

Rebrary

THOMAS MERTON'S DILEMMA: THE KERYGMA AND/OR ZEN CONSCIOUSNESS

THOMAS MERTON'S DILEMMA: THE KERYGMA OF CHRISTIANITY AND/OR THE
METAPHYSICAL INTUITION OF THE GROUND OF BEING IN ZEN
BUDDHISM

By

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ABSTRACT

My interest in Thomas Merton began two years ago in my last year of an M.A. program in Church History at the Wheaton Graduate school outside of Chicago. In particular, I was impressed with Merton's ability to carry on a dialogue with D.T. Suzuki, communicator of Rinzai Zen to the west, while retaining his commitment to Christianity. Hence I chose to work on an aspect of the Merton/Suzuki dialogue recorded in Zen and the Birds of Appetite.

The impulse for such a study arose from my own questions regarding Christianity. Did Christianity alone contain the formula for truth or did Christianity contain one of many formulas to find ultimate reality or God? It became evident as I progressed in my research that the kingpin in Merton's dilemma between the Kerygma of Christianity and Zen consciousness was the epistemological question.

The epistemological road of Zen Buddhism is that of experience. The epistemological road of Christianity equally emphasizes experience and rationality. Inasmuch as the experience of the reality of the Kerygma is a vital component of Christianity, and inasmuch as this sphere is often downplayed in a society which puts the scientific method on a pedestal, Merton correctly assimilates Zen Buddhist themes in order to inform that neglected aspect of Christianity. However, the irreconcilable difference between Zen Buddhism and Christianity is apparent. Christianity is not just an experiential, romantic feeling of unity with 'the one'. Conversely, Zen Buddhism refuses the imposition of content on its central thrust. I conclude

that we are faced with a 'Mexican standoff' between Christianity and Zen Buddhism inasmuch as in the quest for satori the Zen Buddhist will not include the Kerygma, nor will the Christian eliminate the Kerygma in his quest for the experience of ultimate reality or God.

Thus a merger is impossible unless severe compromise is made on both sides. I maintain that while there is a wealth of gold to be discovered in Christianity and Zen Buddhism, it is impossible to equate them. Merton's theory of the non-religious character of Zen which can shine through any system, enabled him to espouse the Zen-way to a Christian audience. I refute the claim that Zen is non-religious and rather maintain that allegiance to non-thought represents a definite epistemological stance. Also, the authoritative edge in Zen inspired by satori contains the same degree of dogmatism as the Christian allegiance to the deity of Christ.

I understand Merton's assimilation of Zen themes with his evolved Christian thought in the following manner: 1. Disgust with a technological society whose values carried over into the religious sphere. 2. His own poetic, paradoxical nature and obsession with ultimate reality. 3. His desire that Zen Buddhists learn about Christianity in a non-threatening way, and 4. His intuition that Christianity must be more than intellectual assent to dogma which does not change one's lifestyle, and his discovery in Zen of a preparatory mode for the breakthrough of truth. He wanted to integrate the heart with the head.

I begin with a biographical report of Merton's life and evolved religious thought. The second chapter focusses on representative thinkers in Merton's thought beginning with Bernard of Clairvaux, Meister Eckhart and D.T. Suzuki. Finally the third chapter focusses on the dialogue between Suzuki and Merton.

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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

I. BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THOMAS MERTON	
1. Introduction	1
2. Pre-Christian: January 31, 1915-September 1938	8
3. Pre-Monastic: 1938-1941	13
4. Early-Monastic: 1941-1952	15
5. The Eastern Turn: 1952-1968	22
6. The Asian Journey: October 15-December 10, 1968	27
7. Endnotes	32
II. THE EVOLUTION OF MERTON'S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT: BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX--MEISTER ECKHART--D.T. SUZUKI--MERTON'S ZEN	
1. Introduction	37
2. Bernard of Clairvaux	38
3. Meister Eckhart	42
4. Suzuki's Zen: Lin-chi, satori, and the koan	46
5. Merton's Zen thought	52
6. Endnotes	56
III. THE MERTON/SUZUKI DIALOGUE	
1. Background	59
2. Suzuki's Position	63
3. Merton's Position	66
4. Suzuki's Final Comments	71
5. Merton's Final Comments	71
6. Summary of Dialogue	73
7. Endnotes	75
CONCLUSION	78
1. Endnotes	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY	85
1. Books--Primary Sources	85
2. Books--Secondary Sources	86
3. Articles	89
4. Manuscripts and Typescripts	89

CHAPTER ONE: BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THOMAS MERTON

Introduction

The religious thought of a twentieth-century Trappist monk sets the stage for the examination of the epistemological question which confronts today's religious thinker. Thomas Merton, born in 1915, entered Gethsemani Abbey near Bardstown, Kentucky, at the age of 27. His obsession with reality and his ability to communicate the inner questions which propelled him into radical spheres of thought, inspired a generation. A growing disillusionment with the dominant western values of technology, materialism and the scientific method together with his consistent search for ultimate reality precipitated his interest in the writings of D.T. Suzuki, the popular communicator of Rinzai Zen Buddhism to the west.

The dialogue between Merton and Suzuki between 1959 and 1964 represents a fascinating exchange between two men committed to their respective beliefs yet eager to explore each other's religious thought. A couple of years after the dialogue in the preface to Dr. John Wu's The Golden Age of Zen, Merton concluded:

We will see later that the supernatural Kerygma and the metaphysical intuition of the ground of being are far from being incompatible. One may be said to prepare the way for the other. They can well complement each other, and for this reason Zen is perfectly compatible with Christian belief and indeed with Christian mysticism (if we understand Zen in its pure state, as metaphysical intuition).¹

Here, the supernatural Kerygma refers to Christianity and the 'metaphysical intuition of the ground of being', to Zen Buddhism. The above statement summarized Merton's view of the complementary relationship between Christianity and Zen Buddhism in 1966.

I intend to explore Merton's dilemma between the Kerygma of Christianity and the 'metaphysical intuition of the ground of being', characteristic of Zen Buddhism. In his thesis the essential problem is epistemological. How does one know truth or ultimate reality? Merton 'knew' the truth of Christianity based on an acceptance of the Kerygma in his early monastic phase (1941-1949). Gradually, the pendulum of his religious thought swung towards an experience-oriented certainty and by December 1, 1968, according to an experience recorded in the Asian Journal, he found "what he was obscurely looking for" as he viewed two sleeping Buddha statues in Polonnaruwa, Ceylon.² This final recorded experience verifies the thesis that by his death the pendulum had swung from the carefully balanced statement in 1966 to the emphasis on experience in 1968.

We cannot know with certainty Merton's intentions as he left the Christian, western harbor whose lighthouse was the Kerygma and sailed east, but we are motivated to understand the phenomenon. Merton's dilemma faces every religious thinker today. Are there different epistemological roads to ultimate reality? Merton's religious evolution manifests an espousal

of contradictory roads as he evolved from the rational road of intellectual assent to dogma, to an experiential road which emphasized union with 'Being' or ultimate reality apart from the fact.

The methodology of the thesis begins with a biographical report on the evolved religious thought of Merton. His theory of the complementary nature of Christianity and Zen Buddhism will be tested against the scenario of his evolved framework. Admittedly, Merton's complementary theory of Christianity and Zen Buddhism changed. Nevertheless, his theory highlights the epistemological problem of this thesis.

A scrutiny of Merton's Christianity inspired by Bernard of Clairvaux and Meister Eckhart, and Suzuki's Zen Buddhism rooted in Lin-chi, follows the biographical section. There are many inspiring factors in Merton's religious development. I have chosen Bernard and Eckhart because they represent the shift in his religious thought. This section informs the reader of the changes in Merton's thought. Meister Eckhart's thought symbolized the bridge in Merton's thought from the Christianity based on the Kerygma found in Bernard of Clairvaux, to the radical espousal of Zen Buddhist themes in his later life. We present a brief view of Suzuki's Rinzai Zen which originated in the life of Lin-chi during the Great Persecution in 845 A.D., followed by Merton's unique interpretation and presentation of Zen Buddhism based on the writings of Suzuki. The last section of the thesis examines the actual dialogue between Merton and Suzuki as it developed between 1959 and 1964.

The 'Kerygma' and 'experience' require careful definition. In

this thesis we understand Kerygma as defined by Eberhard Simons:

Hence the Kerygma, as an event which takes place in and through the 'word of Christ' is at once historical and suprahistorical. It is the presence of the past and the future, of the temporal and the eternal. It is the one Lord who did his work as Jesus of Nazareth, who dwells as Spirit in his own and is to come as the Lord of glory. In this three-fold way the Lord is the living and present though hidden Lord in the Kerygma.³

The Kerygma does not require intellectual assent to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but manifests the reality of those facts:

The Greek term was adopted by the New Testament writers and used to signify in a specifically biblical way a central reality of Christianity. It can indeed be regarded as one of the key concepts for the description of revelation. . . Salvation is understood as the reality of the word: God himself in his epiphany is Word and expresses himself as such. In this sense, Kerygma is the word of salvation, understood as the word which is constitutive for the coming of salvation.⁴

The reality of the Kerygma flows from the central fact. By reality, we mean the experience of the factual element.

When we refer to 'experience' we delete any historical or factual element and focus on the metaphysical reality only known by experience. The experience forms an essential component of Christianity yet without the fact, the experience becomes incomprehensible. In Zen, there are no facts and the 'metaphysical intuition of the ground of being' reigns supreme. These definitions form the framework of the thesis.

To recapitulate, the epistemological problem of knowledge and certitude in religious matters forms the central problem of the thesis. Merton's dilemma between the Kerygma (which includes the experience) and the experience, serves as a fruitful point of departure for the problem of religious certitude.

The question of interreligious dialogue springs from the epistemological problem. This thesis presupposes the following. First, Christianity cannot be understood apart from the Kerygma. We are not prepared to pronounce judgment on the millions of people who haven't heard the Kerygma. Invariably, such people sought ultimate reality through the witness of creation and the 'inner law written on their hearts.'⁵ The above exception raises the unavoidable possibility that the Kerygma may not be a necessary soteriological component for those who have been negatively exposed to the Message. The Buddhist, raised in the way of Buddhism and suddenly confronted with the Kerygma through a western missionary may decide that he likes his way better.

Second, in Zen Buddhism intellectual assent to dogma is discouraged. This commitment against rational thought takes on the character of belief. The Zen Buddhist believes in non-thought.

The epistemological commitment of a religious thinker profoundly affects the nature of interreligious dialogue. If we understand 'dialogue' to mean a complete willingness to understand and possibly change one's original religious commitments, both the Zen Buddhist and the Christian must be prepared to renounce their original commitments. The dialogue mode of communication often serves as a guise covering the true intentions of the partners. Conversion to their way of thought forms the hidden agenda of those committed to dialogue. Very possibly, Merton commenced the dialogue with Suzuki hoping to learn about Zen Buddhism but also to see Suzuki converted to Christianity. Some would say the plan backfired.

Merton's thesis represents an admirable attempt to understand and dialogue with a Zen Buddhist but any attempt to put Christianity on an equal status with another religious system will be doomed to failure. The attempt to make all religions the same without regard for the irreconcilable doctrinal differences, is naive and romantic. The significance of the experience of the reality of God shared by many various religious adherents shouldn't be minimized. Conversely, many right-believing Christians live like animals.

In his equal emphasis on the experience and the belief in 1966, Merton showed discernment. The experience, coupled with right belief forms the backbone of Christianity. In his quest for satori or enlightenment, the Zen Buddhist won't include the Kerygma, nor will the Christian eliminate the Kerygma in his quest for the experience of ultimate reality. We have a 'Mexican standoff' and perhaps can only cling to Suzuki's conclusion of the dialogue. After both men said their piece Suzuki exclaimed that the most important thing was to love one another. Merton's rejoinder that 'love is the highest knowledge' appears to agree with Suzuki's sentiment. Again we raise the question whether such a conclusion lacks careful thought. Love as the highest knowledge was embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. Love is not simply a feeling or experience.

We applaud Merton for his adventurous spirit which propelled him into the Zen orbit of thought. His paradoxical/artistic nature helps explain the contradictions in his religious thought during the eastward turn. Merton prophetically and rightly emphasized the intuitive, experiential side

of the epistemological problem in a society which emphasized the rational road. His strong background of Church teaching enabled him to explore the fascinating Zen Buddhism of Suzuki without danger of forsaking his eternal Christian commitments.

We disagree with Ed Rice's⁶ conclusion that Merton died a Buddhist and believe that the eastward turn deepened Merton's Christian commitments. At the same time we emphasize the dangers and contradictions in such a venture. Merton was a true seeker. He went where his questions led. He is a paradigm for the religious search. Anything worthy of attainment necessitates danger, misunderstanding and perhaps life itself.

Pre-Christian: January 31, 1915-Sept. 1938

The poet is born upon a day
embroidered with one flower. . .
The good poet looks into the center of the flower
where the unobserved seeds are
that grow in his own heart
and he scatters them
with the abandonment of petals. . .

a poet lives whole within a day
whose crest is the one-flower
he teaches men to speak
into the center of themselves. . .⁷

A generation that lost the ability to 'speak into the center of themselves,'
gained an eloquent teacher when Thomas Merton "came into the world. . .
on the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a
year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on
the borders of Spain."⁸ His mother, Ruth Merton kept a diary entitled
Tom's Book in which she recorded that two or three months after he was
born, Thomas "said 'Aye' in many different and expressive ways, watched and
talked to a flower. . ."⁹ If a 'good poet' is one who 'looks into the
center of the flower. . .', then Merton's destiny was marked at the outset
of his life.

