire to control and manipulate and an assumption of moral superiority and self-righteousness.[84]

[83] Ibid.: 75
[84] Ibid.: 75

Merton insisted that humanity is interrelated and that no person is separated from another – we are all tightly knit together. In the act of inflicting pain on someone else, our hearts are poisoned it is done in darkness. Non-violence, however, is done in the light, where we do not hide our actions from one another. Where Augustine assumed the possibility of separating our intentions and actions, Merton argued for something far more holistic and integrated. He recommended steps such as refusing to vote for hostile politicians, working to promote the Peace Corps and freeing ourselves from the "crusading spirit that thinks our problems can be solved by nuclear violence."[85]

He even went so far as to call the then, current war ethic as pagan and less than pagan, and continued by saying, "There is little of Christianity left, in it anywhere. The truth and justice have been drained out of it. It is a lie and a blasphemy, and this has to be said." He knew that it would make him unpopular; and it did. He knew that his ecclesiastical superiors would take action to tone down his message or to suppress it altogether, which they did. However, Merton persisted in his efforts to get his fellow Christians to see that the concept of war must be condemned not only as immoral, but also as impractical and self-defeating.[86]

Merton's contribution to the peace movement brought to it the respectability of his name and his reputation as a priest and contemplative and as one of the major Catholic spiritual writers of his time. The fact that the peace-mongering minority is as large and as vocal as it has become in recent years is largely due to Merton and his writings on peace. Like

[85] Zahn: xv
[86] Ibid.: xx

Gandhi, Merton expressed a preference for non-violent resistance to expedient surrender in a situation where one's basic rights are at stake.[87]

Merton was well aware of the pitfalls of non-violence. Because the goal is to proclaim the truth and help the enemy to discover that truth for themselves, there is always the temptation of self-righteousness and unwillingness on the part of the practitioners of non-violence –convinced that they know the truth- to listen to the opposing argument. However, Merton always emphasised the need to keep open a two-way communication link and to avoid extreme means of protest that would jeopardise negotiation and communication. [88]

Perhaps today, people are more willing to hear Merton's message on non-violence because the environment of human life has changed in a thousand subtle and mysterious ways.[89]

Thoughts on Ecumenical Relations

Merton published little directly on the issue of ecumenical relations of Roman Catholics with other Christians. Heschel gives us a summary of Merton's mature ecumenical perspective.

He emphasises the word 'mature', because Merton's Catholicism underwent a vast revolution from being a young zealous convert to his last days as a mature Catholic. Heschel argues that Merton's ecumenism is a product of both his Catholicism and his contemplation. By the late sixties Merton looked beyond the unity of Christians with one

[87] Ibid.: xxvii
[88] Ibid.: xxx
[89] Padovano: 79

another to their unity with humanity. Therefore, we can learn much from what he said – but much more from what he was and what he did. His spirituality was like a thread of charity, which sews people of all four corners of the world together as one.

There is a clear process of maturation in Merton's attitude towards other Christians, other religions and towards unbelievers. Heschel suspects that Merton experienced a personal liberation struggle between 1949 and 1951. After this period, he seemed to have snatched every opportunity from the church's pronouncements to expand his ecumenical horizons. His concern about the future of humanity and gripping challenges of Western civilisation kept stretching his horizons farther and farther for answers.[90]

Merton's growth is evident in a change of attitude toward Protestantism. According to him as a young boy, the best religious instruction that he obtained was at the Anglican Church school, Ripley Court School and it was 'natural faith'. As a young convert in *The Seven Storey Mountain,* Merton was not impressed with his Quaker and Episcopal experiences and found them wanting even though there were moments when he seriously thought that he would join one of these denominations. In the Roman Catholic Church, he found a contrast: [91]

> …to discover so many ordinary people in a place together, more conscious of God than of one another: not there to show off their hats or their clothes, but to pray, or at least to fulfil a religious obligation, not a human one. For even those who might have been there for no better motive than that they

[90] Hart: 1981: 55-57;
[91] Merton: 1975: 55-57, 65-69, 115-119, 204-207

were obliged to be, were at least free from any of the self-conscious and human constraint which is never absent from a Protestant church where people are definitely gathered together as people, as neighbours, and always have at least half an eye for one another, if not all of both eyes. [92]

By 1960 in a letter to Heschel, Merton lamented his early narrowness and rejoiced that he had learned much from the contrast with other Christians. From that time onwards, Merton met with ministers and seminarians of various denominations on a regular basis. However, Heschel believes that Merton's change came at an earlier date. He argues that the 'new' Merton was already visible when he composed *No man Is an Island*, published 1955. In this publication, Merton affirms his identification and unity with humanity.

He made his intentions clear, he was not divorcing himself at any point to from the Catholic tradition, but neither was he going to accept points of his tradition blindly. He proceeded by stating that every other person is a piece of himself. [93]

In 1965, Merton noted with approval in an article (The Council of Religious Life) that the church "openly and officially" recognised that there was a good reason for the Protestant Reformation.[94] More of his ecumenical perspective is revealed in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Merton seemed to have been convinced that it was more important to try to understand each other's viewpoint (Protestant) than to prove the other denomination as false. In other words, he saw greater value in affirming the truth in other denominations than to refute every shade of e.g. Protestantism.[95]

[92] Ibid.: 208
[93] Merton: 1966: 11, 16
[94] Hart: 1981: 59
[95] Merton: 1966: 90, 144