Owen and Ruth Merton ventured across the Atlantic ocean with their
son Thomas, a year after his arrival in Prades, France. November, 1918
marked the arrival of a younger brother, John Paul for Thomas in Long

Island, New York where the Mertons settled. Thomas described his artistic itinerant parents as being "in the world" but "not of it" since the "integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it."¹⁰

At the age of six Thomas received a note from his mother. Unwilling to expose her dying condition to her sons, Ruth Merton chose to inform Thomas by letter that she wouldn't see him again. Provincetown and Bermuda were two stopping points for young Thomas in the next few years as he accompanied Owen Merton in his ongoing artistic career.

In 1925 he returned with his father to St. Antonin, France. Regarding religious development in his early years Thomas remarked:

The only really valuable religious and moral training I ever got as a child came from my father, not systematically, but here and there and more or less spontaneously, in the course of ordinary conversations. Father never applied himself, of set purpose, to teach me religion. But if something spiritual was on his mind, it came out more or less naturally. And this is the kind of religious teaching, or any other kind of teaching, that has the most effect.¹¹

In his fourteenth year, 1929 Thomas commenced school at Oakham, England. That year he received the tragic news that his father had a malignant tumor on his brain. After two years his father died. Fifteen years passed and Thomas recalled:

The death of my father left me sad and depressed for a couple of months. But that eventually wore away. And when it did, I found myself completely stripped of everything that impeded the movement of my own will to do as it pleased. I imagined that I was free. And it would take me five or six years to discover what a frightful captivity I had got myself into. It was in this year, too, that the hard crust of my dry soul finally squeezed out all the last traces of religion that had ever been in it. There was no room for any God in that empty temple full of dust and rubbish which I was now so jealously to guard against all intruders, in order to devote it to the worship of my own stupid will.¹²

Despite the 'empty temple', 'devoted to the worship of his stupid will', Merton discovered William Blake's poetry,--his father's favorite poet. Blake's poetry catalyzed the process of conversion to Christianity which culminated in Merton's development, in September, 1938:

The Providence of God was eventually to use Blake to awaken something of faith and love in my own soul . . . I have to acknowledge my own debt to him, and the truth which may appear curious to some, although it is really not so: that through Blake I would one day come, in a round-about way, to the only true Church, and to the One Living God, through His Son, Jesus Christ.¹³

After several years Thomas entered his first year of college at Cambridge. To avoid the second world war he sailed for America in 1934 after one year of school. Enroute to America he was "in the thick of a conversion. . .I was becoming a Communist."¹⁴ There were good precedents for such a conversion in that "being the son of an artist, I was born the sworn enemy of everything that could obviously be called 'bourgeois'. . ."¹⁵ The Communist phase ended after an early departure from a Young Communist League meeting. Cynically he observed:

The truth is that my inspiration to do something for the good of mankind had been pretty feeble and abstract from the start. I was still interested in doing good for only one person in the world--myself.¹⁶

The self-described intolerable state of life in 1935 and 1936 set the stage for a life-changing conversion to follow in two or three years.

Merton reminisced:

Three or four nights a week my fraternity brothers and I would go flying down in the black and roaring subway to 52nd Street, where we would crawl around the tiny, noisy and expensive nightclubs that had flowered on the sites of the old speakeasies in the cellars of those dirty brownstone houses. . . it was this strange business of sitting

in a room full of people and drinking without much speech, and letting yourself be deafened by the jazz that throbbed through the whole sea of bodies binding them all together in a kind of fluid medium. It was a strange, animal travesty of mysticism, sitting in those booming rooms, with the noise pouring through you, and the rhythm jumping and throbbing in the marrow of your bones.¹⁷

He contrasted his lifestyle with laborers,--"men healthy and awake and quiet, with their eyes clear, and some rational purpose before them."¹⁸

Struck by the effect of Aldous Huxley's Ends and Means on Merton in 1937, Mertonian writers refer to the event as a foreshadowing of later developments.¹⁹ At the time, "the most important effect of the book on me was to make me start ransacking the university library for books on Oriental mysticism."²⁰ After his first 'crash-course' in eastern mysticism he concluded:

the strange great jumble of myths and theories and moral aphorisms and elaborate parables made little or no real impression on my mind, except that I put the books down with the impression that mysticism was something very esoteric and complicated, and that we were all inside some huge Being in whom we were involved and out of whom we evolved, and the thing to do was to involve ourselves back into him again by a system of elaborate disciplines subject more or less to the control of our own will. The Absolute Being was an infinite, timeless, peaceful, impersonal Nothing.²¹

In another decisive encounter with the East Merton met Bramachari at the age of 23. The wise Hindu monk from India advised Merton first to study Western mysticism and to read St. Augustine's Confessions and Thomas à Kempis's The Imitation of Christ. Regarding Bramachari's advice Merton wrote: "It seems to me very probable that one of the reasons why God had brought him all the way from India, was that he might say just that."²²

By September, 1938, Merton desired conversion, but, the notion was still vague and obscure, and it was ludicrously impractical in the sense that I was already dreaming of mystical union when I did not even keep the simplest rudiments of the moral law.²³

Nevertheless, one hot day in September, after hearing the news that Germany occupied Czechoslovakia, Merton borrowed Father Leahy's Life of Gerard Manley Hopkins from the library. The following shows the profound impact of the book on Merton:

I took up the book about Gerard Manley Hopkins. The chapter told of Hopkins at Balliol, at Oxford. He was thinking of becoming a Catholic. . . . All of a sudden something began to stir within me, something began to push me, to prompt me. It was a movement that spoke like a voice. 'What are you waiting for?' it said. 'Why are you sitting here? Why do you still hesitate? You know what you ought to do? Why don't you do it?'²⁴

In decisive response to those inner promptings Merton was baptized into the Catholic church on November 16, 1938. The following fragment from a poem entitled "Sacred Heart Two" captures the spirit of Merton's initial encounter with God:

Geography comes to an end,
Compass has lost all earthly north,
Horizons have no meaning
Nor roads an explanation:
I cannot even hope for any special borealis
To rouse my darkness with a brief 'Hurray'!

O flaming Heart,
Unseen and unimagined in this wilderness,
You, You alone are real, and here I've found You.
Here will I love and praise You in a tongueless death,
Until my white devoted bones,
Long bleached and polished by the winds of this Sahara,
Relive at Your command,
Rise and unfold the flowers of their everlasting spring.²⁵

The allusion to flowers in the last line consistently appears in Merton's writings throughout his life.

Pre-Monastic: 1938-1941

Meanwhile, there had been another thought, half forming itself in the back of my mind--an obscure desire to become a priest.²⁶

Thomas Merton's desire to become a priest occurred in the month of his baptism into the church, November, 1938. After his baptism the desire dissipated as academic concerns occupied his attention. He finished his M.A. in English Literature from Columbia University, New York, 1939 and commenced his Ph.D. dissertation on Gerard Manley Hopkins. As he sat with friends in September, 1939, the latent desire to become a priest surfaced:

I cannot say what caused it: it was not a reaction of especially strong disgust at being so tired and so uninterested in this life I was still leading, in spite of its futility. . . It was a strong and sweet and deep and insistent attraction that suddenly made itself felt, but not as movement of appetite towards any sensible good. It was something in the order of conscience, a new and profound and clear sense that this is what I really ought to do.²⁷

Dan Walsh, a friend and teacher at Columbia, recommended that Merton make a retreat at the Trappist abbey at Gethsemani, Kentucky. His description of the abbey left Merton cold:

The life took my breath away, but it did not attract me. It sounded cold and terrible. The monastery now existed in my mind as a big grey prison with barred windows, filled with dour and emaciated characters with their hoods pulled down over their faces.²⁸

Merton applied to be a member of the Franciscans but was rejected when under his admission they reviewed his past lifestyle.

In the fall of 1940 he taught English at St. Bonaventure's College in New York. By spring he needed a break and Merton wrote to Gethsemani for

permission to have a retreat at Easter. He received a positive reply and a few days later a letter from the Draft Board arrived informing him that his number was up for the army. He applied as a non-combatant objector along with an explanatory letter.

The positive impact of the retreat at Gethsemani on Merton wasn't enough to motivate him for a life commitment to the monastery. A brief temptation to help Catherine de Hueck with her Friendship House ministry to negroes in Harlem, New York ended that summer after several days of service. The experiences at Gethsemani and Friendship House awakened in Merton the awareness of his need for Christian community support.

Merton's conviction that he should be a priest recurred at the end of November, 1941 as he:

suddenly found myself filled with a vivid conviction: 'The time has come for me to go and be a Trappist.' Where had the thought come from? All I knew was that it was suddenly there. And it was something powerful, irresistible, clear.²⁹

Perhaps the letter from the Draft Board received after an acceptance letter from the abbey for a Christmas retreat sealed Merton's fate. He wrote the Draft Board informing them of his decision to enter a monastery and quit his job at St. Bonaventure's. On the train to Louisville he recalled: "It was a strange thing. Mile after mile my desire to be in the monastery increased beyond belief."³⁰ Any doubts he had about a monastic vocation were quelled when faced with the worse prospect of entering the war. Thus, Merton entered the gates of the abbey whose motto above the gate read "God Alone."

Early Monastic Phase: 1941-1952

In one sense we are always travelling, and travelling as if we did not know where we were going. In another sense we have already arrived. We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are travelling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light. But oh! How far have I to go to find you in Whom I have already arrived!³¹

Thomas Merton arrived at Gethsemani in Kentucky on December 10, 1941 to commence a new travel mode which occupied his devotion for the next decade. The way of purification and spiritual discipline characterized Gethsemani, "the first Trappist abbey founded in America, with a heritage going back to the severe reform of La Trappe by Abbé de Rancé in the seventeenth-century."³² A Trappist monastery in 1940 represented an opposite way of being-in-the-world for the newly-converted Merton than what had prevailed in his previous experience. In Thomas Merton on Mysticism Raymond Bailey described the monastery:

Only minimal contact with the outside world was permitted. In those days there were no radios, no TV's, no newspapers, and no newsmagazines. Visitors were allowed only once a year for three days. Letters could be sent and received only four times a year. The witty, urbane language of academia was abandoned for the silence of Gethsemani.³³

The first years of monastic life pictured the young convert, Thomas Merton, as he eagerly learned and accepted what the Church taught. In 1942, Merton's younger brother, John Paul visited him enroute to the war in Europe.

John Paul's baptism into the church highlighted the visit, but a year later, April 27, 1943, Thomas received a telegram which announced the death of his last immediate family member. Sorrowfully he eulogized about John Paul's death at sea:

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep
 My eyes are flowers for your tomb;
 And if I cannot eat my bread,
 My fasts shall live like willows where you died.
 If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,
 My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.³⁴

Beyond the hardships of monastic life, Merton experienced the greatest pain with his writing. The following indicates Merton's frustration with his vocation as writer within the Church:

If the monastic life is a life of hardship and sacrifice, I would say that for me most of the hardship has come in connection with writing. It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk (a doubt I have to live with), but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer, that I was born one and will most probably die as one. Disconcerting, disedifying as it is, this seems to be my lot and my vocation. It is what God has given me in order that I might give it back to Him.³⁵

Like Gerard Hopkins, Merton wrestled throughout his career with the inherent tension of being a writer/priest. Dom Frederic, spiritual authority over the monastery, recognized and encouraged Merton's writing ability, but the Church Censors were another story. Later in life he rated his early monastic writings lowest on a comparative scale of all his works. An explanation for the above phenomena involves the theory that Merton's creativity was bound during the early monastic phase by his adherence to the Kerygma and Church teachings.

The publication of Thirty Poems by Merton took place in 1944.

Thomas described the experience when he received the completed volume in the mail:

The exceedingly tidy little volume, Thirty Poems, reached me at the end of November, just before we began the annual retreat, in 1944. I went out under the grey sky, under the cedars at the edge of the cemetery, and stood in the wind that threatened snow and held the printed poems in my hand.³⁶

A fulfilling point for Merton occurred a year later when,

one day, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, 1945--I went to Father Abbot for direction, and without my even thinking of the subject, or mentioning it, he suddenly said to me: 'I want you to go on writing poems.'³⁷

Such encouragement from Dom Frederic characterized his stance towards

Merton's double vocation as writer and priest.

Indeed, Dom Frederic stimulated Merton's autobiography, The Seven-Storey Mountain, written in 1944 and published with great acclaim in 1948.

Merton's friend Edward Rice wrote:

The book was set down in what seemed like one long swoop of enthusiastic writing, with a freedom and vitality that he was unable to obtain in the biographies of saints that Dom Frederic assigned him to write during this period.³⁸

Five years at Gethsemani went by like five weeks for Merton as he recorded December 10, 1946 in the Sign of Jonas. Ross Labrie in The Art of Thomas Merton described Merton's life during this phase as:

extremely sheltered; he lived literally as well as psychologically enclosed within the ordered world of the abbey, and although his life was not a life without stress, his outlook appears to have been more stable during this period than in any other part of his life.³⁹

During this early monastic phase Merton found kinship and inspiration in the Augustinian/Platonic tradition of Christian mysticism. On March 10, 1947 he described the impact made on him by St. John of the Cross:

Yesterday I read a couple of chapters of the Cloud of Unknowing. Every time I pick up a book in that tradition, especially St. John of the Cross, I feel like the three wise men when they came out of Jerusalem and out of the hands of Herod, and once more saw their star. They rejoiced with great joy. They were once more delivered from questions and uncertainties, and could see their road straight ahead. In this case it is not even a question of seeing a road. It is simpler than that. For as soon as you stop travelling you have arrived.⁴⁰

The metaphor of travel consistently used by Merton caused Elena Malits to entitle her book, The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey.

A week later, March 19, 1947, Merton took five solemn vows which included poverty, chastity, obedience, stability and conversion of manner. Characteristically he noted: "I did not become a better monk after solemn vows than I had been before them. . ."⁴¹ Nevertheless, the following entry on October 12, 1947 manifested an enriched life:

All the hills and woods are red and brown and copper, and the sky is clear, with one or two very small clouds. A buzzard comes by and investigates me, but I am not dead yet. This whole landscape of woods and hills is getting to be saturated with my prayers and with the Psalms and with the books I read out here under the trees, looking over the wall, not at the world but at our forest, our solitude. Everything I see has become incomparably rich for me, in the years since I made my simple vows and emerged from the novitiate.⁴²

In 1948 three events occurred which made a profound impact on Merton. First, on Wednesday, July 7, 1948 Dom Frederic handed Merton the first copy of the Seven-Storey Mountain. Second, on August 3, a month later, Dom Frederic died. Merton wrote that "his sympathy was deep and real all the time he was alive."⁴³ Third, on a trip to Louisville on August 12, 1948 an evolution in his attitude towards the world had obviously occurred:

Yesterday I had to go in to Louisville. It was the first time I was out of the monastery in seven years. . . Although I felt completely alienated from everything in the world and all its activity I did not necessarily feel out of sympathy with the people we were walking around. On the whole they seemed to me more real than they ever had before, and more worth sympathizing with.⁴⁴

Two years later in a journal entry which reflected an earlier novel entitled My Argument with the Gestapo, Merton amplified on the above thoughts:

One of the problems of the book was my personal relation to the world and to the last war. When I wrote it I thought I had a very supernatural solution. After nine years in the monastery I see that it was no solution at all. The false solution went like this: the whole world, of which war is a characteristic expression, is evil. It has therefore to be first ridiculed, then spat upon, and at last rejected with a curse.⁴⁵

His changed attitude towards the world manifested his spirit of travel in the world of ideas.

"The one great secret for which I had been born"⁴⁶ unfolded for Merton on May 28, 1949 when he became a priest and performed his first Mass. In the summer which followed his ordination he passed through a desert experience, an "abysmal testing" and "disintegration of spirit" which finally subsided a year and a half later in December, 1950. He explained the phenomena:

It was a sort of slow, submarine earthquake which produced strange commotions on the visible, psychological surface of my life. I was summoned to battle with joy and with fear, knowing in every case that the sense of battle was misleading, that my apparent antagonist was only an illusion, and that the whole commotion was simply the effect of something that had already erupted, without my knowing it, in the hidden volcano.⁴⁷

Perhaps the eruption in the "hidden volcano" catalyzed a renewed interest in eastern mysticism. Earlier in the year, the following passage possibly alludes to an unconscious desire for the Zen Experience of enlightenment or satori:

Inside me, I quickly come to the barrier, the limit of what I am, beyond which I cannot go by myself. It is such a narrow limit and yet for years I thought it was the universe. Now I see it is nothing. Shall I go on being content with this restriction? . . . How quickly my limits accuse me of my nothingness and I cannot go beyond. I pause and reflect and reflection makes it final. Then I forget to reflect anymore and by surprise I make a little escape, at least to the threshold, and love moves in darkness, just enough to tell me that there is such a thing as freedom.⁴⁸

In Zen Buddhism he discovered the reality of 'limitlessness' within one's inner sanctum achieved through satori.

A week after his ordination as priest, a twelve-year written silence on eastern mysticism broke as Merton wrote:

One of the most impressive people I have ever seen is Archbishop Paul Yu-Pin, of Nanking, who was here for the centenary. In fact he spoke in Chapter about China and the contemplative life and Buddhist monasticism--and about the reproach that Buddhists fling at us, that is, we are all very fine at Building hospitals but we have no contemplatives. He spoke of the two million Buddhist monks and nuns in China.⁴⁹

A few months later on November 24, 1949 we find a second eastern reference:

I think I shall ask permission to write to a Hindu who wrote me a letter about Patanjala's yoga, and who is in Simla. I shall ask him to send us some books. A chemist who has been helping us with some painting jobs turned out to have been a postulant in a Zen Buddhist monastery in Hawaii and he spoke to the community about it in Chapter.⁵⁰

In an unpublished manuscript entitled "Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia", Alexander Lipski rightly observed:

Yet the monastic discipline, especially the practice of silence, asceticism, and contemplation paved the way for an exploration in greater depth of Oriental monasticism and mysticism.⁵¹

The early monastic phase culminated as Merton was appointed the Master of the Scholastics. Characteristically he reflected:

Thus I stand on the threshold of a new existence. The one who is going to be most fully formed by the new scholasticate is the Master of the Scholastics.⁵²

Towards the end of the early monastic phase, the eruption of the 'hidden volcano' may have catalyzed a deeper quest for ultimate reality. The path, precipitated by the eruption, pointed eastward.

The Eastern Turn: 1952-1968

Merton's eastern turn characterized the fourth phase of his life between 1952 and 1968. The following statement by Edward Rice exaggerated the significance of eastern thought for Merton in the fourth phase:

Day in and day out, Merton thought, wrote, preached peace and the East. I think that a lot of his readers, particularly the very devout ones from staunch Catholic backgrounds, began to drop out. . . the fact is, what was to come in the 1960s was not an aberration but the entire point of his life as a layman and especially as a Trappist. The trip was inevitable, inexorable, and it was independent of rules, regulations, bad health, monastic discipline, constant tensions and the very severe attempts of the Trappist censors to silence him.⁵³

The statement indicated one close friend's surmised about his eastern turn. Later Rice claimed that Merton died as a Buddhist in Bangkok.⁵⁴

The appointment in May, 1951 as Novice Master demanded most of Merton's time. The appointment of Abbot James after the death of Abbot Frederic in 1948 resulted in crucial changes. These included a larger emphasis on Gethsemani's commercial enterprises (cheese, ham and fruit cakes), a more rigid imposition of the Rule, and a rapid growth rate of buildings and machinery.

Because of these changes Merton grew disillusioned with Gethsemani and in 1953 petitioned for a transfer to the Carthusians. (a recurring temptation in the earlier monastic phase). The request was refused, but in 1961 his desire for increased solitude resulted in a hermitage dwelling which dispelled some of the tensions at Gethsemani.

Merton's attitude of acceptance characteristic of his early monastic phase contrasted in the second phase with a progressive stance towards life. In the following Labrie explored the differences between the two phases as highlighted in Sign of Jonas and Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander:

If Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander could be said to have a central theme, it is that of exploration. While he was in the process of exploring his links with the world outside, Merton found himself looking more and more critically at his community. His viewpoint is often sardonic and censorious, a contrast to the soft effusiveness of The Sign of Jonas. The mercurial tone is amplified by the dark and restless mood and by the discursive structure.⁵⁵

Did his restlessness set the stage for a new conversion? Did he convert to Buddhism as Edward Rice maintained? In this context we should recall the restless disillusionment with his lifestyle at Columbia before his conversion to Christianity. Restlessness is not minimized in a religious context. In "The Eastward turn of Thomas Merton", Paul Bernadieu explained Merton's fascination with Zen Buddhism:

Part of Merton's enthusiasm for Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, was because it attacked the problem of the illusory self with such ruthless rigor. It is relentless in devastating all defense mechanisms: physical, emotional, and intellectual. It leaves the subject naked and vulnerable, ready for the breakthrough of enlightenment. Merton's ultimate identity is not explained in terms of his inquisitive intelligence or even of his psychological search for wholeness, unless these are seen as motivated by his single-minded, almost Zen-style, dedication to life in the Spirit. This for Merton was to discover the nature of the true self.⁵⁶

A trip to Louisville in 1956 sparked his need to discover the 'nature of the true self':

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.

It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.⁵⁷

Labrie interprets this statement in the following manner:

The change in his thinking was based on his fresh perception—which replaced his earlier indifference toward a world he regarded as doomed—that man's interpretation of himself was decisive in determining his destiny.⁵⁸

His evolved view of man facilitated a widened horizon towards other parts of Christianity. An excerpt from Conjectures revealed:

If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. . . . We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.⁵⁹

His ecumenical desire preceded the desire to understand other religions.

Accordingly, Merton initiated a dialogue with D.T. Suzuki in the spring of 1959 when he sent a copy of Wisdom of the Desert to the 'celebrated apologist for Rinzai Zen'. Chalmers MacCormick called the new Mertonian phase signified by the above-mentioned gesture, the "Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton."⁶⁰ Suzuki's Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist explored the similarities between Meister Eckhart and Zen Masters. His analysis prompted Merton to read Eckhart and he commented:

Meister Eckhart may have limitations, but I am entranced with him nevertheless. I like the brevity, the incisiveness of his sermons, his way of piercing straight to the heart of the inner life, the awakened spark, the creative and redeeming Word, God born in us.⁶¹

Later, in a preface to Zen and the Birds of Appetite published in 1968, he wrote: "A fuller and truer expression of Zen in Christian experience is given by Meister Eckhart."⁶²

Several references to Zen and the East are found in the Conjectures.⁶³

The most direct reference to Zen is the following one:

The taste for 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, flight from being into verbalism, mathematics, and rationalization. Descartes made a fetish out of the mirror in which the self finds itself. Zen shatters it.⁶⁴

His study of Zen Buddhism found fulfillment on two occasions, the first with an encounter with Suzuki in New York, 1964 and the second on his Asian journey in 1968. On the Asian journey, he visited Buddhist monks, shrines and the Dalai Lama. His earlier thesis that Zen consciousness complemented the Christian Kerygma found expression in the poem entitled "Song: If you Seek" published in Emblems for a Season of Fury. 'Solitude', the professor teaches the student a form of Zen consciousness essential and preparatory for the Kerygma:

If you seek a heavenly light
I, Solitude, am your professor!

I am the appointed hour,
The 'now' that cuts
Time like a blade.

I am the unexpected flash
Beyond 'yes', beyond 'no',
The forerunner of the Word of God.

Follow my ways and I will lead you
To golden-haired suns,
Logos and music, blameless joys,
Innocent of questions
And beyond answers:

For I, Solitude, am thine own self:
I, Nothingness, am thy All.
I, Silence, am thy Amen!⁶⁵

The Zen consciousness described above facilitated by satori served as an essential preparatory mode for the proclamation of the Kerygma. In this way the two influential spheres complemented one another. This summarizes Merton's theory at this important phase.

The Asian Journey: October 15-December 10, 1968

Merton's last recorded journal entitled the Asian Journal revealed important glimpses of his evolved religious thought. On October 15, 1968 he left San Francisco after two weeks in the California redwoods and a quick trip to Alaska. The twenty-seventh anniversary of his entry into Gethsemani occasioned another entry for Merton. His death by accidental electrocution in the hotel room at Bangkok shocked the world. That same day, Karl Barth, eminent Protestant theologian died of natural causes.

One of Merton's friends wondered if he would return to Gethsemani after his trip to Asia. Ed Rice met with Merton early in September, 1968 and recalled:

My strongest impression at the time--and he said it quite clearly, too-- was that he did not intend to return to Gethsemani. . . However, in the light of what happened, I am firmly convinced now that not only did he not intend on returning 'home' but that he knew he was going to die abroad and perhaps in Asia. . . He had completed his life within the monastery walls, a total of twenty-seven years, and the next twenty-seven would be spent in another milieu.⁶⁶

Merton's hope that his restlessness would result in total fulfillment on the trip, haunts this writer. Prior to his eastern trip he believed that the vital connection with Absolute Reality, awaited him. His conversion to Christianity represented the genesis of the pilgrimage but not the conclusion. Would death signify the entry to Sunyata?⁶⁷

As he sat in the eastbound plane on October 15 he wrote:

We left the ground--I with Christian mantras and a great sense of destiny, of being at last on my true way after years of waiting and wondering and fooling around. May I not come back without having settled the great affair.⁶⁸

Three months passed and his physical body returned parted from the spiritual Merton who had finally settled the great affair. After a decade of thought and speculation about the east he took action. He had to know and find that which eluded him.

His view of Calcutta, one of the first stopovers on the trip drastically changed. The first impression was negative:

How does one take pictures of these streets with the faces, the eyes, of such people, and the cows roaming among them on the sidewalks and buzzards by the score circling over the main streets in the 'best' section? Yet the people are beautiful. But the routine of the beggars is heart-rending.⁶⁹

Further he wrote: "Calcutta, smiling, fecal, detached, tired, inexhaustible, young-old, full of young people who seem old, is the unmasked city. It is the subculture of poverty and overpopulation."⁷⁰ In Calcutta he thought about Gandhi:

And the thing that haunts me: Gandhi led all these people, exemplified the sense they might make out of their life, for a moment, and then, with him, that sense was extinguished again.⁷¹

His intuition that it was futile to attempt change strikes a realistic note of despair.

The second impression of Calcutta was positive: "This is one of the greatest cities in the world, with a character completely its own, full of contrasts and yet beyond contrast. The vast noise of Calcutta seems somehow to be also a silence."⁷² In that Zen claims to contain opposites

yet be beyond them, we find Merton in a Zen-mode of thought in the above passage. The similarity of noise and silence and the greatness of Calcutta which before was 'the subculture of poverty', and the contrasts which led to something beyond contrast show the influence of Zen in Merton's thought.