What we can learn from Merton has something to do with preparation (contemplation) for ecumenical encounter, not only Christians with one another, but of Christians with all people everywhere. We must be prepared to go beyond words and thoughts otherwise there would be little prospect of genuine union. Merton discovered the cosmic Christ who precedes us in our encounters with one another and that unless we discover the cosmic Christ, we will remain hopelessly tied to our prejudiced perceptions. [96]

Thoughts on Asian Religions

It is important to remember that it was not only Merton who made significant progress in his understanding of other religions, but also the Catholic Church, which travelled a mighty distance in a short period. By 1959, Christians of other denominations were hardly considered 'Christian'. Non-Christians were hardly considered as belonging to a religion, and to think that they might have something to offer Christians was absurd. God could be found only in the Catholic Church; all other manifestations were to be discounted. However, the Second Vatican Council became the symbol of the Church's openness to the modern world. Pope John XXIII announced the Council on January 25, 1959. The first gathering was on October 11, 1962, and the last on December 8, 1965. The agenda was extensive, and topics discussed included modern communications media, relations between Christians and Jews, religious freedom, the role of laity in the Church, liturgical worship, contacts with other Christians and with non-Christians, both theists and atheists, and the role and education of priests and bishops. [97]

Merton possessed qualities such as humility, inquisitiveness, genuineness, truthfulness acceptance of others (as his very own) and profound lovingness which enabled him to

[96] Hart: 69-70
[97] Vatican Council, Second," *Microsoft® Encarta® 99 Encyclopedia.* © 1993-1998 .Microsoft Corp.

embrace and experience other religions. Before Merton left for Asia, he visited his good friend Deba P. Patnaik at the University of Louisville, to say goodbye. During their conversation, Merton remarked, "You're right, a world network of spiritual human beings will hold us together. We'll exchange notes when I come back." Merton seemed to have anticipated that this journey would be crucial to his spiritual formation. Perhaps it was the culmination of his spiritual journey. The opening pages of his Asian Journal reveal that this visit to the East had been a long awaited dream, destined to be fulfilled.[98] It was not only his rediscovery of himself, but its serving for us as an example of great compassion, '*mahakaruna*', the only true way for all nations and peoples of the world to survive and live in an age of violence, nuclear weapons and technology. Merton saw this journey as "going home". Patnaik interprets Merton's "going home" as the ground of being/becoming, of mystical contemplation, ecstatic faith, and spiritual enlightenment symbolising the ancient and holy cultures of these countries symbolise. Although he died in a distant land, Merton died a free man and as it is said, "the freeman's road has neither beginning nor end."[99]

Merton has been criticised as being unchristian and uncatholic –proclaiming that Merton was a confused monk who had no business to wander off and flirt with Eastern religions and philosophy; and asking what kind of Trappist monk Merton was, for he couldn't even keep his mouth shut on social and temporal affairs. Nevertheless, perhaps the doubts, which have been raised by many, betray the doubters own fear, ignorance, limitedness and misunderstanding. Merton was not confused, neither unchristian nor uncatholic. He

[98] Burton: 4-5
[99] Hart: 1981: 74

was firmly rooted in the Christian faith, terribly honest and not afraid to enter into new experiences and ask questions about other religions. It is helpful and important to remember that early church fathers like St Augustine were immersed in Plotinus and St Thomas in Aristotle.

Merton believed that the life of a monk is a journey in this temporal existence – a journey through doubt, struggles, hope and mystery, not a static point or destiny. His writings often suggest that the journey is toward the very source of being, toward the eternal being –oneness with the Mystery. Therefore, his Asian journey was both a physical fact and psychological and spiritual reality of a symbolic movement that started a long time beforehand in Merton.

His earlier writings in 1962 seemed to challenge the status quo, which limited the study of Asian religions to "comparative studies" in order to check concepts and to study them from an apologetic or missiological viewpoint. Merton was convinced that Asian religions could enrich ones spiritual experience.

In an essay entitled "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom" Merton argued that Christians need to gain new perspectives. He was hinting that by studying other religions Christians could learn more about their own tradition. He insisted that the study of humanities in the West must introduce an element of contemplation as well as wise action and that this cannot be achieved simply by going back over European and Christian cultural traditions. He proceeded by stating that Westerners can no longer afford to reject

Eastern faiths as 'pantheistic', but that these religions offer values in the realm of spiritual experience.[100]

> I do not know if I have anything to offer Asians but I am convinced that I have an immense amount to learn from Asia. One of the things I would like to share with Asians is not only Christ but also Asia itself. I am convinced that a rather superficial Christianity in European dress is not enough for Asia. We have lacked depth. We have lacked the breadth of view to grasp all the wonderful breadth and richness in the Asian traditions, which were given to China, India, Japan, Korea etc…[101]

Merton has put an emphasis on the experiential and practical basis of Asian wisdom. His exploration has been in the area of application of this wisdom in the life of the people of the respective cultures, the various methods and practices in meditation and their value. He suggested that the hidden values in Eastern thought revealed themselves only in the realm of spiritual experience. [102]

I noted earlier that Merton's interest in Eastern religions and philosophy emerged early in his life, when he had a turning point encounter with his Hindu friend, Bramachari, who advised him to study his own (Merton's) religious roots. It was during his Colombia days when he came across Mahatma Gandhi. Merton was totally fascinated and impressed by Gandhi's philosophy and application of *ahimsa* and *satyagrah;* he avidly read books and articles relating to the Asian thought and continue keenly until his death. [103]

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[100] Ibid.: 61
[101] Ibid.: 62
[102] Ibid.: 76
[103] Merton: 1975: 220

Patnaik is convinced that Merton's appreciation and understanding of Gandhi's ideas and philosophy formed the inspiration and basis for his book *Faith and Violence*. Merton also edited a book entitled, *Gandhi on Non-Violence*.