On November 4, Merton met the 'Dalai Lam', the "pope of the Lamaist monks"⁷³ according to Webster's Dictionary. 'Dalai' denotes ocean and 'lama' denotes exalted, hence the Dalai Lama signified the 'ocean of exaltation' to his devotees. That night after the encounter Merton dreamed:

that I was, temporarily, back at Gethsemani. I was dressed in a Buddhist monk's habit, but with more black and red and gold, a Zen habit, in color more Tibetan than Zen. . . I met some women in the corridor, visitors and students of Asian religion, to whom I was explaining I was a kind of Zen monk and Gelugpa toge, when I woke up.⁷⁴

In the questions surrounding Merton's religious allegiance at death, the dream provides food for thought. Did the dream project his deepest subconscious aspirations?

On November 8 he had his third and final interview with the Dalai Lama. That morning he wrote:

So far my talks with Buddhists have been open and frank and there has been full communication on a really deep level. We seem to recognize in one another a certain depth of spiritual experience, and it is unquestionable. On this level I find in the Buddhist's a deeper attainment and certitude than in Catholic contemplatives.⁷⁵

The last line showed how far Merton had travelled down the Buddhist road. Was Catholicism as spiritually bankrupt as the sentiment suggests? Was he ready to trade in his monk's habit for a black, red and gold habit?

In a conversation with Chatral Rimpoche, on November 16 Merton found another kindred spirit:

He said he had meditated in solitude for thirty years or more and had not attained to perfect emptiness and I said I hadn't either. The unspoken or half-spoken message of the talk was our complete understanding

of each other as people who were somehow on the edge of great realization and knew it and were trying, somehow or other, to go out and get lost in it--and that it was a grace for us to meet one another.⁷⁶

Chatral Rimpoche informed Merton that he was a natural Buddha! At this date Merton felt he was on the edge of great realization. His desires were soon fulfilled. However, a couple of days later-on a tea plantation in the Himalayas he had time to assess his journey:

Too much movement. Too much 'looking for' something: an answer, a vision, 'something other.' And this breeds illusion. Illusion that there is something else.⁷⁷

We might assume he was backtracking from the above journal entry.

Merton's experience at Polonnaruwa on December 1, recorded on December 4,⁷⁸ culminated all previous experiences in his lifetime. While he viewed the reclining Buddhist statues he:

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. . . The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no 'mystery.' All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. . . Surely with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has become clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.⁷⁹

Eight days later Merton died. Brother Patrick Hart described the death as ascertained from the reports:

Thomas Merton returned to his cottage about one-thirty p.m. and proceeded to take a shower before retiring for a rest. While barefoot on the terrazzo floor, he apparently had reached for the large standing fan when he received the full 220 volts of direct current. He collapsed, and the large fan tumbled over on top of him.⁸⁰

They found him two hours later. It was a decisive end to an indecisive life, a life marked by the metaphor of pilgrim, explorer and traveller.

An exclamation mark ended his life and the questions ceased as he found that which he sought.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known. ⁸¹

Endnotes

¹Thomas Merton, Zen and the Birds of Appetite (New York: New Directions Book, 1968), p. 47.

²Thomas Merton, The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton, edited by Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions Book, 1973), pp. 235-236.

³Eberhard Simons, "The Kerygma", in Karl Rahner, ed., The Concise Sacramentum Mundi (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 798.

⁴Ibid., p. 797.

⁵The Bible, New American Standard Version, Romans 1:20--the witness of creation and Romans 2:15--'the Law written in their hearts'.

⁶Edward Rice was a personal friend of Thomas Merton. His conclusion that Merton died a Buddhist is found in Edward Rice, The Man in the Sycamore Tree (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 139.

⁷Besmilyr Brigham, Monks Pond, ed. Thomas Merton, No. 2 (Summer 1968), Trappist, Kentucky, pp. 3-4 as quoted in Sister Therese Lentfoehr, Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions Book, 1979), p. 1.

⁸Thomas Merton, The Seven-Storey Mountain (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1948), p. 3.

⁹Ruth Merton, Tom's Book as quoted in Lentfoehr, Words and Silence, p. 1.

¹⁰Merton, Seven-Storey Mountain, p. 3.

¹¹Ibid., p. 53.

¹²Ibid., p. 85.

¹³Ibid., p. 88.

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- ¹⁴Merton, Seven-Storey Mountain, p. 131.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 133.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 148.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 157.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 158.
- ¹⁹Elena Malits, The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 100; Alexander Lipski, unpublished manuscript "Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia" (Western Mich. U.: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p. 7 & 8; and Raymond Bailey, Thomas Merton on Mysticism (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975), p. 34.
- ²⁰Merton, Seven-Storey Mountain, p. 187.
- ²¹Ibid.
- ²²Ibid., p. 198.
- ²³Ibid., p. 204.
- ²⁴Ibid., p. 215.
- ²⁵Poem written in 1940, Thomas Merton, The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions Book, 1977), p. 24.
- ²⁶Merton, Seven-Storey Mountain, p. 218.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. 253.
- ²⁸Ibid., p. 264.
- ²⁹Ibid., p. 363.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 370.

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- ³¹Merton, Seven-Storey Mountain, p. 419.
- ³²Raymond Bailey, Thomas Merton on Mysticism (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1975), p. 59.
- ³³*Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ³⁴Merton, Seven-Storey Mountain, p. 404.
- ³⁵Thomas Merton, A Thomas Merton Reader, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Image Books, 1974), p. 17.
- ³⁶Merton, Seven-Storey Mountain, p. 410.
- ³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 413.
- ³⁸Edward Rice, The Man in the Sycamore Tree (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 64.
- ³⁹Ross Labrie, The Art of Thomas Merton (Texas: Texas Christian U. Press, 1979), p. 58.
- ⁴⁰Thomas Merton, The Sign of Jonas (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1953), p. 28.
- ⁴¹Thomas Merton, The Sign of Jonas (New York: Image Books, 1956), p. 24.
- ⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.
- ⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 118.
- ⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 119.
- ⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 312.
- ⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 181.
- ⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 226.
- ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

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- 49 Merton, Sign of Jonas, p. 195.
- 50 Ibid., p. 237.
- 51 Alexander Lipski, "Thomas Merton and Asia: His Quest for Utopia", unpublished manuscript [made available by Brother Patrick Hart,] (Western Michigan U.: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p. 11.
- 52 Merton, Sign of Jonas, p. 319.
- 53 Edward Rice, Man in Sycamore Tree, p. 80.
- 54 Ibid., p. 139.
- 55 Labrie, Art of Merton, p. 68.
- 56 Paul Bernadicou, S.J. "The Eastward Turn of Thomas Merton" Science et Esprit, XXXIV/3 (1982) p. 358.
- 57 Thomas Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 140.
- 58 Labrie, Art of Merton, p. 71.
- 59 Merton, Conjectures, p. 12.
- 60 Chalmers MacCormick, "The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton" Journal of Ecumenical Studies (1972), p. 804.
- 61 Merton, Conjectures, p. 42.
- 62 Thomas Merton, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, p. 9.
- 63 Merton, Conjectures, p. 117 and 136.
- 64 Ibid., p. 260.
- 65 Merton, Collected Poems, pp. 340-341.

⁶⁶Ed Rice, Man in Sycamore Tree, p. 124.

⁶⁷Alan W. Watts in The Way of Zen (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), pp. 62-63 defines Sunyata in the following: "voidness". . ."with which Nagarjuna described the nature of reality. Sunyata seeks out the hidden and unconscious premises of thought and action, and submits them to the same treatment until the very depths of the mind are reduced to a total silence."

⁶⁸Thomas Merton, Asian Journal, p. 4.

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 25-27.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 28.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid., p. 132.

⁷³Lamaism is a form of Buddhism found in Tibet and Mongolia.

⁷⁴Merton, Asian Journal, p. 107.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 143.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 143.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 148.

⁷⁸A common mistake in Mertonian history is to record his experience on December 4, when in reality it occurred on December 1. See Asian Journal, p. 231, "I visited Polonnaruwa on Monday. Today is Thursday December 4" The error is found in Paul Bernadicou in "Eastern Turn of Thomas Merton", p. 256 and Monica Furlong in her biography of Merton, p. 332.

⁷⁹Merton, Asian Journal, pp. 235-236.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 258.

⁸¹The Bible, New American Standard Version, I Corinthians 13:12.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE EVOLUTION OF MERTON'S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT:

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX--MEISTER ECKHART--C. T. SUZUKI--MERTON'S ZEN

Introduction

To facilitate a clear focus of the religious dialogue between Merton and Suzuki, we zoom our lens to the religious thought of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and Meister Eckhart (1260-1329). Suzuki's Rinzai Zen originated in the experience of Lin-chi during the Great Persecution of Buddhists in 845 A.D. and precedes a final section covering Merton's unique interpretation of Zen. The methodology of the thesis involves a 'zooming-in' process as we gradually focus in on the actual Merton/Suzuki dialogue. Hence, the second chapter represents the second more in-depth phase of the 'zooming-in' process.

Bernard of Clairvaux

In Thomas Merton's Shared Contemplation: A Protestant Perspective,

Daniel Adams assessed the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux in Merton's Christian thought as foundational:

It was only natural that Merton should find Bernard a foundation stone in his own thinking, for Bernard was both a Cistercian and troubled by the question of contemplation and action. He was also very like Merton in his personality and action. Bernard was a man of great literary ambition, and upon entering the monastery he did all that he could to escape this ambition and completely focus his attention upon God.¹

Merton's decision to become a Trappist monk entailed an acceptance of Cistercian thought and ideals propounded in the twelfth century by St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

Bernard was born in 1090, the son of a nobleman at the chateau Fontaines-les-Dijon. In Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit, Jean Leclercq wrote:

In the midst of this fervant and restless society, in this world both crude and fragile, sensitive to beauty and capable of violence, there appears the great unexplained figure of Bernard de Fontaines, who became the voice of his era.²

At the age of twenty-two Bernard, along with thirty companions entered the monastery of Citeaux in 1112. After three years Bernard founded the abbey at Clairvaux in Champagne. In his short work entitled The Last of the Fathers, Merton claimed:

Clairvaux and Bernard meant one thing above all: the great twelfth-century revival of mysticism, a spiritual renaissance which had its effects in all the other renaissances of the time.³

Bernard's active role in the second Crusade clouds the fact that by his death in 1153, 164 communities had begun under his leadership. The first Cistercian pope, Eugene III, a monk under Bernard's charge ascended the throne of Peter in 1145. The year of 1145 "finds Bernard and Eugene on the eve of their greatest and most tragic effort: the second crusade."⁴ Initially, Bernard refused the request of King Louis VII to preach the second crusade. Through the Pope, the King achieved his goal and Bernard raised the standard of the Cross at Vezelay. Merton remarked:

It is here that we see Bernard, the saint, as a most provoking enigma, as a temptation, perhaps even as a scandal. Here the sleeping power of Bernard's warlike atavism wakes and fights its way to the front of his life like some smiling Romanesque monster pushing through the leafage of a pillar's capital in the cloisters of Cluny. This power, too, is part of his sanctity.⁵

The above shows Merton's defense of Bernard's controversial action as he called the power of Bernard, 'his sanctity.' Merton pointed to Bernard's mystical view of the Church as God's institution on earth. When the Church speaks through its Pope, the sons and daughters must obey. Despite Bernard's intentions the Crusade failed and Bernard died eight years later in his monastery, August 20, 1153, "lamented by the whole world of his time."⁶

Bernard's confrontation with Peter Abelard evidenced in the tract "Against the Errors of Peter Abelard" (1140) made Bernard famous in church history. He denounced Abelard's romantic view that Christ's death on the cross served as a supreme example of charity, because this view annihilated the true meaning of the Cross. Rather, according to Bernard,

Christ became man precisely in order to redeem mankind from sin, deliver man from the power of the devil, and to become, instead of Fallen Adam, the new head of a redeemed and sanctified human race.⁷

Merton adds, "without this dogmatic basis the whole mystical theology of St. Bernard would be completely incomprehensible."⁸ The heart of the Kerygma found expression in this staunch defense of the historical and efficacious death of Christ on the cross. In his early monastic phase Merton found affinity with Bernard's emphasis on the Kerygma as the factual basis for a mystical theology.

Bernard's mystical theology sprang from his grounding in the Kerygma. Merton summarized his well-known contribution to Bible exegesis, the group of 86 sermons on the Canticle of Canticles--the Song of Solomon into two themes: "the mystery of Christ in Himself and in those who are conformed to Him in the Holy Spirit. In other words: Christ and the Church."⁹ Bernard interpreted the love story between King and lover in the Song of Solomon as a metaphor for the love of Christ for the Church and their union.

Leclercq concluded that Bernard was a mystic:

His teaching is marked by his experience: it is drawn from it and leads back to it. His doctrine is as it were suspended from moments of intense union with God, from summits of contemplative prayer.¹⁰

Merton clarified and added an important distinction:

St. Bernard is not merely to be classified as 'a spiritual writer,' as if his doctrine could be limited to a certain nondogmatic region of affective intimacy with God. He is spiritual indeed, and a great mystic. But he is a speculative mystic; his mysticism is expressed as a theology.¹¹

Merton expresses the view that the 'nondogmatic region of affective intimacy

with God' is not enough for Bernard. This idea would make Bernard a pure mystic with no rational base such as the Kerygma. Merton showed that Bernard combined the experience of God with his belief in the basic doctrines. Thus, he is a 'speculative mystic.'

The interior journey towards God best describes Bernard's central emphasis:

'It does not behoove thee, O man,' says the Saint, 'to cross the seas, to penetrate the clouds, or to climb the Alps (in search of God). No great journey is necessary for thee. Seek no further than thy own soul: there wilt thou find thy God!'¹²

While Merton with Bernard grounded his religious thought in the Kerygma, the seeds of a possible exploration of Zen Buddhism are discerned in Bernard's emphasis on the interior journey towards God. The central thrust of Zen focusses on the naked self where ultimate reality resides. The early monastic phase of Merton characterized that aspect of Bernard's teaching which marked him as a defender of the faith or Kerygma in the twelfth century. Merton grounded his thought in the Kerygma--Christ's historical death on the Cross which meant salvation for the sinner.

Merton's mystical experiences flowed from the contemplation of the message of the Kerygma. Would Merton's epistemology change in the following years from a rational/factual basis centered in the historical event of the Kerygma, to an experience-oriented basis bereft of factual content?

Meister Eckhart

The study demands an examination of the pivotal thought of Meister Eckhart (1260-1329). In his excellent preface to the Classics of Western Spirituality volume on Meister Eckhart, Huston Smith described Eckhart's mode of thought:

Eckhart doesn't argue against a science-restricted mindset, which of course had not yet emerged. He shows us an alternative. And in doing so--I am thinking especially of the way he returns repeatedly to his theme of the God-intoxicated man--we sense that he knows so vividly what he is talking about that we experience through his words an inrush of the Real. Like prisoners, we had been straining at our bars, hoping for a sliver of light. He spins us around and shows us that the door behind us is wide open.¹³

The condemnation of Eckhart's teachings in 1327, followed by his death two years later before the final verdict of 'guilty' may perplex the reader. Merton wondered why a 'God-intoxicated man' was condemned and concluded:

The first step in identifying 'heresy' is to refuse all identifications with the subjective intuitions and experience of the 'heretic' and to see his words only in an impersonal realm in which there is no dialogue--in which dialogue is denied a priori.¹⁴

In other words, Eckhart's accusers refused to allow themselves an opening in a dialogue-fashion to Eckhart's thought. His thought, viewed from an impersonal, detached stance was condemned because no one wished to understand his meaning.

Eckhart was not a conventional teacher but rather Bernard McGinn described his mode of communication in the following:

He was not only a highly trained philosopher and theologian, but also a preacher, a poet, and a punster who deliberately cultivated rhetorical effects, bold paradoxes, and unusual metaphors, neologisms, and word play to stir his readers and hearers from their intellectual and moral slumber.¹⁵

Eckhart stood in the apophatic stream of theology. William Shannon in Thomas Merton's Dark Path delineates the distinctives of the apophatic and kataphatic traditions in Christian theology. Briefly, knowledge of God through concepts, analogy and symbols drawn from creation describes the tradition of light known as the Kataphatic tradition.¹⁶ The Apophatic way is the way of darkness and negation.¹⁷ Shannon describes the point of departure from the Kataphatic way to the Apophatic way:

For there comes a point in contemplation when concepts and images will no longer do; indeed, they become a hindrance to the deep experience of God. For, while it is true that all creatures bear in themselves the imprint of God, there is, nonetheless, an infinite distance between God and created things. One simply cannot enter through creatures into the presence of God in His own being. Hence, sooner or later, the contemplative must renounce the mind's activity, put out the light of the intellect, and enter into the darkness, wherein there is an 'experience' of the ineffable reality of what is beyond experience.¹⁸ The presence of God is 'known,' not in clear vision, but as 'unknown.'

Eckhart's task:

was not so much to reveal a set of truths about God as it was to frame the appropriate paradoxes that would serve to highlight the inherent limitations of our minds and to mark off in some way the boundaries of the unknown territory where God dwells.¹⁹

The following extract from a Sermon illustrates Eckhart's task:

What is the last end? It is the hidden darkness of the eternal divinity, and it is unknown, and it was never known, and it will never be known. God remains there within himself, unknown, and the light of the eternal Father has eternally shone in there, and the darkness does not comprehend the light (John 1:5).²⁰

Similarly, in Sermon 83 he states: "Now pay attention: God is nameless, because no one can say anything or understand anything about him."²¹

Eckhart was accused of pantheism because he taught that God was the existence of everything. McGinn writes: "The fact remains that it is esse, understood as Absolute Existence, that was Eckhart's most frequently employed term for God."²² Eckhart referred to God as "the divine depth, abyss, or ground (Grund) and is the hidden source from which all things proceed and to which they return."²³ Pantheism is normally understood as jeopardizing God's transcendence, yet both poles are found in Eckhart's theology. After emphasizing God's unknowingness, Eckhart now equates God and man, as the extract from Sermon fifteen shows:

Truly you are the hidden God in the ground of the soul, where God's ground and the soul's ground are one ground. The more one seeks you, the less one finds you. You should so seek him that you find him nowhere. If you do not seek him, then you will find him. That we may so seek him that we may eternally remain with him, may God help us to this.²⁴

The claim that the soul contains a part which is uncreated was condemned in the Avignon Bull. Eckhart referred to Augustine's teaching which said that the soul's highest part (mens) or disposition, was created as a coffer of spiritual forms, and described the uncreated part of the soul in the following:

This power (coffer of spiritual forms) makes the soul resemble the Father in his outflowing divinity, out of which he has poured the whole treasure of his divine being into the Son and into the Holy Spirit, differentiating between the Persons, just as the soul's memory pours the treasure of its images into the soul's powers. . . . But if all images are detached from the soul, and it contemplates only the Simple One, then the soul's naked being finds the naked, formless being of the divine unity, which is there [as] a being above being, accepting and reposing in itself. Ah, marvel of marvels, how noble is that acceptance, when the soul's being can accept nothing else than the naked unity of God.²⁵

Eckhart wanted to strip away the images blocking the naked unity of God. To enforce this idea he radically stated at the end of the sermon:

Then how should I love God? You should love God unspiritually, that is, your soul should be unspiritual and stripped of all spirituality, for so long as your soul has a spirit's form, it has images, and so long as it has images, it has a medium, and so long as it has a medium it has not unity or simplicity. . . Then how should I love him? You should love him as he is a non-God, a nonspirit, a nonperson, a nonimage, but as he is a pure, unmixed, bright 'One,' separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of 'something' into 'nothing.'²⁶

Eckhart affirmed God's transcendence and immanence. McGinn brilliantly summarized the apparent contradictions in Eckhart's thought which on the one hand spoke of the 'total otherness' of God in the apophatic tradition, and on the other hand maintained that man contains an uncreated part of God--the Absolute Existence which is the ground of our being. How are these strands synthesized in Eckhart? McGinn writes:

Eckhart's teaching about God really needed a way of speaking about the divine nature that would combine the negative (eg. transcendent) and the positive (eg. immanent) moments, or the simultaneous thinking of contradictory determinations, into some higher positive unity. This way of speaking forms Eckhart's dialectic, a language he learned, or perhaps better recreated, from Neoplatonism.²⁷

McGinn's summary of Eckhart's thought process points to the Meister's central desire which was to be unified with God.

Suzuki found similarities between the teaching techniques of Eckhart and the Zen Masters. Both sought by paradox, riddle and shocking statements, to arouse the slumbering, lazy mind to reality. Second, both emphasized a unity beyond duality--a unity of reality or Absolute Existence. Third, they emphasized the nakedness of the inner ground of all being. At Suzuki's impulse Merton widely read Eckhart. Eckhart established the bridge between Merton and Suzuki.

Suzuki's Zen: Lin-chi, satori, and the koan

In a discussion of D.T. Suzuki's thought, two strands of Zen Buddhism must be distinguished. Suzuki stood in the Rinzai Zen school founded by Lin-chi who died in 867 A.D. Rinzai Zen or the Sudden Enlightenment school contrasted with Soto Zen or the Gradual Enlightenment school founded by Dogen who lived from 1200-1253. Dogen emphasized years of meditation to precede satori or enlightenment. In Rinzai Zen, satori occurs suddenly and recurs in unexpected moments.

In the Zen Experience Thomas Hoover notes the absence of Soto Zen knowledge in the west:

The Soto master Dogen is probably the most revered figure in all Japanese Zen. Yet until recently he has been comparatively unknown abroad, perhaps because that great popularizer of Zen in the west, D.T. Suzuki, followed the Rinzai school and managed to essentially ignore Dogen throughout his voluminous writings. But it was Dogen who first insisted on intensive meditation, who produced the first Japanese writings explaining Zen practice, and who constructed the first real Zen monastery in Japan, establishing a set of monastic rules still observed.²⁸

Did Suzuki's charisma cloud Merton's thought in his study of Zen? One assumes that Merton would have been more attracted to Soto Zen given his monastic idealism. However the following will show that both gradual and sudden enlightenment are combined in Suzuki's thought.

Rinzai Zen originated in the experience of Lin-chi during the Great Persecution of 845 A.D. under Emperor Wu-tsan. In his early twenties

Lin-chi arrived at the monastery of Huang-po where he observed the rules for three years. Since he was making no progress his head master advised Lin-chi to approach Huang-po with the question: 'What is the principle of Buddhism?' In response, Huang-po hit him several times with a stick! After several similar instances Lin-chi left for another monastery. Ta-yu, the headmaster of the second monastery told Lin-chi he was treated with compassion by Huang-po. Lin-chi yelled: 'So Huang-po's Buddhism is actually very simple; there's nothing to it after all!' Ta-yu's answer evoked satori in Lin-chi and that moment culminated his three-year search. Lin-chi returned and told Huang-po his story. Huang-po threatened to hit Ta-yu for being a 'big mouth.' Instead, Lin-chi hit his Master who laughed and proudly led him to a seat of honor.

Hoover's comments are noteworthy:

This is a perfect example of 'sudden enlightenment' that took many years to achieve. Lin-chi had been a plodding, earnest young man until the moment of his 'sudden' enlightenment, which occurred over a seemingly uncalculated remark by a teacher not even his own master. In fact, all Huang-po had done was to assail him with a staff. But Lin-chi was transformed suddenly from a milksop to the founder of a school, probably the greatest radicalization since the Apostle Paul was struck down on the road to Damascus.²⁹

Lin-chi's story exemplifies the combination of sudden and gradual enlightenment. Three years of intense struggle induced satori. Suzuki interpreted the incident with a provocative twist:

To my mind, Lin-chi's three years under Huang-po were spent in a vain attempt to grasp by thinking it out--the final truth of Zen. He knew fully well that Zen was not to be understood by verbal means or by intellectual analysis, but still by thinking he strove for self-realization. . . If it had not been for the three years of intense mental application and spiritual turmoil and vain search for the

truth, this crisis could never have been reached. So many conflicting ideas, lined with different shades of feelings, had been in *mêlée*, but suddenly their tangled skein was loosened and arranged itself in a new and harmonious order.³⁰

The unpredictable application of the shout and stick earned Lin-chi the reputation of employing the 'lightening method' as a teacher. The koan method evolved from Lin-chi's teaching method and hallmarks Rinzaï Zen. Suzuki defined the koan as "an expression of a certain mental state resulting from the Zen discipline" rather than a "logical proposition."³¹ A koan is described as a complex riddle situated in the Question and Answer sessions between teacher and student. Suzuki reports further that

technically speaking, the Koan given to the uninitiated is intended to 'destroy the root of life,' 'to make the calculating mind die,'³² 'to root out the entire mind that has been at work since eternity.'

In short, the koan symbolizes the destruction of western modes of thought.

Suzuki defined Zen as "the act of seeing into the nature of one's own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom"³³ Satori is the act of 'seeing into the nature of one's own being' and the koan is a complex riddle which facilitates satori. Noticeably, satori and Zen are equivalent.

Satori takes center stage in Suzuki's Zen. Unless we understand Suzuki's definition of satori and the importance he assigns to it, it is not possible to grasp his conception of Zen. First, he defined satori:

as an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it. Practically, it means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistically-trained mind. . . Logically stated, all its opposites and contradictions are united and harmonized into a consistent organic whole.³⁴

Notice Suzuki's inconsistent use of 'logic' in the above quote? Satori is achieved intuitively rather than logically yet Suzuki reverts to a logical explanation of satori in the last sentence.

Second, Zen is incomplete without satori:

At all events, there is no Zen without satori, which is indeed the Alpha and Omega of Zen Buddhism. Zen devoid of satori is like a sun without its light and heat. Zen may lose all its literature, all its monasteries, and all its paraphernalia; but as long as there is satori in it, it will survive to eternity.³⁵

The reader may wonder why satori is more important than Zen in this quote when earlier we discovered that Zen and satori were the same by definition. Perhaps Suzuki connects Zen in this quote with the institutional aspect of Zen rather than its essential meaning--'seeing into the nature of one's own being.'

Third, satori is characterized by:

1. Irrationality
2. Intuitive insight
3. Authoritativeness--"By this I mean that the knowledge realized by satori is final, that no amount of logical argument can refute it."
4. Affirmation (because of its certainty)
5. Sense of the beyond
6. Impersonal tone (contradistinction to Christian mystical experiences)
7. Feeling of exaltation
8. Momentariness³⁶

The above-noted characteristics describe the epistemological way of experience completely devoid of fact or content. The third characteristic, 'authoritativeness' indicates the barrier between the Christian and the Zen Buddhist as they dialogue. Both parties contain an authoritative edge. Some try to say Zen is not a religion. This third point certainly gives Zen a religious character.