Merton found tremendous unity in the Gandhian concept of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha.* The Supreme Law, *ahimsa*, implies self-purification. Where there is *ahimsa* there is Truth and Truth is God. Exemplifying self-purification, the non-violent revolution, according to Gandhi, is a programme of transformation of relationships. *Satyagraha* is the intense and active purifying force – with complete adherence to truth, which is under-girded by the power of love. The entire thrust of the Gandhian way is towards self-transformation, transcendence and identification, which Merton was convinced was the indisputable, essential, and ultimate state of being human. [104]

What made Merton effective was his ability to integrate different religious traditions, e.g. in his introduction to *Gandhi Non-Violence,* he illustrated the Gandhian way with innumerable parallels from the Christian tradition, while fully acknowledging its Hindu dharma basis, and concluded that Gandhi's message was valid not only for India and for himself, but for the whole world.

Although Merton's early years displayed misconceptions about Asian religions, he modified his viewpoint as he progressed in his understanding of them.[105] He turned out to find affinities between Catholic and Hindu faiths (for example, in novice/superior and guru/ disciple relationships). Merton integrated fundamental ideas of Asian wisdom, and

[104] Hart: 1981:83
[105] Merton: 1975:188

even practised techniques of meditation and contemplation. He retained a remarkable insight into the core of the Asian wisdom – Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Tantra and Zen (discussed in Chapter Four).[106] The following passage in his Asian Journal emphasises Merton's natural assimilation and experience of Asian religions.

> Everything I think or do enters into the construction of a mandala. It is the balancing of experience over the void, not the censorship of experience. And no duality of experience-void. Experience is full because it is inexhaustible void. It is not mine. It is 'uninterrupted exchange'. It is a dance. Five mudras. The dancing god embraces and penetrates the Mother. They are one motion, one silence. They are Word. Utterance and return. 'Myself'. No-self. The self is merely a locus in which the dance of the universe is aware of itself as complete from beginning to end – and returning to the void. Gladly. Praising, giving thanks, with all beings. Christ light - spirit – grace - gift. (Bodhicitta)[107]

Patnaik suggests that Merton's entire religious and spiritual life characterises the Hindu *sadhana*, the process of balancing theory, practice, and the attainment of perfection *(siddhi),* since both in Hindu and Buddhist thought truth and knowledge are precious by virtue of its soteriological functions. *Sadhana* is experience – 'To know God is to experience God', say the Upanishads.[108]

I agree with Patnaik who found Merton's travelling to and interest in Eastern religions as growth and crystallization of Merton as monk and as an enlightened person. Merton was

[106] Hart: 1981: 84
[107] Burton: 68
[108] Hart; 1981: 88

convinced that God could be found not only in his own heart but in the voice of the stranger. Merton entered the fabulous edifice of Asian wisdom.

He was well aware of the differences between the Christian faith and the Asian religions but, despite the contradictions and inconsistencies, became convinced that the communication between Christian and Asian religious thought and practices is enriching and essential. Merton argued that the contemplative life could bring dialogue not only among Christians, but also between Christians and ancient religions of the East. [109] Merton was convinced that the sharing was necessary in order to improve the quality of their own monastic life and even help in the task of monastic renewal, an aim in the Western Church and that charity to be found in all religions.[110].

> I believe that by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditional ...The combination of the natural techniques and the graces and the other things that have been manifested in Asia, and the Christian liberty of the gospel should brings us all at last to that full and transcendent liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals...[111]

Merton believed that it would renew our appreciation of our own cultural heritage. Merton even wrote to a Chinese priest in California informing him that he would like to share with Asians not only Christ but Asia itself. By that he meant that the Eastern religions are beautiful, rich in tradition and that it is all a natural preparation for the

[109] Ibid.: 1981: 77
[110] Merton: 1975: 116, 297-298
[111] Burton: xxiv

Coming of Christ. I am sure many fundamentalists may quarrel over Merton's comment about the "natural preparations for the Coming of Christ" in connection with the Asian traditions. However, I do not think there is a problem, nor do many in Asia for that matter, in respecting Merton for his belief and hope, because the core of his ecumenism is the dimension of friendship, spontaneity and spiritual liberty. Merton was sure that in-depth communication across religious barriers was possible and necessary for the twentieth century person. He remarked that if the West should continue to underestimate and neglect the spiritual heritage of the East it might hasten the tragedy that threatens humanity and civilization. The key word in Merton's interfaith experiences has been "communication", a matter of sharing and walking together into contradictions (even chaos at times) and possibilities. It was imperative for Merton to discover or recover the original unity of humanity. It seems that Merton followed in footsteps of St Paul. St Paul was convinced that he had to be all things to all people (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). [112]

> If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians and the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the union of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians...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.[113]

[112] Hart: 1981:78-79
[113] Merton: 1966: 12, 129

It was important to Merton that a monk should not live completely detached from the rest of the world but instead be a person of prayer and contemplation with certain openness towards the world with a genuine interest and participation in its endeavours. Merton's life displayed a true sense of engagement with the world in all aspects. His urge for greater enlightenment and deeper spiritual consciousness drew him deeper into the Asian wisdom.[114]

Although some interpret Merton's fascination and engagement with Asian Religion as erroneous and controversial, I think Merton's dual approach of non-violence and engagement with other religions reveals that it is healthy not to 'get stuck in the mud', especially when it comes to religious issues, viewpoints, traditions and methods. However, Merton invites us to be open to new interpretations and methods of relating and operating in the world. To me, this is where Paul Feyerabend, author of *Against Method* comes in helpful.

Paul Feyerabend believes that people's experiences of life have their own value. People all over the world have developed ways of surviving in partly dangerous, partly agreeable surroundings. The 'progress of knowledge and civilization' (as the process of pushing western ways and values into all corners of the globe) has regrettably destroyed these wonderful products of human authenticity, ingenuity and compassion, and without a single glance in their direction. 'Progress of knowledge' in many places meant a killing

[114] Hart:1981:81

of minds. Fortunately, today old traditions are being revived as people try to adapt their lives to the traditions of their ancestors.[115]

The idea of method contains firm, unchanging and absolutely binding principles for doing the business of science. Freyerbend questions this as he says that the idea of a fixed method or fixed theory of rationality, rest on too naïve a view of humans and their social surroundings.

His thesis is that *anarchism* helps to achieve progress in any one of the senses one cares to choose.[116] In a way he uses the principle of anything goes. Feyerabend considers that we find new truths by contrast. Therefore, he suggests we use hypotheses that contradict well-confirmed theories and/or well-established experimental results and so may advance sciences by proceeding counterinductively. In doing that we need to create a dream world to discover the features of the real world we think we inhibit and therefore the first step in criticism of 'facts', must attempt to break the circle. This is counter-inductive (which Feyerabend maintains is always reasonable and always has a chance of success). His intention is clear (although critics at times think otherwise), not to replace one set of rules by another set but rather to convince that all methodologies, even the most obvious, have their limitations.[117]

A consistent theory demanding that new hypotheses agree with accepted theories is unreasonable. Preserving the older theory and not the new theory inhibits growth. A variety of opinions is necessary for objective knowledge and a method that encourages

[115] Feyerabend: 3
[116] Ibid: 14-19
[117] Ibid.: 20-23

variety is the only method compatible with a humanitarian outlook.[118] Amazing growth (proliferation) takes place when one includes and considers ideas from ancient history up to the most modern hypotheses; it is all capable of improving our knowledge. It is needed to overcome the chauvinism of science that resists alternatives to the status quo.[119]

The facts in a theory do not always all agree in its domain – it is not the theory that is to blame. Older ideologies constituted the facts and a clash between facts and theories may be proof of progress. It also seems to be the first step in our attempt to find the principles implied in familiar observational notions. The material that scientists have at their disposal is never fully separated from the historical background.[120]

Feyerabend examined the Aristotelian 'tower argument' that often was used to refute the motion of the earth – natural interpretations; also closely connected with observations. He introduces Galileo, who identified the natural interpretations, which were inconsistent with Copernicus, and replaces them with others, so illustrating and arguably how easily one can be deceived by appearances. From childhood one starts firmly to connect 'shape' appearance with words. They are the associated statements assigned to them, and reinforced by beliefs.

Galileo, a thinker who did not want to retain natural interpretations nor altogether eliminate them, insisted on critical discussion to decide which natural interpretation could

[118] Ibid.:24-32e
[119] Ibid.:33-38
[120] Ibid.:39-53

be kept and which need to be discarded and replaced. Without the help of reason a true account of nature cannot be given. therefore the senses accompanied by reason are essential for this purpose.[121]

Theories are tested and possibly refuted by facts. but facts contain ideological components. as well as older views that have vanished or were perhaps never formulated in an explicit, accurate, manner. We do not know why and how they were introduced; their nature tends to protect them from critical examination and therefore, when there is a contradiction between a new and a firmly established fact the best way forward would be to use the new theory to discover the hidden principles responsible for the contradiction. It is here where counterinduction is an essential part of such a process of discovery. [122] Feyerabend continues to reveal how Galileo went about supporting and expanding Copernicus' theory of the earth, by using ad hoc hypotheses and *counter-induction.*[123] Feyerabend believes that whatever examples we consider. we see that the principles of critical rationalism (take falsifications seriously; increase content; avoid ad hoc hypotheses' 'be honest'-whatever that means; and so on) and the principles of logical empiricism (be precise; base your theories on measurements; avoid vague and untestable ideas etc.), though practised in special areas. give an inadequate account of the past development of science as a whole and are liable to hinder it in the future. They give and inadequate account of science because science is much more 'sloppy' and 'irrational' than its methodological image. In addition. the two sets of principles are liable to hinder an adequate account of science because the attempt to make science more 'rational' and

[121] Ibid.:54-64
[122] Ibid.:54-64
[123] Ibid.:77

more precise is bound to wipe it out. What appears to be 'sloppy' and 'chaotic' or opportunism when compared with "laws of reason", etc. has a most important function in the development of those very theories, which we today regard as essential parts of our knowledge of nature. *These deviations, these errors, are preconditions of progress*. They permit knowledge to survive in the complex and difficult world we inhabit; they permit us to remain free and happy agents...without 'chaos' no knowledge, and without a frequent dismissal of reason, no progress. Ideas that today form the very basis of science exist only because there were such things as prejudice and conceit, passion; because these things opposed reason; were permitted to have their way. Therefore, even within science, reason cannot and should not be allowed to be comprehensive and must often be overruled or eliminated in favour of other agencies. Not a single rule remains valid under all circumstances, and no single agency exists to which an appeal can always be made. [124]