What are the philosophical precedents of Suzuki's Zen? The primary presupposition of Zen entails an acceptance of the reality of that which unifies the seeker with that which exists beyond the enslaved dualistic world of subject/object. Names for the reality beyond opposites include 'Absolute Existence', Tao, 'ground of being', 'Ultimate Reality' and so on. This metaphysical reality encompasses everything. In A Western Approach to Zen: An Inquiry, Christmas Humphreys calls it the 'Beyond of Duality:'

So now we are faced with the Beyond of duality, not as a far ideal still wrapped in fog but with understanding a little more advanced. With intellect strained to its limits we move towards the Unborn. But where is the bridge between thought and No-thought, duality and Non-duality? In a sense there is none, nor can there be. The Absolute IS; we of the relative can neither add to it nor enter it nor take from it ought away. Yet we are part of it, we are it! It is immanent as well as transcendent; else could we never know that which we have never ceased to be.³⁷

Zen Buddhism hinges on an ontology of Reality. This Reality contains and is beyond opposites and exists at the center of everything. The implicit paradox of Zen finds expression in Lao-Tzu's description of the Eternal Tao:

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.
Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets;
But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its
manifestations.

These two are the same
But diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same they are called mysteries,
Mystery upon mystery--
The gateway of the manifold secrets.³⁸

D.T. Suzuki communicated to the west Rinzai Zen with its use of complex paradox and riddle (koan) to facilitate satori. It made a strong impression on Merton from which resulted the dialogue which will be explored.

Merton's Zen thought

An investigation of the Merton/Suzuki dialogue necessitates a preliminary summary of Merton's Zen thought. Merton defined Zen as:

consciousness unstructured by particular form or particular system, a trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-formed consciousness. It is therefore in a sense 'void.' But it can shine through this or that system, religious or irreligious, just as light can shine through glass that is blue, or green, or red, or yellow. If Zen has any preference it is for glass that is plain, has no color, and is 'just glass.'³⁹

Because he viewed Zen non-religiously he had no problem with his ongoing Zen studies. Also, his non-religious view of Zen explains why he set it alongside the Kerygma of Christianity in his 1966 theory that the Kerygma and Zen consciousness (or metaphysical intuition of the ground of our being) are complementary. Again, the problem with his theory is that it renders impotent both Zen and Christianity in that Christianity is incomprehensible without the Kerygma and Zen Buddhism refuses the imposition of religious terms on what it teaches. In saying that the Kerygma and Zen consciousness complement one another he is putting them on an equal footing, analogous to the image of two sides of the same coin.

Those aspects of Zen he communicated to the Christian world as necessary and forgotten elements in their practice include:

1. Non-Judgmental attitude which indicates the irrational element:

What is meant here is that the Zen consciousness does not distinguish and categorize what it sees in terms of social and cultural standards. . . . If it seems to judge and distinguish, it does so only enough to point beyond judgment to the pure void. It does not settle down in its judgment as final. It does not erect its judgment into a structure to be defended against all comers. Here we can fruitfully reflect on the deep meaning of Jesus' saying: 'Judge not, and you will not be judged.' Beyond its moral implications, familiar to all, there is a Zen dimension to this word of the Gospel. Only when this Zen dimension is grasped will the moral bearing of it be fully clear!⁴⁰

The non-ethical implications of Zen clearly deduced from the above quotation were defended by Suzuki at a philosopher's conference in Hawaii the summer of 1959. The problem is discussed further in the final chapter.

2. The similarity between the experience of satori and 'Birth in the Spirit' characterized by 'limitlessness and lack of inhibition':

That is to say that when one breaks through the limits of cultural and structural religion--or irreligion--one is liable to end up, by 'birth in the Spirit,' or just by intellectual awakening, in a simple void where all is liberty because all is the actionless action, called by the Chinese Wu-wei and by the New Testament the 'freedom of the Sons of God.' Not that they are theologically one and the same, but they have at any rate the same kind of limitlessness, the same lack of inhibition, the same psychic fullness of creativity, which mark the fully integrated maturity of the enlightened self.⁴¹

Here Merton states the common fact that a mystical experience, regardless of the doctrinal or non-doctrinal framework, contains enough similar characteristics to create the illusion that all religions or non-religions meet at the top in an ecstatic embrace.

3. 'Sunyata' in God and man and their unity:

Here Merton draws from Eckhart's statement that "A man should be so poor that he is not and has not a place for God to act in. To reserve a place would be to maintain distinctions," and makes the equation:

In any case this passage reflects Eckhart's Zen-like equation of God as infinite abyss and ground (cf. Sunyata), with the true being of the self grounded in Him; hence it is that Eckhart believes: only when there is no self left as a 'place' in which God acts, only when God acts purely in Himself, do we at last recover our 'true self' (which is in Zen terms 'no-self'). 'It is here, in this poverty, that man regains the eternal being that once he was, now is and evermore shall be.'⁴²

The next chapter explores the problem of imposing Christian terms on Buddhist concepts. In this case, the Christian idea of God can't compare with the Buddhist concept of Sunyata.

Those similar characteristics between Christianity and Zen Buddhism are summarized as non-judgmentalism, limitlessness of Birth in the Spirit and satori, and the Void-like meeting place between God and man. In the discussion, Merton repeatedly warns that we must think beyond the doctrinal differences implicit in Christianity and Zen to achieve a point of dialogue. An example is, "Thus with all due deference to the vast doctrinal differences between Buddhism and Christianity, and preserving intact all respect for the claims of the different religions. . ." ⁴³ The dialogue must be approached experientially. As he emphasized: "Zen explains nothing. It just sees. Sees what? Not an Absolute Object but Absolute Seeing." ⁴⁴ His message to the Christian world was that true Christianity goes beyond intellectual assent to a creed:

We must never forget that Christianity is much more than the intellectual acceptance of a religious message by a blind and submissive faith which never understands what the message means except in terms of authoritative interpretations handed down externally by experts in the name of the Church. On the contrary, faith is the door to the full inner life of the Church, a life which includes not only access to an authoritative teaching but above all to a deep personal experience which is at once unique and yet shared by the whole Body of Christ, in the Spirit of Christ. ⁴⁵

I maintain that his enchantment with Zen was motivated by his correct analysis of western Christianity which rationally gave assent to the Kerygma of Christianity but which had no intention of letting that message permeate and change a way of life. He never intended that the Kerygma from which true experience flows, be trampled in the dust as

people rushed into an experiential realm which by a superficial understanding encouraged moral permissiveness. The dialogue with Suzuki sheds further light on Merton's dilemma between the Kerygma and Zen consciousness.

Endnotes

¹Daniel J. Adams, Thomas Merton's Shared Contemplation: A Protestant Perspective (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Pub., 1979), p. 109.

²Jean Leclercq, Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit (Michigan: Cistercian Pub., 1976), p. 14.

³Thomas Merton, The Last of the Fathers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Pub., 1954), p. 29.

⁴Ibid., p. 38.

⁵Ibid., pp. 39-40.

⁶Ibid., p. 44.

⁷Ibid., p. 57.

⁸Ibid., p. 58.

⁹Ibid., pp. 63-64.

¹⁰Leclercq, Bernard of Clairvaux, p. 27.

¹¹Merton, Last of Fathers, p. 48.

¹²Ibid., p. 65.

¹³Huston Smith, preface in Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, translators, Meister Eckhart: The essential Sermons, commentaries, Treatises, and Defense. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. xiii.

¹⁴Thomas Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 42-43.

¹⁵Bernard McGinn, translator, Meister Eckhart, p. 24.

¹⁶The Greek word Kataphasis means affirmation--hence it is a positive way.

¹⁷Greek word apophasis means negation or denial.

¹⁸William H. Shannon, Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The inner experience of a contemplative (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 10.

¹⁹Bernard McGinn, translator, Meister Eckhart, p. 31.

²⁰Meister Eckhart, Meister Eckhart: The essential Sermons, commentaries, Treatises, and Defense, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 196.

²¹Ibid., p. 206.

²²McGinn, trans. Meister Eckhart, p. 35.

²³Ibid., p. 31.

²⁴Eckhart, Meister Eckhart, Sermon 15, p. 192.

²⁵Ibid., p. 206.

²⁶Ibid., p. 208.

²⁷McGinn, trans. Meister Eckhart, pp. 33-34.

²⁸Thomas Hoover, The Zen Experience (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1980), p. 193.

²⁹Ibid., p. 139.

³⁰Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, Essays in Zen Buddhism, Vol. II (London: Luzac & Co., 1933), pp. 35-36.

³¹Ibid., p. 71.

³²Ibid., p. 73.

³³Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, Essays in Zen Buddhism, Vol. I (London: Luzac & Co., 1927), p. 1.

³⁴Ibid., p. 216.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Suzuki, Vol. II, pp. 16-21.

³⁷Christmas Humphreys, A Western Approach to Zen: An Inquiry (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1971), p. 59.

³⁸D.C. Lau, translator, Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 57.

³⁹Thomas Merton, Zen and the Birds of Appetite (New York: New Directions Book, 1968), p. 4.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 8.

⁴²Ibid., p. 10.

⁴³Ibid., p. 8.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 54.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 56.

CHAPTER THREE: THE MERTON/SUZUKI DIALOGUE

Background

In the spring of 1959, Merton sent D.T. Suzuki a copy of Wisdom of the Desert based on translations from Verba Seniorum, (sayings of the Desert Fathers). He perceived similarities between the Christian Desert Fathers of the fourth century and the Zen masters and hoped to initiate a dialogue with Suzuki. In the letter which accompanied the manuscript Merton wrote:

Not to be foolish and multiply words, I'll say simply that it seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the Gospels, and the Gospels are bursting with it. It is the proper climate for any monk, no matter what kind of monk he may be. If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation. But I still don't know what it is. No matter. I don't know what the air is either. ¹

Suzuki and Merton corresponded and in 1964 met in New York for two conversations. The following years saw the publications by Merton of The Way of Chuang Tzu (1965), Mystics and Zen Masters (1966) and Zen and the Birds of Appetite (1968). The Asian Journal based on an Asian trip between October 15 and December 10, 1968, recorded moving insights into his continual dialogue with Buddhists including the "pope of the Lamais", the Dalai Lama.

In the development of a horizon of meaning, the birth of new ideas is not without pain. In his essay, "Thomas Merton and Zen Buddhism", Cyrus Lee observed:

In reading the Suzuki-Merton dialogue, one may easily have the feeling that Suzuki seems to be more daring and offensive whereas Merton seems to be more cautious and defensive. . . We noticed, however, Merton's cautiousness and defensiveness of theological principles had become lesser and lesser after his deeper study of Zen and longer acquaintance with the Oriental Zen scholars.²

Initially, Merton retained strong ties with his early monastic training, but as his Zen studies deepened the ties were loosened. He recognized the change and wrote in the Postface of Zen and the Birds of Appetite³:

The dialogue with Suzuki goes back further--about ten years. I was tempted to cut out my own 'final remarks' in the dialogue because they are so confusing. Not that they are 'wrong' in the sense of 'false' or 'erroneous', but because any attempt to handle Zen in theological language is bound to miss the point. If I leave these remarks where they are, I do so as an example of how not to approach Zen.⁴

The Merton/Suzuki dialogue is marked by heavy usage of theological language indicating, as Merton noted, the earlier dependence on his theological training.

An example of the progression of his ideas is the development of the meaning attached to 'Being.' Initially he presupposed that 'Being' centered on the fullness of Christ. By 1966 a contradiction in his meaning of 'Being' was discerned by Silvio Fittipaldi in an essay entitled "Preying Birds: An Examination of Thomas Merton's Zen." In an essay found in Mystics and Zen Masters Merton claimed that "the ground of all Being is Void."⁵ At the same time he stated that ultimate reality was 'Being': . . . "that ultimate reality which is at once pure being and pure awareness

which we referred to above as 'mind' (h'sin)."⁶ Fittipaldi asks: "If Being is ultimate, then it does not rest or arise from any other ground than itself, that is, Being as ultimate must be its own ground."⁷ Fittipaldi insisted that "central to Zen. . . is the Void"⁸ rather than 'Being.' 'Being', in Merton's earlier view was a loaded concept denoting a Christian ontology.

The Buddhist meaning of Void or Sunyata, according to Fittipaldi must not be confused with the Christian meaning of 'Being.' A helpful explanation of Sunyata is found in Shin'ichi Hisamatsu's essay entitled, "The characteristics of Oriental Nothingness":

1. Nothingness is neither the negation of a particular or whole being.
2. Nothingness is not the 'not' of a statement.
3. Nothingness is not a universal as 'being' is. Rather, Non-being goes beyond being and non-being.
4. Nothingness is not conjectural, eg. imagining that a friend who is present is really absent.
5. Nothingness is not the unconscious of deep sleep, fainting or death.⁹

Sunyata defines the Buddha-Nature or one's original nature. Fittipaldi explained:

Emptiness is beyond grasping yet always with us and in us, constantly within our reach. This is what Suzuki means when he says that 'to be is not to be, not to be is to be,' and when he proposes the equation Zero equals infinity. Thus the central realization of Zen is satori, which is a seeing into one's true nature. True Nature is the Buddha-Nature which is absolute Emptiness which is beyond 'being' and 'non-being', yet always with us.¹⁰

Essentially, Sunyata defies definition, yet we cannot understand Zen without a proper view of Sunyata.