Today, theologians and scientists, looking back at history and proceeding in many different ways, find that rules of method, if mentioned explicitly, are either not obeyed at all, or function at most like rules of thumb and that important results come from the influence of achievements produced by separate and often conflicting trends. The idea that 'scientific' knowledge is in some way peculiarly positive and free from differences of opinion, is nothing but a mental illusion (chimaera). Scientific methods should not be restricted to the area where they scored their first triumphs, but if possible embrace methodologies proven in other areas/disciplines of science. There are times when science is less effective, because some sciences (e.g. economic theory, riddled with contradictions and obfuscation) are in sorry shape. Others are sufficiently mobile to turn

[124] Ibid.:157-158

disaster into triumph because they are not tied to any particular method or world-view. The question of truth, finally, remains unresolved. There is no 'scientific world-view' just as there is no uniform enterprise 'science'- except in the minds of politicians, schoolmasters and metaphysicians trying/hoping to make their nation competitive. Just as there are still many things we can learn from the sciences so we can also learn from the humanities, from religion and from the remnants of ancient traditions that survived the onslaught of Western Civilization.[125]

As history, culture, education and social location shaped who we are and how we perceive the world to be, so have our religions been shaped. As there is creative interaction between individuals beliefs-and-decisions and the community's beliefs-and-values, so is it true for religion. Religion has therefore become a constructive interpretation that takes place within a community, which forces the community of believers to think and to develop their faith systematically, which hopefully leads to renewal. Yet, experience has taught me that there are times when my Christian faith is constrained (by church dogmatics, culture, history and society) ... leaving me to think that there must be more depth and meaning in for what I have settled for. I suppose this explains Merton's desire for greater enlightenment.

Therefore, if we were to apply Feyerabend's arguments to our faith, perhaps it would revolutionise our lives! Yes, there would be chaos, but as Feyerabend said, chaos is necessary for progress. It would be a daunting journey - even fearful at times, yet adventurous - to break the mould, to question beliefs that have been engraved on our

[125] Ibid.:249-251

minds. in the church. education centres and in societal structures. Merton asked many questions and definitely did not entertain or maintain the status quo.

Feyerabend's arguments such as that all methodologies are limited. encourages us to think that there may be another way of experiencing and relating to God. even though it might seem absurd to others. A variety of theories and experiences is needed. As our cultures change through the ages. so do our world viewpoints change: it is unreasonable to force a people to hold on to old ideologies and theories if there are new and fresh ideas and thoughts in my experience of faith which can enhance the lives of communities and the world. I do not think this implies that we need disregard older theories but rather that new theories should be tested against them. especially to pinpoint clashes in order to determine and examine the principles underlying the clashes. It is so true, there are various theories we cling to without knowing why we do so, or their origins. It seems easier to follow a set of rules and put sciences like Religious Studies into a box, as opposed to applying our brainpower to the possibility of another way/method of experiencing God or whatever science in life. I do not have to hold on to one particular world-view to progress.

Both Merton and Feyerabend's arguments are radical. I agree with both because we have been indoctrinated by world-views and perceptions of truth as 'others' have experienced life , which leaves us brain-dead if we are never to question (or break the mould/rules/status quo) the truth. as we've come to know it (whatever truth is*): truth is not absolute.* We have been taught to see failures as errors and to reject that which is not

known (other religions) but deviating from 'the truth' (as it has been taught for centuries) seems to be a precondition for progress, and that gives hope for a better future which is progressive and not stagnant.

Merton was not afraid to take that leap of faith to plunge into direct experience of other religions. He was persistent in his experiential approach – "to rise above ...all dialectical reasoning in order to seize the truth by a pure and direct experience."[126]

The Asian Journal demonstrates Merton's appreciation, understanding and ability to connect with other religions. His encounter with Buddhist and Tibetan monks convinced him that they have "a deeper attainment and certitude" with regard to the depth of spiritual experience, than the Catholic contemplatives."[127]

Merton closed the First Spiritual Summit Conference in Calcutta in October 1968 with the following prayer:

> O God, we are one with You. You have made us one with You. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection. Oh God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore You, and we love You with our whole being, because our spirit is rooted in Your spirit. Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways,

[126] Hart: 1981:82
[127] Burton: 124

united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen. [128]

[128] Burton: 318-319

Chapter Four

THOUGHTS ON ZEN

In the last years of Merton's life, he approached Zen with great enthusiasm. It is noted in the use of his vocabulary as well as in his experience. I have already established that Merton was fascinated with Eastern religions right from his earlier years. In an earlier section on contemplation, I described Merton's thought on contemplation as an experience of darkness and denial that is beyond verbalisation and rationalisation. Many agree that Merton's emphasis on experience beyond concepts led him back to the Eastern though and especially Zen.

When Merton writes about Zen in the late sixties he states that Zen's whole aim is not to make foolproof statements about experience, but that it comes to grip with reality without the mediation of logical verbalisation. This comes close to what he's been trying to say for a long time about Christian contemplation.[129]

D T Suzuki

D T Suzuki had a great impact on Merton's understanding of Buddhism and in this case Zen. Before, it had been very mysterious and a confusing jumble of words, images, legends, rituals and so forth. Merton was quick to affirm that it was the Japanese Zen master, the late Dr Suzuki who gave him insight into Zen, enabling him to become one of its most authentic interpreters in the Western world. Over the years, they corresponded in written dialogue on Buddhism and Zen: their dialogue was published in 1961and Merton and Suzuki met face-to-face at Columbia University in 1964.

[129] Shannon: 200

That dialogue seems to have grown out of a book Merton published in 1959, *Wisdom of the Desert*. The book contained sayings of the Desert Fathers which had a remarkable resemblance to some of the stories of the Zen masters. Merton believed that when people seek poverty, solitude and emptiness the same incidents are likely to occur. Merton invited Suzuki to engage in a dialogue about the 'wisdom' of the Desert Fathers and the Zen masters.

Suzuki chose as the point of departure or common ground for this dialogue, what Merton calls "the narrative of the Creation and Fall of man in the Book of Genesis". Suzuki equates the original state of humanity before the fall with Innocence (Wisdom, *Prajna*). It is only after the fall that humanity falls out of Innocence into the state of Knowledge (Ignorance) – knowledge of good and evil- this knowledge has 'eyes' of discrimination and no longer sees unity, but differences, Suzuki identifies this with Ignorance. Therefore, human life involves keeping balance between Innocence and Knowledge. The task is to regain and to recognise that we already possess it (Innocence, in a hidden way), which is symbolised in the Genesis story by the Innocence and in Zen by the Emptiness. The mind must be emptied from all that pollutes it, namely the Ignorance that flows from the egocentric consciousness. It is here that Suzuki finds a parallel to 'emptiness' in the writings of Meister Eckhart, who speaks of the 'most intimate poverty', where a person is emptied of things, creatures, self and even God. Suzuki was convinced that only in this 'most intimate poverty' of total selflessness can we find ourselves. For the experience of emptiness is not only a metaphysical and ontological, it is existential and empirical.

Merton's reply was called the 'Recovery of Innocence', where he refers to the Desert Fathers who went into the desert to seek the 'lost innocence, the emptiness and purity of heart which had belonged to Adam and Eve'. The dialogues go into much detail and are difficult to understand at times as each author tries to use the language of the other, but it seems that they came to some conclusions (in Merton's Innocence on the one hand and Suzuki's Emptiness on the other) that match each other's in many respects.

Merton makes an interesting observation after his meeting with Suzuki at Columbia University. He remarked that one could not understand Buddhism until one meets it in an existential manner, that is to say, meets a person in whom it is alive. After his face-to-face encounter with Suzuki, Merton wrote a series of articles on Buddhism and Zen.

What is Zen?

In Merton's writings he remarks, that often those want to acquaint themselves with Zen study it as a religion, place it in the context of Chinese and Japanese history and see it as a product of joining Indian Buddhism with practical Chinese Taoism. One may read books on Zen and legitimately assume that one is learning the doctrines of Zen. A person may then compare it with Christianity and perhaps conclude that they both have something to do with meditation. But, other than that, they are alien to one another.

Merton affirms that if we do that we would miss the point of Zen. Zen is not a religion, not a philosophy, not a system of thought, not a doctrine, not an ascesis.[130] Practitioners of Zen deny that it is a sect or a school or that it is confined to Buddhism and its religious

[130] Merton: 1983: 1

structures; it is outside all structures and forms. It is not a world view, it does not attempt to explain the meaning of reality: in fact, Zen does not attempt to explain anything. It is not concerned with God, it neither confirms nor denies a Supreme Being, though it is possible to discover sophisticated comparisons between Zen experience of the Void *(Sunyata)* and the experience of God in the 'unknowing' of apophatic Christian mysticism. [131]

The word 'Zen' comes from the Chinese *Ch'an*, which designates a certain type of meditation, yet it is not a 'method of meditation' or a kind of spirituality. It is a 'way' and 'experience' of 'life', but the way is paradoxically 'not a way'.[132]

> It is a consciousness that is trans-formed. Merton argued that it can shine through any system, religious or irreligious, just as light can shine through glass that is blue, or green or red. If Zen has a preference, says Merton, it is for glass that is plain, has no colour and is just glass. Modern Zen authors compare this trans-formed consciousness to a mirror.
>
> The mirror is thoroughly egoless and mindless. If a flower comes it reflects a flower, if a bird comes it reflects a bird. It shows a beautiful object as beautiful, and an ugly object as ugly. Everything is revealed as it is. There is no discriminating mind or self-consciousness on the part of the mirror. If something comes, the mirror reflects; if it disappears, the mirror just lets it disappear.[133]

[131] Ibid.: 92-93
[132] Ibid.: 1
[133] Shannon: 199

The significance is that Zen consciousness does not try to fit things in to preconceived structures. It is simply attentive to reality. It sees what there is to see and does not add any comments, any interpretations, any conclusions or judgements. There is a freedom in Zen to refrain from categorising and classifying life. Zen does not have the habit, so common in the West, of verbalising and rationalising, whereby we tend to falsify even our ordinary experiences. Merton puts it as follows:

> The convenient tools of language enable us to decide beforehand what we think things mean and tempt us all too easily, to see things only in a way that fits our logical preconceptions and our verbal formulas... Zen uses language against itself to blast out these preconceptions and to destroy the specious 'reality' in our minds, so that we can see directly. Zen is saying, as Wittgenstein said: 'Don't think: Look!'[134]

Evidently, Zen is interested in the real, not the verbalised. The awareness of Zen is therefore, an awareness of the immediately present reality – it is not the self-conscious awareness of knowing, reflecting, or talking ego, but pure awareness. It is a direct experience of life, seized with hands unglovedly. The invisible is grasped as imbedded in the visible, in the phenomena; Nirvana (enlightenment) is samsara (everyday existence). Enlightenment is to be found in the realities of one's life. Merton argues that there is a kind of living and non-verbal dialectic in Zen between the ordinary everyday experience of the senses and the experience of enlightenment. Enlightenment is the attainment of the 'Buddha-mind' and if I understand Merton correct, 'the Buddha-mind is your every day

[134] Ibid.: 199

mind. Therefore, the Zen saying that going to a monastery to seek enlightenment is like a person riding on an ass in search of an ass.[135]

Zen is therefore, a direct grasp of life in its unity and depth, in its pure, inarticulate ground – a grasp of what was always there, but not perceived, because an ego-subject cannot perceive it.