Fittipaldi noted Merton's changed framework by 1968. In a few essays on Zen published that year, "Merton speaks of Zen enlightenment,

but nowhere in terms of being."¹¹ And finally, by noting Merton's preface to Zen and the Birds of Appetite, Fittipaldi verified his thesis that Merton had swung to the Buddhist side in the controversy over the meaning of 'being:'

Zen enriches no one. There is no body to be found. The birds come and circle for awhile in the place where it is thought to be. . . But they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the 'nothing', the 'nobody' that was there, suddenly appears. That is Zen. It was there all the time but the scavengers missed it, because it was not their kind of prey.¹²

The quote indicates the wrong way to approach Zen. The Christian who imposes his Christian framework on Zen is likened to the 'scavenger.' The 'birds of appetite' are those 'scavengers' who insist on the message of Zen pointing to their pet theory or belief. Was Merton thinking of his early attempt to understand Zen in the above statements? As Merton caustically noted, the dialogue in 1964 negatively exemplified his early attempt to understand Zen.

Suzuki's Position

In response to Merton's first letter on March 12, 1959, Suzuki replied on March 31:

I am trying to write my understanding of Christianity. Some of the ideas I have are: We have never been driven out of Eden; We still retain innocence; We are innocent just because of our sinfulness; Paradise and original sin are not contradictory; God wanted to know himself, hence the creation; When we know ourselves we know God.¹³

The above ideas form the backbone of the first essay in the dialogue entitled "Knowledge and Innocence."

Suzuki began the essay with an answer to the criticism that Zen leads to moral revolt. At an East/West conference of philosophers in Hawaii in the summer of 1959, Suzuki fielded criticism about the ethical implications of Zen. The problem centered on the lack of moral restraint which a superficial interpretation of Zen implied. As Merton noted in the postface of the dialogue, "Zen has, indeed, become for us a symbol of moral revolt."¹⁴

Suzuki began with the Garden of Eden, a procedure which fascinated Merton:

It is certainly a matter of very great significance that Dr. Suzuki should choose, as the best and most obvious common ground for a dialogue between East and West, not the exterior surface of the Desert spirituality (with its ascetic practices and its meditative solitude) but the most primitive and most archetypal fact of all Judaeo-Christian spirituality: the narrative of the Creation and Fall of man in the Book of Genesis.¹⁵

He found in the 'archetypal fact of all Judaeo-Christian spirituality' the key to the evil of dualism in the world whereby man is no longer innocent

but rather corrupted by knowledge. René Descarte's mind/body separation in the seventeenth-century was not the origin of the problem as many have theorized. Rather, Suzuki takes us back to the genesis where the sin of eating the forbidden fruit drove an eternal wedge between innocence and knowledge. In a footnote he explains the key concepts of Knowledge and Innocence:

Throughout this paper, 'Innocence' is to be taken as the state of mind in which inhabitants of the Garden of Eden used to live around the tree of life, with eyes not opened, all naked, not ashamed, with no knowledge of good and evil; whereas 'knowledge' refers to everything opposite of 'innocence', especially a pair of discriminating eyes widely opened to good and evil.¹⁶

His interpretation of Knowledge and Innocence offers the reader a provocative twist from traditional Christian thought as the following shows:

Buddhist philosophy considers discrimination of any kind--moral or metaphysical--the product of Ignorance which obscures the original light of Suchness which is Emptiness. . . Knowledge is the outcome of our having lost Innocence by eating the forbidden fruit. But no Christians or Jews, as far as I am aware, have ever attempted to get rid of knowledge in order to regain Paradise whereby they might enjoy the bliss of Innocence to its full extent as they originally did.¹⁷

He clearly implies that Zen succeeded where Christianity and Judaism failed.

Radically Suzuki drives the point home:

Man who has lost Innocence and acquired Knowledge differentiates just from unjust, good from evil, right from wrong, foes from friends. He is therefore, no longer innocent and perfect, but highly 'morally' conscious.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, Suzuki found ample criticism from western philosophers regarding the nonethical implications of his radical views. The state of Innocence became the owner's privilege without the necessary disciplines .

which precede such an exalted state. Imagine the murderer who faces the judge and pleads "Not Guilty" because he was in an innocent state beyond good and evil when the act was committed.

Suzuki qualifies the anti-moral implications of the above statements and states: "The Knowledge to do good and not to do evil is not enough; it must come out of Innocence, where Innocence is Knowledge and Knowledge is Innocence."¹⁹ Suzuki equated Innocence with Emptiness or Sunyata and agreed with Eckhart's definition of poverty: "He is a poor man who wants nothing, knows nothing, and has nothing."²⁰ The greatest knowledge is poverty. Hence, "to gain Innocence again is to be poor."²¹ The goal of Zen training becomes the eradication of all vestiges of Knowledge:

To be absolutely naked, to go even beyond the receiving of an 'impulse' of whatever nature, to be perfectly free from every possible remnant of the trappings we have put on ourselves ever since the acquisition of Knowledge--this is the goal of the Zen training.²²

Suzuki equated Knowledge with egotism and sordidness or evil.

True Knowledge arises from the Innocence and poverty of selflessness and non-attachment to that which deludes. As he concluded:

The life we used to enjoy in the Garden of Eden symbolizes Innocence. How to regain (or perhaps better how to recognize that we already possess) this primitive-mindedness in the midst of industrialization and the universal propagandism of 'an easy life' is the grave question given to us modern men for successful solution. . . The day of the Desert Fathers is forever gone and we are waiting for a new sun to rise above the horizon of egotism and sordidness in every sense.²³

Suzuki agreed with Merton that the Desert Fathers exemplified the kind of Innocence he sought. The crux of the issue is whether Suzuki's goal to recapture 'innocence' in a 'fallen' world is possible. Shouldn't we be

more concerned with a realistic appraisal of life rather than attempting to change that over which we have no control?

Merton's Position

Suzuki's combined ideal of poverty, emptiness and Innocence is fully exemplified in the Desert Fathers. As Merton observed they strove for purity of heart and

a clear unobstructed vision of the true state of affairs, an intuitive grasp of one's own inner reality as anchored, or rather lost, in God through Christ. . . [These men were] at peace in the possession of a sublime 'Nothing' the spirit laid hold, in secret, upon the 'All'—without trying to know what it possessed.²⁴

Merton's equation of the 'inner reality' with Christ in the first sentence and the with the 'nothing' which is 'everything' in the second sentence reflects him grappling with the Christian idea of 'Being' and the Zen idea of 'Being.' He imposes a Christian ontology on the 'inner reality' and then states that the 'inner reality' which is 'lost in God through Christ' is a sublime 'Nothing.' The Buddhist doesn't attempt such philosophical gymnastics but rather declares that 'nothingness is nothingness.' Merton equates nothingness with Christ.

At this point we do well to reflect on Merton's thesis that the Kerygma complements Zen consciousness. Logically the concepts, Nothingness and Emptiness exclude any content. How can Nothingness 'be' anything? Throughout his response the reader is painfully aware of Merton's struggle

to combine Emptiness with the content (Kerygma) from which his 'Innocence' sprang.

Interestingly, he entitled his response "The Recovery of Paradise."

He began his response with the affirmation that

what the Desert Fathers sought when they believed they could find 'paradise' in the desert, was the lost innocence, the emptiness and purity of heart which had belonged to Adam and Eve in Eden. . . They sought paradise in the recovery of that 'unity' which had been shattered by the 'knowledge of good and evil.'²⁵

Merton and Suzuki both employ terms like 'emptiness' and 'purity'. The question looms incessantly over the horizon of the dialogue: what did Merton and Suzuki respectively mean by emptiness?

In a letter to Suzuki dated April 11, 1959, Merton likens satori or the breakthrough with God's grace:

The breakthrough that comes with the realization of what the finger of a koan is pointing to, is like the breakthrough of the realization that a sacrament, for instance, is a finger pointing to the completely spontaneous Gift of Himself to us on the part of God--beyond and above images, outside of every idea, every law, every right or wrong, everything high or low, everything spiritual or material.²⁶

Here, Merton speaks of the experience of God rather than knowledge about God or Revelation. He speaks of the unexpected moment when the seeker is momentarily transported to that realm which defies every logical construct of the mind. He continued:

Whether we are good or bad, wise or foolish, there is always this sudden eruption, this breakthrough of God's freedom into our life turning the whole thing upside down so that it comes out, contrary to every expectation, right side up. This is grace, this is salvation, this is Christianity. And, so far as I can see, it is also very much like Zen.²⁷

The question remains, is grace contentless? Is grace simply an

experience, a sudden eruption, or is it rather that which flows from the historical death and resurrection of Christ two thousand years ago? The pendulum of Merton's thought is swinging from a mysticism rooted in the Kerygma to a mysticism devoid of Kerygma. Yet Merton continues to use theological language to describe the experience. In his Master's thesis entitled "Buddhist components in the thought and spirituality of Thomas Merton", Paul Ruttle pinpoints the problem:

Merton's void is filled with Christ and with the light and glory of God. The void in Zen, however, remains totally unqualified. It neither contains nor does not contain the light and glory of God. It simply IS. Thus once again Merton has imposed the Christian dimension on an essentially Buddhist concept.²⁸

In another passage Merton spoke of the positive fulfillment of emptiness in Christ. He wrote:

In the beginning, Adam was 'one man.' The Fall had divided him into a 'multitude.' Christ had restored man to unity in Himself. The Mystical Christ was the 'New Adam' and in Him all men could return to unity, to innocence, to purity, and become 'one man.'²⁹

This passage answers the question raised earlier. The question dealt with Suzuki's idealism which called for a return to innocence in a fallen world. We asked whether it was possible. Merton answers affirmatively but Suzuki would disagree with the roadmap to innocence suggested by Merton. A couple of years later in a letter to Suzuki dated May 3, 1965, Merton changed the roadmap. The following shows that Merton believed all religions would meet in paradise:

I think that Buddhists are aware of this, and is therefore aware of that which is the intimate ground of all Knowledge and all faith. And to the extent that Christian faith is unaware of this, it lacks some of the reality which it ought to have. However, I think it is

there in the depths both of Christianity and Buddhism. Let us hope it is not being lost. In any event there is only one meeting place for all religions, and it is paradise. How nice to be there and wander about looking at the flowers. Or being the flowers.³⁰

If the paradise where all religions would someday meet was in reality shot through with the vision and reality of Christ, many devout adherents of other religions would take offense. However, if it was, as the Zen Buddhist insisted, utter nothingness, beyond concepts of good and evil, the Christian who finds fulfillment in sole allegiance to Christ would be disappointed.

Merton did not denigrate Knowledge to the same extent as Suzuki did. He criticized the fanatic Innocence characteristic of some of the Desert Fathers who

were so innocent that they had lost all contact with everyday reality of life in a struggling and complex world of men. . . It was the emptiness of the quietist, an emptiness that was merely blank and silly: an absence of knowledge without the presence of wisdom.³¹

Rather than 'contradictory realities' he treated Knowledge and Innocence as 'complementary realities.'³² Thus he criticized the Desert Fathers for wanting "to get along simply with innocence without knowledge."³³ Some of the Desert Fathers took pride in an innocence which led to the "creation of a pseudo-emptiness, an exquisitely purified self that is so perfect that it can rest in itself without any trace of crude reflection."³⁴

Merton introduced Discretion as the synthesis between Knowledge and Innocence. Discretion was germane to the realm of Knowledge because it distinguished between good and evil. The key was that it functioned in the light of innocence. Hence, "it judges not in terms of abstract standards

so much as in terms of inner purity of heart."³⁵ Therefore Knowledge flows from the innocence of purity. But whence cometh purity?

Merton does not forget the dangers of Knowledge as the following statements show:

The realm of Knowledge or scientia is a realm where man is subject to the influence of the devil. This does nothing to alter the fact that Knowledge is good and necessary.³⁶

Is a contradiction implied in the above two statements? What he means is that Knowledge is necessary and good but we must beware of its temptations for the

realm of Knowledge is a realm of alienation and peril, in which we are not our true selves and in which we are likely to become completely enslaved to the power of illusion.³⁷

The problem of Knowledge is that its perspectives "are not those of our inmost, spiritual nature."³⁸ Thus, Knowledge must function in the light of Innocence. Suzuki had a similar conclusion: "The Knowledge to do good and not to do evil is not enough; it must come out of Innocence, where Innocence is Knowledge and Knowledge is Innocence."³⁹

Finally, Merton concluded that emptiness and innocence signify the return to our original selves but the journey is not over. Rather it has only begun for "the ultimate end is the Knowledge of God."⁴⁰ He continues:

Purity of heart establishes man in a state of unity and emptiness in which he is one with God. But this is the necessary preparation not for further struggle between good and evil, but for the real work of God which is revealed in the Bible: the work of the new creation, the resurrection from the dead, the restoration of all things in Christ.⁴¹

The implication here is that there is a Knowledge more deep and profound than the superficial 'right and wrong' form of knowledge which judges outwardly rather than inwardly. Suzuki would agree to this point but

when Merton speaks of 'the restoration of all things in Christ,' he parts company with Suzuki.

Suzuki's Final Comments

Suzuki responds accordingly in a short summary entitled "Final Remarks" with the claim that Merton's concept of emptiness is not deep enough. He wrote: "Father Merton's emptiness is still on the level of God as Creator and does not go up to the Godhead."⁴² This statement reflects the Asian aversion to a personal God. The Godhead conjures up an image of an impersonal force wielding its power in a wu-wei-like fashion.