> Zen does not bring news, which the receiver does not already have, about something the one informed did not yet know. What Zen communicates is an awareness that is potentially already there but is not conscious of itself. Zen is, then, not Kerygma but realisation, not revelation but consciousness, not news from the Father Who sends His Son into this world, but awareness of the ontological ground of our own being here and now, right in the midst of the world.[136]

Hence, as Suzuki said: 'Zen teaches nothing', it merely enables one to wake up and to become aware of what was always there, right in the midst of the world.[137] True wisdom, therefore is not a replacement of old knowledge with new knowledge but rather a transformation whereby a person knows what was always potentially knowable, e.g. when a Zen master is asked 'What is knowledge?', perhaps answers, 'It is no knowledge'. With enlightenment, nothing new is added from the outside. For no new knowledge has been acquired, it was always there.[138]

[135] Ibid.: 201
[136] Ibid.: 201
[137] Merton: 1983: 107
[138] Shannnon: 202

Merton was convinced that Zen had much to offer to modern people. They were divided in their own lives, from one another and caught up in their own prejudices unaware that they live more often with illusion than with reality. Zen according to Merton is concrete, direct, existential and seeks to come to grip with life itself, not with ideas about life.

Christianity and Zen

Merton was clear on the fact that to approach the subject of Christianity and Zen with a theological or intellectual chip on the shoulder would only end up in confusion. For Merton one could not set Christianity and Zen side by side to compare them. He said it would be like trying to compare mathematics with tennis. It would be best to treat each by itself.[139] I think what Merton was saying, following the above discussion, that you cannot compare Christianity and Zen as religions; you cannot compare them at the level of doctrine.

Zen is neither an intellectual approach to reality nor a theological explanation of human existence, whereas Christianity at first sight seems to be both. Zen is realization; and Christianity is revelation - and throughout the centuries that revelation has developed into a comprehensive system of doctrines. Much has been written on Christian doctrines, which are verbal whereas Zen, as far as possible, is non-verbal. For Christianity doctrine is of paramount importance, in Zen it is incidental. Therefore, to compare the two at the level of doctrine would be futile. [140]

[139] Merton: 1983: 91
[140] Ibid.: 203

Experience is definitely the meeting place for Zen and Christianity. Zen gives priority to experience. Although Christianity begins with revelation it should not simply be understood as a doctrine but rather as the self-revelation of God calling the Christian to experience God in Christ. Merton notes that Christians have always been profoundly concerned about exact meanings of statements and the formulation of doctrines, which has led to the unfortunate truth that Christians are so obsessed with the correct doctrinal formula that they forget that the heart of Christianity is 'a living experience of unity with Christ', which far surpasses all conceptual formulas. The early church was called to participate in the Kerygma of Christ's death and resurrection, they were called to participate and experience eternal life.[141]

Merton emphasises that Christianity is much more than a change of behaviour – it includes a transformation in consciousness. If understood in this way, it becomes similar to Zen, an experience that is transformative and can never be adequately presented or understood in verbal formulation.

When we go back to the Early Church Fathers, we discover that theology was not so much about formulating and reflecting on doctrines but rather the experience of the realities that doctrines attempt to express. However, the rise of Scholasticism in the West brought a change, which resulted in a gap between theology and experience. According to Merton, this is where an error occurred because theology and experience need be integrated to form one body of knowledge.

[141] Ibid.: 203

Merton then reaches a conclusion- first he was reluctant to compare Christianity and Zen on theological grounds- that theology might just be a fruitful place for a Christian-Zen dialogue, as long as it is 'theology experienced in Christian contemplation' and 'not speculative theology found in textbooks'.

Much of Merton's time was occupied with the problem of human consciousness – for humans to arrive at their true identity. He found that the modern person used two approaches to consciousness. The first is the Cartesian reflective awareness (dominating Western thought since Descartes 1596-1650): here we are occupied with our ego-selves and see ourselves as subjects against objects in the world. It involves a flight from being into verbalism and rationalisation. The second is the consciousness in which we transcend our ego-selves and achieve an immediate experience of undifferentiated Being; we discover the unity of being. This second approach to consciousness is characteristic of the Zen perception of reality.[142]

In the Cartesian thinking, self and God become objects, which can only be reached by concepts.

> Cartesian thought began with an attempt to reach God as object by starting from the thinking of self. But when God becomes object, God sooner or later dies, because God as object is ultimately unthinkable... God as object is not only a mere abstract concept, but one, which contains so many internal contradictions that it becomes entirely non-negotiable except when

[142] Ibid.: 206

> it is hardened into an idol that is maintained in existence by sheer act of the will.[143]

Today many Christians, exhausted by the effort to preserve a contradiction in existence, have let go of the God-object concept that their fathers and forefathers still hoped to manipulate for their own needs. It is this collapse of the Cartesian approach to reality, which has led people, like Merton, to seek alternative models of approach. Many have found the Zen model not only to satisfy their needs but also to concur with the Christian contemplative experience of reality.

> The taste of Zen in the West is in part a healthy reaction of people exasperated with the heritage of four centuries of Cartesianism: the reification of concepts, idolization of the reflexive consciousness, flights from being into verbalism, mathematics and rationalisation. Descartes made a fetish out of the mirror in which the self finds itself. Zen shatters it.[144]

Merton reminds us that another model of consciousness –a metaphysical one- is available. It starts from Being, ontologically seen to be beyond and prior to the subject-object division. The experience is a unitive one in which the 'other' is perceived not in separation but in oneness. It is a transcendent experience in which the ego-consciousness is left behind – the self is not its own centre – the centre is God, the one centre of all, called the Void *(Sunyata)* in Zen. This transcendent experience liberates people from their intense self-consciousness and from their obsession with self-affirmation, in order to enjoy the freedom from concern that goes with being simply who they are and accepting things as they are. In this experience, you let go of your superficial thoughts and

[143] Ibid.: 207
[144] Ibid.: 208

preoccupation to gain a deeper life in an unimpeded unself-conscious look at reality. The Christian calls this 'life in the Spirit' and Zen calls it *Prajna*, which is the mature understanding of the primordial emptiness in which all things are one.[145]

If the ego-consciousness is left behind, in the transcendent experience, the empirical ego cannot be the subject of that experience. This questions the whole nature of experience precisely as experience. Can we speak of consciousness when the conscious subject is no longer able to be aware of itself as separate and unique?

Merton attempts to answer this question by stating:

> The subject of this transcendent experience is not the ego as isolated and contingent, but the person as 'found' and 'actualised' in union with Christ. In other words, in Christian mysticism the identity of the mystic is never purely and simply the mere empirical ego – still less the neurotic and narcissistic self – but the 'person' who is identified with Christ, one with Christ. [146]

Merton describes this 'finding', 'actualising', 'awakening' in different ways e.g. 'spiritual birth', 'the mind of Christ' and as Christ … 'who emptied himself'.

> Thus, the Buddhist enters into the self-emptying and enlightenment of Buddha, as the Christians enters into the self-emptying (crucifixion) and glorification (resurrection and ascension) of Christ. The chief difference

[145] Ibid.: 209
[146] Ibid.: 211

between the two is that the former is existential and ontological; the latter is theological and personal.[147]

[147] Ibid.: 211

Chapter Five

CONCLUSION

Claude Geffre also acknowledges that Christianity is in crisis, and makes sense only makes sense if we pay attention to the new challenges of our historical experience at this beginning of the third millennium.[148]

Therefore, we need to cognise that our context has changed dramatically and influences every dimension of our lives and world. Postmodernism has no absolute foundations or sources for truth – the truth is not dished out, nor is it found in any one place, unchanging for all time. It does not offer general theories of interpretation whereas the previous paradigm, the modern paradigm, upheld the idea that there is always a right way of believing and doing. The introduction to this Thesis refers to the generational theory that needs to be kept in mind.

In a way, postmodernism insists on the dominance of diversity, taking into account the historical, social, and personal 'location' and tradition influencing a person's whole experience of life.[149]

Geffre reckons that there is contrast between the unaltered freshness of the gospel message and the dead weight of the Church institution. We know this is not a new

[148] Geffre: 14
[149] Hill: 201; 288

phenomenon, Vatican II made us hope for a real renewal in the governance of the Church, but to date the church has not been successful.[150]

I have noted in the introduction that the church is feeling the impact of the new religious scene. Thanks to globalization and the speed of modern communication, non-Christian religions are increasingly becoming widely known. Within this global village, religions recruit new adherents from the territory of other religions, with the result that many people find it possible to belong to several religions at once without inner conflict. Just as it is not unusual, today, to find world citizens, who feel at home in different countries and able to embrace different environments, countries, cultures and languages without much effort. Such people, even though firmly rooted in their own religious tradition, are able to relate to other religions – which are spiritually multi-lingual and multi-focus like 'world citizens'. Interestingly, recent research has revealed that a mere four percent of young people in England, Germany, and France consider that 'truth is in one single religion'.[151]

I agree with Geffre that perhaps we are still experiencing the ripple affect of Vatican II, the positive judgement on non-Christian religions. Christian people as a whole are questioning the most official teachings on Christian identity.[152]

Therefore, in studying Merton's life and work, I am convinced that we need to approach religion with a sense of exploration and discovery, a sense of new birth,

[150] Geffre: 14
[151] Ibid.: 16
[152] Ibid.: 17

growth, transformation and also of death. He also emphasises the need for churches to confront the challenges of a seemingly insurmountable religious pluralism.

We cannot use the pretext that Christianity is the true religion, as we used to do, to decide that other religions are characterised only by error. We have to allow plural truth. [153]

Interfaith encounters or dialogues require a more neutral framework in which members of different religions can discover common ground as well as their mutual concerns and perhaps mutual accountability and responsibility for the enormous and urgent tasks of the contemporary world.

I have also noted that interfaith dialogue can be a liberating experience. In fact, it breaks the mould of one's own viewpoint and beliefs in which one discovers the particular lens through which one's own tradition has mediated to the world. One can either embrace or reject this encounter. However, I think it is the potential source of new inspiration and an encouragement for authentic change. If we take a leap of faith, like Merton did, to engage the praxis and experimental of Asian religions and Zen, it could lead to new critical and reflective work in our own religious tradition - as well as stimulate further discussion and action on a practical level with other religions.

Active engagement with other religions requires not only tolerance but a genuine desire to seek understanding as well as respecting one another's differences. Hopefully, it can

[153] Ibid.: 19

lead to mutual understanding and transformation – the aim being to understand ourselves and our religion as well as that of others more clearly and fully.

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