For Suzuki

Zen emptiness is not the emptiness of nothingness, but the emptiness of fullness in which there is 'no gain, no loss, no increase, no decrease,' in which this equation takes place: zero equals infinity. The Godhead is no other than this equation. . . Creation is out of inexhaustible nothingness.⁴³

Finally, regarding eschatology he writes: "Eschatology is something never realizable and yet realized at every moment of our life. We see it always ahead of us though we are in reality always in it."⁴⁴

Merton's Final Remarks

In comparison, Merton retains a linear view of history and the personal Creator God of Judaeo-Christianity. The first point in "Final

Remarks" reflects the differences:

First of all it is clear that the strongly personalistic tone of Christian mysticism, even when it is 'apophatic,' generally seems to prohibit a full equation with Zen experience.⁴⁵

As for the personal God, Merton wrote:

It seems to me that in actual fact the purest Christian equivalent to Dr. Suzuki's formula zero equals infinity is to be sought precisely in the basic Christian intuition of divine mercy.⁴⁶

Emptiness, in Christian terms,

still has the character of a free gift of love, and perhaps it is this freedom, this giving without reason, without limit, without return, without self-conscious afterthought, that is the real secret of God who 'is love.'⁴⁷

Hence, for Merton, "Paradise cannot be opened to us except by a free gift of the divine mercy."⁴⁸

Finally, Merton was impressed with Suzuki's eschatological view of the 'nowness' of that which we seek:

I think Dr. Suzuki's intuition about the eschatological nature of reality is vivid and very profound and it impresses me as much more deeply Christian than perhaps he himself imagines.⁴⁹

He continues:

We are in the 'fulness of time' and all is 'given' into our hands. We imagine that we are traveling toward an end that is to come, and in a sense that is true. Christianity moves in an essentially historical dimension toward the 'restoration of all things in Christ.' Yet with Christ's conquest of death and the sending of the Holy Spirit that restoration has already been accomplished.⁵⁰

The paradoxical nature of Christianity characterizes Merton's discussion.

He continually seeks the synthesis between opposites. Conversely, Suzuki's discussion favors one side of the opposites--namely Innocence.

Merton summarized Zen and Christianity in two statements: "For the Buddhist, life is a static and ontological fullness. For the Christian it is a dynamic gift, a fullness of love."⁵¹

Summary of dialogue

The dialogue shows similarities and deep differences between the two men. Similarities include their suspicion of the effects of Knowledge on modern man and their call for a return to Innocence. They agree that the 'archetypal fact' of the Garden of Eden initiated the wedge between Innocence and Knowledge. They agree that Innocence can be realized in the 'now'.

Differences arise in the analysis of how to attain Innocence in the present. Merton speaks of grace through Christ, the 'Second Adam' and Suzuki speaks of satori through a koan. The concept of emptiness used by both men denotes a different framework within which they think. It is correct to say (as Paul Ruttle and Silvio Fittipaldi point out) that Merton imposed his Christian framework on Zen Buddhist terminology in equating emptiness with sunyata. It is also fair to note that Suzuki mishandled the Genesis story. He imposed his Zen idea of sunyata on the innocence of Adam and Even described in the Genesis story. Emptiness or Sunyata which indicates Innocence and Poverty in the dialogue, is at the center of Being. Being equals emptiness for both men. What emptiness means then, is of powerful import. It is at the heart of what constitutes man and the universe.

Paradoxically Merton believes that Being or Emptiness is Christ who is everything, yet is known through unknowing. The paradoxical nature of Christianity is shown in its center, Christ who is both God and Man--

eternal and temporal combined, yet one. And Merton's Emptiness which is Christ, is a contradiction. How can emptiness be anything? It is beyond concepts. So too is Christ for the believer according to Merton. The dilemma between the Kerygma and Zen consciousness has yet to be solved.

Endnotes

¹Thomas Merton and D.T. Suzuki, correspondence, Encounter: Thomas Merton and D.T. Suzuki (unpublished document made available by Dr. Robert Daggy, Curator of Merton Studies Center, Louisville, Kentucky), p. 2.

²Cyrus Lee, "Thomas Merton and Zen Buddhism" Chinese Culture (1972) 18, p. 42.

³A collection of essays on Zen by Thomas Merton including the Merton/Suzuki dialogue. This book spans approximately a decade of Merton's Zen thought.

⁴Thomas Merton, Zen and the Birds of Appetite (New York: New Directions Book, 1968), p. 139.

⁵Thomas Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967), p. 40.

⁶Ibid., p. 24.

⁷Silvio E. Fittipaldi, "Preying Birds: An examination of Thomas Merton's Zen" Horizons 9/1 (1982), p. 43.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Shin'ichi Hisumatsu, "The Characteristics of Oriental Nothingness", trans. R. DeMartino, Philosophical Studies of Japan, 2 (1960), p. 65 & 70, as in Fittipaldi, "Preying Birds", p. 44.

¹⁰Fittipaldi, "Preying Birds", p. 45.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Merton, Birds of Appetite, p. ix.

¹³Merton and Suzuki, Encounter, p. 2.

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- ¹⁴ Merton, Zen and Birds of Appetite, p. 101.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 103.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 104.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 105.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 106.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 107.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 109.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid., p. 114.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 115.
- ²⁴ Thomas Merton, Trans., The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century (New York: New Directions Book, 1960), p. 8.
- ²⁵ Merton, Zen and Birds of Appetite, p. 117.
- ²⁶ Merton and Suzuki, Encounter, p. 12.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Paul Ruttle, C.P., "Buddhist components in the thought and spirituality of Thomas Merton", (M.A. Thesis, St. John's University, New York, 1980), p. 49.
- ²⁹ Merton, Zen and Birds of Appetite, p. 117.
- ³⁰ Merton and Suzuki, Encounter, pp. 42-43.
- ³¹ Merton, Zen and Birds of Appetite, p. 121.

³²Merton, Zen and Birds of Appetite, p. 128.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., p. 129.

³⁵Ibid., p. 130.

³⁶Ibid., p. 125..

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., p. 107.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 132.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., p. 133.

⁴³Ibid., p. 134.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 135.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 136.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 137.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 138.

⁵¹Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Merton's dilemma between the Kerygma and Zen consciousness poses the provocative problem of epistemology for the religious thinker. The pattern of Merton's thought is characterized by three distinct periods of time since his conversion to Christianity in 1939. From 1941 to around 1949 his thought is rooted in the Kerygma. Between 1949 to around 1965 the evolution between Christian thought rooted in the Kerygma towards a form of Zen consciousness is evident. In this crucial phase the statement which provoked the subject matter of this study was made--the idea that the Kerygma of Christianity complements the 'metaphysical intuition of the ground of being' in Zen Buddhism. The final three-year period of his life evidences a swing of the pendulum further east as Merton pressed deeper in his study of Zen Buddhism.

Merton's theory, developed in the middle period was chosen for analysis for two reasons. First, negatively, it represents a version of interreligious dialogue which Merton caustically observed was the wrong way of conducting such a dialogue. He made that statement in 1968, the third phase when the swing was east, but also remarked that the dialogue retained value as an example of how not to dialogue. Second, it exemplifies the provocative idea in religious thought, that two different epistemologies complement one another. In itself, the idea that two traditional, mutually,

exclusive theories of salvation/satori (if I can loosely put the two together) found by Merton to be complementary, radically departs from the Christian idea that salvation is only through Christ. In philosophical terms the rational road to knowledge generally excludes the experiential road when these roads are independent of one another. The rational road can include experience as in the case of Christianity and more particularly, the Kerygma. However, in Zen Buddhism the experiential way excludes the rational component and rather meshes any rational thought together in a net of interwoven facts where no one strand is highlighted above the rest.

The naive, romantic notion propounded by Merton in the middle phase that two religious epistemologies complement one another is stated by Harvey D. Egan in the following:

Christianity and Buddhism for Merton, really do not contradict each other. Comparing Christianity and Zen Buddhism, is like comparing math and tennis. Christianity offers a living experience of union in Christ; Zen, an immediate awareness of the unity of the visible and invisible creation.¹

If two things do not contradict each other, the result is a similitude. Are Christianity and Zen the same thing? Egan's statement reflects the kind of naiveté which accompanies other religious philosophers who maintain all religions are essentially one. And here I presuppose that Zen inasmuch as it claims an authoritative aspect based on the certainty which no logical argument can shake achieved in satori, has a religious character. Comparing Christianity and Zen Buddhism is not like comparing math and tennis because both are religious. Comparing Christianity and Zen Buddhism is more like comparing football and baseball, but not math and tennis.

Merton's 'Middle phase' thesis serves as a warning in interreligious dialogue. Merton realized the deep-rooted problems towards the end of his life in his initial well-intentioned attempt to understand Zen Buddhism. He discovered that he couldn't escape his Christian framework. Under the guise of carrying on a dialogue with Suzuki, he hoped to persuade Suzuki that Zen Buddhism was really Christianity. He left the dialogue as it was as an example of how not to dialogue.

Even though Merton's attempt to Christianize Zen failed, the dialogue is yet a remarkable example of how far two religious communicators can meet, and open wide their horizons in the noble effort to understand. Suzuki's willingness to begin with the 'archetypal fact' of the Genesis story to illustrate key Zen themes, and Merton's acceptance of the Zen idea of Sunyata, (albeit a Christianized version) exemplify grace, courage and love. There is never the idea that what has been communicated in the dialogue is the 'last word.' The reader senses that many doors yet await an opening. If the curious reader followed Merton's life in the next five or six years he would have observed Merton the traveller edging deeper and deeper into Zen territory. Perhaps he had himself in mind when he described the religious traveller in the preface to the Japanese edition of Seeds of Contemplation in March 1965:

This journey without maps leads him into rugged mountainous country where there are often mists and storms and where he is more and more alone. Yet at the same time, ascending the slopes in darkness, feeling more and more keenly his own emptiness, and with the winter wind blowing cruelly through his now tattered garments, he meets at times other travellers on the way, poor pilgrim as he is, and as solitary as he, belonging perhaps to other lands and other traditions. . .²

The Merton/Suzuki dialogue reminds the religious student that without risk the attempt to understand other religious traditions will be doomed. Often the first awkward attempt will be followed by a depth of understanding otherwise not learned. Merton was always learning and never satisfied for long with that which he learned. He was a seeker. The 'holy grail' of his quest continued to haunt and elude him. As he said in the preface to the Thomas Merton Reader:

If I were once to settle down and be satisfied with the surface of life, with its divisions and its clichés, it would be time to call in the undertaker, except that in the monastery we do without the ministrations of an embalmer. So, then, this dissatisfaction which sometimes used to worry me and has certainly, I know, worried others, has helped me in fact to move freely and even gaily with the stream of life.³

Merton accepted his paradoxical nature, born of two itinerant artist parents, and fed by a highly unstable and lonely childhood. He found security when he accepted himself and realized that inner contradictions signified God's mercy:

I have had to accept the fact that my life is almost totally paradoxical. I have also had to learn gradually to get along without apologizing for the fact, even to myself. . . It is in the paradox itself, the paradox which was and still is a source of insecurity, that I have come to find the greatest security. I have become convinced that the very contradictions in my life are in some way signs of God's mercy to me: if only because someone so complicated and so prone to confusion and self-defeat could hardly survive for long without special mercy. And since this in no way depends on the approval of others, the awareness of it is a kind of liberation.⁴

This security propelled him forward into uncharted realms. To understand Merton, one must recognize his complex inscape. In a philosophical mode he writes:

All life tends to grow like this, in mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction, yet centered, in its every heart, on the divine mercy. . . without this gift we would have no philosophy, for we could never explain such simplicity in the midst of contradiction. . . We can overlay the contradiction with statements and explanations, we can produce an illusory coherence, we can impose on life our intellectual systems and we can enforce upon our minds a certain strained and artificial peace. But this is not peace.⁵

For Merton the 'divine mercy at the center' enabled him to live at the edge. Simply stated, Merton resolved his inner contradictions by recourse to God's mercy. That 'someone so complicated and so prone to confusion and self-defeat could hardly survive for long without special mercy', consoled and motivated him through a life of devotion to the God who by mercy held him in love.

Elena Malits summarized Merton as

a symbol of a life that can embrace paradox, live with tensions, and grow into new realizations through constantly reinterpreting the meaning of one's primary commitments.⁶

He never forsook his original commitment to Christianity but as the above alludes, constantly strove to make it real. Raymond Baily in Thomas Merton on Mysticism wrote:

In Eastern thought he found a perception of reality that penetrated the illusory world of Western (and Marxist) materialism. The unmasking of reality would preoccupy him for the rest of his life. He would find in Eastern thought, and particularly in Zen, an idea that he had already intuited, that the key to reality is the self.⁷

Merton and Suzuki called for a return to Innocence. Aside from the opposed epistemological roads to that state, the goal is similar. Merton struggled to find the balanced road to Innocence. Thus his complementary theory discussed in this paper. We noted the dangers in Merton's answer.

However, after all is said and done, Merton's answer despite its problems, despite its idealism and romantic naiveté, reflects that land to which he pointed. The state of Paradise or Innocence awaits every seeking heart. The invitation has been extended. Will we join the 'cosmic dance'?

For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity, and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not. Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds, and join in the general dance.⁸

Endnotes

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³Thomas Merton, A Thomas Merton Reader, Ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Image Books, 1974), p. 16.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 17.

⁶Elena Malits, The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey (New York: Harper & Ros, Pub., 1980), p. 20.

⁷Raymond Bailey, Thomas Merton on Mysticism (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1975), p.110.

⁸Merton, Reader, pp. 504-505.

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